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A wider perspective and more options

Investigating the longer term
employability of
humanities graduates

Rebecca Allan

A report carried out on behalf of the Higher Education Academy Subject Centres for
English; History, Classics and Archaeology; Languages, Linguistics and Area Studies

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Understanding what graduates do after leaving university has mainly depended upon statistics collected six months after graduation. *A wider perspective and more options* is based on in-depth interviews with humanities graduates from the 1970s onwards and captures something of the diversity of career paths followed by graduates in so-called 'non-vocational' disciplines. The report will be a valuable resource for lecturers and careers advisors seeking to help humanities students prepare for life after graduation.

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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

The majority of students entering higher education today do so to better their future prospects in the job market. In a recent student survey, when asked to rank reasons for going to university, 70% of students cited gaining qualifications as their main motivation, whilst 57% said that it was to improve their chances of getting a job (UNITE, 2005).

Even with an increasing number of graduates on the job market, having a degree will certainly boost an individual's career prospects and potential earnings (Elias and Purcell, 2004).

This being the case, where do degrees in the humanities stand? If students are looking for more vocational higher education which will provide them with a clear path into the workplace, are degrees in English and so on, which do not lead to an obvious vocation, relevant?

The answer is that degrees don't guarantee employment. Employers are looking for proof of an overall aptitude for the job, which may include subject specific knowledge, but will also include the soft and transferable skills which are needed to enable the graduate to work as part of a team, communicate ideas, problem-solve, deal with the public, and so on. Moreover, graduates must be able to articulate these skills to a potential employer.

Over half the positions which require a graduate do not specify the discipline area from which they should come (British Academy, 2004). The British Academy report argues that humanities graduates are better off than their counterparts who have degrees that are more closely linked to a specific career, as humanities graduates do not feel pressured to find work that exactly fits their training. Therefore humanities graduates can be employed in a wide range of fields. This allows them to pursue other interests they may have alongside academic study, or to diversify on completion of higher education.

The British Academy report also indicates that it may take longer for graduates with less obviously 'vocational' degrees to take up graduate level jobs, and they may have an initial period of unemployment directly after graduation. This claim seems to be reflected in the Destination of Leavers from Higher Education Survey (DLHE) carried out by The Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA). This survey replaced the First Destination Survey (FDS) in 2004, and provides a snapshot of graduates' activities in the January, following their graduation in June.

For the discipline areas of concern for this report, only History, English and Modern Languages are represented by the DLHE surveys. When compared to more vocational subjects, these disciplines show a lower number of graduates in employment in the UK six months after graduation. For example, of those graduating in 2003, 55.5% of English graduates, 50.4% of Modern Languages graduates and 51.5% of History graduates were in employment in the UK, compared with 61.3% of Electrical and Electronic Engineers and 68.3% of Business and Management Studies graduates (the average across all subject areas was 61.1% for graduates in 2003). Even compared with other subjects which also don't have strong links to a specific career, fewer humanities graduates were employed in the UK six months after graduation. For example, Sociology has a 62.8% employment rate.

However the DLHE survey also indicates that a high percentage of English (8.1%), Modern Languages (7.3%) and History (10%) graduates were studying for a higher degree (all subjects average: 6.4%) or for a teaching qualification. Of the Modern Languages graduates in 2003, 8.9% were working abroad. The percentage of humanities graduates who were believed to be unemployed was in line with the averages across all subject areas (6.6%). This indicates that humanities graduates do not tend to go directly into employment but rather pursue other activities first. The DLHE survey does not tell us how long humanities graduates will generally take to settle into a career, or when they do, if they are as successful as their peers from different discipline areas.

This study investigates how and to what extent graduates with humanities degrees feel that their higher education experience has contributed to their career progression, choices, and overall employability several years after graduation. Through 24 in-depth interviews, we examine the key skills developed during the higher education experience and how these have impacted on the individual's employability. We have also explored the individual's motivation for choosing their degrees and how prepared they felt when they entered the world of work.

The term 'humanities' is used throughout this report. It refers generically to the disciplines of Modern Languages, Linguistics, Area Studies, Classics, History, Archaeology and English. The graduates interviewed had studied these subjects, either as single or joint/combined honours.

1.1 The higher education experience

This report does not examine in isolation the skills and knowledge gained from academic study, and how they are used in the work place. Instead it considers the wider aspects of student life, referred to as the 'higher education experience'. Individuals may have developed particular skills and attitudes through certain elements of their degree programme such as a year abroad or field work, or through university clubs, societies and committees. Indeed, the very fact that they were required to live outside their family homes and become more self-reliant may have caused them to develop new skills. These experiences could be as valuable to the employability of an individual as subject knowledge.

1.2 Definition of employability

Employability can be defined as a set of achievements which constitute a necessary, but not sufficient condition for the gaining of employment (Yorke, 2004). Put another way, employability is a set of skills, understandings and personal attributes that make a graduate more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefit themselves, the community and the economy (as above).

Employment itself is dependent on a number of external factors which are beyond the influence of the individual, such as the economic climate, geographical location and other prevailing circumstances. There is no guarantee that employability can be turned into employment.

1.3 What are skills: hard and soft, core, key, generic, transferable?

It is important to make the distinction between hard and soft skills. Hard skills can be defined as the knowledge or the ability to do something tangible. In the case of this study, the hard skills we would expect the graduates to display would be the ability to speak a foreign language if they had studied languages for example. However, this report focuses primarily on soft skills. Soft skills, which are also known as core, key, generic or transferable refers to the ability to do something which is based more on an attitude or a behaviour, and whilst they can be developed, they are not taught in the same way as hard skills.

Throughout this report we have simply used the terms 'skills' to encompass all alternative definitions. Furthermore, the research approach allowed participants to use their own terms and vocabulary so it would have been inappropriate to label skills differently.

1.4 Graduate skill sets: categorisation and organisation

The lists of skills that graduates ought to be able to offer the employer seem to be endless. The ways in which they are categorised and sub-divided seems also to be inexhaustible.

Whether higher education can reasonably fulfil all the expectations of all employers, or indeed, whether it is the role of higher education to furnish graduates with these skills, as well as subject knowledge, is an issue open to debate and is discussed later in this report. Several examples of the categorisation of skills for different audiences are examined below.

The Dearing Report (Dearing, 1997) acknowledges the high level of intellectual skills developed by individuals during higher education but states that degree programmes should be helping students develop other capabilities needed in the workplace. The report points to the key skills of communication, numeracy and capability in information and communication technology. Students also need to develop the ability to be flexible and adaptable, to work in teams, to manage their own development and career and take responsibility for their own learning. It is important to bear in mind that this report was written as an assessment of current higher education provision with a view to making recommendations to inform development and organisation of programmes over the next two decades.

The **Chartered Management Institute** report 'Graduate Key Skills and Employability' (2002) examines the skills and competencies that graduates are bringing to the workplace. This report is written from the perspective of employers and was a result of a survey of managers who employ graduates. This report divides the skills into three categories: key skills, interpersonal skills, and workplace and personal attributes. The table below shows what is included in each of these categories.

Key skills	Computer/IT literacy Basic skills (literacy and numeracy) Communication skills Team-working/interpersonal skills Creativity/innovation Presentation skills Reasoning/comprehension Problem-solving/analytical thinking Commercial awareness
Interpersonal skills	Diplomacy/political skills Understanding others Formal etiquette Team-working
Workplace and personal attributes	Receptiveness to training Attendance record Self-confidence Time keeping Flexibility Motivation Respect for authority Ease with which fit into culture Loyalty Performance/productivity

This study goes a lot further into looking at elements which are personal attributes and arguably can not be taught or developed by higher education. Being punctual and having good time-keeping could be related to a personal attitude and the importance an individual attaches to this, which may have been informed by upbringing or cultural understanding.

The **National Employers Skills Survey 2004**, conducted by the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) in partnership with the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) and the Sector Skills Development Agency (SSDA), highlights a number of skills desired by employer of graduates. These can be divided into four broad areas:

Self-reliance skills	Self-awareness Proactivity Self-promotion Networking Planning action
People skills	Team-working Interpersonal skills Oral communication Leadership Customer orientation Foreign language
General skills	Problem-solving Flexibility Business acumen IT/computer literacy Numeracy Commitment
Specialist skills	Specific occupational skills Technical skills

This list is a lot more detailed than that offered by the Dearing Report. However it also does not suggest that all of these should be linked to the degree programme itself, but rather demonstrates how these skills can be derived from extra-curricular activities and work experience as well as study-based activities¹.

