

GMT interview

How was it for you?

In this edition of the GMT interview, Jane Artess (JA) interviews the two principal investigators of the Futuretrack studies: Professors Kate Purcell (KP) and Claire Callendar (CC). Kate led the cohort tracking study of full-time students who were surveyed four times over a 5/6 year period from when they applied to higher education in 2005/06 until 2011/12 and Claire led the study of part-time students whose split sample were tracked over a three year period from 2007.

JA: When HECSU invited interest in what was to become Futuretrack, what drove you to submit your proposals?

KP: Peter Elias and I have for many years been researching the graduate labour market with colleagues from the Institute for Employment Research at Warwick and at the University of the West of England. We knew from previous experience that the relationship between higher education and employment is complex and best understood by taking a longitudinal perspective. Important though the DLHE survey of graduate outcomes¹ at six months is, we wanted to know about the relationship between HE participation and outcomes – who had difficulty getting a job? Who progressed to postgraduate study? Who did an internship? and so on – but importantly why they made the choices they did, what they valued about their learning in higher education and what their experiences tell us about social mobility. We were also very attracted by the idea of designing a study that would track progress of the whole student journey, from application to two years after graduation. This had never been done before in the UK or anywhere else in the world as far as I know. I saw it as a wonderful opportunity.

CC: I agree with Kate but for us, the real motivation was to add to our understanding of the so often neglected careers of the part-time students. Around one third of students in higher education study on a part-time basis but far less is reported about their achievements or the challenges they face. Many part-

time students are already in work and we wanted to know what effect that had on their experience of higher education. We were delighted when we heard that BIS had offered HECSU additional funding to enable a survey of part-time students' employers because the attitude of employers can play such an important role in part-time students' thinking about whether to begin higher education at all.

JA: How did you design the study?

KP: For the main Futuretrack study we collaborated with UCAS and invited the whole of one cohort of applicants (in 2005/06) to participate in the study. We were so fortunate to have access to this population, contactable via UCAS. Contact was established and maintained using email addresses and virtually all the data was collected online. Futuretrack is thus a very comprehensive study of a single cohort that could be tracked from application to employment and training, between 18 and 30 months after graduation² and included all awards, subjects and institutions in the UK. Nearly 130,000 applicants completed the Stage 1 survey, which gave us big enough numbers of students in different categories – such as ethnic groups, subject groups, or types of HE institution – to be able to draw conclusions confidently about the impact of different variables on experiences and outcomes.

But contacting part-time students was more of a challenge as most apply directly to the institution (not through a common system) and there was also an intention to capture the views of their employers.

CC: Part-time students do not apply to university via UCAS, they apply directly to the HEI of their choice. Consequently there is no centralised source for accessing part-time undergraduate students. Instead, we had to contact individual HEIs and get students' contact details directly from them. In some cases HEIs were not prepared to give their students' contact details to us, for data protection reasons, so the HEIs contacted the students on our behalf. The sample of students was drawn from 29 HEIs - those with the

¹Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education (DLHE) survey is an annual census of the destinations of higher education qualifiers approximately six months following graduation. Data from institutions is collected by institutions and collated on a national basis by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA).

²Assuming a typical three year degree programme. However, as many degrees are longer than three years, a second stage 3 survey was undertaken to capture the views of those on four year courses. Those on very long courses or who intercalated may still be studying.

high proportions of part-time students. We decided on a split sample comprising one group of those who were beginning their part-time higher education and another group who were nearing the end of it – we called them, the ‘starters’ and the ‘completers’. We followed both student groups over-time. They were also sampled on the basis of their qualification aim (BA/BSc, HND/HNC, and Foundation degree), and their subject (Business and Administrative Studies, Law, Social Studies, Technologies and Engineering) so we got a mix of vocational and non-vocational subjects. Thus the sample did not represent a single, cohort.

Collecting data via email from part-time students proved difficult, so telephone interviews were used with both students and their employers with much more success.

KP: You can find out more about the methodologies from the published reports.

JA: What did you find particularly challenging?

KP: Maintaining contact with students and graduates over such a long time, four stages of time, has arguably been the greatest challenge; some students changed email addresses many times. We put a lot of effort into maintaining a high level of response. Of course, during the study, there has been an explosion in the use of new social media communication channels, such as Facebook and Twitter, and there is much more mobile phone use now than even in 2006. We would have a different range of options to consider if we were starting now. We were supported hugely by careers services and other staff in institutions who used internal email communications to encourage students to respond to each of the surveys. One careers service even designed posters for us; we are very grateful for all the help. We explored the use of a Futuretrack website for a time and publicised the study via the press and student-facing websites. By Stage 4 we were also supported by employers, employers’ organisations and professional associations.

