

**LEARNING, IDENTITY AND AGENCY IN THE LIFE COURSE:
INVESTIGATING PARTICIPATION IN ADULT EDUCATION AND
TRAINING USING BIOGRAPHICAL AND PANEL DATA**

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Learning, identity and agency in the life course: Investigating participation in adult education and training using biographical and panel data

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Introduction

In this symposium we present emerging findings from an ongoing longitudinal study into the learning biographies of adults in England and Scotland. Through repeated interviews with a large group of adults over a period of three years our research seeks to gain an understanding of the meaning and significance of formal and informal learning in the lives of adults, both retrospectively and in 'real time'. We are particularly interested in relationships between learning, identity and agency. Alongside the interviews we are conducting analyses of the British Household Panel Survey in order to map our case studies onto larger trends and processes within the UK.

The first paper by Heather Hodgkinson with Geoff Ford, Ruth Hawthorn and Phil Hodgkinson, presents a preliminary analysis of biographical data which suggests that people engage or disengage with formal education and training for fairly lengthy phases within their lives. The emerging evidence suggests that within an engagement phase, participation in a series of courses becomes a significant part of a person's life. This engagement may be focused primarily on one type of purpose, such as employment or personal interest, or may span several. Non-engagement phases are sometimes the result of alienation developed as a result of earlier education or training or arising from the positive value placed upon practical or experiential learning. However, many phases of non-engagement simply result from the absence of any particular driver for engagement within a person's lives. One practical implication of this finding is that adult learning provision needs to be varied and to permit on-going learning, once a person has embarked on a phase of positive engagement.

The second paper by Phil Hodgkinson with Geoff Ford, Ruth Hawthorn and Heather Hodgkinson shows that engagement in formal education and training can be highly significant in transforming a person's view of themselves and of their place in the world. This can best be understood when we view learning as becoming through participation (Dominice, 2000). Phil and his colleagues use case studies to explore the use of some conceptual tools to help do this that entail the blending rather than separation of formal and informal learning (Colley et al., 2003) and of structure and agency. The paper demonstrates how learning, including learning during a phase of engagement in formal education and training, entails change to and/or reinforcement of a person's dispositions, and

the accumulation of social, cultural capital, related to their possibly changing social position. The result, it is argued, is an on-going process of becoming, as seen in the balance between continuity and change in people's lives.

These two papers fill an important gap in the literature about why people undertake episodes of formal learning during their adult years and how far life transitions and life events impact on the likelihood of undertaking a spell of formal learning. Together they show how hard it is to overestimate the importance of context. In the process of becoming, the presence or absence of social and environmental factors may be influential only under certain conditions and the same life event may have a different effect depending on the time of life it occurs and the circumstances under which it occurs.

In the third paper Flora Macleod and Paul Lambe apply event history techniques to panel data to explore the occurrence and timing of return to adult learning among 1997/8 leavers from full time initial education in England. The interest in this paper is centred on *whether* and, if so, *when* those who had just left initial full time education return to adult learning and the extent to which gender, qualifications and employment circumstances can predict the likelihood of an early return. The results give new insights into the ratios and patterns of adult participation in formal learning opportunities.

The phased engagement of adults in formal education and training

Heather Hodkinson (with Geoff Ford, Ruth Hawthorn, Phil Hodkinson), University of Leeds

Introduction

This is a descriptive paper based on preliminary analysis of some biographical data from the Learning Lives project. Fuller details are in Hodkinson et al (2006). The Leeds research team are working with a sample of 21 people. In periodic interviews over the past 18 months these people have given us detailed life stories and information about their ongoing lives. Here we explore their engagement in and experiences of what may be called "formal" learning. The terms formal and informal are imprecise when applied to learning (Colley et al., 2003). There is no agreed definition. In practice they overlap, and attributes of both occur in most learning situations. The formal learning discussed here concerns practices that are explicitly structured for learning, such as courses, in locations intended for learning, and normally led by a teacher. They would take place whether or not any particular learner joined. For our sample, informal learning is also important and often closely related to their formal learning, as is briefly discussed in a later paper.

Much of our sample's engagement with formal learning occurred over sustained periods in their lives. In most cases there were also sustained periods of non-engagement. Patterns of phased engagement and non-engagement are visible when the whole life course to date is considered. A period described as non-engagement may contain occasional attendance at short courses, whilst a phase of engagement may contain occasional years with no attendance at formal courses. With these provisos, engagement usually lasted several years, and usually involved participation in several different courses.

