



REPORT 10 Apr 17

HOW LEARNING HAS BECOME A LIFELONG PURSUIT

Driven by the evolving relationship between learning and earning, a desire for a more fulfilling life, and shifts in the job market, an increasing number of mid- to late-careerists are returning to education. How are people acquiring knowledge outside of college? And what are they hoping to achieve?

Location **United States**

Highlights & Data

- The belief that ‘the more you learn, the more you earn’ still stands true, but it’s becoming more nuanced
- The monetary gains from increased education tend to benefit those on the highest and lowest wages, rather than those in the middle
- While many go back to education to advance within their present job, others do so to pursue a new career altogether or to study a topic they’re interested in
- There’s a growing belief that degrees should focus on giving students the skills they need for a career
- However, personal and intellectual development may be more valuable given the availability of info online
- Online training and ‘returnships’ are enabling people to shift course mid-career without formal education
- **73%** of American adults consider themselves to be ‘lifelong learners’ (*Pew Research Center, 2016*)
- **23%** of nontraditional students in the US study for a bachelor’s degree to advance at their current job (*Strayer University, 2016*)
- In 2016, **32%** of employers in the US were asking for more higher education than in 2011 (*CareerBuilder, 2016*)
- **14%** of all doctoral recipients are aged 40-plus (*National Science Foundation, 2016*)
- **35%** of US students regret their choice of major and **36%** regret their choice of school (*McKinsey & Company, 2013*)
- **50%** of Americans believe the main aim of college education should be to acquire workplace-related skills and knowledge (*Pew Research Center, 2016*)

Scope

The demographics of those in education are changing, and it’s becoming normal for people to return to school mid-career or even after retirement. In the US, 73% of people consider themselves to be ‘lifelong learners’, and among these individuals, 36% (equivalent to 63% of all workers) are

'professional learners', taking a course or pursuing training connected to their career advancement. [1]

The idea of the 'lifelong learner' emerged in 1993 – the first official acknowledgment that learning is not exclusively linked to childhood or school, but happens throughout one's life. [2] More precisely, learning can no longer be separated into set places and times to acquire knowledge, and others to apply that knowledge (i.e. work). Instead, it happens on an ongoing basis and it is not always formally structured. More than ever before, learning can be informal or self-driven, with advances in technology now allowing people to tap into different educational resources at their leisure. So what is driving older students to return to the books? And has tech and its speed of development changed our motivations to learn?

The rift between learning and earning

One of the obvious reasons people are returning to school is career advancement; 23% of nontraditional students in the US study for a bachelor's degree to advance at their current job. [3] However, understanding the link between education and salary is more complex. In theory, the correlation between learning and earning still predicates that the longer you learn, the more you earn – but this link is getting more fragile and nuanced. [4]

Data analysis conducted by MIT economist David Autor found that, in 1973, one year of college increased wages by 8% beyond the level of high school graduates. By 2007, the increase had risen to 11%, and the difference in earning power widens the more one studies; the completion of 18 years of education overall (roughly equivalent to getting a master's degree) meant a 12% increase in 1973, and a 19% increase in 2007. [5] However, this may not mean much in 2017. High tuition fees mean that American students now need nearly a decade to break even, and it's predicted that a student starting college in 2030 without scholarships or grants may not see a return on investment until the age of 37. [6]

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Rob Valletta, VP of the Economic Research Department at the Federal Reserve Bank of San Francisco

Despite the increasing costs, a 2016 survey revealed that 32% of employers in the US were asking for more higher education than five years prior. Over a quarter (27%) were requesting master's degrees for jobs that used to only need a bachelor's, while 37% of employers demanded bachelor's degrees for roles that used to be open to high school graduates. [7]

“The earnings gap between people with a college degree and those with no education beyond high school has been growing since the late 1970s. Since 2000, however, the gap has grown more for those who have earned a post-graduate degree as well,” writes Rob Valletta, VP of the Economic Research Department at the Federal Reserve Bank of San Francisco. “The divergence between workers with college degrees and those with graduate degrees may be one manifestation of rising labour market polarisation, which benefits those earning the highest and the lowest wages relatively

more than those in the middle of the wage distribution.” [4]