This categorisation is therefore useful for this research as respondents were asked to reflect on the origins of their skills and how they gained them from the whole higher education experience.

The **Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education** has produced 46 benchmark statements for higher education programmes (QAA 2000). These are intended to articulate the generally expected standards for each programme and the expected capabilities and attributes those possessing the qualification should be able to demonstrate. The benchmark statements are written by groups of subject specialists drawn from the subject community. Benchmark statements relevant to this report exist for Archaeology, History, Classics and Ancient History, English, Languages and Related Studies, Area Studies, and Linguistics.

The benchmark statements follow several different formats so a simple collation of all the skills mentioned in them is not straightforward. However, they all make the distinction between subject-based knowledge and skills pertaining to the content of the degree programme, and more generic skills which are learnt through the nature of the study.

¹ See Employability Uncovered! for further break down of these skills and how they are applicable to the wider higher education experience (www.prospects.ac.uk)

The generic skills which appear in each of the benchmark statements being treated are:

- Written and oral communication
- Time-management and management of own study
- Team-work
- Working independently
- Abstracting, synthesising and organising information and evidence
- Planning and executing project work
- Cultural awareness and sensitivity
- IT
- Problem-solving
- Constructing and managing arguments

Many more besides these appear, but are more specific to the individual discipline areas. For example, the benchmark statement for archaeology contains a number of competences focused on data collection and the use and evaluation of appropriate methodology and statistical interpretation.

1.5 Methodology

The graduates whose views are reported here responded to calls for participation circulated amongst a number of academic newsletters and mailing lists. Some were contacted by word of mouth. They work in a wide variety of industries and occupations. There has been an attempt to select participants from both pre-1992 and post-1992 universities. The earliest graduate received their degree in 1975 and the most recent in 2004.

Graduates interviewed represent a good geographical spread of universities, although there is a bias towards the number of female participants as compared to men. Despite the higher number of women with humanities degrees (notably in the discipline areas of Modern Languages and English) the proportions of men and women in this survey are not representative. Both standard entry and non-standard entry students were interviewed. Non-standard entry students can be classed as those who are mature students, or who do not follow a direct route from school to university.

The graduates interviewed are employed in a wide variety of industries. These are: social work, charity work and non-profit making organisations, publishing, teaching and education, academic research, administration, property sales, tourism, financial services, translation, screen-writing, consultancy and marketing and communications.

It must be noted that because of our method of recruitment, a higher proportion of the graduates have higher degrees and doctorates than is representative of the whole population of humanities graduates.

The table below profiles the graduates interviewed. Further details of the participants can be found in Appendix I.

Number of Respondents in each discipline (including combined/joint honours)	English	6
	Languages and Linguistics	8
	Area Studies	2
	History	4
	Archaeology	2
Year of graduation	Classics	2
	1970s	2
	1980s	1
	Early 1990s (1990-1995)	6
	Late 1990s (1996-1999)	8
Form of entry	Post 2000	7
	Standard entry	20
Type of university	Non-standard entry	4
	Pre-1992	19
	Post-1992	3
Sex	Undergraduate time spent abroad	1
	Female	18
	Male	6

At the start of the interview, participants were asked to respond to a list of questions about the composition of their degree, what was included in their higher education experience (to include work experience, travel, extra-curricular activities, etc), their motivation for choosing the degree, how they found the transition into the world of work and how the skills they developed during their higher education experience are used in their place of work.

Whilst a broad list of questions was prepared (Appendix II), these were only used as an aide-memoire for the researcher, and as prompts as when they were needed. Respondents were free to speak at length. This method, which May (2001) refers to as an unstructured interview allows interviewees to respond to questions in their own frame of reference. It also allows the respondent to use their own vocabulary and concepts rather than responding to those set by the interviewer. This approach supplies the qualitative depth required for this research.

The interviews were conducted over the telephone, and lasted for 20 to 30 minutes. Once participants had approached the researcher they were then contacted again with a briefing document which outlined the rationale behind the research and how it was going to be conducted. It also detailed the ethical concerns. It was thought necessary to provide participants with some form of briefing and prepare them for the subject of the conversation. Whilst it wasn't our intention to lead them in any way, it was felt that

the subject area may have been something they hadn't thought about before and would need to reflect on before the interview. This is especially the case where the interviewees had graduated some time ago.

Also of note here is the fact that the graduates are answering the questions with retrospect, which may mean their responses on a number of questions would be different to more recent graduates or current undergraduates. In certain cases they were also reliant on fairly distant memories. Whilst the retrospective view is beneficial, the graduates have had such a wide variety of experiences that identifying those skills derived specifically from their higher education experience is difficult.

Chapter 2

MOTIVATION

Before discussing what the graduates felt were the positive outcomes of their degrees in terms of their employability, we examined why they decided to study what they did in the first place. Since a career path was not a motivation, we were interested to find out what other factors had been influential.

This section looks closely at the respondents' attitudes towards, and inspiration for choosing, their degree subject, their programmes and the university itself.

We asked graduates to comment on their reasons for wanting to study a humanities subject at degree level and how their parents and teachers influenced their choices. Respondents were also asked to explain how they had felt about the employability issue when choosing their degrees, and upon graduation.

Perhaps contrary to The Student Experience Report (UNITE, Jan 2005) none of the graduates interviewed mentioned getting a job at the end of their degrees as being the main reason for studying. The graduates were in fact motivated by a number of different elements, which will be explored in this section.

2.1 Why a humanities discipline?

Graduates were asked to comment on their motivation for choosing their degree subjects and what inspired them to choose their programme.

For the vast majority the main reason for them choosing the discipline that they were to study at degree level was because they felt that they were good at it at school.

"I had chosen to study languages because I was good at them at school"
(Ellen, French and Russian, 1975)

In several instances the graduate felt they were unable to choose between one or more subjects they had studied at school and chose combined courses.

"I chose to combine my subjects because they were two of my favourite subjects and I couldn't pick one over the other" (Lucy, History and English, 1999)

In other examples the graduate chose programmes that they believed would allow them to continue to study their favourite subjects from school since they were implicitly written into the degree programme.

"I found it difficult to decide what to do at university because I had enjoyed everything I'd done at A' Level (French, history and economics), which is why I chose the course - because it didn't sound that narrow"
(Amie, French and Russian Studies, 1998)

This supports the findings of Purcell and Pitcher (1996) which show that the vast majority of arts, humanities and modern language students choose their degrees for the 'hedonistic' reasons. Students' choices were based on the fact that they enjoyed the discipline. This contrasts with students of business, law and technology and engineering who, according to Purcell and Pitcher chose their degrees for 'pragmatic' reasons, insofar as they considered their future employment to a greater extent.

If you don't have a vocation at that point then there's no point making yourself have one - if you don't want to do law or medicine then you're better off doing a humanities degree which will give you a wider perspective on the world and give you more options

Teacher and school influence

To this end, teachers were largely the biggest influence over the choice of degree subject for the respondents, their enjoyment of the subject being inextricably linked to the perceived quality of teaching at school, and the rapport built with the subject teacher.

"I chose my two undergraduate subjects because I had always loved them and was good at both. My teacher was an excellent instructor and really enthused me about the subject area" (Mark, Ancient History and Classics, 1995)

Conversely a couple of respondents commented that they felt 'pushed' by their teachers into a particular direction. According to one graduate, the traditional ethos of her school meant that the study of certain social sciences such as Sociology or Psychology would have been seen as 'radical'. The majority of her peers went on to study more traditional, academic subjects at university because of the influence of the school.

"I chose English because I was good at it at school, but maybe with retrospect this may have been because I went to a fairly traditional grammar school" (Louise, English Language and Literature, 1990)

The motivation for choosing the discipline is different when a subject has not been previously studied at school. Subjects started from scratch involved in this study include Classics, Archaeology, American Studies and certain foreign languages.

