

In a world of less economic growth and material consumption – how might we prosper?

A behavioural study.

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1 Introduction

The UK views prosperity as synonymous with economic growth and plentiful employment fuelled largely by consumer spending. The current Conservative party slogan “*a country that works for everyone*” and the almost identical Labour one “*an economy that works for all, not just the few*” are both seen to be dependent on economic growth, revitalising consumer spending and creating new jobs. This is despite the [evidence](#) that we are less happy than we were in the 1950's when we had a far smaller economy and consumed a tiny fraction of material goods.

Leaving aside whether our lives will be any happier, there are two major problems with this growth-centric approach:-

The first problem is that we inhabit a finite planet. We cannot grow for ever or continue to manufacture and consume finite material resources without further damaging the eco system on which we all depend. A severely impoverished planet won't work for anyone.

The second problem is that technological developments – most recently robotics and AI – mean that many jobs currently done by people can be done more effectively and efficiently by technology – not just manual jobs but also administrative and some professional occupations.

So, the question becomes can we flourish as humans in a smaller economy, with less material consumption and where there are far fewer jobs which need people to do them?

Work means more than income. At best, it offers meaningful activity, social contact and a sense of self-worth. If the alternative is some form of [Universal Basic Income](#) paid to every citizen whether they work or not, what would we all do with our increased 'leisure' time – especially if it was necessarily less dependent on material consumption?

[It's been suggested](#) that, whilst human society cannot grow its consumption of energy and resources for ever, we can grow our social, artistic, intellectual and spiritual lives indefinitely. But can that make us happier and can such activities contribute to a new and different kind of economy? Economist and author [Professor Tim Jackson](#), argues that activities which involve either [care, craft,](#)

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culture or creativity are work sectors which offer a new vision of enterprise “*not as a speculative, profit-maximising, resource-intensive division of labour, but as a form of social organisation embedded in the community, working in harmony with nature to deliver the capabilities that allow us to prosper*”

The present study explores whether people's current interests and activities suggest this is a way forward they could or would embrace. Unfortunately, the study does not address the plight of people in our wealthy country who (to our disgrace) lack the basic resources to feed, clothe or keep themselves warm severely inhibiting their chance to live happy or meaningful lives. I am uncomfortably aware that I am only addressing the lives of those who are fortunate enough to be able to meet their basic needs but require ways to find enjoyment, meaning and purpose in their lives.

The study considered both people's hedonistic (pleasurable) and eudaimonic (engaging, meaningful) activities as different dimensions of their overall well-being.

The questions addressed were:-

1. How do our regular activities contribute to lives which are enjoyable, meaningful and make a difference?
2. To what extent are these enjoyable and meaningful activities at risk in the future because:-
 - they are tied to jobs which may disappear?
 - they are unaffordable without a significant personal income?
 - they depend on constant material consumption of the kind we need to reduce?
 - they have a high carbon footprint?
3. How many of these enjoyable or meaningful activities:
 - contribute to the economy or could do so in new ways?
 - contribute to social capital², i.e. enhance the well being of communities and society as a whole?
4. Do these enjoyable or meaningful activities suggest that a future, less materialistic economy based, say, on care, culture, craft and creativity is viable?
5. What role, if any, does gender, education, income, religion or membership of social organisations play in people's choice of activities – particularly those that contribute to their own and society's well-being?

²“Social capital is a form of economic and cultural capital in which social networks are central, transactions marked by reciprocity, trust, and cooperation, and market agents produce goods and services not mainly for themselves, but for a common good.”
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_capital

2 Study method

An online survey was administered firstly through social media (25 responses) and then via a paid survey population filtered to reflect a wider, more representative demographic (300 responses).

The survey asked participants to describe an activity they had recently enjoyed, an activity they found meaningful and an activity they felt made a difference. In each case, they were asked to describe why the activity had that effect, how much it had cost them and whether it had been part of their paid work.

Presented with a list of activity types (creative, constructive, learning, discovering, helping, volunteering, collaborating and outdoor activity), participants were asked which of these they had done in the past few months and whether it was part of their paid work or not.

They were then asked to rate how enjoyable and/or meaningful they felt their lives were overall, whether they felt able to make a difference or change things and whether they felt valued.

Alongside standard demographic questions of gender, age, employment, income and health they were asked about their membership of social organisations and any spiritual faith or practice.

People's free-form descriptions of their activities and the effect these had were analysed linguistically and were compared against their self-reported happiness and meaningfulness ratings and their demographics.

