

Graduates prove a hard bunch to satisfy

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*Going to university is a social experience as well as an educational one, writes **Andrew Norton***

Most people who go to university end up earning more money than non-graduates. But does a university degree make life better in other ways? As part of Grattan Institute research into the benefits of higher education, we examined several Australian social surveys.

The most obvious way higher education can improve lives is through work. Degrees open up jobs that are difficult or impossible for non-graduates to get. Money aside, the professional and managerial jobs that most graduates obtain should be more interesting, varied and creative than other occupations.

Unfortunately, graduates are not more satisfied overall with their jobs than non-graduates. Graduates are not dissatisfied but there is no graduate job satisfaction premium.

On specific aspects of employment, graduates do express more positive attitudes. They report better relationships with their colleagues and bosses than non-graduate workers. They are more likely to regard their job as "useful to society". However, only people with postgraduate qualifications are much more likely than other employees to see their work as interesting.

A possible explanation is that graduates expect too much. Most go to university to improve their job prospects. When actual jobs don't match hoped-for jobs, they mark down their satisfaction levels. Good jobs by general community standards become disappointing jobs by graduate standards.

The apparent mismatch between objective and subjective indicators for graduate job satisfaction is not found for graduate health. Graduates are less overweight than non-graduates, putting them at lower risk of a wide range of medical conditions. Consistent with their objective health status, graduates are more likely than non-graduates to report that their health is good. Perhaps because few people go to university to improve their health, the experience does not give them unrealistic expectations.

Going to university is a social experience as well as an educational one. The usually light timetables and long holidays of undergraduate courses leave time for lasting friendships to develop. This may explain why graduates have more close friends than non-graduates. However, graduates are not more likely to be satisfied with their partners. The qualities that make someone a good spouse are probably not much affected by education.

Higher incomes, better health, and more friends should translate into higher overall life satisfaction or happiness. As part of our research into the benefits of higher education, we examined three different Australian surveys that asked about happiness or life satisfaction. In two of them, graduates were overall less happy or satisfied with their lives, and in the third they were more satisfied.

We lean towards thinking that the positive result is closer to the truth. The relevant survey was conducted by the Australian Bureau of Statistics. More people answer questions from the ABS than from private survey organisations. The ABS survey may include grumpy people who refuse to answer questions from non-government pollsters, and make the non-graduate population look happier than it is in reality.

Even if this is so, the mixed life satisfaction results are surprising, given the number of objective factors that should improve graduate lives.

Other researchers who have examined this issue offer possible explanations.

Academics at the University of Canberra have found that the results are complicated by age factors. For older people, graduates are less satisfied with their lives than people with school education. But for younger people, graduates are a little more satisfied with their lives than those with less education. Possibly graduates become less satisfied with their lives as they age. Or it could be that for older generations a degree was not necessary to get a good job, and so the importance of higher education differs between the generations.

Mike Dockery from Curtin University used a survey that tracked the same group of people from their mid-teens to their mid-20s to find that happiness was highest for more academic students while they were studying. As they entered the workforce, their average happiness declined. For less academic students, their happiness improved as they moved into paid work.

For many young people, higher education is one of the best experiences of their lives. The trouble is that it creates expectations about the future that cannot always be met. Not everyone gets the job they want, or the pay they would like.

Even when their careers go to plan, graduates have many more obligations and responsibilities than they did as students.

The limitations of the "real world" compared with university may explain why the objectively better lives of graduates are not always reflected in their subjective feelings about life.

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