**The hidden benefits of part-time higher education study to working practices: is there a case for making them more visible?**

## Policy background

Expansion of higher education (HE) continues to be justified largely in terms of improving economic competitiveness and social cohesiveness. The OECD's 2012 Skills Strategy sets out policy approaches to help countries invest in skills development and deployment, and increase the demand for high level skills in ways that will drive economies and improve peoples' lives (OECD, 2012). Within the UK, the Westminster coalition government's November 2010 document *Skills for Sustainable Growth (*BIS, 2010) reiterated the importance of skills to the UK's economic future and the improvement of skills to build sustainable growth. Higher education has a part to play in improving skills in the general population. However, much of the Westminster coalition government's plans for HE, set-out in the June 2011 White Paper, '*Higher Education: Students at the heart of the system'* focussed on the planned major reforms to the student finance system (BIS, 2011). In so doing, it also re-iterated government's intention to open up the HE market and encourage a more diverse system responding in new ways to the needs of students and employers. In many respects, the 2011 White paper was building on the previous Labour government's strategy for sustaining the strength of England's HE system, outlined in its *Higher Ambitions* White paper (BIS, 2009). That 2009 White paper envisaged the next phase of HE expansion would be based around more flexible routes in to HE, more part-time study, more work-based learning, more vocationally-based provision such that different types of people would have the opportunity to experience HE in a wider range of ways. The aim to widen participation through the expansion of the number of adults at university was seen as core to sustaining the strength of England's HE, and the government's wider skills strategy. Arguably, it also reflected the reality of England's demographic and labour market profile, and a desire to raise the potential of the workforce by up-skilling and reskilling those people already employed.

With constraints on public finances and challenging economic circumstances, the focus of HE policy has, unsurprisingly, shifted to seeking different ways of funding HE. Whilst the 2011 White Paper acknowledged the importance of part-time study in meeting government's wider HE policy objectives and its skills strategy, in contrast to Labour's 2009 White Paper (BIS, 2009), it had little to say explicitly about up-skilling and reskilling the workforce through HE. However, the fact that, for the first time, some part-time students were to be given access to student loans to cover tuition fees was a clear signal that such students were seen as important.

The one paragraph in the White Paper devoted exclusively to part-time students reads

> 'For the first time, students starting part-time undergraduate courses in 2012/13, many of whom are from non-traditional backgrounds, will be entitled to an up-front loan to meet their tuition costs so long as they are studying at an intensity of at least 25 per cent, in each academic year, of a full-time course. This is a major step in terms of opening up access to higher education, and remedies a long-standing injustice in support for adult learners. Up to around

> 175,000 part-time students will benefit. Under the new system, distance learning students studying full-time will also benefit from a loan to cover their tuition costs' (BIS, 2011, para 5.7 p 61).

The rationale for this policy shift can be found in the *Independent Review of Higher Education Funding and Student Finance* (2010) chaired by Lord Browne. One of the principles informing Browne's proposals was that:

> 'Part-time students should be treated the same as full-time students for the costs of learning. The current system requires part-time students to pay upfront. This puts people off from studying part-time and it stops innovation in courses that combine work and study. In our proposal the upfront costs for part-time students will be eliminated, so that a wider range of people can access higher education in a way that is convenient for them.' (Independent Review of Higher Education Funding and Student Finance, 2010, p5)

Elsewhere Browne observed:

> 'The lack of support for part-time study makes it much more difficult for this country to catch up with other countries on the skill levels of the existing workforce. Individuals who are already in work and do not have a higher education qualification are usually unlikely to give up their jobs and enter full-time study. Part-time study may be a realistic option for them, but access to part-time study is hampered by the lack of Government support. The potential exists to combine the experience of individuals already in work with the skills that higher education can provide; but it is not being exploited.' (Independent Review of Higher Education Funding and Student Finance, 2010, p 22-23).

Clearly, the government hoped that the introduction of student loans for part-time students to cover higher tuition fees would open up access to part-time higher education, and help to stem its decline. However, the initial effect of these changes has been to contribute to a dramatic fall in demand (HEFCE, 2013), contrary to the government's overall intentions (Callender, 2013).

Within the UK, part-time study was considered significant in helping to meet wider government HE policy objectives and for economic growth through skills development. Elsewhere, as Bennion et al. note (Bennion et al. 2011), part-time study is a characteristic of many HE systems in the former British colonies, for example, Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the United States of America. But in very many mainland European countries, the majority of students are classified as having full-time status, even though in some countries, around a fifth of students seem to have rates of study (of 20 hours or less per week on study-related activities) that would infer they are part-time. Further, in a few mainland Europe countries, part-time study does not carry any formal status as such, yet in others, around a quarter of HE students has part-time status, including in Lithuania, Poland, Norway and the Slovak Republic (Orr et al. 2011).

But regardless of the formal status of study at HE level through which skills are developed, there continues to be criticism about the underlying premise that increasing the level of skills 'supplied' to the labour market will lead to improvements

in economic performance (for example, Warhurst and Findlay, 2012) and in individual and national prosperity (Brown et al. 2011). Further, the underlying notion of matching skills supply to skills demand assumes a degree of labour market stability, wherein jobs and sectors have predictable requirements, which no longer hold good (see for example, Bimrose et al. 2011).

