Graduating into employment

Richard Pearson

The transition from graduation to employment may be longer than the six months allowed for in UK surveys.

GOVERNMENTS the world over are investing in education in the hope that this, along with research and development, will be the key to economic growth. Increasingly, they are also reviewing existing provision with a view to enhancing the vocational element. Education has far broader objectives than simply serving the needs of the economy and its role is crucial in the development and supply of higher-level scientific and technological skills.

There is, however, an inadequate understanding of the nature of the future needs of the labour market on which to base any 'planning', be it by potential students choosing between subjects and courses, institutions planning courses or by governments and agencies wanting to target public finance. One necessary and achievable first step in this direction is an improved understanding of the relationship between education and employment. Valuable input into this comes from the growing body of 'first-destination' and cohort studies of recent graduates; the United Kingdom, Australia, Canada and the United States all regularly monitor this area. But the validity of many of these studies and statistics is debated. In the UK, for example, regular first-destination statistics showing the employment status, or otherwise, of graduates six months after graduation have been collected for over 20 years and are regularly used to show the relative employability of graduates in different subjects¹. These statistics have consistently shown the greater employability of graduates in engineering relative to life sciences and the humanities, and from universities relative to polytechnics. More recently, these figures have been used by the government as a measure of performance for individual institutions. The critics of these indicators argue that, in a rapidly changing market, many graduates are spending a year or more deciding on job and career and hence the six-month picture is becoming increasingly unreliable and misleading.

A recent study of CNAA graduates three years after graduation has shown that, although many more humanities and social science graduates were unemployed six months after graduation, two years later almost all had jobs and the differences between subjects in terms of unemployment was negligible. But technology students earned most, and more arts and humanities graduates considered themselves overqualified. Most important, the study shows that the transition from education to employment in the United

Kingdom can take up to two years, adding further weight to the criticism of the six-month figures. What the study fails to show is that subjects are not all equal, in terms of employment prospects. More UK figures should be available at the end of 1987 in the form of the initial results of the Department of Employment's survey of the first five years post graduation of the 1980 cohort of graduates.

What, then, does overseas experience tell us? In Canada, results are now available on the experiences of the cohort of 1982 graduates two years after they grad-

Fig. 1 University graduates rating the match between field of study and job as "very important" by field of study. Source: *National Graduates Survey*, June/July 1984.

uated². This is the second such study (the first was in 1978) and it draws on the experiences of over 35,000 graduates, 73 per cent of whom are either university or college graduates. The short-term picture showed relatively low unemployment rates, at 9 per cent, soon after graduation in January 1983; this figure had fallen to 7 per cent by October of that year but had risen again to 9 per cent by June 1984. In addition some 14 per cent were in temporary work in January 1983, while 19 per cent were not in the labour market and not looking for a job. These figures suggest a more rapid and easier transition into employment than has been apparent in the United Kingdom over comparable years. In Canada, on a subject basis the figures show a remarkable similarity with the United Kingdom, with electrical and mechanical engineers, medics and computer studies graduates all having the highest full-time employment rates at 90 per cent plus, while graduates in humanities, social sciences and biological sciences, along with those in education, had below-average success.

Much is made of the virtues of part-time employment and, although it is rapidly on the increase, it is not very often the first choice of many workers. Among

the Canadian graduates, 7 per cent of men and 13 per cent of women were in part-time employment, most because they could not find full-time jobs; however, for a significant minority it was because they were continuing with their studies. Further study was also the main reason that both men and women were not participating in the labour force. Although unemployment rates averaged only 9 per cent, nearly half the graduates had been unemployed at some time in the first two years after graduation and the average period of unemployment was nearly seven months. This suggests that the Canadians were either more able or more willing to take temporary or stopgap jobs.

If degree subject clearly affects the ease of employability, do graduates want a close link between their subject and their job and to what extent do they achieve it? Such a link was thought to be of highest importance in health and education, and also in maths and physical sciences; fewer, although still almost half, from engineering and business desired a link; while the figure for business was matched by the percentage for the humanities and the social sciences (see Fig. 1). Once in work less than 20 per cent of all graduates in full-time employment said their job was not related to their education and the majority said they needed their qualification. The subjects showing the weakest linkages included the biological sciences, social sciences and the humanities, and it was graduates in these subjects who were also most likely to be in jobs not requiring university qualifications. The strongest linkages were, as expected, in health, business and engineering.

What does this tell us about the linkages between university education and subsequent employment in Canada? First, that most students expect there to be a link but that their rating of the link between subjects does not always follow expectations. Differences between subjects in terms of ease of transition follow a similar pattern to that in the United Kingdom. What is clear from both studies is that the first year or so after graduation is one of transition. However, although statistics based on a six-month snapshot may not reflect the longer-term status quo, the longer-term picture does not show that the differences between subjects change. □

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1. Pearson, R. *Nature* **318**, 90 (1985).

2. Pearson, R. *Nature* **318**, 494 (1985).

3. *The Class of 82. Statistics* (Canada, 1986).