Patterns of engagement

Our sample had varied patterns of engagement and one way of understanding these is to look at the timing and number of phases. All but one of our sample had their first engagement with formal education in childhood schooling, and all except one had reengaged later. This is because our sample were selected because they were either engaged in adult education or receiving guidance, at the start of the research. Their phases of engagement and reasons for them varied, but there are groups where the patterns of phasing are similar. One group have never stopped formal learning throughout their lives. For example **Rebecca** (53) who worked in shops, offices and now care has pursued a mixture of instrumental work skills related courses and leisure courses. **Jennifer** (55) left school at 16 but studied for A-levels whilst in the army and did a degree level college course. Throughout her working life she has done courses to upgrade her skills as a linguist and teacher as well as attending leisure courses.

Another group dipped in and out of formal learning several times during their lives, usually for significant periods. **Joe** and **Stephen** are both over 55 and moved into work via apprenticeship, Stephen's periods of reengagement were mainly related to developments in his industry, and later to relieve the boredom and depression of disablement and enforced retirement. Joe's mid-career courses were to enhance his understanding of his community and how to help them. Late career changes were enforced by bankruptcy, and compulsory "New Deal" courses have been followed by academic study for a new career.

In this paper I want to concentrate on a group of older (55+) people who had virtually no engagement with formal learning though most of their adult lives but who have returned to this type of learning late on, usually in a committed way. As the reasons for non-engagement and engagement are different I deal with the two phases separately.

A working life of non-engagement

Tony (56) had an unsatisfactory experience of secondary schooling. His reading and writing were poor. He learned to skive, to cheat on homework and to gain kudos with peers from canings. He strongly perceives a failure by the school to take account of his needs. He left at 14 with a resentful attitude to formal education. He worked in casual, manual jobs, eventually finding his niche in road

repairs. His poor writing excluded him from apprenticeships and promotion, which didn't bother him at the time, though he is aware of it now. A workplace injury forced a move to a sedentary job, where he struggled with the form filling side of the work. When wife died leaving him with two teenagers, he chose to stay at home to look after them. He had always been aware of the possibility of formal education, because close relatives worked in it. But he wasn't interested and there were always other things to be doing.

Jim (74) spent his working life in a series of semi-skilled manual occupations. After national service there was little work available. He took what he could get, moving on through jobs he fancied or which paid better, before settling happily for 17 years as a machine operator in a big engineering firm. He became Union convenor for several years before redundancy when the firm closed. He found a second 'career' working for the water board. All his workplace learning was on the job. It was not until he had been retired for a couple of years that he considered going to classes. At home, he liked cooking and DIY, & loved his wife, but missed work and became bored and depressed. A neighbour suggested he try some classes at the local community centre. He had had no reason to know of their existence previously.

Like Jim, **Elsie** (76) did not return to formal education until after retirement. She did well as a girl at school passing to the city commercial college at 13. From there she followed a career in administrative work for the gas board, through to denationalisation, when she took early retirement. She took one short course in bookkeeping early in her career but says that there wasn't a lot of opportunity, particularly just after the war when there were no spare teachers, so few classes for adults. Her workplace learning was on the job. She developed an active life for herself post retirement to which, after a couple of years, she added various classes. Initially she joined English to explore her perception that language was being misused in the media.

William came from a mining background. He fulfilled parental hopes by passing to grammar school but found the cultural clash difficult as his contemporaries worked on more practical subjects at secondary school. He settled on textile design as a career. His apprenticeship included college courses of debatable value. Thence, his learning for work, leisure and life has been informal. He taught himself to play musical instruments and learned foreign languages when he lived overseas. The decline of the industry in Europe meant he needed another job. His return to formal education at the age of 61, following careers advice, has been specifically to this end.

Re-engagement

The people described above returned to formal learning after a gap spanning much of their lives. The central reasons for **Jim** and **Elsie's** return are given

above. Both have continued to study since they started. Elsie picks a different course each year to fit in with her other activities. Jim does 3 or 4 courses each year, but only at the one centre as the courses and centre are the core of his social life and community commitment. **William** was more job focussed, but he has thoroughly enjoyed the computer courses he has done. He has now obtained part-time work, so will his engagement with formal learning continue?