Arguably more emphasis is now being placed on issues about: which skills are needed in the workplace; the effectiveness of skills utilisation in the workplace; and the relationship of skills utilisation to productivity. For example, the UK Commission for Employment and Skills argues that 'skill acquisition which does not enhance employability, earnings, labour market progression or which does not bring other economic and social returns, is a waste of public and private resources' (UKCES, 2010, p109). This article addresses these challenges. Specifically, it explores whether graduates from part-time study use the skills they learn on their part-time higher education courses, highlighting both the private and social benefits. It also discusses the financial private returns to part-time undergraduate study and how these differ from those reported in the rates of return literature, which, we argue, places too much emphasis on financial returns for this student group and thus tends to ignore the non-financial benefits that are especially important for graduates of part-time study.

**Measures of financial and non-financial returns to skills acquisition through lifelong learning**

As the OECD Skills Strategy document notes, preparing young people for entry into the labour market is only one aspect of skills development; working age adults also need 'to develop skills so that they can progress in their careers, meet the changing demands of the labour market, and don't lose the skills they have already acquired' (OECD, 2012, p.9). Within the UK, around a third of all HE undergraduates study part-time, and most – around 80% - are employed, primarily full-time, while studying (Callender et al., 2010). These part-time students can be considered as engaging in lifelong learning where this term is used generically, covering forms of human capital accumulation occurring 'after the cessation of an individual's first period of continuous education' and undertaking reskilling or up-skilling through HE 'following entry to the labour market'; and wherein lifelong learning is seen as a key driver of economic growth and competitiveness (Blanden et al. 2010, p1).

Blanden et al's 2010 paper 'Measuring the returns to lifelong learning', note that the notion of the development of work-related skills as the primary driver for participation in lifelong learning has been criticised, because it focuses on extrinsic, economic goals and ignores wider private and public benefits. International research on the returns to lifelong learning reviewed by Dorsett et al (2010) is a good example. These studies consider post-graduation outcomes concentrating on a narrow range of financial indicators such as employment and pay effects. Blanden and others (2010) also note that human capital theories view education as an investment, and earnings as one of the returns to that investment; and yet, 'focusing solely on monetary returns....may lead us to neglect other important social outcomes, such as higher levels of social status, work autonomy and social capital, all of which have been shown to have positive knock-on effects for the individual, their household and the

community' (ibid., p8). They also acknowledge that in much of the literature on returns to (lifelong) learning, one can see a distinction between studies that use economic, and those that use sociological outcome measures of 'returns', although most of the HE literature focuses on economic returns and rarely discusses skill utilisation.

***Returns to HE***

As with lifelong learning, often the measures to capture the impact of HE study are based on the analysis of the financial returns to individuals who have experienced HE. Given continuing debates about how England's HE system should be funded, and the balance between private and public contributions (see for example, the Browne review, 2010, cited above) we should not be surprised at the focus on financial returns, with rather less attention being paid to non-financial returns, especially in respect of private returns.[1] However, it is noticeable that measures of the private benefits of HE have been based on an underlying premise that HE students tend to be young school leavers studying on a full-time basis who have yet to make the transition into the labour market 'proper' (even though a significant number will be working on a part-time basis while studying –albeit in low-level occupations). Measures such as employment status, income level, and occupational level have traditionally been captured in annual national surveys like the Higher Education Statistics Agency's (HESA) 'Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education'. But prior to 2002/2003, this HESA survey was limited to those who had studied full-time – part-time students' destinations were not captured. This absence of part-time students tended to reinforce a sense that measures of private returns to HE were premised on notions of full-time students moving into the labour market for the first time, rather than trying to capture such information for all HE students, including the significant numbers who study part-time whilst continuing to work in substantive jobs.

Considerations of private returns as measured in financial gains to the individual continue to dominate governments' and other's (e.g. OECD, 2013; Woodhall, 2006) thinking about HE. For example, in David Willetts' (the government minister with responsibility for HE) April 2012 speech at the Higher Education Funding Council for England's (the organisation responsible for distributing public money for HE to universities and colleges in England) annual conference, he spoke of social mobility and equality of opportunity in accessing HE, and referred to work already underway to assemble evidence on the 'effects of the emerging changes in higher education' where the evidence in question seemed to focus on financial returns (including an assessment of earnings returns from different kinds of degrees), and improving graduates' earnings data (Willetts, April 2012). He had little to say about HE as part of government's wider skills strategy, nor of how the effects of the emerging changes in the funding of HE might be captured in ways other than strictly financial measures (in the form of earnings' returns).

One might question how relevant measures such as earnings' returns are for part-time students who are already employed in substantive posts , and may not be seeking 'returns' in such economic terms (see for example, Feinstein et al. 2007, cited later).

[1] Cost-sharing policies are based on the idea that those who benefit from higher education should contribute towards its costs, while loan policies in particular are predicated on the financial returns to higher education.

In fact, data from the British Household Panel Survey suggest that there are relatively high levels of employment continuity within the working population generally – for example, in the period 2006 – 2008, almost three quarters of the working population had stayed in employment with the same employer (Callender and Wilkinson, 2013). Of course, such employment continuity may not imply similar levels of income continuity for most of the working population, many of whom may have stayed with the same employer but gained promotion (and hence have experienced increased levels of income, as we will show below). But such levels of employment continuity could mean that by focussing measures of private returns primarily on explicit changes in employment conditions, other aspects of private 'returns' could be overlooked, as could the broader, social/public benefits of HE.

