

## **Graduate Pathways: A Longitudinal Study of Graduates in Outdoor Studies in the U.K.**

### **Introduction**

The first destinations of graduates in the UK are monitored comprehensively in Higher Education (HE) institutions (HESA, 2004) but for many graduates, it may take as long as three years to gain employment at what they define as graduate 'level' (Connor *et al.*, 1997; DfEE *et al.*, 1999).

The focus of this paper is a case study of graduates from a single honours Outdoor Studies degree course at St Martin's College, Ambleside, U.K. As such, it is representative only of a small percentage of national data capture. However, it can detail practice and explain data trends and be of significant use to tertiary institutions, employers and students.

A key question at open days from parents and prospective students concerns career prospects: what might be available, what careers have past graduates followed and what is the likelihood of securing employment? (At St Martin's College, the percentage of graduates securing a graduate level post on graduation is the highest in the UK at 89.7 % (Sunday Times, September 2004).

It is evident that employers are seeking personal, core and process skills beyond the academic or vocational discipline perhaps with different emphases dependent on the career area. Not all graduates pursue careers related to

their first degree subject area and these key core and transferable skills are crucial. However, it is useful to ascertain the importance of specialist skills in the workplace, matched to concerns as to the numbers of outdoor graduates in the UK and the extent to which the industry can support them. Certainly, there were concerns in the early 2000's about the validity of Higher Education courses in Outdoor Education (Revell, 2001) and a recent survey of almost 150 responses from employers in the outdoor sector (Barnes, 2004) identified outdoor activity awards/skills as the main quality that they would expect to find in an outdoor education degree graduate. This was closely followed by 'personal attributes', 'experience', 'group working skills' and 'communication skills' i.e. those skills beyond subject knowledge and understanding.

There has been a commitment at St Martin's College to developing key core and transferable skills (see, for example, [www.keyskills.ucsm.ac.uk](http://www.keyskills.ucsm.ac.uk)) and considerable implicit and explicit emphasis in the Outdoor Studies programmes on these personal and process skills and their application in the field. Many graduates in Outdoor Studies take short term, often seasonal employment, initially and there has been a suspicion amongst staff that perhaps a later destination would be a better indicator long term career patterns than first destination data.

Thus, this project examines the longer term employability of graduates from a BSc (Honours) degree in Outdoor Studies to inform curriculum design and development, careers guidance for current and prospective students and currency of knowledge of professional practice and skills needed in the

outdoor industry and beyond. As a case study of the author's own college, there may be issues of selectivity and bias which must be recognised and minimised.

This research was part of a Graduate Pathway project and had two key aims:

- To track the career pathways of Outdoor Studies graduates;
- To identify which skills developed at undergraduate level have contributed to the careers of these graduates.

## **Methodology**

The research was essentially a survey using a structured questionnaire to all BSc Outdoor Studies graduates (five cohorts, 2000 – 2004 inclusive) in October 2004.

To date, few studies have considered the perspectives of the graduates themselves ... (Shah *et al.*, 2004, pp9-10.)

This methodology reflected the timescale of this small scale research project, questions of representative sample selection for other methodologies and marginalisation of bias (the author designed, developed and implemented this degree.) The questionnaire was directed at eliciting primarily quantitative data (descriptive statistics) to generate unbiased summary data and to allow comparisons to be made with other published data on graduate employability in LTSN Unit 25 (e.g. Maher, 2004). Qualitative responses were sought to add depth and explanation, and direction on curriculum development and careers guidance.

The self administered postal or email questionnaire was developed in relation to studies on graduate employability (e.g. Shah *et al.*, 2004; Maher, 2004; Connor & Pollard, 1996; DfEE *et al.*, 2004). However, the graduate skills profile contained the skills as defined by Dearing and QCA (2000), HAVE (2004) and attributes related to the subject area from Definitive Course Documents, Course Leaders' and employers' surveys (Barnes, 2004 ;Owen, *pers. comm.*).