Getting a high-earning degree incurs a high price

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Correcting the path

According to the National Science Foundation, the overall age of PhD candidates in the US has fallen over the last decade. Yet roughly 14% of all doctoral recipients are 40-plus, and institutions are seeing more students in their 40s and 50s enrolling in this pinnacle of formal education. Why? Some students hope a PhD will further their careers, while others are targeting academic research or teaching positions. This kind of studying is led by women in particular; in 2015, Cornell University reported that its number of female doctoral students aged 36 and older was 44% higher than in 2009. [8]

For many, further education is not strictly linked to career advancement – it’s about self-development and adding meaning and value to one’s life. Indeed, while 54% of nontraditional university students study to pursue a better job, 35% do so to explore a subject they’re interested in, and 27% tackle a bachelor’s degree to prove something to themselves. [3] “We change jobs along our career more often than ever, because we can, not because the market has forced us to,” says Joanne Lin, associate at [University Ventures](#). “New alternative educational resources and programmes have given us the freedom of choice. A complete mid-career switch is achievable now without necessarily going back to university for another expensive four-year degree. It’s hard to say if it always leads to a ‘better’ job. Sometimes too much choice can be crippling – but so can that ‘what if’ feeling.” [9]

This return to school mid-career is in part attributable to mistakes from people’s first experience at university. In the US, 35% of students regret their choice of major – a figure paralleled in the UK, where 33% would have chosen a different course – and 36% regret their choice of school. Additionally, 48% of American graduates couldn’t find work in the field they’d hoped to enter and had to settle for employment outside their intended area. [10][11]



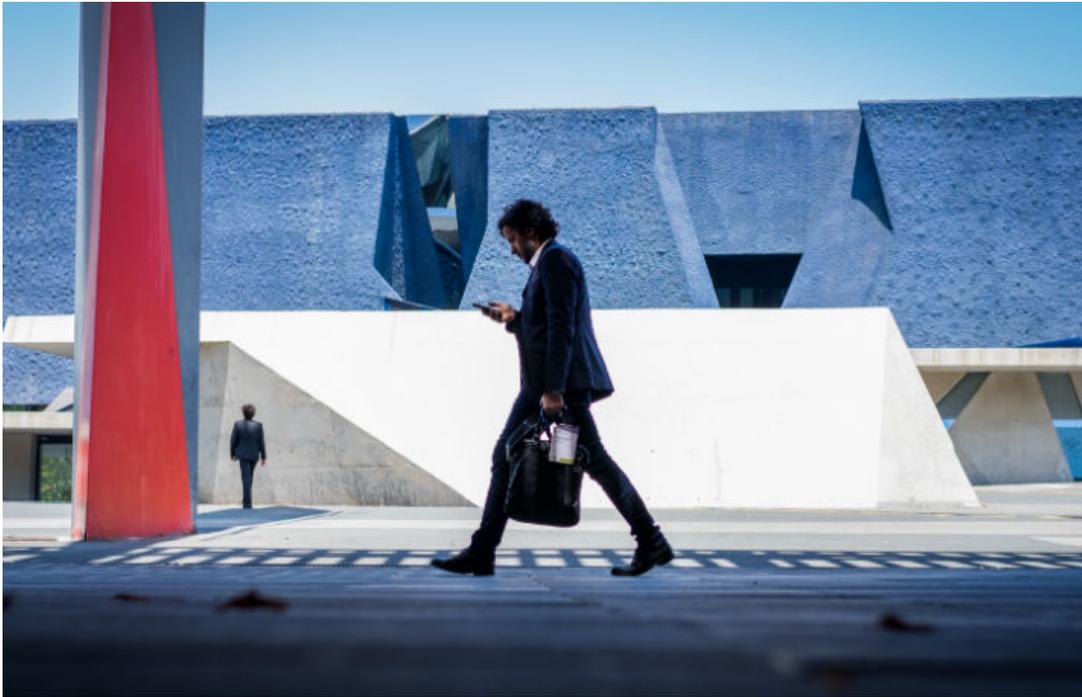
Some people need a second shot at college

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“The job you want three, five or ten years into your career is most likely not going to be the same job you started in right out of school,” explains Lin. “Broad access to alternative educational resources (think Khan Academy or coding bootcamps) has made overcoming the learning curves between each of these transitions much easier to navigate. My personal career trajectory has taken me from an elementary school teacher, to a Wall Street banker, to a private equity investor and social enterprise entrepreneur. Along the way I’ve earned a bachelor’s in economics and a master’s in education, but a lot of my training and education came through formal employer training programs, informal mentorship and alternative educational resources that I sought out on my own.” [9]