**Studies on the benefits of part-time HE study**

There have been studies on the benefits of part-time HE, but a review of the literature published since 1999 notes that because of the diversity and complexity of part-time HE, as well as a lack of attention from policy makers, there has been a distinct lack of research in the area, and that 'research on the impacts of part-time study on graduates and any benefits that accrue to the individual or society ..is still rare' (Bennion et al. 2011, p150). In addition, because part-time HE is so diverse, studies tend to focus on particular segments of part-time provision. As discussed, the nationally-run systematic survey of the destinations of leavers from HE has only recently included part-time students. However, the survey also has a narrow focus, primarily considering post-graduation outcomes concerned with employment, pay, and further study, training and research. Arguably the destinations survey is still geared towards full-time students and the assumption that new graduates are new labour market entrants. Moreover, it fails to collect data on part-time students' earnings prior to starting their studies, and thus cannot be used to calculate fully the financial returns of part-time HE.

Bennion et al's (2011) review of 22 research studies found such studies ranged across part-time students' motivations to study; the economic benefits of part-time study; and the personal benefits. The majority focussed on personal (i.e. private) benefits, though it acknowledged that increasing numbers of studies are now looking at wider public societal benefits. Those studies concentrating specifically on economic benefits tended to explore personal economic benefits as opposed to public economic benefits, and ignore issues about skills utilisation. The most commonly reported personal economic benefits were cited in quantitative, tangible forms, namely an increase in personal income, promotion, as well as other less objective measures like job satisfaction, and employment prospects. The studies also reported that such benefits may vary according to individuals' socio-economic and demographic profiles, as well as their motivations to study. For example, a large scale longitudinal study of graduates from the UK's two main providers of part-time HE (the Open University and Birkbeck) found that the most commonly cited reason for study related to 'progression and personal development', closely followed by 'enjoyment'. This 'enjoyment' reason was most popular amongst those students whose studies were not being funded by their employers; and such students were more likely to give 'improving the current job' as a motivation for study, as opposed to 'changing job' (Feinstein et al., 2007, cited in Bennion et al, 2011).

We should note that the review seems to be using the term 'social' to denote benefits beyond purely economic ones, be they experienced by individuals or by wider social groupings. Other literatures tend to use the term 'private' to denote gains (financial and/or non-financial) accruing to the individual, and the term 'social' when referring to such gains experienced by wider groupings or society at large. Thus, Bennion et al's review found that studies exploring social (sic) benefits of part-time HE reported personal development as the dominant theme; with the most cited attainment being an increase in self-confidence and self-belief. For example Jamieson et al.'s study of the benefits of HE study for part-time students based at the two main UK part-time HE providers set-out to explore impacts of part-time study wider than 'just' employment aspects (Jamieson et al. 2009). In analysing the benefits, Jamieson and others used a four-way classification of outcomes and benefits, namely employment-related benefits, generic skills, identity capital (such as personal development and happiness), and social capital (networks, relationships and civic participation) which was developed from Schuller et al.'s original three-way theoretical capital framework (Schuller et al. 2002). In Jamieson and other's study, part-time graduates reported 'identity capital benefits ..much more strongly than any other category of benefits' (Jamieson et al. 2009, p260).

Given current policy commitments to part-time HE study (amongst other things) as part of government's wider skills strategy, and some signs that more attention is now being paid to skills utilisation and links to general economic performance, it would seem timely to look more closely at the benefits of part-time study. We have argued (above) that current measures of the private benefits of HE study which focus on financial (and other economic) gains may not be the most appropriate measures for part-time students who, by and large, are already employed in substantive jobs during their period of study. Rather, more attention needs to be paid to part-time students' experiences in the workplace, and whether, and to what extent such students' knowledge and skills developed through HE are being used in the workplace. A focus on part-time students' views of their skills development and the deployment of those skills in their workplace could add a very useful dimension to current debates about up- skilling of the workforce, and links to productivity and general economic performance.

Our investigations being undertaken as part of the national Futuretrack longitudinal study of part-time HE students provided an opportunity to explore in more depth students' experiences of work during and since completing their undergraduate studies. We found that irrespective of whether the students had experienced explicit employment or financial gains (for example changed employer, or job), or not, the students reported a range of job-related private (i.e. personal) and more public (social) benefits that had resulted from their HE studies. Such findings bring into question a range of assumptions underpinning existing literatures on the returns to HE that still tend to be pre-occupied with full-time graduates making a transition into the labour market and focus on tangible financial measures, and hence tend to underplay (or miss altogether) other job-related benefits that might accrue to those individuals who have been holding down substantive jobs throughout their HE studies, and to their wider social groupings in the workplace.

## Our study

The Futuretrack study of part-time HE students is a longitudinal study tracking students through a series of surveys. It is the first study of its kind involving a nationally representative sample of part-time undergraduates from across the UK, aiming for one of the following qualifications: a higher national (diploma or certificate); a Foundation degree: or a first undergraduate degree, and studying a range of vocational and non-vocational subjects. The main research was carried out in two phases. The first phase (wave 1) was undertaken in 2007/2008 and included a survey of 3,704 part-time UK domiciled undergraduates, of whom 1,876 were in their first year of study, and 1,828 were in their final year of study. The first phase (wave 1) survey focused on students' career intentions and ambitions, and career development and decision-making, and findings were reported in 2010 (Callender et al, 2010).