Tony is learning after a life of illiteracy. The need to help his daughter triggered his reengagement. She was struggling with writing at school, so he got her a computer and realised he needed to learn to use it himself. He enrolled on a course locally, which he liked. It led him to recognise specific shortcomings in his English and to enrol for a second course. He didn't get on with the English teacher, who didn't appreciate his underlying negativity towards 'school' attitudes, and addressed her own not his agenda. His engagement could have ended there but a relative recommended a different centre and teacher. Working more individualistic way she identified Tony's dyslexia & found a simple way to help him read. Attendance at a number of courses now structures his life. He had been drifting at home and slipping towards alcoholism, but basic skills courses have altered his view on life, strengthened his confidence, and opened up new interests.

Examples from a younger age range.

Two women in their 30s have followed a similar pattern by disengaging from formal education when they started work then reengaging several years later. Louise's reasons were more job related. At school, **Louise** concentrated on the 2 artistic GCSE's she was really interested in. To her disappointment she failed everything else and couldn't go to art college. She found an artistic job in the print industry and was happy to be earning money. Personal relations there led her to move after 5 years, to work as a teaching assistant. By now she recognised that she had made mistakes at school and would like to retake some exams, but her partner discouraged her. During her serious illness he left, and thereafter Louise took part-time courses and passed her English and Maths GCSEs. She has since done any work-related courses and qualifications she has been offered, supported by her new partner. She has a view to improving her job, but is also looking to compensate for her own failure at school and her mothers sacrifice of her own education to bring up her daughters.

Wafa did well at school, went to university and became a teacher. She later fulfilled Pakistani family and cultural expectations by marrying a cousin. They lived and worked in London for several years, but when she became pregnant they moved near to both families to bring up the child. Her return to formal learning was initially fortuitous as some leisure courses were set up alongside her son's playgroup. She is happy with her role as housewife, which allows her the flexibility to deal with situations in the extended family, but she wants to enjoy some things for herself and this has mainly involved doing courses. Her choice of courses has not entirely been her own. Her sister has become schizophrenic and

Wafa chose several courses to go to with her. Her current University course in Arabic studies allows her to use her brain and fits with her religious faith. Any course must fit her family routine.

Reasons for phases of engagement in formal learning

In our sample we have seen people spending significant periods of their lives engaged in formal learning and significant periods not engaged. The reasons for engagement may be very specific, for example to develop employment skills, or to help someone with a specific problem. Equally, the reasons are often complex and varied and may change within a period of engagement. In many of our case studies, we see that learning through participation in a series of courses can become a significant part of a person's life, at least for a while. It becomes part of their pattern of living and part of their sense of identity.

Any phase of engagement, but especially the phase of compulsory schooling and continuing education, may be followed by disengagement for a number of reasons, such as changed circumstances, lack of time and opportunity, or a negative experience. There may be a deliberate choice not to engage, perhaps following alienation developed during a previous experience, or because of a belief in the benefit of experiential and practical learning. However where there is no particular need to participate, no obvious opportunities to participate, formal learning will not form any part of a person's social and cultural experience. Their life and their identity are focussed elsewhere. For the people described above there have been periods with a strong focus on work &/or on family &/or on leisure and other activities which have not involved formal learning.

In our sample changes of phase were often though not always linked with wider life changes. For example, disengagement after schooling was often part of a move into employment and eventual adult family relations. Later reengagement was associated with job change, retirement, unemployment and illness, but also through family changes or becoming part of a local community. Often, reengagement followed such life changes, but was also an integral part of them. What it means to consider learning in this way is discussed in the next paper.

The place of formal education and training in learning as becoming

Phil Hodkinson (with Geoff Ford, Ruth Hawthorn & Heather Hodkinson)

Introduction

To those at this conference it is no surprise that preliminary analysis of data in the Learning Lives project shows that engagement in formal education and

training can be significant in influencing a person's view of themselves and their place in the world. Some examples were described in the previous section led by Heather Hodkinson. Here are some others.