For one respondent her interest in Russian came from the opportunity to participate in a Russian exchange at school. Although she had never studied it before, this gave her enough of an insight into the subject to begin it at university. Another commented:

"I had initially registered to do German and English. It hadn't occurred to me to do Chinese at all until I got to registration and found out that you could do it. It was purely out of a matter of interest" (Claire, German and Chinese, 1995)

Another participant stated:

"It was really daunting [starting American Studies] but I was enthusiastic about it. But obviously it was a completely new area, and completely new demands from A level. I'd looked into the course material about what was taught and what was involved as much as possible and I think I had a good understanding of what was expected of me so it was quite a gamble but I knew it would be something I'd stay interested in" (Caroline, American Studies, 1998)

Where a new subject was started at university it seems that this was borne out of a natural curiosity leading to an academic interest.

"I had become interested in Archaeology when I started to read around the subject. It wasn't available as a full degree so I combined it with English" (Natalie, Archaeology and English, 2002)

"I was just interested in Archaeology. I had done some weekend courses and thought it might be an interesting career" (Carol, Archaeology, 2001)

Parental influence

The vast majority of respondents were of the first generation in their families to go to university. Whilst for every respondent their parents played an important part in their decision to go to university it was more through general support rather than steering them in a particular direction.

"I was encouraged to go to university by my parents because my dad had gone to university and enjoyed it, I thought it would be a good time and worthwhile as well. I think my parents were happy with my choice of course. They didn't say too much. It was my choice and they supported it" (Carina, French and German with Linguistics, 2004)

Only in a couple of instances had the graduates done the same subjects as their parents.

"My Dad had done English, so there were always lots of books in the house. And from my Dad I knew that English was a course I could do and I knew what it involved and this probably had a big influence on me" (Richard, English Language and Literature, 1990)

Whilst several of the respondents commented that their parents would have been happy regardless of the degree discipline they chose, a couple of others stated that their parents had thought a degree in law would have been a 'sensible' option. Law is probably the only 'vocational' degree that could be classed as a humanities degree, and which would be open to students who had studied the same subjects at A' level as the respondents. This is perhaps why this connection has been made.

"I was the first person in the family to go into higher education, so I never felt pushed. I feel that my parents felt law was a better option" (Catherine, History, 1999)

Some respondents received negative reactions to their choice of course.

"I was told by so many people that Classics was a waste of time, and that I should do something useful and that I was never going to get a job in Classics... My parents were trying to get me to do Business Studies, although my Classics teacher was very supportive" (Kristine, Classical Studies, 1999)

"People had asked why I was doing a history degree because they said I wouldn't get a job with history" (Dan, History, 1999)

"I think my dad raised his eyebrows about American Studies - what's that going to get you sort of thing, and that's an attitude I've come across a lot when I've discussed my degree" (Caroline, American Studies, 1998)

It seems that despite these negative attitudes, the graduates' determination to study a discipline they were interested in, as opposed to something 'useful' prevailed. This is discussed in more detail below.

2.2 Motivation for choosing degrees: course and university

The graduates mentioned a great number of different reasons which influenced their choice of university. It was notable that for every graduate, geographical location was a very important factor. Nearly all the respondents mentioned the fact that they had chosen their university because it was near to their parents' home, or indeed, far from it, depending on their personal attitudes.

Graduates also mentioned the importance of area surrounding the university as being either urban or rural depending on their preferences, with some graduates wanting to live in a large city. For one graduate the transport links to her parents' home were important.

"I chose my university due to geographical reasons. I had chosen a number of reputable universities around the country but there were direct flights and it had a similar sort of feel [to her home town] although a lot bigger" (Jo, English Studies, 2002)

Many of the graduates said that their university was 'good' but did not specify what they felt was good about it. This seemed to be a general impression based on the reputation of the university. In several cases the respondent had a contact who had gone to the university previously and seemed to play some part in influencing their decision to go there. Having a good experience on an open day was also mentioned, as well as having good impressions of academic staff, as one respondent commented:

"the admissions tutor took 45 minutes out to talk to me about being a mature student in general, and how I might go about choosing a university" (Carol, Archaeology, 2001)

Where a respondent did mention elements of the course contributing to their choice of university these were obviously very specific to the discipline area.

Two joint honours languages graduates said they were drawn to the course because they would have an opportunity to spend time in two countries during their third year abroad. Other language graduates stated that they chose their degrees because they thought the approach to languages was more practical, and they would be able to avoid the more literary elements that they hadn't enjoyed as much at school. Others admitted to not having read the course information that closely which meant they were unaware of the course content until they had started.

"Because I hadn't read the prospectus that closely I didn't realise how much of the course would be Anglo-Saxon and linguistics. I hadn't studied this before but actually enjoyed it" (Richard, English Language and Literature, 1990)

2.3 Attitudes towards employability

None of the graduates interviewed mentioned that they had taken their future potential employability and employment into account when deciding on their discipline areas or university. Instead they felt it was more important to do a subject that they enjoyed.

We also asked them whether they had had any aspirations to do a particular career when they started their degree. With few exceptions most responded that they had no ideas of careers before besides childhood aspirations which they had since discounted.

The overall impression was that the degree would furnish them with the skills and general education needed for employment. Several of the respondents suggested that having a degree alone demonstrated that they were of a certain level of intelligence, had certain generic skills and could cope in situations as required by the working world.

"I feel that my degree gave me a little badge that said 'I'm clever enough to cope'" (Sarah, English and French, 1993)

"I thought it would be a good general degree to have" (Carol, Archaeology, 2001)

Graduates felt that they looked at university as an opportunity to take a subject that they had enjoyed at school and focus on it a lot more closely. The respondents talked about being in a 'bubble world', 'ivory tower' or 'cocoon' during their time as undergraduates where they did not think of life beyond their graduations. They see this time almost as a luxury.

"Looking back, I know only too well what the real world is, and what the demands of work are and I look back with fondness at the 'in the bubble world' at university that those three years were about" (Louise, English Language and Literature, 1990)

Many of the participants also spoke of their degrees as opening up more opportunities because they weren't being taken in one specific direction.

"One of the reasons I chose English was because I didn't want to do something where I'd have to come out of university and then be it" (Richard, English Language and Literature, 1990)

"Doing a degree that is going to be of a practical, vocational use is an alien concept... I thought of a university education as being a general training in how to think and how to operate and how to work independently. And in most jobs it doesn't matter what you're degree is in, you'll have learnt transferable skills" (Claire, German and Chinese, 1995)

For several respondents this is preferable to more vocational degrees which may lead to an explicit career path which may then mean they are less open to other occupations.

"If you don't have a vocation at that point then there's no point making yourself have one - if you don't want to do law or medicine then you're better off doing a humanities degree which will give you a wider perspective on the world and give you more options" (Jo, English Studies, 2002)

One respondent who currently works in marketing stated that with retrospect she wouldn't have wanted to have done a degree in marketing since her degree expanded her knowledge and feels she has learnt enough about marketing since working.

However several of the respondents saw this as a double-edged sword. Whilst they were free to choose a career that they were interested in, they felt that they were not qualified for anything in particular. A couple of the participants admitted to feeling slightly envious of their peers who had completed degrees in medicine or law and had a clear career path. The absence of an obvious career path impacted on how the graduates felt towards, and their general preparedness for, the world of work, as discussed in the following chapter.

2.4 Conclusion

Rather than the employability aspect, the graduates were unanimous in choosing to do humanities disciplines to degree level because they felt they were good at them at school. On the whole the group were supported, if not necessarily influenced by their parents, although a couple reported receiving some negative comments concerning their choice of degree. What seemed to be most important was the fact that they would enjoy the subject they were studying, rather than the fact that it would lead to any particular career.

Following non-vocational subjects meant that the graduates were able to follow different interests and arrive in different industries, as is illustrated by the diversity of careers they are now involved in. This would seem to evidence the British Academy report:

"But graduates with a non-occupation-specific degree are suitable for a wide variety of employment and are less pressurised to find work that exactly fits their training because they have skills that are applicable to a large number of different sectors" (British Academy, 2004)

It is not unimaginable that as the cost of higher education and student debt rises, students may feel more pressure to focus on employability and employment after graduation. This is particularly the case given the time-lapse many of the graduates experienced between graduation and full time permanent employment. This is discussed in more detail in the next chapter.