The second phase (wave 2) was undertaken in 2010/2011. The two wave 2 surveys conducted focused on students' experiences since the previous survey, including aspects of working life, and the extent to which they were drawing on knowledge and skills derived from their HE studies in their current jobs. One survey tracked those part-time students who had been in their first year of study in 2007/2008 (Callender and Wilkinson, 2012). A second survey tracked those undergraduates who had been in the final year of study in 2007/2008, and had finished studying when re-interviewed in 2010/11 (Callender and Wilkinson, 2013). Both surveys included follow-up in-depth interviews with a sub-set of the students surveyed (Callender and Wilkinson, 2013). The achieved sample of this second 'completers' survey totalled 940 students, most of whom had completed a first degree (79%) rather than a Foundation degree (14%) or a higher national (7%). The majority (59%) of employees in both waves – in 2007/08 and 2010/11 - worked in the same job for the same employer at both points in time, nearly a quarter had changed job but not employer, and the remaining 18% had changed employer. Thus it would seem from the Futuretrack study that most graduates from part-time study do not change jobs or employer, at least not in the short term period covered in the study (up to two and half years after completing their studies).

In the following section, we present some of the findings from this wave 2 survey for a sub-group of students surveyed: those who were employed both at wave 1 and wave 2 so that we can examine any job change and its impact; and those who had taken a bachelor's degree (N=474). We focus on degree graduates because they are most comparable with full-time graduates, 90% of whom study for a first degree (Pollard et al. 2012), and because most wave 2 survey respondents had studied for a first degree (as opposed to a Foundation degree or higher national).

As noted above, the majority of completers were still working for the same employer, in the same job as they had been in when undertaking their studies.[2] Our data analysis shows that the majority of graduates who changed employer had received a pay rise - only 30 per cent had not received a pay rise as a direct result of their HE course. Of those working for the same employer, a minority (two out of five) had received a pay rise as a direct result of their HE studies, but the majority - 60 per cent – had not done

[2] Among this particular sub-sample of respondents who were employees in 2007/08 and 2010/11 – 55% worked in the same job for the same employer at both points in time, 23% had changed job but not employer, and the remaining 22% had changed employer.

so; and of those who had received a pay rise, around three quarters had changed job. Furthermore, of those graduates working for the same employer, a third who had gained promotion, three-quarters had changed job but the majority - two-thirds - had not been promoted as a direct result of their studies. So it would seem that those graduates who had stayed with the same employer, in the same job, had little to 'show' by way of returns to HE when gauged by explicit tangible measures like pay increases, or promotion.

Ideally we would have liked to compare the pay and promotion outcomes for the graduates we surveyed with non-students to isolate the effects of their part-time study. We investigated the possibility of using data from the British Household Panel Study (BHPS) and Understanding Society (US) to look at pay increases and promotions amongst those that did not undertake a part-time degree to assess whether those taking a part-time degree were more likely to receive a pay rise because of completing their degree. Fieldwork for wave 18 of the BHPS largely took place between September and November 2008, broadly in line with the first wave of our survey, with further data collection taking place for these respondents throughout 2010, broadly in line with the second wave of our survey. However, using these data it was difficult to identify a suitable and reliable comparator group. This is partly due to the heterogeneity of the part-time graduates surveyed in Futuretrack, especially their diverse socio-economic characteristics and entry qualifications all of which are likely to impact on the likelihood of receiving a pay rise. Furthermore, the data collected in BHPS and US do not include questions that capture the attitudes and motivations to study, which raises the possibility of selectivity bias (Heckman, 1990) in any analysis that compared these groups of students and non-students. Given this, we concluded that any such analysis was unlikely to produce robust evidence of the impact of part-time study and was beyond the scope of this paper.

But what about skills usage as a measure of HE returns? In the following sections, we explore graduates' skills usage in their current jobs, before exploring in more detail findings emerging from interviews undertaken with a small sub-sample of these degree qualifiers. We look at two particular wave 2 survey questions, and in each case present the responses are grouped into three separate categories, namely whether, since the wave 1 survey (when students were in the final year of study) the graduate had: changed employer; changed job, but not employer; changed neither job, nor employer. We acknowledge that within the first category, changed employer, graduates may or may not have changed their type of work, but the overall numbers within this category (77) are too few to allow any further breakdown in our subsequent analyses[3].

In Table1 below, we consider the extent to which graduates considered they were using the skills learned on their degree in their current job.

[insert Table 1 about here]

Around three quarters of graduates considered they were using their degree skills to some extent, or a great deal in their current jobs, with just under a half indicating they

[3] Of the 22% who had changed employer, almost two thirds had also changed the type of work they did, and for four in ten their occupational level had increased.

were using them a great deal. But it is those who have changed job but are working for the same employer who are most likely to consider they are using the skills learned during their degree a great deal – almost two thirds do so, compared to just over half of those who have changed employer, and only a third of those who have changed neither job nor employer. Further, none of those who had changed job considered they were not using their new skills at all; whereas just over a tenth of those who had changed employer, or who were in the same job with the same employer felt they were not using the skills learned in their degree at all.

Whilst skills usage could be seen as an aggregate, rather easily-captured measure, it tells us little about how the part-time graduates' approaches to their work may have changed as a direct result of their studies, especially those (the majority) who had not changed job or employer since graduating. In Table 2 below, we look at the respondents' views on aspects of their employment. The Wave 2 survey question asked respondents if "since we were last in touch, have any of the following had happened to you at work, *as a result of your course*?". We acknowledge that given respondents had been in work in the intervening period then such additional experiences of work may have contributed to some of the employment aspects about which certain questions were posed. But the survey question specifically asked if the changes were as a direct result of the respondent's HE course – hence we consider we should interpret their responses in that light.[4]

[insert Table 2 about here]

Table 2 shows that those who had changed employer (response coded 1) and those who had changed job but not employer (response coded 2) were much more likely than those who had stayed in the same job with the same employer (response coded 3) to cite a range of positive changes in their approach to work as a direct result of their degree course. If we look at change as a direct result of the course or the course helped, we can see that the majority (seven out of ten, or more) agree that: they now have a deeper understanding of their work; their ability to undertake their work has improved; they are more confident about their work; they feel they are taken more seriously at work; they find their work more satisfying; and feel better qualified to do the job. Further, six out of ten (or more) have taken on more responsibilities at work, and are more enthusiastic about their work.