At the age of 47, Sarah Kelly switched from a banking job to cosmetology. “I resigned from my job at Wells Fargo Bank in May of 2009, took a summer break then entered the Aveda Institute, Minneapolis, to get my cosmetology license in October of the same year. It’s not exactly graduate school, but I’ve opened a salon and have had a very successful shop for a couple years now. I’ve been so much happier in my new vocation. It’s my dream job and it’s absolutely what I was meant to do.” Kami Evans, meanwhile, abandoned a headhunting career to become a holistic health coach at age 41; “I thought why not. I felt that the program offered at the Institute of Integrative Nutrition ticked all the boxes. Learning is all online, support is via a website and iPad... also it gives me the flexibility to work from home and hopefully help others and network with like-minded people. This is a far cry from the [old headhunting] days, but it sure feels more fulfilling.” [12]

“I think the distinction between personal fulfilment and career goals is unhelpful,” says Andreas Schleicher, head of the education directorate at the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. “People should learn what they have a real passion for, where they can become really good at, and what serves a social purpose. Then they will be successful also in their careers.” [13]



Education doesn't end once you're employed

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Confusion in the workplace

There may be valid university alternatives in more left-field professions, but what about mainstream sectors? “[It’s] confusing when we’re told that employers are greedily demanding more degrees while simultaneously saying degrees don’t matter,” writes Ryan Craig, managing director of University Ventures. “Employers including Ernst & Young and Penguin Random House are either saying degrees don’t matter, or proactively masking from hiring managers whether or not candidates have degrees because the companies have ascertained that ‘degree bias’ tends to result in... hiring the wrong person or not hiring the right person. Google is the company that’s probably most invested in disrupting the degree. In addition to partnering with both Udacity and Coursera on nanodegrees and specialisations... Google also requires candidates to take assessments, which are much more predictive of success on the job.” [14]

“When somewhere between 50% and 80% of recent college graduates are unemployed and looking for work, it’s hard to deny there’s a disconnect between education and employment,” says Lin. “There are many factors at play here, but at the core, it’s a matter of missing expectations. Many students pursue formal education, in part, because it’s a prerequisite for more and more jobs. However, higher education institutions are not structured to train for real-world work scenarios or optimise career discovery or matching.” [9]

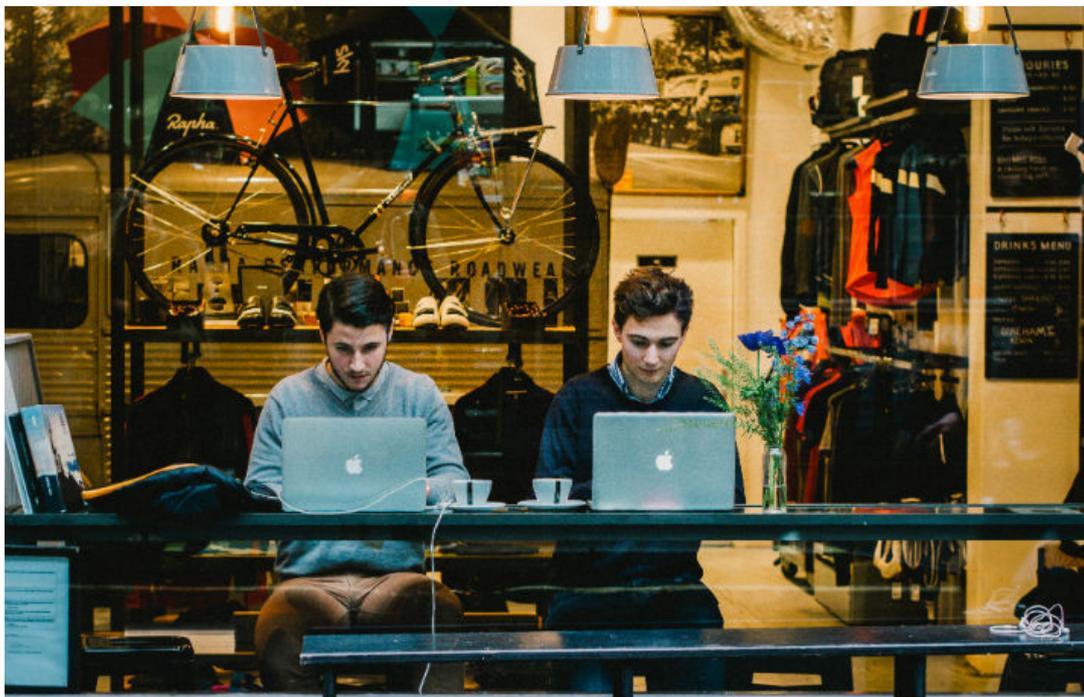
“*Educational success is no longer going to be about reproducing content knowledge, but about extrapolating from what we know and applying that knowledge in novel situations*