3 About the survey population

Because 92% of the participants were signed up members of a paid survey panel, this risked yielding a non-representative sample. However, with selected filters applied, the demographic profile of the 325 participants broadly reflects the UK profile.

Participants were 51% female, 49% male with 1 gender neutral.

Figure 1 shows their age distribution. The 18-35 age group were slightly under represented and the 51-65 years slightly over represented ([compared to UK population](#)).

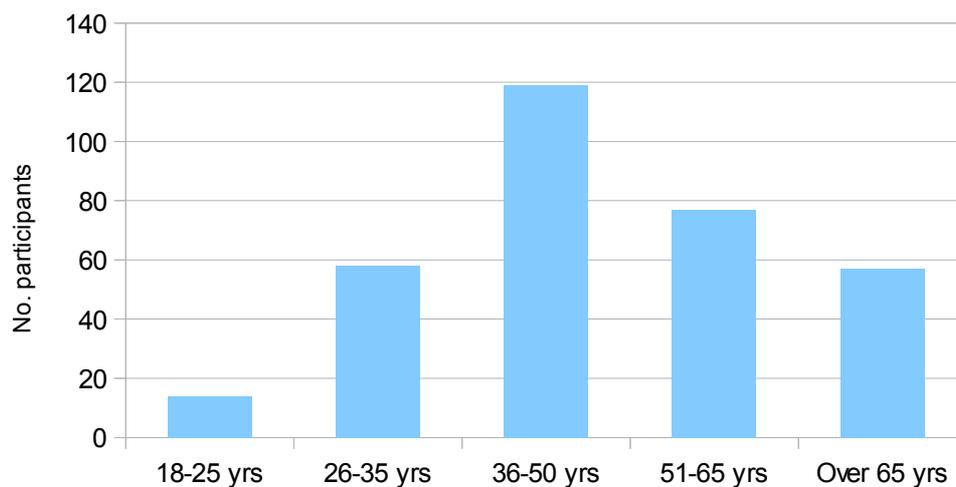


Figure 1 : Age distribution

Figure 2 shows that 61% of respondents were in some form of paid employment and 78% of those under 65 years were. This is a slightly higher employment rate than the [UK average of 74%](#) (of working age adults).

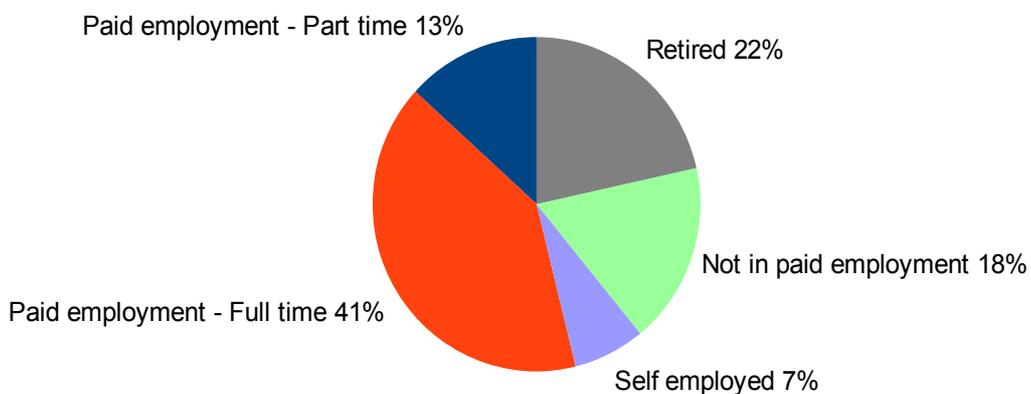


Figure 2 : Percentage in paid employment

Figure 3 shows the job categories of the participants in paid employment.