A pilot study was considered essential but, as there were no mirror programmes, this was carried out with graduates of a BA (Honours) with QTS/BEd (Honours) degree in Environmental Science and Outdoor Studies (1993 – 1999). Thus, slight differences in outcomes were expected but the fifteen graduates were also asked to evaluate the questionnaires following Bell (1999).

The results of the pilot which produced a response rate of 67% not only provided interesting results (see separate evaluation, Prince, 2004) but, moreover, guided and directed the composition and final format of the main questionnaire.

Two hundred and one questionnaires were administered in the main study using known contact details held at the College using postal addresses as a default where recent email addresses were unknown. Email reminders were sent to 38% of non-respondents after a period of two weeks which elicited

further responses. A response rate of 42% was achieved with a usable response of 41% (82 questionnaires). For the type of methodology employed, this constitutes a valid sample and compares with similar studies of 11% (Lamble, 1998), 20% (Smetherham, 2003), 35.6% (Maher, 2004) and 54% (Shah, *et al.*, 2004.).

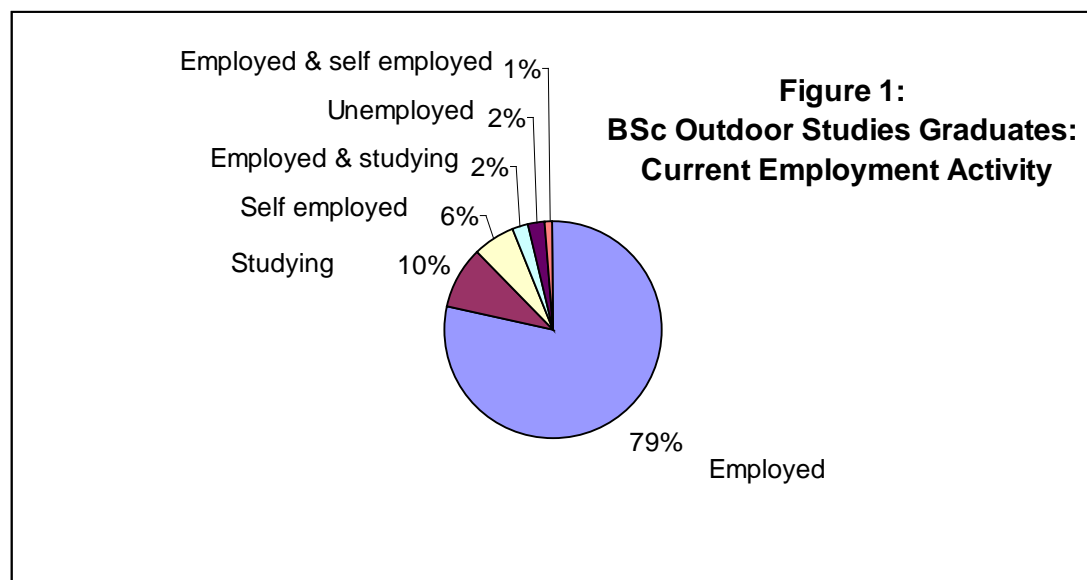
In terms of a critique of electronic contact, email does tend to reach the travellers and frequent 'movers' which, in this kind of study, are thought to constitute a significant percentage of the sample and there is an immediate return from accounts which have expired. However, on the negative side, problems with the network affect responses and sometimes there seemed to be a lack of understanding of the rationale for the project (perhaps a reflection of the explanatory attachment being unread?). In one case, a blank form was returned because the respondent had overwritten her own form. In most cases, the electronic returns tended to be lengthier than those sent back in the post. However, although there might be a problem in the currency of email addresses, this is rapid in its solution and email is cheap to administer. To compensate for any bias from non-response, characteristics of gender, age, time since graduation and class of degree were collated. Evidence from  $X^2$  indicated that no bias was present and peer reports indicated that working abroad and travelling probably were the most critical reasons for non-response. However, the respondents did show a 59% male:49% female ratio against a total population of 72% male:28% female. The degree classifications exhibit a normal distribution, slightly right (2.2) skewed which mirrors the total population.