Gladys Dean is a 66 year-old woman, of West Indian origins. Widowed, she lives alone. Gladys did not start her formal education until two years after she retired. Encouraged and supported by her eldest daughter, she enrolled on a basic literacy course in a local community centre. At the time of writing Gladys is in her fifth year there, and attends courses on four mornings a week. As well as literacy she has been encouraged to study maths, and is doing a couple of courses using practical skills which she learned as a child - sewing and cookery.

Her progress in reading and writing has been slow but she feels it has made a considerable difference to her life. As well as practical improvements in her ability to deal with written material, Gladys's self-confidence is growing. She feels independent for the first time. She is able to do things she enjoys and is eager to do more. This is largely the result of going to college, where she has had support from staff and students. She sees continued attendance at college as central to her progress and happiness.

Timothy Keane is 54. Early childhood problems led to underachievement at school. He did less well than expected at A-level and, influenced by his foster family, enrolled on a business studies HND from which he dropped out.

He earned his living by doing a variety of casual jobs for two years, before moving to London, where he became fascinated by the theatre. He got work as a film extra, then worked for 10 years for one theatre company in low-status jobs. Following the theatre company's closure he found similar work elsewhere, and during this time he re-engaged with formal education through part-time Open University courses. A careers adviser suggested that he could have another attempt at higher education (HE), and he then went to university. However an old problem of poor concentration persisted, and although he got his degree and started an MA, he couldn't finish the latter. He returned to fulltime casual work, but then took up evening classes in acting. These went so well that he changed to part-time work and signed on for an acting course. He is hoping to embark on an acting career that he has hovered around throughout much of his life so far.

Jane Eddington is a 55 year old single woman who is very well read, with considerable expertise in European ancient and medieval history. She left school at 18 with A-levels, and a place to do a degree at an Art College. She failed two out of three subjects in her first year and had to leave. The subject she passed was art history. Two years later she returned to HE having met a girl with a classics degree, which determined her to have another try. She read ancient history and archaeology with Italian, as a mature student, aged 23. Her first year went well. However, in the summer holidays she inadvertently took LSD, was ill for six months and dropped out of the course the following Easter.

By the 1970s, she had been to Istanbul and back, had a baby with an American, tried living with him in the US but returned, and was living in council accommodation when she enrolled on an acting course. Jane had been interested in the idea of acting since childhood. She had worked as a volunteer with a theatre group before she had her son. She did well in the classes and took an exam, but failed by two marks. She did not resume the classes, being discouraged, and because of the time required to earn money to look after her son.

Later, life improved and she bought her council house and sold it; but then lost the capital through a confidence trick. She moved to East London and her health collapsed. To start to put the pieces back together she did a computer course with a local women's centre, and started on work experience with them, but the centre closed down. She went to an FE college in east London and did an NVQ in Advice and Guidance, followed by an ESOL teaching course at a different college, but she withdrew because she found it too theoretical. She is currently waiting for her first college to run an ESOL/CEUTA course, whilst doing a drop-in programme on the use of computers in photography.

Her informal learning runs parallel with this changing succession of courses, being closely integrated in her early years, then separated, and now integrated again. Her informal learning started in early childhood abroad, which fostered an interest in other languages and culture. Her father, who was in the Forces, wanted one of his children to learn Italian. He left a copy of *Teach Yourself Italian* lying around and Jane picked it up and had a go. She saw languages as something to be spoken and, although she only had school French, she got a job as a bi-lingual telephone operator in the years between HE courses.

There were many struggles throughout her son's education about how best to support his development, and Jane speaks happily about taking him to Restoration Comedy and Shakespeare during his teenage years. She says little about the vocational classes she has done recently, but the photography course has become part of her lifelong enthusiasm for the archaic; currently she is spending happy hours tinkering with a photo of a Greek statue in the Louvre. Her enthusiasm for the archaic seems to be traceable to a special subject on the Crusades and Byzantium that she took as part of her A-level in History, and may be connected with her early life in Malta. Since then she has picked up an enormous amount of information through reading, travelling and visiting museums and art galleries. Since her son became financially independent she seems to spend what little money she has on going to Sicily. This appears to build on the art history in her first HE course and her formal learning of Italian in her second, but she does not relate such interests back to her classroom experiences. For her it is excitement for the places, the stones and their history.

Learning as becoming

Learning is a contested concept. As Sfard (1998) and Hager (2005) suggest, one way of understanding these conflicts is through the use of different metaphors for learning. Leading contenders are acquisition, participation and construction. It is possible to make some sense of the stories presented here (and others in our data) through any of these conceptual lenses. However, each has some short-comings, if taken alone.