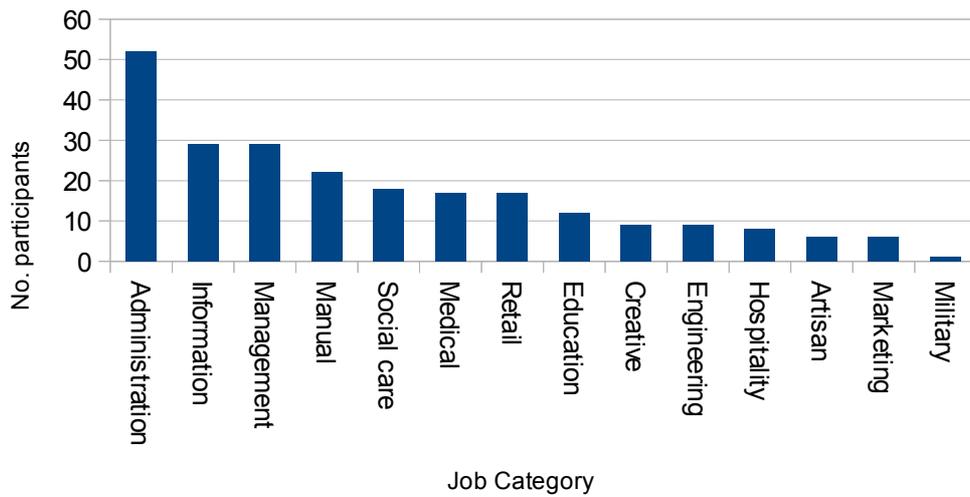


Figure 3 : Job categories

Figure 4 shows the distribution of personal income. 58% of the surveyed population had a personal income of less than £25k which is broadly in line with the UK median of £21k.

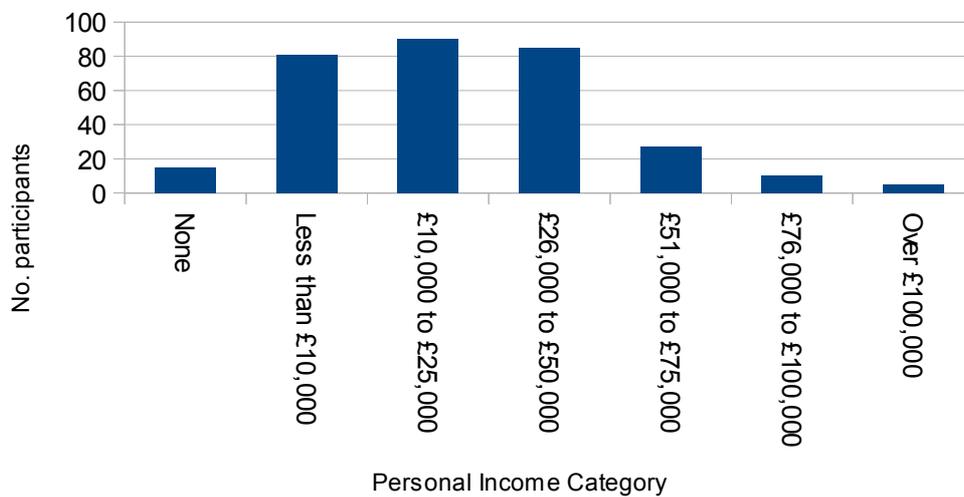


Figure 4 : Distribution of personal income

Figure 5 shows the distribution of the highest academic qualification held by participants. Only 3% had no academic qualification and 46% were graduates. This suggests they were better academically qualified than the general UK population where 9% have no qualification and only 38% are graduates.

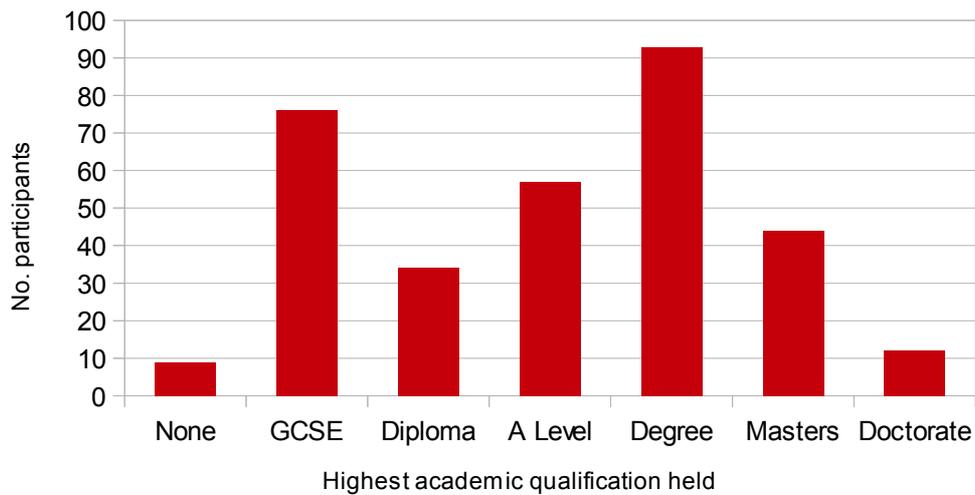


Figure 5 : Highest academic qualification

Figure 6 shows participants' self report of their general health level. 67% reported 'good' or 'very good' health which is below the UK average of 81%. This might reflect the slight age bias of the survey group.