A critique of this and other similar research concerns the competence of graduates to judge the importance of skills when perhaps their own knowledge and experience of the listed skills is not equitable. The graduates' and researcher's perceptions and interpretation of terms and concepts significantly influence the data and the way in which it is interpreted. This should be seen as a potential limitation.

## Results

### *Current Employment Activity*

Figure 1 shows the data obtained from the sample.



The range of activity is shown in Table 1, using the Standard Industrial Classification (SIC) (HESA, 2004).

**Table 1: BSc Outdoor Studies graduates: range of employment and self employment activity**

<b>Standard Industrial Classification (SIC)</b>	<b>Percentage of those employed and self employed</b>
Recreational & sporting activities	31%
Education & youthwork	27%
Health & social work	10%
Public services	10%
Retail & wholesale	7%
Hotels & restaurants	6%
Business & research activities	4%
Horticulture & forestry	2%
Recycling	1%
Technical testing & analysis	1%
Motor industry	1%

It can be seen that there is a bias towards the 'caring' professions with a total of 37% in Education and Youthwork and Health and Social Work and a further 31% in Recreational and Sporting Activities. Since there might be a problem translating the actual post to the Standard Occupational Classification (SOC), the respondents were asked whether they considered their current employment activity to be at graduate level. Overall, 51% considered their employment to be at graduate level with 49% replying in the negative. In terms of differentiation by cohort, the following data were obtained (Table 2):

**Table 2: BSc Outdoor Studies Current Employment Activity: Graduate or non-Graduate status?**

Status	2004	2003	2002	2001	2000
Graduate	35%	80%	43%	72%	42%
Non-Graduate	65%	20%	57%	28%	62%

This illustrates no trend towards increasing graduate level employment with time in the workplace.

To test the notion that a later destination might be a better indicator of long term career patterns, the percentage changes were obtained between the first and second jobs and the first and third jobs. Sixteen percent of respondents moved from non-graduate to graduate employment (jobs 1 -2) but 6% moved the opposite way. Twenty two percent moved from non-graduate to graduate employment between the first and third jobs and 5% moved the other way. Thus, there is a slightly increasing trend towards graduate employment with each destination, but it is not marked.

However, the notion of graduates being at a certain level of job is very objective and there may be more subjective decision making and value based intrinsic choice of post or career (Smetherham, 2003). Therefore respondents were asked to state whether they thought that their job was relevant to their first degree subject and to comment about their current employment activity and reasons for it.



Thus, 66% considered their employment to be relevant to outdoor studies, 5.6% replied “partially” and 28.4% replied in the negative. By cohort, there is a gradually increasing relevance of degree to post the greater the time in the workplace (Table 3).