Chapter 3

PREPAREDNESS FOR WORK AND THE HIGHER EDUCATION EXPERIENCE

I had a huge 'Oh My God!'
I had absolutely no idea at all of
what I was going to do in the
short, medium or long-term

This section looks at how the graduates felt on graduation, and what their next steps were immediately after it.

3.1 Transition from university to work

The graduates were asked to comment on how they felt when they left university, and how they coped with the transition from student life to the world of work. As suggested earlier in this report, and outlined by the British Academy:

"For other subjects within the arts, humanities and social sciences, the link (between the area of study and employment) may be less direct and the transition from graduation to employment may be longer and more complex" (British Academy, 2004).

It is for this reason that the Destinations of Leavers of Higher Education Surveys undertaken by The Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) show a lower level of employment six months after graduation in the discipline areas being treated by this report, as compared to other disciplines.

Amongst the graduates interviewed, those who went straight into full time employment were in the minority. Instead they tended to pursue a number of different activities including further degrees and temping. These activities, and the motivation behind them, are explored in more detail later in this chapter. However, the graduates' comments about how they found this transition are very revealing as to the level to which they felt they had been prepared for work by their higher education experience.

A couple of respondents stated that they didn't feel prepared by for the world of work by their higher education, but they were philosophical about the benefits their degrees had already furnished them with, and felt confident about their futures. The relationship between the higher education experience and confidence of this nature is explored in the Chapter 4: Skills.

One respondent commented:

"I don't remember feeling panic when I finished university. I always knew that I would find something eventually and it would all fall into place" (Natalie, Archaeology and English, 2002)

Another commented:

"I didn't feel prepared for the world of work after university, but I didn't feel that bothered by this as I didn't want a serious job until later in my twenties" (Sarah, English and French, 1993)

Several others found finishing university a bit more of a shock. One participant said she felt very 'cut-loose' after university and remembers the summer after her graduation as being 'very depressing' (Elaine, English, 1992)

Another put it very succinctly:

"I had a huge 'Oh My God!'. I had absolutely no idea at all of what I was going to do in the short, medium or long-term" (Richard, English Language and Literature, 1990)

For others, even though they had no immediate plans as to what career they wanted to go into, they felt ready for work.

"I had done quite a lot of summer work in offices and bars. I don't know if you can be prepared for the nine to five, but the actual tasks I do I felt prepared for" (Catherine, History, 1999)

"I was chomping at the bit to get working. I wanted to start earning my own money, and get started on a career. I felt very prepared" (Dan, History, 1999)

A couple of respondents commented on the role of universities in the preparation of graduates for work.

"There was no careers help at university at the time... There was no real guidance at all. It's not the role of higher education to prepare people for the world of work, but it's the role of higher education to have something there towards the end to help people and careers advisory services"
(Nina, Russian and French, 1975)

Arguably it is this lack of obvious vocation common amongst humanities graduates that leads to less immediate permanent employment outlined above, and results in them being more likely to undertake 'bridging' activities such as returning to study, travel or taking on temporary positions.

3.2 'Bridging' activities

Higher degrees

Of our relatively small sample of graduates, a very high proportion had gone on to complete higher degrees or other postgraduate qualifications. According to the DLHE survey up to 10% of humanities graduates study for a higher degree immediately after graduation, although other figures from the Higher Education Statistics Agency, show that approximately 15% of undergraduates continue to study to Masters Level at some point (HESA, 2003/04). However approximately a third of all the respondents had gone on to do a Masters degree of some sort. These were overwhelmingly MAs although one respondent has an MBA and another one had completed an MSc. It is important to note that the graduates interviewed are perhaps an unrepresentative group in terms of their further study, which may be due to the methods used to recruit them. This is explained in the introductory chapter:

In more than half the cases, the masters qualification was directly related to the subject studied at undergraduate level. Also several of the respondents had continued at the same university.

The motivations and reasons behind continuing on to Masters level vary greatly. The timing of the higher degree also could be interpreted as an indication of why the respondent chose to continue studying. Many respondents completed their Masters directly after their first degree, or after one year of working.

For several of the participants it appears that they were simply at a loss as to what to do after they had obtained their first degrees (See Chapter 3.1 above).

"I enjoyed the degree, and I liked the town and I had lots of friends staying on and was very involved in sport, and also I didn't know what I wanted to do" (Matt, History, 1999)

"I think I just didn't know what else to do"
(Claire, German and Chinese, 1995)

"I'm not sure what else I would have done"
(Sian, French and English, 1999)

For another group, their motivation for continuing on to do a Masters came from the feeling that their first degrees had not been enough, that they needed something else to set them apart from other graduates.

"I did my MBA because I felt I needed something else"
(Dan, History, 1999)

"I felt that so many people in the workforce have a degree so I thought that I would have to have something... that was extra"
(Helen, Intercultural Studies with French, 2001)

Several respondents stated that they also wanted to stand out from the crowd, but their motivation for doing so was directly related to their future employment.

"I did a post-graduate MSc in Information and Administrative Management at Glasgow Caledonian University to improve my prospects of employment" (Elaine, English, 1992)

"I knew that I wanted to work in publishing but felt there were a lot of English graduates that wanted to work in publishing so I wanted to do something that would make me stand out [completed a Masters in Electronic Publishing]"
(Julia, English and Related Literature, 2000)

On the whole doing a Masters seems to be linked to the level of preparedness felt by graduates on completing their undergraduate degrees. One respondent commented:

"I didn't feel completely ready to go into the world of work which is why doing another degree was attractive... I didn't really know what I'd be able to offer the world of work. Even though I knew what I wanted to do I didn't know how I'd fit into it"
(Julia, English and Related Literature, 2000)

A couple of respondents completed postgraduate diplomas directly related to the field in which they are currently working. These are clearly linked to their career progression. In both instances the respondents did these qualifications after working in the field for some time.

"I did [a Postgraduate Certificate in Psychoanalysis and Psychotherapy]... because I needed it to get any further in the field... I really feel I could have done this earlier but... I wanted to find the right course" (Louise, English Language and Literature, 1990)

"I had seen what this qualification [Screenwriting] could offer and it seemed like a very good place to learn practically and it could be a good stepping stone into the industry"
(Richard, English Language and Literature, 1990)

Temporary work

Many respondents spent a period of time temping after their graduations. Their motivation behind this was essentially their need to earn money. However, several of the graduates spoke about temping as having a positive effect on their future employment.

"Temping was better for general experience in the workplace. Long term temping in the same place meant that I got involved in training people and so on, so it was quite good in terms of work experience!" (Matt, History, 1999)

"I did all sorts of things which I thought was actually quite good for me as it gave me a good idea of what I wanted to do and what I was good at" (Carol, Archaeology, 2001)

For one individual their experience temping led to a permanent position in the same organisation and in fact, he feels that his experience doing lower level jobs gives him a greater understanding of the company.

"It was quite hard having to go into temping. But I don't regret it because it means I have a lot of knowledge about different areas and how the business works, more than people who are senior to me, and more than [other] graduates"
(Dan, History, 1999)

Travel

Several participants spent significant time abroad after their degrees. Similarly to the time abroad described below, these experiences were seen as being beneficial to the individual's future employment.

One respondent related the benefits of travelling directly to her current job:

"Travelling teaches you really good interpersonal skills - how to relate to other people. You don't have the same friendship network that you have when you're at home. Encountering people of different faiths and cultures has been particularly valuable because through working on the RE books [as Commissioning Editor] I have to meet lots of faith leaders and so on...making people feel at ease when you talk to them and feeling at ease yourself because you have the confidence"
(Lucy, History and English, 1999)

3.3 Other aspects of the higher education experiences: time abroad, extra-curricular activities and part-time work

Respondents were asked to comment on other activities they had become involved with at during their time as undergraduates and how they feel this contributed to their skill development.

For most graduates of language or area studies degrees, spending time abroad was a compulsory element of the course. For many it was the opportunity to spend some of their study time abroad which drew them to choosing the degree. The vast majority of graduates who had spent time abroad identified this period as being the most formative of their higher education, and mentioned the benefits as being increased self-confidence, maturity and heightened cultural understanding.

