RETURNING TO LEARNING: GENDER, ETHNICITY AND RE-ENTRY INTO POSTGRADUATE STUDY

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The graduate labour market in the UK is becoming increasingly congested, with a growing throughput of students chasing a largely stagnant pool of opportunities - especially since the global financial crisis. This ‘opportunity trap’ (Brown 2003) has been such that even high-achieving graduates have been unable secure employment at a level that matches their academic results or perceived employment potential (Smetherham 2006).

One effect has been the reclassification of jobs as ‘graduate’ as become populated by those who have been unable obtain traditional graduate roles (Chevalier and Lindley 2009). Another has been that graduates have felt compelled to increase their qualifications in order to accrue, accredit or demonstrate the ‘work-related skills’ that are valued by employers, especially where they felt that they underperformed in their first degree (Brooks and Everett 2009).

There are persistent questions about who wins and who loses within this marketplace and which factors might determine behaviour and outcomes. This paper will address one component of this issue, by looking at those individuals who seek to enter the graduate labour market, but who return to higher education within three years to increase their qualifications.

Specifically, this paper will report the findings of a quantitative study using data drawn from the national Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education (DLHE) surveys, which take place six months and three-and-a-half years after graduation. Specifically, it focuses on a sample of 22,207 individuals who graduated in 2007 and who were active in the labour market six months later. Of these, 11% returned to taught postgraduate study at some point in the following three years.

The study uses binary logistic regression analysis to examine which factors determined whether an individual became a ‘returner’ (i.e. enrolled for postgraduate study after a period in the labour market) or a ‘leaver’ (i.e. remained within the labour market). The factors found to have a significant role were gender, age, ethnicity, subject, sandwich study, degree classification, university status and nature of initial employment.

In particular, this study suggests that women and people from minority ethnic communities are disproportionately likely to ‘return’ when other factors are held constant. Drawing on literature on structural inequalities (e.g. Moreau and Leathwood 2006), discussion will focus on this finding in the context of high educational demand from these groups, ongoing concerns about discrimination and the nature of competition within the ‘opportunity trap’, providing some questions for employers, universities and government.