**Table 3: BSc Outdoor Studies Current Employment Activity: Relevance of Activity to Outdoor Studies**

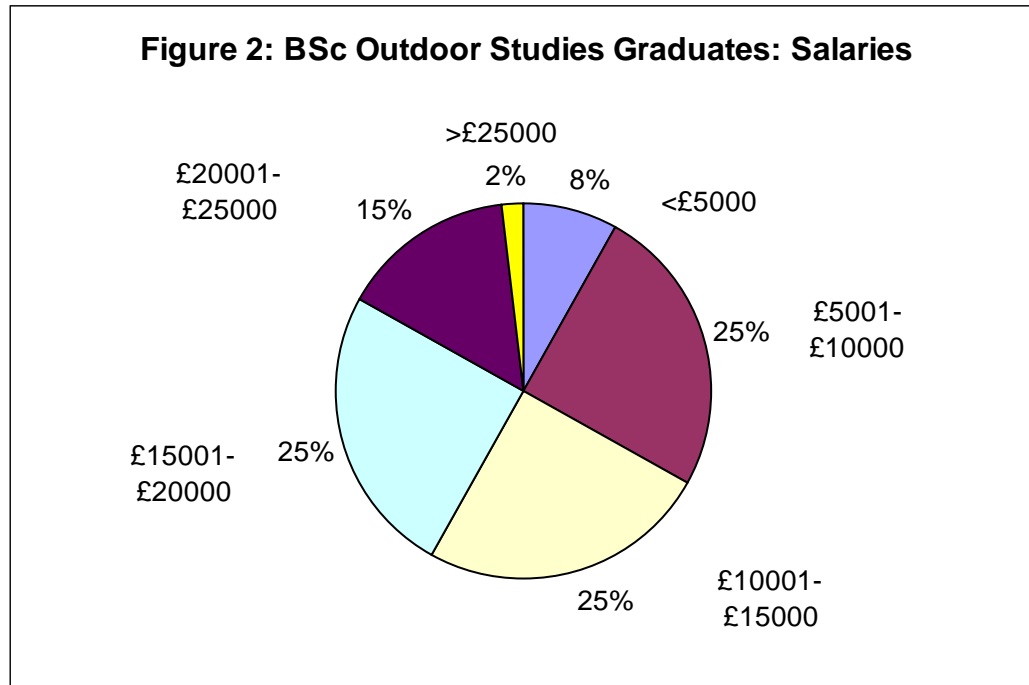
Relevance to OS	2004	2003	2002	2001	2000
<b>Relevant</b>	53%	64%	66%	66%	77%
<b>Not relevant</b>	47%	27%	33%	33%	8%
<b>Partially relevant</b>	-	6%	-	-	15%

In terms of satisfaction with their employment, 85% overall made positive comments and 15% were dissatisfied with their positions. For example, an adventure trek leader may not be in a graduate position but the job is relevant to the degree and produces much satisfaction for the postholder (travelling, meeting people, using skills learnt on the degree, interest, etc.) By cohort, satisfaction increases with greater time in the workplace (Table 4).

**Table 4: BSc Outdoor Studies Current Employment Activity: Satisfaction with Current Activity**

	2004	2003	2002	2001	2000
<b>Satisfied</b>	71%	75%	88%	90%	100%
<b>Dissatisfied</b>	29%	25%	12%	10%	0%

In terms of salary, outdoor studies graduates generally do not command large salaries (Figure 2).



The average salary per cohort does increase very slightly with time since graduation but there is little correlation of this or degree class with salary ( $r_s = -0.098$ ). The two highest earning graduates left in 2000 with a third class degree and in 2004 with a 2.2 degree and are in professions unrelated to Outdoor Studies.

### *Finding work*

Sixty four percent of graduates had found work before or straight after the summer assessment period with a further 27% finding jobs within six months of graduation. Most of the other respondents stated that they had not tried to seek work or were travelling; this was not accounted for in the closed

question. Respondents had had between 0 and 12 jobs (mean=2.98) and an approximate mean maximum time of 16 months in a job. Respondents were asked whether or not they considered each job to be at graduate level and 34% of all jobs were in this category (obviously, with few jobs, the data were at extremes). However, further from graduation comments indicated that this had been by choice rather than default and some jobs were termed as 'partially' or 'sometimes' of graduate level and others commented that although their employment was not at graduate level, being a graduate certainly helped.

Forty nine percent of graduates reported experiencing problems obtaining work related to their degree. Of these, the reasons given are shown in Table 5.