Those who had not changed employer or job were much less likely to cite such positive changes as a direct result of their degree course: around only four in ten feel better qualified to do their job, about a third have a deeper understanding of their work, and are more confident about their work, and even lower proportions cite other positive changes. But if we consider changes as a direct result of the course or that the course helped, then we see that the majority – seven out of ten (or more) - of those still in the same job do feel better qualified to do their job, they have a deeper understanding of their work, they are more confident about their work, and consider their ability to do the job has improved.

[4] As discussed above, it was not possible to compare these graduates' responses to non-students. Moreover, even if it had been feasible to isolate a suitable comparator non-student groups, the BHPS, and no other national survey to the best of our knowledge, collect comparable data about the sort of changes in working lives described in Table 2.

***Follow-up qualitative study***

In addition to the wave 2 survey, we undertook qualitative interviews with a sub-set of 'completers' to explore in more depth graduates' experiences of work since completing their studies, and wider aspects of learning benefits. Again, we focused on those who had studied for a first degree. The selection of completers to be approached to take part in the in-depth qualitative interviews was purposeful in that we were interested in learning from those for whom their degree course had an impact on their employment experiences, and thus aimed to identify those who were most likely to illustrate these particular benefits.

In total, 246 of the 552 respondents to the wave 1 and wave 2 'completers' surveys who had agreed to take part in a follow-up telephone interview had completed a first degree. Most had provided an email contact address, and a telephone number. Of these 246 respondents, five were unemployed at wave 1, in their final year of study (in 2007/2008) and employed at wave 2, three years later, in 2010/2011; and a further 159 were employed full-time at wave 1 and at wave 2.

We approached all those who had been unemployed at wave 1 and who were employed at wave 2 (n=5), and a sub-set of the 159 who were employed full-time both at wave 1 and wave 2, selected across the subject range. In all, 51 respondents were contacted by email at the end of September 2011. The email reminded recipients that they had previously been in involved in the Futuretrack study, asked if they would be prepared to take part in a follow-up phone interview (lasting around 25 minutes) and provided a short outline of the study by way of background. In most cases, a follow-up phone call was made some 10-15 days after the initial email to remind recipients about the email, and to ask them to contact the researcher to arrange a suitable date/time for the 'phone interview. In most cases, a message had to be left on voicemail. Once an agreed date/time had been established, the individuals concerned were emailed some further details about the telephone interview, essentially outlining the main themes to be covered. The semi-structured interview schedule was designed to: explore, in more depth, the relationship between the graduates' degree studies and their working lives; to explore *whether*, and *to what extent* respondents considered they were using/not using the knowledge, skills, attributes developed through their studies in their current work, and *why;* to explore broader issues of work/life balance, plans for the future and *whether*, and *to what extent* respondents think their lives had changed as a result of completing their degree. In this article, we draw on the graduates' responses to the questions about whether, and to what extent they considered they were using/not using the knowledge, skill, attributes developed through their degree studies in their current work, and why.

The achieved 'completer' qualitative sample comprised 17 graduates: only three had changed employer since their final year of study; five had changed job but were still working for the same employer; and the majority (nine interviewees) were working in the same job for the same employer. In almost all cases, the telephone interview was undertaken in the early evening, once the respondent was home from work; all agreed to the interview being recorded, and detailed notes of the interview, including a

verbatim transcript of certain sections were produced. The breakdown of interviewees by subject studied is shown in Table 3 below.

[insert Table 3 about here]

Our interviewee sample was dominated by those who had completed an Education degree programme; more than half the interviewees (nine of the 17) had graduated from Education degree programmes (compared to less than a fifth in the survey sample). Further, all interviewees were working full-time, most (15 of the 17) were female; more than half (11 of the 17) were aged over forty when they completed their studies, and all interviewees except one were white.

The vast majority of interviewees were able to cite ways in which they had been able to draw on their degree knowledge and skills in their current employment. A great many spoke of the confidence they had gained from successfully completing a degree, and the pride they felt from such an achievement, especially when their prior educational experiences (usually completed very many years before) had not necessarily been that positive in terms of formal (school-level) qualifications gained. What seemed particularly interesting was an emerging sense of individuals being able to deploy knowledge and skills and attributes developed through their HE studies within their current workplace, irrespective of whether the job they were doing had changed since completing their studies.

It seemed that our interviewees were reaping a range of employment benefits (in terms of putting their knowledge and skills to productive use in ways that they felt improved their workplace practices) even where they had not moved employer or changed job since graduating. Most interviewees fitted this category – nine were employed in the same job that they had been in when in their final year of study, although a few had changed job earlier on during their undergraduate studies. As discussed, much of the literature about work-related benefits of HE employment 'success' is often measured in tangible measures, for example, individuals moving into different jobs, particularly at higher occupational levels, and/or changing employer. We considered, therefore that our findings could be indicative of a situation whereby less tangible, non-financial employment gains are likely to be under-estimated, or overlooked completely.

As noted above, the telephone interview was semi-structured around a small number of broad themes; such an approach allowed individuals to respond in a manner which made sense to them and did not 'force' their responses in a specific direction. In the following section we explore some of the main themes that emerged from the interviews in response to being asked *whether*, and *to what extent* they considered they were using/not using the knowledge, skills, attributes developed through their part-time studies in their current work, and *why.* In attributing quotes, we indicate the respondent's subject of study, whether they have changed job/employer or not since completing their studies, and current job.

