

# Expression of interest

# Title: Research with graduates of low-return subjects

**Project reference: 2018/060**

**Deadline for expressions of interest: 28/09/2018 at 7pm**

## Summary

Expressions of interest are sought for a research project focusing on graduates of ‘low-return’ subjects and the extent to which these might generate wider benefits to individuals and society. Recent analysis, commissioned by the Department for Education (DfE), confirmed that graduates of some subjects (such as creative arts) have significantly lower than average earnings returns from Higher Education (HE). However, such subjects may provide students and society with other types of return. It is these ‘low earning return’ graduates and wider benefits that is  the focus of this proposed research. We believe that a combination of secondary analysis and qualitative research would be the most effective methodology to address our research questions, but we would welcome contractors to put forward other methodologies.

## Background

The recent DfE report, [‘The relative labour market returns to different degrees’](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/714517/The_relative_labour_market-returns_to_different_degrees.pdf), shows that graduates of some subjects have significantly lower than average earnings returns from HE. In some cases, these earnings might be less than the cost of a degree and perhaps even less than their non-graduate peers. Even accounting for student characteristics (such as gender, socio-economic group and prior attainment), significant differences in the relative returns of different subjects remain. The research uses Longitudinal Education Outcomes (LEO) data on the earnings of graduates 5 years after graduation.

Creative arts – which enrols more than 10% of all students – has very low earnings returns: around 15% less than the average degree. Other ‘low-return’ subjects include English and Sociology.

However, the benefits of Higher Education go beyond any change in future earnings, and might include greater career satisfaction for the individual or wider benefits to society, such as cultural contribution or public service. The Department is therefore commissioning work to help us understand the strength of the wider economic and social case for low-return subjects.Beyond the salaries earned by graduates, what other measures of career success exist and how important are these measures for graduates of low-return subjects? How do graduates of low-return subjects view their HE choices, what were their expectations of HE (in terms of salary and job prospects) and have these expectations been met? What are low-return graduates’ experiences of work, what types of work are they in, what are their levels of career satisfaction and general wellbeing – and how does this compare with graduates of average or higher-return subjects? What evidence is there that they might be making a wider social contribution greater than that of other graduates.

It is anticipated that the proposed study will use a mixture of secondary analysis and primary qualitative research to explore these issues. The results will inform the work of the review of post-18 education and funding and the development of DfE’s student information policies. It may also lead to longer-term ideas of how the Department might seek to improve evidence in this area.

## Research Aims

The overarching aims of the research project are:

* To identify which measures of career success (beyond earnings) are most important for graduates, and to identify the relative importance of these measures for graduates of low-return subjects.
* To identify how graduates of low-return subjects view their HE choices, how they made their choices about which subject to study at HE, what their expectations of HE were (with respect to salaries and job prospects), and the extent to which these expectations have been met.
* To understand low-return graduates’ experiences of work (and how these have been shaped by their HE choices and experiences), the types of work they are in, their levels of career satisfaction and their levels general wellbeing, compared with graduates of higher-return subjects.
* To understand the strength of the wider economic and social case for low-return subjects.
* To identify practical ideas for research beyond the scope of this project that the DfE might consider to improve the evidence-base in this area.

### Research Questions

1. What types of jobs do graduates of low-return subjects go into? To what extent are these graduate-level jobs?
2. Beyond the salary they currently earn, or can expect to earn, in their chosen career what other measures of career success exist for graduates? And, how important are these ‘other’ measures of career success for different graduates (i.e. those of low-return subjects versus high-return subjects)?
   * For example: finding work in a chosen field / finding a job that they are passionate about; finding a job with a good work-life balance; good career progression; job security; doing ethical / socially useful work?
3. To what extent does the prospect of having a low salary job ‘matter’ to graduates of low-return subjects? How does this perception change over an individual’s life course?
4. How did graduates of low-return return subjects make the choice about which subject to study?
   1. Compared with students of other subjects, to what extent did graduates of low-return subjects consider job prospects / salary outcomes when making their choice about which subject to study?
   2. What other factors did graduates of low-return subjects consider when applying to HE (e.g. enjoyment / being good at a subject)?
   3. How do graduates of low-return subjects now view the choices they made, and the information they received about post-18 routes?
   4. On balance, are low-return graduates satisfied with their educational choices? Would they make the same choice again given the opportunity?[[1]](#footnote-1)
   5. What are lessons we can draw about the information needs of applicants to low-return subjects?
5. How satisfied are graduates of low-return subjects with their careers? What are their general levels of wellbeing? How does this compare with the satisfaction / wellbeing levels among graduates of other subjects?
6. What lessons can we draw about the wider value that graduates of low-return subjects bring to the economy and society?

## Methodology

The methodology will comprise a review / summary of existing literature, secondary analysis and qualitative interviews.