"The year abroad totally changed me. I'm not sure that I learnt as much Russian as I could have because I was so overwhelmed by the experience. It was so different. I made good friends and learnt a lot about myself and what I was capable of. Previously I had been very shy and quiet"
(Amie, French and Russian Studies, 1999)

"Going somewhere completely different from the university environment makes you think more about what's out there and the opportunities that are out there"
(Julia, English and Related Literature, 2000)

"You pick up the culture of the countries - and start to understand why they're like they are. You understand why people are different" (Sam, Modern Languages, 2000)

"I found this year very character developing - thinking independently, cross-cultural understanding... I feel that I am now someone who would be a lot more welcoming to the stranger"
(Sarah, English and French, 1993)

A couple of respondents spent some time abroad before they started university and they found that this gave them a head start when they arrived at university in terms of their maturity and confidence.

"The month in France aged 17 made me grow up very quickly and made me more open to meeting new people and new experiences" (Nina, Russian and French, 1975)

"I guess in terms of another year just in terms of age makes a big difference at that stage... having that extra year just maturity wise made a difference. For me arriving in Glasgow as a fresher, it wasn't my first time away from home, whereas for the majority of students it was" (Sian, French and English, 1999)

We had also asked the respondents for details of sporting activities, clubs and societies they were involved with during their higher education and to comment how they felt these had added to the experience.

Many respondents stated that they hadn't been as deeply involved in these types of extra-curricular activities as they had hoped to be when they had first started at university.

For those respondents who had been involved in these activities found they were beneficial as they added to their overall skills development.

"I played inter-mural squash and football. Any sports boost self-confidence which is very important in the workplace. It's also good for team-building" (Dan, History, 1999)

"I was involved in American football and was captain of the golf team. This was quite a big deal as it involved a lot of travelling around, organising fixtures, being part of the committee and talking to coaches and so on. These sort of organisational skills are very important in my current job" (Matt, History, 1999)

Similarly, graduates who undertook part time work spoke of the benefits.

"All the time through university I waitressed which was really good because it gave me an idea of what the area was like for people who weren't students, because otherwise it's a bit of a closed existence" (Elaine, English, 1992)

3.4 Conclusion

The majority of the graduates did not go straight into full time permanent employment after graduation. Instead they did higher degrees, worked on temporary contracts or travelled. On the whole the graduates found that these experiences added to their personal development.

A lot of the graduates did not feel prepared to go into work after their higher education experience. For many this caused some form of anxiety, whilst others were confident that their degrees had furnished them with enough skills that they would be successful. This concept links back to the above (Chapter 2: Motivation) which suggests that humanities degrees mean graduates are, or feel, less pressurised to go down a certain career path and allows them to be flexible in their choices. The 'bridging' activities undertaken by many participants had an influence on their choices, or, as is explored in more detail below, added to their skills sets and to their overall employability.

Chapter 4

S K I L L S

The graduates were asked to reflect on what skills they had picked up during their higher education experience and how they were using these, or had used these, in their place of work.

The respondents were not asked to respond to a list of skills and state which they thought they had and did not have, but rather spoke about the skills that they thought were the most valuable, using their own vocabulary. For example, what one graduate might call 'problem-solving' may be called 'critical thinking' by someone else.

A number of skills the respondents spoke about came very clearly from the learning and teaching processes they had been exposed to during their degrees. Other skills were developed through extra curricular activities or domestic arrangements. Others were not developed at all during the higher education experience but have been built up by the individual through day-to-day work or industry training.

4.1 Categorisation

For ease of reference the skills below have been loosely put into three broad categories: organisation; people skills; and study skills and cognitive competences. Organisation includes the individual's approach to their study and extra-curricular activities during their higher education experience including their ability to prioritise and manage their time effectively. People skills include more personal attributes which the individual has developed in order to work more collaboratively with others. Finally study skills and cognitive competences refer to those skills which facilitate efficient learning and a deeper understanding of the subject area and the wider world.

The following table shows the skills discussed in this chapter:

Organisation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Self-motivation and self-discipline Time management, working to deadlines and prioritising and managing workload Motivating others and leadership Survival skills and life skills Money/budget management Problem-solving
Study skills and cognitive competence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Independent learning Gathering, organising and synthesising information and data (research) Critical analysis and the application of theory Defending arguments and positions Presentations Information Technology Numeracy Learning to learn
People skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Cultural awareness and sensitivity Communication Flexibility and adaptability, perseverance and resilience Team-working, interaction and listening

“We had to submit work on a regular basis. You couldn't just float through the year and cram for an exam at the end”

4.2 Communicating skills: reflection

An interesting observation of the data collection process of this research was the respondents' readiness to respond to, and understanding of, the questions put to them. The participants had a varying understanding of the term 'skills' in this context. Many of the older respondents spoke only about 'hard' skills. On the other hand, the more recent graduates spoke at length about their transferable skills.

A likely explanation for this contrast is that more recent graduates have become more used to reflecting on their experiences and the skills they have gained. It may be that they have had been required to complete job applications which ask them to demonstrate their transferable skills, or that they were completed activities at university where they mapped their skills sets or planned their personal development.

4.3 Organisation

Self-motivation and self-discipline

Many of the participants commented that one of the biggest shifts between their A' Level study and university study was the reduced number of contact hours they had. This meant that they had to plan their own study (see **Independent learning**) in order to meet their deadlines. At school and college they had become more used to continual support and attention from their teachers and other members of staff. They were also used to being monitored more closely and guided through their study.

"In the sixth-form you were given responsibility but if you didn't do your homework someone chased you up. At university if you don't do the work, you eventually get told not to come back" (Sam, Modern Languages, 2000)

This is a skill that many of the participants are currently required to use in their jobs as they are responsible for their own workloads.

"I work from home so have a lot of freedom to manage my own workload" (Natalie, Archaeology and English, 2002)

Time management, working to deadlines and prioritising and managing workload

Directly related to self-motivation and self-discipline is time management and the management of workloads. This was mentioned by the vast majority of respondents and seemed particularly valuable to joint or combined honours students, who would often be given conflicting deadlines in each of their subject areas, and so had to manage these accordingly.

"...to start with you are doing three separate subjects, and have to coordinate what you have to submit for all three. If work was all due the same week you just had to get on with it" (Elaine, English, 1992)

Similarly, those graduates who completed programmes with systems of continual assessment felt they had to manage their time effectively to work steadily through the year:

"We had to submit work on a regular basis. You couldn't just float through the year and cram for an exam at the end" (Elaine, English, 1992)

Several of the respondents observed that when they started university their deadlines seemed to be set a long time in advance, and they had to learn how to plan larger segments of time than they have previously been used to.

"It would be easy to say that something wasn't due for a couple of months and so just forget about it" (Carina, French and German with Linguistics, 2004)

"You had to deal with long periods of time. You could be given an assignment in February that isn't due until June. This helps me now. If we're starting a project in September we really have to have it sorted out by Easter. I can't leave things for months" (Sam, Modern Languages, 2000)

For one individual juggling all her commitments during higher education has greatly improved her time and project management.

"I was involved with the student newspaper, did additional Italian lessons, played college sports and was in a band. I'm good at managing my time and good at organisation. At work I have hundreds of projects to manage at any one time. Also it's not only about deciding your own priorities but taking others' priorities into account" (Julia, English and Related Literature, 2000)

Motivating others and leadership

These skills have proved important to those graduates who have some form of line management or management as part of their job role.

One respondent identified these skills as coming from being captain of a university sports club and her involvement in the Christian Union.

"I fenced for the college and was team captain. This gave me some sort of leadership skills and motivational skills which I have carried over to my line management. I was also involved in the Christian Union which was good... for low level leadership" (Sarah, English and French, 1993)

Survival skills and life skills

Linked inextricably with **independence** (from parents and home environment) and **team-work** (derived from shared accommodation), survival skills and life skills were mentioned by several participants. They referred generally to their need to learn to cope on their own in situations with which they had had no prior experience. This may have been the very fact of living away from home, and being responsible for

cooking, paying bills and so on, and coming into contact with other bodies such as local government and landlords.