It is possible to see Gladys as *acquiring* literacy skills, but this fails to do justice to the deep impact her learning is having on her identity. This is partly because to see learning as acquisition implies a separation of that which is learned from the learner. The latter contains the former, like a tin, bought and stacked in a cupboard. Jane's and Timothy's stories illustrate another problem for acquisitional views of learning. In both cases, formal and informal learning are intertwined. It makes little sense to divide Jane's love and knowledge of ancient history between her formal courses, her times abroad and her extensive reading. Timothy's acting interests and abilities come from his informal learning in the theatre company, as well as from his later acting courses. Yet another problem with acquisition can be seen in Jane's experiences of learning to use computers in photography. The main benefits of that course for her lay not in the skills of photography that were the intended outcomes, but the new ways the course gave her to expand her understanding of ancient history.

The main recent challenger to acquisition as a metaphor for learning has been participation (Sfard, 1998), and it is helpful to see the formal learning of our subjects in this way. Not only have they learned through participating in courses (as well as other learning activities) but they have often valued the process of participation as much as the actual achievements. Gladys has expanded the number and types of course that she studies, beyond literacy. Both Jane and Timothy have experienced valuable learning processes, but also some that were less so. But there is nothing inherent in taking a participatory view of learning that requires such participation to be positive. It is important to understand the often complex nature of participation in courses, where parts can be valuable and others not, or where the perceived value can change from time to time, as circumstances alter.

Taking a participatory view of learning is helpful in bringing to the fore the social nature of learning. In studies of college and workplace learning, for example, this has made possible a necessary focus on power relations and social inequalities, including those associated with class, gender and ethnicity (Hodkinson et al, forthcoming). However, if taken alone, participatory views of learning have a tendency to marginalize the significance of individual experiences and dispositions.

A solution is to blend elements of a construction metaphor with that of participation. Here I am drawing rather more on a Deweyan conception of construction (Hager, 2005) than a restrictedly cognitive view. The former focuses on the ways in which individuals, like Jane, Gladys and Timothy, construct their learning through embodied actions, not thinking alone. They construct their learning through participation in life including, for them, formal educational courses. Interrelationships between participation in differing types of situation and activity are easy to accommodate. Thus, as our stories illustrate, learning on a formal course is often influenced by learning off the course, and vice versa.

Current learning is influenced by a person's dispositions, developed through their past lives. That current learning contributes to the on-going development of those dispositions, through reinforcement and/or change. That is, a combination of construction and participation metaphors means learning can be seen as *becoming*. This is similar to Dominic's (2000, p11) observation that the French concept *formation* 'describes the alliance of formal and experiential learning that gives shape to an adult life'. As people learn, they become who they are. This becoming may sometimes be deliberate and planned, with a desired end point, as with Timothy's desire to become an actor. But often it is not. Jane did not originally study Italian with the objective of enhancing her interest in ancient history. Rather, her interest in Italian, in Italy and in classical history and art progressively combined as a significant part of her developing identity. Gladys had no idea of the contentment with her lifestyle that would result, when she forced herself through the college door for the first time. Though she met several setbacks in her formal educational career, none of these prevented this process of becoming, which is more important for her than achieving the qualifications.

The occurrence and timing of return to adult learning among 1997/8 initial full time education leavers in England

Flora Macleod and Paul Lambe, University of Exeter

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to tentatively answer the following questions using an event history approach:

1. How long does it take 1997/8 leavers from initial full time education in England to return to adult learning?
2. Can one predict the likelihood of an early return from individual characteristics: gender, qualifications and employment circumstances?

The source of data for this paper is the British Household Panel Survey (BHPS) wave 8 (1998) through to wave 13 (2003). For more details about the BHPS data and references on its methodology see Macleod and Lambe (2006).

How long it takes a leaver to become a returner might seem a straightforward enough question. Yet it is a question that is fraught with methodological difficulty. Event occurrence represents an individual's transitions from one "state" to another. In this paper state one is represented as "being a non-returner" and state two is represented as "being a returner". But unlike our colleagues in this symposium who report on how people spend periods of their lives in an engaged state followed by periods in a disengaged state (or vice-verse) and describe the phase of non-engagement as potentially containing "occasional attendance at short courses, whilst a phase of engagement may contain occasional years with no attendance at formal courses" our methodology does not permit definition overlap.