**Table 5: BSc Outdoor Studies graduates: reasons reported for experiencing problems obtaining work related to degree**

<b>Reasons</b>	<b>Percentage (of all responses given)</b>
Not enough experience and qualifications	22%
Not enough NGB's	19%
Degree too broad	14%
Not enough relatively well paid work in field	8%
Constrained by location	7%
Lack of recognition of degree by employers	5%
Difficulty in finding environmentally related jobs	4%
Personal indecision	4%
Supply & demand imbalance	3%
No driving licence	2%
Ambitions changed whilst at College	2%
Age	2%
Gap between College and looking for work	2%
Lack of guidance	2%
Problems getting onto a PGCE course	2%
No accelerated training/graduate programs or apprenticeships	2%

However, very few graduates (7%) felt that having a different degree (e.g. BA Honours) might have been beneficial in obtaining employment (one stated BA with Qualified Teacher Status) and a further 10% were not sure. One 2000 graduate said that,

No, as it wouldn't have shaped my character the way this one did.

### *Time since graduation*

Graduates were asked about blocks of further study and Continuing Professional Development (CPD) since graduation (Table 6).

**Table 6: BSc Outdoor Studies graduates: % of respondents who had undertaken blocks of further study or CPD**

	2004	2003	2002	2001	2000
<b>% who had undertaken study or CPD</b>	40%	42%	81%	81%	100%

The pattern is of a generally increasing tendency for further study or CPD with increasing time since graduation. The type of blocks of study ranged from higher degrees (M.Phil., MSc.) and PGCE's, to PGC, PGD in youthwork and other professional qualifications (e.g. Neuro-Linguistic Programming). CPD was in the majority National Governing Body (NGB) awards and in-service training. Most had undertaken one block of further study but 11% had undertaken more than three blocks of further study or training. There seemed to be no pattern for this, although few 2004 graduates had yet studied or trained beyond their degree although there was one exception to this: one graduate had undertaken three blocks of study since leaving in July 2004.

Of those stating reasons for CPD or further study, 75% gave reasons to do with enhancing employability although those studying PGC's and MSc's tended to do this for 'interest' or to narrow down an area of the BSc degree.

Forty three percent had undertaken voluntary work since graduation and this was predominantly soon after graduation. Out of those giving reasons for engaging in voluntary work, 63% were to enhance employability prospects but the rest were for personal satisfaction or 'giving something back'.

I needed to gain hours for an NGB award, but I carried on because I enjoyed it. (Graduate, 2000)

To offer my experience and knowledge base to an organisation that had given me time etc. ... as a participant in the Duke of Edinburgh Award. (Graduate, 2001)

I think it is important. Not everything has to be paid for. (Graduate, 2003)

### ***Skills***

Graduates were asked to rank a number of skills in terms of the importance of each skill to their career and the success of the degree in developing each skill.

Twenty four percent of all graduates in the survey thought that all the skills were very important or important to their careers, with an increasing number of these further into their careers. Twenty seven percent thought that all the skills had been successfully or adequately developed in the degree course. Table 7 compares the skills that were considered *not important* to career (in

rank order) with those considered to have been *unsuccessfully* developed in the degree course.

**Table 7: BSc Outdoor Studies graduates: skills *not important* to career and skills *unsuccessfully* developed in the degree course**

Skills	Percentage (of all graduates)	
	<i>Not important to career</i>	<i>Unsuccessfully developed in degree course</i>
Numeracy	34%	39%
Outdoor technical skills	33%	21%
IT	22%	20%
Project management	21%	22%
Understanding the world of work	20%	48%
Reflectiveness	15%	6%
Managing People	12%	22%
Creativity	11%	9%
Ethical awareness and integrity	9%	16%
Written communication	9%	2%
Health & safety awareness	6%	10%
Subject knowledge & understanding	6%	9%
Improving own learning & performance	6%	1%
Flexibility	5%	4%
Leadership; Personal organisation	5%	9%
Critical thinking	5%	1%
Teamwork	2%	4%
Oral communication	1%	5%
Self motivation	1%	6%
Initiative; Decision making	1%	4%
Problem solving	1%	2%

Graduates were asked to consider these categories on three point scales.