Another major challenge has been to analyse the data. Each of the four surveys has generated huge amounts of quantitative and qualitative material on all aspects of career development, for example, on the take up of paid/unpaid work, managing finances, use of university employability support, development of skills, and at Stage 4, early work histories. It is fascinating to be able to access such depth of

information about students’ and graduates’ experiences – to have the opportunity to make sense of students’ motivations and aspirations during this difficult post-recessionary period has been quite a privilege actually.

CC: Accessing participants has been particularly challenging for us as we needed to also persuade employers to explain their support of part-time students. Their support appears to have been affected by recent economic circumstances. Maintaining contact with students and graduates over time was also a challenge for us. Both Futuretrack studies have taken place during a time of great change for graduates, both within their institutions and at their place of employment.

JA: Was any other research work developed out of Futuretrack?

CC: Yes, as our sample included students taking Foundation Degree courses and we provided Foundation Degree Forward (FDF) with some additional analyses – a report of which is now, since the cessation of the FDF, on the Higher Education Academy and the HECSU websites.

Another important aspect of our work is that it was cited in the evidence to the Brown Review of student finance and has informed other academic papers too, including one recently about the changes in the availability of loans for part-time students.

KP: Yes, we have used findings in other work, for example, it has been used in studies of STEM students and graduates, comparative studies with other countries and has informed our work on occupational classifications. Researchers in Brazil and Canada have already embarked on studies using our methodologies and drawing heavily on our questionnaires, and we are currently talking to German and Italian research teams to explore the feasibility of doing comparative work on the relationship between higher education and access to opportunity, drawing on comparable student and graduate survey data collected in their countries. Heike Behle, a member of the research team, has been awarded a Society of Research in Higher Education (SRHE) junior research award to build on the work she did on Futuretrack about overseas students who studied at UK universities.

We might have reached the end of Stage 4, but the work is by no means over, there is much more to do.

JA: Did any of the findings surprise you?

KP: Some of the findings confirmed what we suspected, but also surprised us too. For instance, we have known for some time that there is a gender differential in graduate salaries, but we did not expect to be able to reveal the extent to which this has remained stable and has been particularly resistant to change in some occupational sectors, despite Equal Opportunities legislation and changing gender patterns in employment and family roles; we knew that students living at home experienced HE differently from those living away but had not appreciated the way it affects participation in extra-curricular life; nor did we expect the growth in paid work. There is some very interesting, robust evidence now about the obstacles to social mobility that many first generation graduates face, and the fact that unpaid work after graduation clearly benefits employers a great deal more than graduates seeking access to real jobs. It did not surprise me that graduates who had been proactive in seeking employment and who had obtained career-relevant work experience as students, whether as part of their courses or independently, were less likely to have failed to achieve appropriate employment as graduates. Given the recession and difficulties of the current labour market, it surprised that 96% of graduates would do it all again! The overall optimism of the respondents, when asked about their longer-term prospects, was surprisingly high.

CC: Yes, and I would add that we were surprised to capture evidence of the way students use not just their graduate skills but also their subject knowledge – benefits accrue to part-timers, and their employers, during their courses and not just on completion.

JA: What would you do differently if you could start it all over again?

CC: We would have liked a much bigger sample of students. Also we would have loved to have delayed the start of the project so that we could have assessed the impact of the new student finance arrangements on part-time students. But that is only with the benefit of hindsight. When this study started in 2007, I am not sure anyone would have predicted the HE funding reforms introduced in 2012/13. For the first time in 2012/13 part-time students can access student loans to cover their fees, but our findings suggest that this will not be sufficient to sustain part-time participation. In particular, a high proportion of would-be part-time undergraduates are not eligible for loans, but fees have gone up just like those of full-time students.

KP: I would love to do it all again starting now, knowing what we know about accessing participants. It would be fascinating to do a parallel study post-recession and in light of the new student finance arrangements. In a way our study captured something unique – students began their courses in a time of economic prosperity but by the time they graduated, they faced the worst recession in more than 50 years. If we did it again now, we might find that students now have a very different outlook...different expectations...more realistic maybe? We would really love to follow current graduates into a Stage 5 too.

Plus...if you could arrange for us to have eight days in a week...that would be handy!

CC: I agree!

To read the full reports from all Futuretrack Stages 1, 2, 3 and 4 please go to
www.hecsu.ac.uk/futuretrack_research_reports.htm

**For more information and to read reports from
Futuretrack: part-time students, please go to**
www.hecsu.ac.uk/futuretrack_part_time_students.htm