Andreas Schleicher, head of the education directorate at the OECD

Americans are waking up to these concerns; just 16% think a four-year degree prepares students ‘very well’ for a well-paying job. Possibly as a consequence, over 50% believe the main aim of

college education should be to acquire workplace-related skills and knowledge, surpassing the 35% who think the focus should be on intellectual development or personal growth. The public's views on the purpose of college education have gotten stronger since 2011, when 47% thought college should mainly teach specific skills and knowledge, and 39% replied that college should promote personal and intellectual growth. [15]

While this shift reflects a growing desire for more practically applicable knowledge, Schleicher believes it's the wrong approach. "Educational success is no longer going to be about reproducing content knowledge, but about extrapolating from what we know and applying that knowledge in novel situations, and about thinking across the boundaries of disciplines," he explains. "If everyone can search for information on the internet, the rewards now come from what people do with that knowledge. This is about curiosity, open-mindedness, making connections between ideas that previously seemed unrelated." [13] And these skills stem from personal development rather than from imparted knowledge.



Should degrees be designed with employability in mind?

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Insights and opportunities

Amid rising dissatisfaction with the formal academic route, alternative education pathways are thriving. There are already a plethora of courses available for professional training and certification, useful for gaining the skills mid- and late-careerists need to keep or progress with their current jobs. However, the field of online education shows no sign of slowing down; the e-learning market was worth \$166.5 billion in 2015, and it is predicted to grow to \$255 billion by 2017. [16] Demonstrating the potential for online education, 48% of respondents to a survey conducted by Global Shapers said they'd be willing to pursue online certification for certain skills once they'd started their working careers. [17]

Beyond training, Lin suggests that career counselling needs boosting from university age onwards. "The career centres at most universities are poorly funded and under-resourced," she notes. "Employers, on the other hand, expect graduates to come ready to hit the ground running and are less willing to invest in on-the-job training. This obviously leaves students in a tough position [and]

is particularly true for those returning to school mid-career.” [9]

Schleicher agrees, saying: “The demand for skills is rapidly evolving. In the past, teachers could assume that what they taught would last for the lifetime of their students. Today, they need to help students develop a reliable compass and the tools to navigate with confidence through an increasingly complex, volatile and uncertain world. Effective learning strategies and the motivation and capacity to expand their horizon every day is what matters.” [13]

“*If we spend our whole life in a silo of a single discipline, we will not gain the imaginative skills to connect the dots to see where the next invention might be found*

Andreas Schleicher, head of the education directorate at the OECD

A few companies have been created with the purpose of helping employees navigate a new career or restart their old one. **Encore** is an organisation that gives advice to (mostly retired) Boomers on how get the education they need to secure an ‘encore career’, although primarily in the voluntary sector. **iRelaunch**, meanwhile, is a dedicated ‘return-to-work’ agency, complete with advice on how to refresh skills or pursue further education. These examples are still few and far between, but they represent an area for expansion in the near future. Similarly, the part-education, part-work ‘returnship’ (or middle-age internship) – open to mid-careerists returning to work or hoping to make a big career change – has been touted as a ‘terrific resource’ by many, though more such initiatives need to be offered. [18]

Lifelong learners are not a fully definable demographic. Instead, they exist across boundaries, with different motivations, educational routes and desired outcomes. “There is no question that state-of-the-art knowledge and skills in a discipline will always remain important. Innovative or creative people generally have specialised skills in a field of knowledge or a practice,” says Schleicher. “However, if we spend our whole life in a silo of a single discipline, we will not gain the imaginative skills to connect the dots to see where the next invention might be found.” [13]

***Tacita Vero**’ is a journalist, maker and recent graduate from the London Consortium. Her main research interests are cycling culture, underground phenomena and alternative travelling, which have brought her to Abkhazia, Nagorno-Karabakh and Chernobyl.*

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