*Importance of each of these skills to career:* 'Very Important', 'Important', 'Not Important'; *Success of the degree course in developing each skill:*

'Successful', 'Adequate', 'Unsuccessful'. The biggest differentials (i.e. the importance of a named skill to career against how unsuccessful the degree course was in developing that skill) mentioned by 10% or more of respondents were in Understanding the world of work (18%), Managing people (14%) and Outdoor technical skills (10%). 48% of respondents had no maximum differentials (i.e. no skill ratings of 'Very Important' (to career) against 'Unsuccessful(ly)' (developed in degree course).)

### *Curriculum Development*

Graduates were asked if they had suggestions for curriculum development (marketing material from the current portfolio of courses had been mailed with the questionnaire or the web sites highlighted (email questionnaires). This was an open response question but the highest ranking answers were as follows (number of times mentioned in parentheses):

- More opportunities for NGB's (17)
- Work placement/experience (15) of which 'environmental' (4)
- More specialisms (9)

This matches very closely to the problems experienced in finding employment related to the degree area.



However, the integral and associated personal and process skills might also have relevant and applied currency in the workplace.

...I found the course had a very stable balance which has been highly beneficial in less than obvious circumstances. (Graduate, 2003)

## **Discussion**

### ***The Career Pathways of Outdoor Studies Graduates***

Outdoor Studies graduates show a very high rate of employment (98%). Overall at St Martin's College, 3.1% of graduates over all programmes are unemployed after six months which contributes to its status as the second 'best for jobs' HE institution in the UK (Sunday Times, 2004). However, graduates from Outdoor Studies are likely to take up some sort of employment, albeit not at graduate level and as they move further into the workplace, there is only a slight shift to graduate level employment.

Careers are no longer like a Chinese banquet: 15 courses brought to your table one after the other. They're more like a progressive supper: bite-sized portions eaten in different places. (Hawkins & Whiteway, 1995, p10)

The survey did not directly address periods of travelling or post-graduation 'gap' years which account for movements from graduate to non-graduate (often seasonal) employment.

The data do show increasing relevance of job to degree subject (Table 3) and increasing levels of satisfaction with employment activity over time (Table 4). The data support reports that graduates are taking longer to settle into their careers than previously and this trend is not being picked up by the First Destination Survey (Connor & Pollard, 1998; DfEE *et al.*, 1999; Shah *et al.*, 2004). However, unlike the conclusions of these reports, the majority of Outdoor Studies graduates make career decisions based on interest and values, rather than status or salary, beyond a baseline of earnings. Generally, Outdoor Studies graduates are not well paid and the higher earners are mainly, although not exclusively, in professions unrelated to the degree subject. Since 68% of graduates may be considered to be in the 'caring' professions or in recreational and sporting activities, this is not surprising. A number of low earners were also studying part-time for a postgraduate qualification. Eight percent of graduates identified the lack of well paid work in the field as a problem in finding work related to their degree. Fance (2004) records a perspective on the degree course from one of the Lecturers in Outdoor Studies:

If their desire is to drive around in a BMW by the time they are thirty, then this is not going to be the course for them. There is no guarantee of well-paid employment at the end of the course so they should realise that it is a course which provides them with an academic degree which will be useful in a wide number of fields. It will not necessarily lead directly into well-paid employment or a defined career path. And they

(prospective students) need to be aware of that already or take that on board at interview ... (Fance, 2004).

After 18 months in the workplace, a very high proportion of graduates undertake blocks of further study or training, mainly to enhance employability but also for interest or to specialise in one area of Outdoor Studies. Voluntary work was also undertaken to enhance employability prospects but 37% undertook this for ethical and values based reasons.