Several respondents highlighted travel either as part of the degree for the year abroad in the case of language graduates, or before or afterwards equipped them with these life skills.

"arriving in a strange place where you don't know anyone... I lived in a city I didn't know, so I suppose the life skills it equips you with are very valuable" (Sian, French and English, 1999)

"I had to learn to cook!" (Sam, Modern Languages, 2000)

Money/budget management

This skill was mentioned by one participant as being something they had developed through membership of committees of clubs and societies. The budget management they were involved in at university was on a smaller scale than they now have in their place of work, but gave them relevant training (see also **Numeracy**)

Problem-solving

Problem-solving was only mentioned specifically by one graduate. He illustrated his problem-solving skills by talking about how he might approach an essay.

"You're given an essay title and that's it - you have to work out how you're going to answer the question and what information you're going to use" (Dan, History, 1999)

4.4 Study skills and cognitive competence

Independent learning

In a similar way to time management, and self-discipline, independent learning was highlighted as something many graduates developed from the nature of how humanities degrees are taught.

For one graduate this way of learning was easier for her than being 'taught' as is the case in schools:

"I'm very much the sort of person who wants to do things on my own and do things my way so it suited me and I flourished a lot more because I worked at my own pace. I was told where I needed to be but how I got there was entirely my responsibility" (Kristine, Classical Studies, 1999)

One respondent who had begun Chinese at university had a lot of contact hours. However she felt that for herself, and her peers, the course was moving at too much of a fast pace, and therefore independent study was necessary to catch up and to gain a better understanding of what she had been taught. (Claire, German and Chinese, 1995)

"Independent working is really good for the working environment because you accept that you have an opinion and that you're making your own decisions" (Julia, English and Related Literature, 2000)

"I thought of university education as being a general training in how to think and how to operate and how to work independently" (Claire, German and Chinese, 1995)

Gathering, organising and synthesising information and data (research)

This is an obvious study skill developed through the majority of degree programmes. It is a skill that proved valuable to many of the graduates interviewed who are required to write reports and analyse information.

"We get lots of reports and documentation and I need to write lots of reports, pulling together information from different sources, so my experience in drafting assignments and asking questions of the material that I was reading, that kind of skill was developed at A' Level but certainly built on at degree level and is something that I use on a daily basis here" (Caroline, American Studies, 1998)

Another commented:

"I generally use a lot of research skills as I compile reports on different titles and for different markets" (Lucy, History and English, 1999)

Not only did the graduates speak about developing this skill in general but they suggested that during their degrees they had developed ways of being able to synthesise information more effectively. Taking notes and skim reading were mentioned by one participant as techniques he developed to aid his study which have proved important in later life (John, French Language and Literature, 1987)

An English graduate admitted:

"I learnt the bad habit that if you didn't want to read two or three 18th Century novels, you could just find a good book on them!" (Richard, English Language and Literature, 1990)

Critical analysis and the application of theory

In the same way as **Gathering, organising and synthesising information and data** above, when writing reports at work, the graduate has to be critical about their application of evidence in the same way as would have been expected with university essays.

"End of assessments [reports] require you to draw conclusions and incorporate any research or theory that is relevant. This is quite similar to university - collecting things that evidence what you are saying and then drawing that to a conclusion at the end and making arguments" (Jo, English Studies, 2002)

One English graduate, who works for a national children's charity, commented that in certain situations she was able to directly apply the theories she learnt at university, although the context is obviously very different:

"I feel I have loads from my university days around this though it was looking at literature and discussing Marxism and feminism and the discourse around power relations, even though it's formal and theoretical, it applies to my work"
(Louise, English Literature and Language, 1990)

Defending arguments and positions

Defending their point of view or opinions was mentioned by one respondent as being very important. This category is also related in some respects to **Team-working, interaction and listening**. As the graduate explains:

"I wanted to do my dissertation on Julian Barnes, but was told that this wasn't 'proper' enough but got the support of one tutor. Recognising people who will help and support you was quite useful... and it's always worth, when people say no, but you think you've got something, to keep going with it. In the business I'm in now I get told to go away again and again and it's very easy to feel that no one thinks you're any good when it's not that at all - it's just difficult to get ideas through"
(Richard, English Language and Literature, 1990)

Presentations

Giving presentations was highlighted by several participants as being something they experienced for the first time at university but have been required to use at work.

"Presenting information and standing in front of people to do a presentation is something that I did do for the first time at uni, and it's something I have to do here now"
(Caroline, American Studies, 1998)

Experience of giving presentations has an effect on confidence in communication.

"I can now speak with authority which came from doing presentations at university" (Helen, Intercultural Studies with French, 2001)

Information Technology

The amount that IT is valued as a skill is dependent on when the respondent graduated. Arguably for more recent graduates their IT skills are implicit as they would have needed to use various programmes to produce their work and the internet for information retrieval.

One respondent from the early 1990s completed a Masters because she felt that she needed up-skilling, particularly in the area of IT, to make her more employable.

"It [the Masters] gave me IT skills. I had typed up my dissertation on an Amstrad word processor and found it really difficult. I'm just not very technically adept - which has a lot to do with the time. For the MSc we needed to write programs and build databases, and I really hated it! But I knew it was a useful, marketable tool for getting a job" (Elaine, English, 1992)

Numeracy

Numeracy was mentioned by one individual as being a skill that he had not particularly developed during his undergraduate years, but something that was developed by his MBA and is now a valuable skill in his work place.

"... the numerical side would be difficult to incorporate [into a history degree]. If you haven't done maths since GCSE and then you need it in your job it's hard" (Dan, History, 1999)

This skill is related to **Money/budget management** experienced by the graduates in the context of their extra-curricular activities.

Learning to learn

When a participant mentioned 'learning to learn' it was in the context of learning and developing all the skills she had developed during her higher education. The development, recognition, adaptation and later deployment of skills in the workplace which have been developed during the degree is a skill within itself.

For this particular individual it is "what university is all about" (Sarah, English and French, 1993)

4.5 People skills

Cultural awareness and sensitivity

Awareness and understanding of other cultures was highlighted by the majority of graduates. This was not only developed through periods of travel and time spent abroad but also through increased contact with foreign students and students from different backgrounds.

For several of the graduates, having a high cultural awareness was not only beneficial in so far as it aided their understanding and appreciation of other cultures, but they felt being taught alongside, and having the insight of foreign students, broadened their understanding of their discipline area.

"It was good to meet a lot of different people, because before that everyone I knew was local to my home town. I had German friends and a good Dutch friend. It was interesting to get different people's perspectives and their different perspectives on archaeology as well" (Carol, Archaeology, 2001)

Of his Year Abroad, a languages graduate commented:

"You pick up the cultures of the countries and start to understand why they're like they are. You understand why people are different" (Sam, Modern Languages, 2000)

Communication

Written and oral communication appears frequently in the list of skills that it is desirable for graduates to possess. These skills are, of course, inextricably linked to other skills examined here such as **Presentations, gathering, organising and synthesising information and data** (in the case of

written communication), **Cultural awareness and sensitivity, and team-working, interaction and listening** and they were mentioned by the vast majority of the graduates we interviewed.

"the most obvious [skills developed] are written and oral communication. I work in Marketing and Communication so the skills I developed during my degree are used every day" (Dan, History, 1999)

"I was involved in the front line dealing with the public, I would have to stand in supermarkets and gather local opinion, and also take some flak from the public. Communication skills were key to this" (Elaine, English, 1992)

"One course was orally assessed rather than by an essay. The time during seminars your contribution was assessed" (Julia, English and Related Literature, 2000)

"I also learnt oral communication during my study, and particularly because of the study of languages" (Amie, French and Russian Studies, 1998)

Flexibility and adaptability, perseverance and resilience

Along similar lines to confidence and maturity discussed below: the graduates felt that through going to university, and in several cases spending time abroad, meant that they became adaptable and used to change, which is a skill they have taken into the work place.

"I have learnt how to adjust to change and become used to change. I am more resilient and independent" (Jo, English Studies, 2002)

Team-working, interaction and listening

Team-working, interaction and listening have been grouped together here as they all involve a reciprocal process which requires receptiveness, and collaborative working with others. Interaction and listening are obviously closely linked to oral and written **Communication**.