A recurring theme is how individuals' confidence has increased as a result of the their studies, and what that now means for their daily working lives, often in the way in which workplace colleagues now view them. As such, increased confidence in the workplace can be seen as both a private and a public/social gain.

"..I think I became more professional and more aware...so I do think my attitude has changed, and I'm certainly more confident as well...[the study] means I have basic knowledge of anything that's thrown at me so I know where to source the information, who to speak to ...sometimes I've been in very difficult situations ,with all the legislation and councillors and local government..I've got to be confident that I know what I'm talking about, and the confidence to say I don't know the answer but I will find out..I know I can go out there and research it...every day is like a learning curve.."

[business administration; made redundant, changed job; clerk to a local council]

"...well, I have been doing essentially the exact same job....I definitely feel I've got better organisation skills and better communication skills having done the degree. It gave me the confidence to put something...new ideas and the like..to my boss...I am expecting a big change [interviewee has recently opted for a redundancy option] and now I've got the confidence to get out there and look for another job"

[engineering; same job/same employer; maintenance engineer]

"I'm not really aware of using particular subject knowledge (from degree)..a lot of it is more about a massive confidence boost...like when going into meetings and being seen as an equal to the teaching staff..staff themselves see me a bit differently. Instead of thinking 'oh, it's just her going on about things' ..I feel they take note a bit more of what I say"
[education; same job/same employer; higher level teaching assistant]

"..confidence wise it's (the degree) helped enormously because I'm managing a team of social workers and occupational therapists..so the degree has helped enormously because of the variety of different professions that I manage..and because I trained so long ago, it was a diploma that I had so..in the profession (now) all the newly-qualified staff have degrees...it took me six years (to do the degree), and in that time the job progressed and I progressed..and now everyone's got the higher qualification.."

[social science; same job/same employer; manager in social work team]

From these few quotes, we see that the relationship between increased confidence and achieving a degree qualification seems to be based on both the individual's increased knowledge and possibly the fact the award of the degree has given external credibility to an individual's existing knowledge, and hence they are now perceived differently by workplace colleagues, particularly those who also have a degree. Hence, the 'identity capital' gains are related to individuals' workplace situations, and are both private gains to the individual, and social gains to the individual's workplace more generally.

Many also spoke of other work colleagues now asking them for advice and guidance, which can be seen in terms of wider social benefits to workplace colleagues.

"...I would say they do come to me for a lot of advice, and I'm now in a position where I can give them that advice but I'm also in a position to give

them the links to go on and further their own education...the staff have got the opportunity ..to basically present a cpd training event for the rest of the staff and I help them to do that ...I probably wouldn't have done that before..it would have been someone else doing that for me...I like to get staff to think about things they're really good at...and maybe could help others..and also I get them to think about things they'd really like to learn more about ...I think now because I know how to access further learning myself, it's actually very simple things to do, I can now pass this information on to others.."

[education; changed job/same employer; child development team leader]

"..even though my position and salary is the same I think the fact that my head of school knows I have this degree..they pick more of your brains and give you different things to do.."

[education; same job/same employer; early years worker]

"..the main thing it (the degree) really helps you with getting to know the theory underlying the practice, so you get a deeper knowledge..I've found I've been able to mentor other staff..there's quite a few of them going through the degree now that I did..they actually come to me for advice and help..."

[education; same job/same employer; nursery manager]

As illustrated in the last quote, a further aspect of the link between the degree studies and current employment situation regularly cited by interviewees related to the importance of theory underlying their work practices. We should not forget that very many of our interviewees (11 in all) were aged over forty when they completed their degrees, and had significant work histories prior to, and during their studies. In particular, those who had completed Education degrees (e.g. Childhood Studies; Early Years and Education) had worked for ten or more years in nursery/ school settings prior to embarking on their HE studies. Yet, in many cases our interviewees stressed the importance of gaining a greater understanding of theories which now informed their working practices.

"well the degree itself gave me the foundations of where children come from, how they actually learn, so having that knowledge, for me that's been quite powerful really...because of child psychology..I hadn't delved into that before ...and so things then started to click into place and make sense..."

[education; changed job/same employer; qualified teacher]

"..the main thing it (the degree) really helps you with getting to know the theory underlying the practice, so you get a deeper knowledge..it helps with parents as well, you know, in terms of child development ..we really went into it in depth, and the theory, and you know why this happens, why that happens...even though I'd done some of that in my nursery nursing course...and that really helps when you're talking with parents and I can explain more to them about things...like if they're asking 'is that normal?' ..."

[education; same job/same employer; nursery manager]

"..I'm using it (the degree) everyday..it opens up your mind..not a whole other way of thinking, but other skills...a wee bit more thought goes in to how you do things...understanding a bit more why children behave like that

...before you would have just dealt with it ..like 'oh, you've got your silly head today'...but now you give it a bit more thought...like you'll look into it in a bit more depth ..there could be all sorts going on..and you'll pick up on their interests to try and deepen their learning...before (doing the degree) you would have dealt with it..if the situation had have arisen..whereas now you're probably thinking a bit more..why did the child do that?' ..trying to understand the behaviours more.."

[education; same job/same employer; early years worker]

Not only were our interviewees regularly drawing on theoretical knowledge to inform and improve their work practices, but they often spoke of now approaching their work from a wider viewpoint, and drawing on a range of perspectives which again they saw as improving their working practices, even where their current job was not obviously related to their degree studies.