In order to track the occurrence of an event and its timing, the state of being a non-returner and being a returner must be mutually exclusive such that each member of our sample can only occupy one of the two states at a given point in time. As our interest here is in *whether* a target event occurs at all during the period for which data are available and, if it does, *when* it occurs during that period, we must have a clear definition of our target event that will allow us to make a clear distinction between each state. This condition must be met so that we can pinpoint the timing of the transition if indeed it occurs at all.

Our target event

As defining our target event "being a returner [to formal adult part-time learning]" was primarily a measurement issue, and thus crucial to our analysis, we settled for a working definition that would allow for precision and clarity in terms of indicating what constituted one state and what constituted another. We operationalised our target event as "return to adult learning for the first time" by using one BHPS item requiring a "yes" or "no" response. That question was:

(Apart from the full-time education you have already told me about) Have you taken part in any other training schemes or courses at all since September 1st [the previous year] or completed a course of training which led to a qualification? Please include part-time college or university courses, evening classes, training provided by an employer either on or off the job, government training schemes, Open University courses, correspondence courses and work experience schemes.

EXCLUDE LEISURE COURSES

In settling for this definition we fully recognise that 'return to adult learning' was defined narrowly for the purposes of this paper as it specifically did not include leisure time courses and the type of adult learning referred to above by our colleagues that does not require one to register on a course. For our purposes, however, we judged that this question represented a meaningful basis for our analysis because it tapped into a wide range of adult learning provision leading

potentially to the full range of qualifications available to adults studying in England from the lowest to the highest. (A further rationale, not directly relevant to this particular paper, was that there were a number of probes for those who answered “yes” that elicited information for up to three spells of participation on what, where, why, outcomes (qualifications) and who paid for the course.)

Our sample

Our sample was made up of all BHPS respondents living in England who had left initial full time education at some point between wave 7 (1997) and wave 8 (1998). 618 individuals aged between 16 and 23 (at wave 8) in England who at the BHPS 1998 interview (wave 8) were recorded as not being in full time education but who were recorded as being in full time education at the 1997 (wave 7) BHPS interview were identified as eligible to enter our sample. Because the BHPS interview takes place between September and November each year, these 618 individuals can be said to have left initial full time education at some point between September/November 1997 and September/November 1998.

Measuring the passage of time

All members of our sample were asked the above question in 1998, 1999, 2000, 2001, 2002 and 2003. Our interest was purely in identifying the **first time** they answered “yes”, or more precisely, the first BHPS wave at which they answered “yes”. For example at wave 8 (1998), our sample of leavers who had left school at some point between this wave and the previous one were asked “.....Have you taken part in any other training schemes or courses at all since September 1st 1997” Thus they were being asked to reflect back on the year in which they had left initial full time education and say whether they had had any spells of adult learning formally organised on a part-time basis since they had left. Those who answer “yes” leave our sample at this point because they have experienced our target event and are thus no longer eligible to experience it **for the first time** again. Those who remain have their wave 9 (1999) responses examined. If they answer “yes” at wave 9 they leave, if “no” they remain in the sample and so on until we reach a wave where they answer “yes”. If they had not answered “yes” by the 2003 BHPS interview they were ‘right-censored’ meaning they left at the end of the period for which information is available having yet to experience the target event.

The metric for recording the passage of time is BHPS waves, that is, one yearly discrete time intervals **from September 1, 1997 or the point thereafter when they left initial full time education prior to the 1998 interview**. This is because the “beginning of time” in this paper is the point at which sample members became eligible to experience the target event. According to how we defined our target event, it could not happen until after completion of full time initial education. There is thus no ‘left-censoring’ meaning everyone is in state one at the “beginning of time” because each individual in the sample is a non-returner until they become a returner.