The reasons cited by graduates who experienced problems in obtaining work related to their degree can be matched very closely to their suggestions for curriculum development. Forty one percent said that they did not have enough experience and qualifications (including NGB's) and 14% stated that the degree was too broad. However, some problems have been alleviated such as the success of the Graduate Apprenticeship Scheme in Outdoor Education and Development Training introduced in 2003 (although there is a demand for a similar environmentally based scheme). There were comments by 11% of respondents about needing better guidance and communicating what is needed in the outdoor industry for certain types of job. However, all but one of these was from recent graduates (2003 and 2004).

### ***Skills developed at College and their contribution to the Careers of Graduates***

As 34% of graduates are in careers unrelated or only partially related to Outdoor Studies, the importance of developing generic skills on the degree

course is evident. However, although the key skill of numeracy was considered by 48% as unsuccessfully developed in the degree course, it is also the most unimportant to graduates' careers. (In some projects, e.g, HAVE, 2004, numeracy is referred to through the term 'application of number' which, in retrospect, might have been a more meaningful expression.) In terms of specific skills, outdoor technical skills was ranked second as 'not important in career' but ranked fourth as 'unsuccessfully developed in the degree course'. For 10% of graduates, outdoor technical skills was a major differential i.e. that these skills were 'very important' to their careers but 'unsuccessful(ly)' developed in the degree course. Thus, the other 90% might fall into two separate groups although it might indicate a circular situation (i.e. graduates are not in work which requires technical skills because they do not have qualifications in these). This is supported by comments about problems getting degree related work and curriculum development.

In comparison to other studies, the skills deemed to need significant improvement on the degree course (>30% of graduates have classed the skill as 'unsuccessfully developed') are 'Understanding the world of work' and 'Numeracy'. Interestingly, numeracy at 39% is the same percentage as that found by Maher (2004) in her study of hospitality graduates from Oxford Brookes University. However, given the comments above in which a third of Outdoor Studies graduates consider numeracy as 'unimportant' for their career, 'Understanding the world of work' (as it has the largest differential) should be an area for potential improvement. It is hoped that this has already been partly addressed with the launch of a Foundation Degree in Outdoor

Studies in 2004 at St Martin's College. In terms of further skill differentials, 'managing people' indicated in this survey is also one which Shah *et al.*, 2004 highlights to be further developed in her degree programmes.

However, an important difference in this study to other published reports on different degree courses is that the key skill areas of personal and process skills e.g. such skills as leadership, reflectiveness, flexibility, initiative, teamwork, decision making and problem solving etc. are well developed in the Outdoor Studies degree and these are important for employability in the outdoors or any other environment (HAVE, 2004).

## **Conclusion**

The rate of employment activity amongst the Outdoor Studies graduates is high, although the numbers of graduates in graduate level jobs is variable and does not increase with time in the workplace. However, there are indications that graduates take time to make decisions on their career pathways which are often interest, work satisfaction and values based. There is a positive trend of increasing relevance to first degree and increasing satisfaction with employment activity with time since graduation. This study supports other recent reports that First Destination data are not illustrative of long term career pathways. Outdoor Studies graduates are not generally well paid which reflects opportunities in the sector but, although there is a tendency towards work in the 'caring' sector and recreational and sporting activities, 28.4% of graduates are employed in areas unrelated to their first degree.

This, and the interrogation of skill development, should question what we are training our graduates to do and the degree of importance of the development of specialist skills in the curriculum. Importantly, the personal and process skills seem to be embedded successfully in the curriculum and these are useful in graduates' careers. A more extensive discussion of these issues and findings in relation to outdoor literature and professional practice is beyond the scope of this paper.

It could be that the absorption of Outdoor Studies graduates into the outdoor industry has reached a reasonable balance: those who want jobs and are qualified for them can find employment but for those with less interest, motivation or seeking a higher salary, there is other, sometimes partially related, work available. Those responsible for recruiting for Outdoor undergraduate courses in the U.K. should not feel that the outdoor industry is being 'flooded' with graduates but, if numbers increase, the patterns might change. Furthermore, if graduates are not getting graduate level jobs then the question is at what level are school leavers able to obtain employment?

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