"....yes (using degree)..I think it's lateral thinking to be honest...it's about thinking in a different way...whereas before (in my sales/marketing job) I was very sales-oriented ...it's really quite a narrow field. But having done the LLB...the academic side of it, obviously the content side of it, absolutely useless for what I'm doing now, but there are the lateral things..certainly the continuous ability to learn and learn quickly has been a major asset to the job I'm now doing.....I will question..I think that's the key, that's what you go to university for..is not to accept things blindly but to teach you to question what goes on and what you do..not just accepting (situations) it is that whole questioning, finding out for yourself..that's what university is all about..it's having that independent thinking.."

[law; changed job/changed employer; sales and trainer with major computing retailer]

" ..what was good was that I got others' perspectives..I mean things like 'values in education' and things like that, and I remember thinking at the time 'will I ever use that?' ..but with hindsight ..I have got that now in my head, and when we're discussing things around that, it does seem to come back ..it does give me other perspectives on the value of education which otherwise I might not have got..so at times, I might have thought 'oh, I don't see where that fits, but now I can see that I've brought that with me....it just gives you a different perspective ..and probably you're a little bit more reflective..than you'd generally be, or what I would have been in the past.."

[education; changed job/same employer; early years specialist]

".well yes (using degree)...not so much about the law in fact...but it's more about a way of thinking...it just changes the way you think about things, that's all...you're likely to be more systematic, and more objective rather than subjective and you know where to find the law...but the biggest thing about it, it wasn't like ..like areas you thought were going to be clarified were not, they were still grey...but you were able to find a kind of stand-point, where to start from..you could find your way through the maze..you could stand back and be more objective..."

[law; same job/same employer; nursing sister in A&E unit]

"...I'm now much more aware of the importance of quality of practice I think the degree showed me that you can look at your own approach to work tasks to improve on things..the whole way of studying for the degree set you up to be much more aware (of your own practice)...large parts of it were about reflecting on practice...the things I've learned have really helped to think a lot more about my work practices..."

[education; same job/same employer; early years worker]

"....even though I haven't been using it (the degree knowledge) I think I've got a more positive attitude now than I did have..because when you do a degree you touch on wider things and other stuff and you start to see how things fit into a bigger picture.."

[engineering; same job/same employer; maintenance engineer]

The above quotes clearly illustrate a range of employment benefits that the 'completers' consider have arisen from their degree studies, irrespective of whether or not they have changed job since graduating. Moreover, whilst many of these positives can be seen as relating to cognitive (or 'hard') skills and competences (for example, a greater depth of theoretical knowledge underpinning and hence improving work practices) and hence are aligned to notions of human capital, others are much more aligned to identity capital (individual's self-esteem and how others in the workplace view them) and also social capital (how individuals have related to others in the workplace in terms of providing advice and cascading knowledge). Such identity and social capitals can be seen as relating to non-cognitive (or 'soft') skills, which are arguably less easily measured objectively, and hence less likely to figure in discussions about skills utilisation and returns to HE. They are also less likely to figure in measures of workplace productivity, and yet many of our interviewees reported that the gains they attributed directly to their HE studies had led to an improvement in their own working practices – that is, their private non-financial gains impacted on their performance in the workplace. Further, in some cases, these gains had also benefited the wider social group within their workplace – that is, there were also social/public non-financial gains.

Data from the wave 2 survey (shown in Tables 1 and 2 above) indicate that those part-time students who changed employer or job since completing their studies are more likely than those who have stayed in the same job to report a range of positive changes in their employment situation in relation to their own approaches to work and how others view them at work. Yet the illustrative quotes shown above, arising from open-ended questioning about the '*whether*, and *to what extent* interviewees considered they were using/not using the knowledge, skills, attributes developed through their studies in their current work, and *why'* do provide clear evidence of graduates of part-time study experiencing positive benefits in their employment situations as a direct result of their studies, irrespective of whether or not they have changed employer/job.

Further, as the quotes illustrate, the gains discussed tend not to be linked to specific areas of knowledge gains, or particular skills now being deployed – rather, the gains, especially those relating to confidence seem to result from a clustering of aspects linked to recognition of an individual's existing knowledge, their own increased

knowledge, how others in the workplace now view the individual and how the individual is now more likely to approach tasks and situations in a different, and arguably more effective manner.

**Discussion and conclusions**

At the outset, we argued that the literature on the returns to HE and the employment benefits of HE tend to focus on labour market entry, pay and progression. In part, this is because it is assumed that most graduates are 'new' entrants to the labour market; and whilst this may be primarily the case for most graduates of full-time study, it is not the case for graduates of part-time study – the vast majority of whom are already in employment. The continuing research emphasis on the economic returns to HE is dominated by the experiences of full-time graduates and a discourse of upskilling, which affects the sorts of research questions posed, including a focus on the tangible (financial) results of gaining a degree. And yet, for very many part-time HE students with considerable labour market experiences, the discourse might more profitably be couched in terms of re-skilling, even when their highest qualification on entry to HE is Level 3 or below and thus they are 'formally' upskilling, skills enrichment and utilisation, and improving current working practices.

Whilst tangible measures are important, less tangible aspects are overlooked, especially HE's impact on the workplace experience for those who are *already* in the workplace, who have been in the workplace for some time, and hence who are likely to have considerable workplace experience and knowledge of workplace practices.