One caveat is the varying time individual members of our sample were eligible to experience the target event during year 1. As we do not know precisely when between wave 7 (1997) and wave 8 (1998) respondents actually left full time initial education, this means that during year 1 (1st Sept 1997 – 1998 BHPS interview date) members of our sample could have had a longer or shorter period of eligibility to experience the event. For example, someone who left initial full time education on 1st October 1997 would have been eligible to experience the event from that date to the 1998 interview date, whilst someone who left initial full time education on 31st July 1998 would only have been eligible from that date to the 1998 interview date – the latter period being a substantially shorter period than the former and both being less than one full year. A second caveat is that for this initial discrete time period the data do not allow us to differentiate between participation pre and post leaving, should the former have occurred.

Models and statistical methods

As the possibility of each sample member experiencing the target event, is in discrete 12 month intervals or periods of time (BHPS waves), a discrete event history model is appropriate for our analysis. The application of regular statistical tools such as means and standard deviations is, however, inappropriate. This is because there are individuals for whom information on the occurrence and timing of the event is not available and excluding these 'right censored' cases would produce misleading results. To get round this problem three new statistical ways of summarising data are introduced: the hazard function, the survival function and the median lifetime (Singer and Willett, 2003).

The hazard function assesses the risk of the target event occurring among those eligible to experience it within each discrete time period. The survivor function assesses the probability that a given individual will survive from one discrete period to the next without having experienced the event. The median lifetime identifies the point in time at which half the sample are estimated to have experienced the target event.

Findings

For our methodology tabular and graphic displays are powerful ways of identifying and summarising trends over time. However, to comply with submission preferences and the specified word limit, these have not been included here. They will, of course, be included in the paper available at the symposium.

Our analysis for the whole sample (n=618) shows that 179 individuals were recorded as having experienced the target event at wave 8 (1998), that is 179 out of 618 returned to adult learning within one year of leaving full time initial education. A further 93 were recorded as having experienced the event at wave 9 (1999). Thus 272 (179+93) had returned to adult learning within two years of leaving. 44 more were recorded as having experienced the event at wave 10

(2000). As the cumulated number of returners at this point was 316 (179+93+44), totalling more than 50% of the sample 309 (618/2) this meant that within a three year period of leaving more than half of our sample had experienced the target event by returning to adult learning. We can thus conclude in response to our first question that **the average time it took the 1997/8 leavers from full time initial education to become returners to adult learning was less than three years.**

A further 30 became returners within 4 years of leaving, totalling 346 by wave 11 (2001), 20 within 5 years, totalling 366 by wave 12 (2002); and a further 19 was added to this cumulative total at the 6 year from leaving point, totalling 385 by wave 13 (2003). This wave marked the end of our observation period. Of the 233 individuals (618-385) who had not been recorded as experiencing the event by this point, only 144 individuals were right-censored. That is, only 144 were recorded as having left the sample at the end of the observation period having yet to experience the target event. The 89 unaccounted for individuals (233-144) were lost from the sample during the 6 year tracking period due to either item or wave attrition or dropout.

Our second question was based on an assumption that our sample was not homogenous. Based on earlier analysis (Macleod and Lambe, 2006), we reasoned that the odds would not be stacked evenly for each member to experience the target event within each discrete time period. We hypothesised that different individuals, distinguished on the basis of their value on selected predictors (gender, highest academic qualification and employment status) would have different hazard functions meaning the odds would be stacked against some and in favour of others according to their value of these predictors.

To test these hypotheses we first calculated the hazard functions, survivor functions and median lifetimes for each dichotomous predictor: male/female; low/high qualifications, employed/unemployed using the information recorded at wave 8 for these latter two time-variant predictors. This analysis showed that each of these predictors had an impact on the likelihood or risk of event occurrence within a discrete time period. Informed by this 'observed heterogeneity' of our sample we specified discrete-time hazard models for gender, qualifications and employment circumstances, evaluated their goodness-of-fit and quantified each predictor's effect on the likelihood of experiencing the event in a discrete time period. The odds ratios for different individuals, distinguished on the basis of their binary value on these three predictors are summarised below:

- The estimated odds of females in our sample experiencing the event of returning to adult learning in any one of the six discrete timeframes studied were 72% of those for males ($1/1.3922 = 0.71828$).
- The estimated odds of the event occurring for those who had left initial full time education with no qualifications or CSEs were 46% of those who left with academic qualifications of 0 levels and above ($1/2.1677 = 0.4613$).

- The estimated odds of those whose status was recorded as unemployed at wave 8 experiencing the target event were 38% of those whose current job status was recorded as employed ($1/2.6501 = 0.3773$).

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