**Secondary analysis**

We would like the contractor to explore three potential secondary analysis routes, but are also open to other suggestions:

1. FutureTrack:

Futuretrack is a longitudinal survey of those who applied to study higher education in the 2005/6 academic year, typically graduating around 2009/10. Four previous waves of the study have been conducted, with the most recent being in 2011/12, when the majority of the sample would have been in an early position in their careers following graduation. (Wave 5 will be conducted in Winter 2018/19, but results will not be available in time for this analysis.) The sample size is around 17,000, of whom approximately 4,900 are low-return graduates[[2]](#footnote-2).

Questionnaire items are highly relevant to this research, addressing key questions around careers, reflections on educational choices and overall life satisfaction. The longitudinal dataset also provides a detailed wealth of information on educational journeys, and allows for a direct comparison of low-return graduates with other graduates.

1. Labour Force Survey:

The Labour Force Survey (LFS) is a survey of households living at private addresses in the UK. Its purpose is to provide information on the UK labour market which can then be used to develop, manage, evaluate and report on labour market policies. The survey is run every quarter, and has a substantial sample of around 90,000 individuals per quarter. While the LFS is less directly relevant to the topic of this research, compared with FutureTrack, it does collect information about: the subject of respondents’ undergraduate degree; details about their current employment, including industry (not available in FutureTrack), occupation and earnings; and their subjective wellbeing. We would like the contractor to explore the feasibility of using LFS:

1. To explore the experiences / wellbeing of recent graduate cohorts (i.e. post 2012), comparing those on low- versus high-return subjects;
2. To look at the impact of studying a low-return subject (compared with a medium- or high-return subject) on wellbeing over a longer time period (with FutureTrack wave 4, we are only able to explore 2-3 years after graduation).
3. To compare the experiences of low-return graduates with non-graduates working in similar industries.
4. Destination of Leavers of Higher Education (Longitudinal):

This Longitudinal Destinations data provides an insight into the employment and study patterns of leavers three and a half years into their careers, and includes data about leavers' activities and their satisfaction with their careers to date.

**Qualitative research**

To address some of the limitations with the secondary analysis, we are also proposing to fund qualitative research with graduates of low-return subjects. The focus would be on the most recent cohort of graduates, who began courses after 2012, and who graduated 2-3 years ago. We would look to explore graduates’ reflections on their educational choices, their career values (e.g. relative importance of salary compared with other factors); their thoughts about / satisfaction with their current career; and perceptions about their career progression potential.

As a minimum, we anticipate that the sample would be stratified geographically (as the experience of low-return graduates in London may be different from those based in other areas), and by university tariff (high / medium / low – as this might serve as a proxy for prior attainment). Other characteristics such as gender, socio-economic group, age and ethnicity are also likely to be important. The focus would be on the English-domiciled population.

## Timing

* Deadline for EOIs: **28/09/2018 at 7pm**
* Deadline for ITT: 15th October 2018
* Contract award/Project start: 22nd October 2018
* Fieldwork: November / December 2018
* Draft Final Report: December 2018
* Proposed End Date: January 2019

## Assessment criteria

Expressions of interest will be assessed against the following criteria:

* Experience of research topics to be covered
* Experience of research methodologies to be used and, in particular, experience of analysing FutureTrack and Labour Force Survey data
* Experience of research with higher education students / graduates
* Capacity and capability to deliver the project in the timescales indicated

Expressions of interests submitted must be no more than 1000 words overall; this includes any website links. Anything longer will be disregarded.

| **Closing date for EOIs: 28/09/2018 at 7pm**  **Send your EOI form to: Emma Drever**  **(Emma.Drever @education.gov.uk)** |
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## How to submit an expressions of interest

You must submit an expression of interest (EOI) in order to be considered to be invited to tender. To do so, please complete the NEW EOI Form which can be found under attachments. A submission of an EOI does not guarantee an invitation to tender and the Department does not routinely advise organisations that they have not been successful in being invited to tender. Feedback is however available on request.

All contracts are let on the basis of the [Department’s Terms and Conditions](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/eoi-guide). You are encouraged to check these before submitting your expression of interest, as these form part of your contractual obligations.

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1. There are methodological challenges with this question. We know that, with the benefit of hindsight, most young people are satisfied with their post-18 choices (see, for example, Lyonette et al., 2016). However, it is less clear the extent to which this is due to a behavioural issue of self-justification, that having made a choice we rationalise that it was a good decision (even if it wasn’t). Unpicking this issue is complex. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. In wave 4, graduates from Arts, Humanities, Languages and Social Science students comprised 29% of the sample. Note that this is a rough calculation based on aggregated categories that do not match those in LEO. The actual relevant sample size at a course level is likely to be higher as it will include additional below-average returns subjects such as Agriculture and Biosciences. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)