Several of the participants felt that they hadn't developed particular team-working skills at university, or that they hadn't exercised them since they were required to work with a high degree of autonomy (see **Independent learning**). Two individuals thought that they hadn't had any experience of team-working as part of the undergraduate study, but felt it was something they went on to develop as part of their Masters programmes.

Others, however, felt that this skill had been well developed through their study and through extra-curricular activities. Contributing to and organising tutorials and seminar presentations was identified by several participants as being the means through which they developed their team-working skills.

One participant recalled an occasion where she and her colleagues pooled their resources and worked as a team to make their study more efficient although this wasn't something they were required to do by the course tutor.

"For our finals we were asked to give a synopsis of different Shakespeare plays, so a group of us got together to split the work up. We used a common way of writing it up so we could all revise from it" (Elaine, English, 1992)

Involvement in extra-curricular activities was also cited as an important way of developing team-working skills. This was not only as part of a sports team but also through membership of committees of university societies and activities such as writing for the student newspaper.

Interaction again was developed through seminar-based courses in which graduates were involved in active discussions. They would be required to contribute orally but also be receptive to others' opinions and the general mood of the group.

"I learnt in seminar groups how to get ideas across. I found it frustrating in the first and second years when everyone was completely silent, so I would speak and not worry about what everyone else thought about it. This is a situation I find myself in now in writers' meetings, but I have learnt to know when to speak and when to shut up and when everyone has had enough of what I'm saying" (Richard, English Language and Literature, 1992)

Responding to the ideas of others, and using this to form ones' own ideas was cited as an important skill. Again this was often developed during seminar sessions.

Active listening was cited by a couple of graduates as a valuable skill they have developed, again, not only through their degree programme but also through extra-curricular activities.

"Active listening is something I need for my role now and which I developed through learning languages. You have to actively listen when you're using your second language. This is something I have to use in my job when I'm interviewing" (Amie, French and Russian Studies, 1998)

"I wanted to do something non-sporty at university, so joined the Executive Committee of Nightline², and this improved my listening skills. This is vital now as a teacher, with pupils having problems and with parents" (Sam, Modern Languages, 2000)

4.6 Independence, confidence and maturity

Although independence, confidence and maturity cannot really be classed as skills themselves, they were mentioned on numerous occasions by respondents. They also seemed to be the first benefits of higher education to come to mind when the respondents were questioned.

² Nightline is a charity organisation run by students to provide emotional support and information to fellow students

Graduates felt that they had developed independence, confidence and maturity through a number of different forums. For many, the very fact that they suddenly were required to live away from their parents, normal support networks of friends, and familiar surroundings, and that they coped with that situation, increased their self-confidence.

"I gained a lot of confidence and independence. It was the first time I'd lived away from home, which was slightly daunting, but I made close friends quickly" (Caroline, American Studies, 1998)

"I became more independent and in control of where I wanted to be and where I wanted to go. Getting out of home really helped, as I was very mollycoddled so it was a whole new experience" (Kristine, Classical Studies, 1999)

"It [higher education] was a great confidence builder. It was one of those things that I took a deep breath and did without knowing for certain that I could. I wasn't certain that I could afford it or that intellectually I could manage it. And I did" (Carol, Archaeology, 2001)

"It [higher education] gives you the chance to break out on your own without having to break out on your own. You don't have the shock of going to find somewhere to live and finding a job because you do have the support network around you but at the same time you are moving away from your parents" (Lucy, History and English, 1999)

In other circumstances, respondents felt a boost in their confidence by travelling, studying abroad or extra curricular activities.

Of her year abroad, one participant said:

"When I got there [year abroad in Germany] it was a bit of a shock... but it was a very good year and I think I learnt a lot from it... particularly being independent and getting on with things by yourself, being confident and it being just yourself" (Carina, French and German with Linguistics, 2004)

Of sport, another participant commented:

"I was involved in inter-mural squash and football. Any sport boosts self-confidence which is very important in the workplace" (Dan, History, 1999)

4.7 Conclusion

Collectively, the graduates interviewed feel that their higher education experience equipped them with many skills that they now require in their jobs. Whilst many of these skills were developed through the teaching and learning process, other activities played an important part and by no means can be ignored in any examination of graduate skills.

There may be many other skills that are not explored here, but it was an important aspect of the research process that participants articulated their skills in their own words, using their own terms. We did not want them to respond to a long list of skills, stating which they possessed and which they did not to highlight areas of strength and weakness. Instead participants have mentioned skills which they do have, and made their own distinctions. For example, **Presentations** is mentioned as a separate skill to **Communication** as this is the way it was articulated by participants.

As has been discussed in proceeding chapters, gaining skills, and later employment, was not a strong motivation for respondents to undertake higher education. Instead they were capable of higher study and wanted to pursue disciplines which interested them. The skills here demonstrate a 'by-product' of the higher education experience and particularly of humanities disciplines. This needs to be more greatly emphasised by programme planners and degree tutors.

Chapter 5

CONCLUSION

This **qualitative study** has been useful in revealing a small sample of humanities graduates' attitudes to their degree, their choices, their skill sets and their employability.

The research also evidences the findings made in the British Academy report (2004). On the basis of this research we are able to make a number of comments which support the British Academy report.

Humanities graduates can do a variety of jobs

The graduates who participated in this study are employed in a large number of varied occupations. These are: social work, charity work and non-profit making organisations, publishing, teaching and education, academic research, administration, property sales, tourism, financial services, translation, screen-writing, consultancy, and marketing and communications.

Some respondents had thought of the career they might follow whilst still at university whereas others did not concentrate on their careers until after graduation. As having a humanities degree means one is not already dedicated to a particular vocation, the graduates were able to investigate what interested them and what they were good at. The other side of this is that, given that they have no clear career path, it may take a humanities graduate longer to settle into a permanent role.

The higher education experience furnishes graduates with many skills they need in their workplaces.

This report discusses a large number of skills categorised here as organisation, study skills and cognitive competences, and people skills. These skills have been developed during the higher education experience, both through learning and teaching practices undertaken as part of the degree, through extra-curricular activities, and elements of the degree such as time abroad.

These skills have been valuable to the graduates in their workplaces where they have developed them further and adapted them to meet the requirements of their jobs.

Many of the more recent graduates seemed to find articulating their skills easier than those who had graduated a longer time ago. This may well be because the more recent graduates had received more guidance at university on how to reflect on what they were able to do. It may also be the case that, the graduates who completed their degrees longer ago, have developed a number of new or different skills through work and through life experiences and so when questioned it was harder for them to distinguish the skills developed during higher education. It is important to note that those graduates who graduated longer ago are relying more on their memories, although they are able to use retrospect to identify their skills.

It is the role of higher education to put in place practices such as personal development planning to encourage students to reflect on and articulate the skills they have developed so they are better equipped when looking for employment. Again this is particularly valuable to humanities graduates who have no clear vocational direction.

Numeracy and IT skills were highlighted as being less greatly developed by the graduates interviewed for this research. However, given the importance attached to these by the Dearing Report (1997), the application of number (or numeracy) and information technology skills are now being integrated into the post-16 curriculum in England, Wales and Northern Ireland as part of the Key Skills initiative. Key Skills attract UCAS points, and so can contribute to an individual's application to higher education, may rectify the paucity of these skills. It should also be noted that minimal attainment in the core subjects, including mathematics, is still a requirement of many undergraduate programmes, and further tests must be completed by those wishing to go on to teach in schools.

Humanities graduates chose their degrees because it was something they were good at and enjoyed rather than considering the employability aspect

The participants were overwhelmingly driven to continue humanities disciplines to degree level because they enjoyed them at school. The employability aspect seems to have had little bearing on their choices.

Likewise they chose their universities and degree programmes on the basis of their perceived enjoyment of the town or city and course, rather than the outcomes in terms of employment.

Many of the graduates were at university at a time when funding was in place in the form of grants for them to pursue their interests rather than judging their higher education as a kind of financial investment in their futures.

Given the recent changes to higher education funding in England and Wales, and increased tuition fees and rising student debt, it would be of value and interest to run a research project along similar lines to this one and observe changes in graduates' attitudes in five to ten years time. We may find future employment prospects to have become more important to undergraduates given the financial implications of higher education.