The results from our studies provide clear evidence of gains in human capital (in terms of cognitive skills and competences) as well as identity capital (individual's self-esteem) and social capital (relating to others in the workplace) which, taken together are seen by the individuals concerned as improving their workplace practices. Further, such private and more public/social gains are likely to be reported by those who have not changed jobs or employers, as well as those who have made changes since completing their studies.

But such gains are likely to be overlooked in current measures and indicators used to capture the employment benefits of HE for part-time students. First, our study found that after completing their studies, most part-time graduates do not change jobs or employers, at least in the short term - and, as noted above, they are far less likely to report easily measureable gains (like pay increase, promotion). Moreover, given that levels of employment continuity within the general working population seem to be high (as noted earlier), research questions that focus on job moves, and progression within the labour market may well be the wrong questions to ask to gauge measures of benefits/returns to HE.

The OECD report 'Better skills, better jobs, better lives' notes that skills need to be used effectively and bring real, sustainable benefits to the individuals concerned (OECD, 2012). But we would argue that we need to look wider than just skills if we are to capture the benefits of HE to individuals and their workplaces. Even if other tangible measures are used – for example, aggregate measures of skills usage - such measures are unlikely to capture the dynamic cluster of gains in human, identity and social capital that taken together seem to underpin positive changes to working

practices (as reported by our interviewees). Such gains linked to HE studies are likely to remain undetected if we continue to focus on tangible measures which seem to privilege financial and economic measures (like change in employment situation, increases in income levels) and downplay other, non-financial aspects of gains which positively impact on individuals' working situations - even where those individuals do not change job or employer. It is imperative that research be undertaken to develop measures to capture the non-financial returns of skills acquisition through part-time HE study, so that future debates about returns to HE adequately take into account those gains that currently seem to be hidden.

Further, we note above that debates on skills supply and demand are starting to move on from questions of the nature, quantity and quality of skills 'supplied' to the workplace, to consideration of skills utilisation 'within' the workplace. Our illustrative quotes cited above give some indication of how individuals already in the workplace perceive how, and in what ways, the knowledge and skills gained through their HE studies are enriching how they go about their day-to-day working practices, and positively affecting those practices, and in some instances the practices of those with whom they work. We suggest that current discussions about skills utilisation may not be adequately capturing this fuller picture in relation to working practices, and the social dynamics of workplaces, and recommend that future debates on skills utilisation, and linked issues of productivity, start to engage with these dimensions of skills utilisation.

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Table 1: Degree qualifiers' usage of skills learned on course in current job, by employment status change since final year of study, %

| | A great deal | To some extent | A little | Not at all |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Changed employer | 54 | 26 | 10 | 11 |
| Changed job, same employer | 63 | 23 | 14 | 0 |
| Same job, same employer | 36 | 32 | 21 | 12 |
| Overall | 46 | 28 | 17 | 9 |

Base: All Bachelor degree graduates who were employed in 2007/08 and 2010/11 Unweighted N=384
Source: Futuretrack: part-time students 2010. Wave 2 survey, Qn16_5 " thinking again about your undergraduate degree, to what extent do you use the skills you learned on the course in your present job?"

Table 2: Degree respondents' views on aspects of employment, by whether they had changed employer, changed job, changed neither employer nor job since final year of study (%)

| | Yes, as a direct result of course, % | | | | Yes, the course helped, % | | | | No change, % | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | **All** | Changed employer | Changed job not employer | Did not change job or employer | **All** | Changed employer | Changed job not employer | Did not change job or employer | **All** | Changed employer | Changed job not employer | Did not change job or employer |
| **Do you feel better qualified to do your job** | 50 | 63 | 62 | 39 | 32 | 20 | 35 | 36 | 18 | 18 | 4 | 25 |
| **Do you have a deeper understanding of your work** | 41 | 50 | 49 | 34 | 35 | 28 | 38 | 37 | 24 | 23 | 14 | 29 |
| **Are you more enthusiastic about your work** | 26 | 41 | 33 | 17 | 31 | 25 | 39 | 30 | 43 | 34 | 28 | 53 |
| **Are you more confident about your work** | 42 | 53 | 56 | 31 | 39 | 31 | 49 | 42 | 19 | 17 | 3 | 28 |
| **Have you taken on more responsibilities at work** | 35 | 41 | 58 | 23 | 27 | 23 | 32 | 27 | 37 | 36 | 9 | 50 |
| **Is your work more satisfying** | 26 | 37 | 32 | 19 | 34 | 33 | 47 | 28 | 40 | 30 | 21 | 53 |
| **Has your ability to do your work improved** | 35 | 45 | 45 | 27 | 42 | 35 | 44 | 45 | 22 | 19 | 11 | 29 |
| **Are you taken more seriously at work** | 35 | 45 | 48 | 24 | 26 | 28 | 33 | 22 | 39 | 27 | 22 | 54 |

Base: All Bachelor degree graduates who were employed in 2007/08 and 2010/11 Unweighted N=384
Source: Futuretrack: part-time students 2010. Wave2 survey, Qn18 "Since we were last in touch with you.....have any of the following things happened to you at work, as a result of your course?

Table 3: Futuretrack ‘completer’ interviewees, and overall ‘completers’ survey sample, by degree subject studied (%)

| Degree subject studied | Interviewees, % | Survey sample, % |
|---|---|---|
| Engineering/technology | 12 | 21 |
| Social Science | 12 | 30 |
| Law | 18 | 9 |
| Business | 6 | 22 |
| Education | 53 | 17 |

Base: All Bachelor degree graduates who were employed in 2007/08 and 2010/11 N=476
Source: Futuretrack: part-time students 2010.