Humanities graduates may take longer to settle into a career

It was rare amongst the graduates for them to settle directly into a career after graduation. Instead they pursued a number of different activities which included higher degrees, but also travel, work abroad, and temporary work. This is reflected in the Destination of Leavers from Higher Education Survey (DLHE) carried out by The Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA), which shows a smaller percentage of humanities graduates in permanent employment in the UK than for other discipline areas.

Again, it would be interesting to see if the personal finances of graduates prompt them into settling into a career more quickly as student debt rises.

Overall, none of the graduates regretted doing their degrees, and with the benefit of retrospect they stated that they would still have made the same choices if they were to have their time again.

One respondent commented:

"I did it because I was interested in the subject and what learning could do for me. It has helped me get a job, but it has done a lot more than that. It has shaped the person which I am, which is more important than having something vocational that you can sell to an employer" (Amie, French and Russian Studies, 1998)

Chapter 6

FURTHER RECOMMENDATIONS

Dissemination of the findings of this research amongst the humanities community will raise awareness of the intrinsic value of the higher education experience to the employability of graduates. The longitudinal aspects of this report greater emphasise the benefits of the higher education experience beyond those illustrated in existing survey data.

The skills derived from the higher education experience need to be made more explicit. The increased use of Personal Development Planning (PDP) and the use of portfolios to record achievements and experiences are of considerable value here. However they must be used in a meaningful and relevant way, and integrated into the existing learning and teaching process to maximise their impact. The use of such tools from the beginning of the degree programme goes some way to achieve this. Undergraduates should be actively encouraged to reflect on their skills and informed of the best ways of articulating these to prospective employers.

The further dissemination of this report amongst careers advisory services will raise awareness of the issues covered. Closer collaboration between the careers advisory service and programme planners is also of value. Liaison with careers advisors and teachers in schools and colleges would be beneficial for student recruitment into the humanities, faced with the issue of rising student debt and individuals' financial concerns.

Greater engagement with employers with regards to the findings of this report should be encouraged. Detailed research into the attitudes of employers to graduates from humanities disciplines would contribute to the community's understanding of the interface between the higher education and employability.

Equally, exploration into the attitudes of lecturers towards the employability of their graduates, how they feel this can be integrated into the learning and teaching process, and where they see their place in this aspect of higher education would be beneficial.

This research will be built upon by further work into specific elements of the humanities disciplines and employability. Investigation into the relationship between the humanities and the entrepreneurial talent of graduates has already begun.

The contribution of certain elements of the humanities degree, notably periods of residence abroad, warrant closer exploration, both in terms of the benefits from the point of view of lecturers and from graduates with regards to the impact of this time on their employability.

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Graduate profiles

This table provides details of the graduates interviewed in this research.

Name	Degree	Year	Masters	Pre/Post 1992
Elaine	English	1992	Yes - MSc	Pre
Jo	English Studies	2002	Yes	Pre
Julia	English Studies and Related Literature	2000	Yes	Pre
Louise	English Language and Literature	1990	Yes	Pre
Richard	English Language and Literature	1990	Yes	Pre
Sarah	English and French	1993	No	Pre
Sian	French and English	1999	Yes	Pre
Nina	Russian and French	1975	No	Pre
Amie	French and Russian	1998	Yes	Pre
Ellen	French and Russian	1975	Yes	Pre
Carina	French, German and Linguistics	2004	No	Pre
Claire	German and Chinese	1995	Yes	Pre
John	French Language and Literature	1987	No	Pre
Sam	Modern Languages	2000	No	Pre
Helen	Intercultural Studies with French	2001	Yes	Post
Caroline	American Studies	1998	No	Post
Catherine	History	1999	No	Pre
Dan	History	1999	Yes	Pre
Matt	History	1999	Yes	Pre
Lucy	History and English	1999	No	Pre
Natalie	Archaeology and English	2002	No	Post
Carol	Archaeology	2001	No	Pre
Mark	Ancient History and Classics	1995	No	N/A
Kristine	Classical Studies	1999	Yes	Pre

Classification of BA	Standard entry	Male/Female	Current occupation/field
2.1	Yes	Female	Administrator
2.1	Yes	Female	Social Worker
2.1	Yes	Female	Publishing
2.1	Yes	Female	Regional Manager (Charity)
2.1	Yes (following gap year)	Male	Screen Writer
2.1	Yes	Female	Marketing
First	Yes	Female	Researcher
2.2	Yes	Female	Teacher
2.1	Yes	Female	Researcher
	Yes	Female	Unemployed
First	Yes	Female	Translating
First	Yes	Female	Administrator
2.1	Yes (following gap year)	Male	National Manager
2.1	Yes	Male	Teacher
2.2	No	Female	Estate Agent
2.1	Yes	Female	Committee Secretary
2.1	Yes	Female	Education Office
2.1	Yes	Male	Marketing
2.1	No	Male	Administrator
2.1	Yes	Female	Publishing
	No	Female	Administrator
2.1	No	Female	Tour Guide
N/A	Yes	Male	Teacher
2.1	Yes	Female	Consultant

A) Personal details

1. University attended:
2. Full title of degree:
3. Year of graduation:
4. Class of degree obtained:
5. Further degrees/diplomas obtained:
6. Any other details - years repeated, courses changed, etc:
7. Name of current employer:
8. Nature of business:
9. Your job title:
10. Outline of your role and main responsibilities:

B) Composition of degree

1. How was your degree programme made up in terms of optional and compulsory modules?
2. How were individual modules examined? (Essays, exams, group presentations, etc)
3. On average, how was the teaching of your degree divided between lectures, seminar and tutorials, and smaller group sessions?
4. Did your degree comprise any other aspects such as field work studies, a year in industry, or a year abroad?
5. Was this element compulsory or optional?
6. Was there the possibility of adding such an element to your degree?

C) Extra-curricula activities

1. During your time at university, which clubs and societies did you actively take part in?
2. During your time at university, what part time work did you do? (paid or voluntary including work done during the university vacations)
3. Have you undertaken any work experience directly related to your degree discipline? If so, how do you believe this has enhanced your career prospects?

D) Key skills

1. Thinking about the skills you gained during your degree, what and how were these developed?
 - Literacy and numeracy skills
 - IT skills
 - Written and oral communication skills
 - Data handling, interpretation and presentation
 - Team-working
 - Analytical, problem-solving and evaluation skills
 - Intercultural awareness
 - Time management and organisational skills including the ability to meet deadlines
 - The ability to present and defend cogent arguments
 - Critical thinking
 - Independent working
 - Abstracting and synthesising information?

E) Aspirations

1. Before starting your degree what line of work had you hoped to go into?
2. What was your motivation for choosing your degree and university?
3. How is your current line of work similar and different to that which you had envisaged when starting university?
4. Was your university and degree programme your first choice?
5. Did your university career fulfil the expectations you had of it before you began (thinking about your academic social experience)
6. How did your family influence your choice of higher education?
7. How did your teachers influence your choice of higher education?

F) Career details

1. How long have you been with your current employer? Please give details of internal promotions or changes in role.
2. Please outline your activities since graduation including periods of further study, travel or other positions.
3. Was your degree a requirement of your post's job specification?
4. What aspects of your job use the subject knowledge gained during your degree?
5. Thinking about the key skills discussed in question D1, how have you used these in the world of work (in your current role or in previous roles)?
6. Thinking about the key skills discussed in question D1, to what extent do you feel you have added to these through your work experience?
7. To what extent do you feel these skills have been added to by other experiences, prior to, during or since your degree?
8. If you were to compare your job with your previous expectations of your career, do you consider yourself successful?
9. How do you envisage your career developing in the next 5 years?

A wider perspective and more options: Investigating the longer term employability of humanities graduates

ISBN: 0-9541709-3-8

March 2006

Understanding what graduates do after leaving university has mainly depended upon statistics collected six months after graduation. *A wider perspective and more options* is based on in-depth interviews with humanities graduates from the 1970s onwards and captures something of the diversity of career paths followed by graduates in so-called 'non-vocational' disciplines. The report will be a valuable resource for lecturers and careers advisors seeking to help humanities students prepare for life after graduation.

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