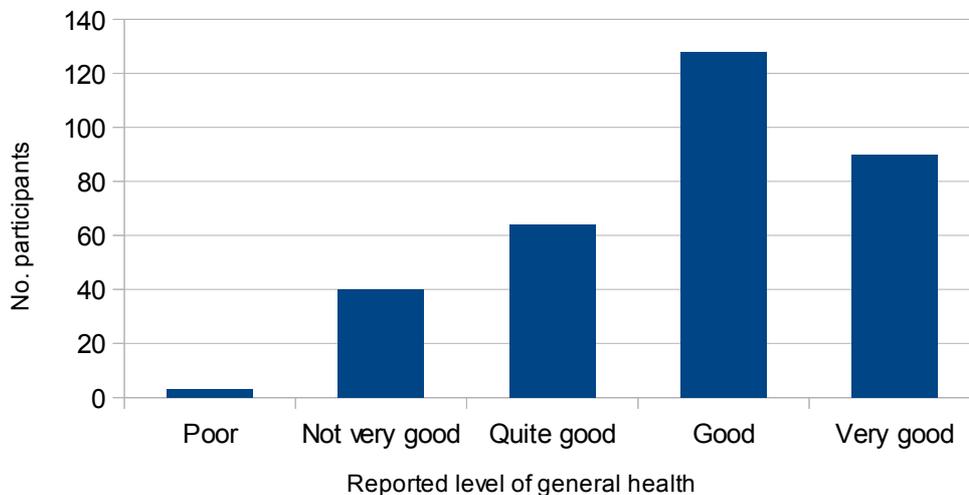


Figure 6 : Levels of general health

In addition to demographics, 32% participants said they were an active member of a social group, club or organisation and 19% actively supported a social or political movement or cause.

Asked whether they had 'a religious faith' or 'other spiritual practice', only 20% said 'definitely', 27% "slightly" and 52% claimed none at all.

Those who belonged to a club or other organisation, as well as those who had a religious faith or spiritual practice, were almost twice as likely to support a social or political cause. This is obviously confused by the fact that the organisation in question might itself be a supporter of a cause.

4 What activities do people enjoy?

I asked people to describe an activity they had spent time doing recently which they enjoyed. They were told that it didn't matter whether it was connected to their home life, work or leisure.

These examples illustrate the wide diversity of responses.

"walking my dog"

"bowling with my grandson"

"I spent four full days with a small group of artist friends doing life drawing and painting"

"going to watch a live football match where my team won 5-0"

"I went to the gym for my bi weekly 5k run"

"I knitted a cardigan using a lovely yarn with an uneven weave and the occasional sparkly bit"

I grouped the 325 free-form responses into similar activities. This resulted in 47 different kinds, 10 of which were only mentioned once. Table 1 shows the 20 activities most frequently mentioned.

Activity type	No. Mentions
walking	32
doing things with kids/grandkids	23
playing sport	20
watching film/TV	18
gaming	15
gardening	14
reading	14
sightseeing	13
craft	12
home diy	11
gym/keeping fit	11
swimming	9
boating	8
watching sport	8
cooking	7
cycling	7
drinking	7
driving	7
eating out	6

Table 1 : Most frequently mentioned enjoyable activities

86% of the enjoyable activities were things they said they either did 'often' (53%) or 'sometimes' (33%).

A subsequent word analysis revealed how often different attributes were mentioned in their descriptions of the activities. For example, 62% of activities mentioned only the person themselves (e.g. *"Knitting a cardigan for myself whilst listening to the radio."* or *"I spent several hours in my shed with a good book and*

my pipe".) whilst 38% mentioned the involvement of others (e.g. *"night out with friends in local turkish bistro"* or *"taking my 2 daughters out for lunch"*).

self only	62%
outdoors	43%
phys exercise	39%
emot stimulation	39%
social/others	38%
using a service	37%
sensory stimulation	30%
skill/challenge/achievement	22%
family	17%
cognitive stimulation	12%
consuming food	7%
creative	6%
consuming materials	5%
social capital	5%
helping/caring	3%
spiritual	1%

Table 2 : Percentage of activities which mentioned particular attributes

4.1 Why do they enjoy the activities?

I next asked them why they found the activity enjoyable. Again, the answers varied wildly.

"escapism learning new things"

"being outside, fresh air, movement and feeling active"

"hard work but end result gives a sense of achievement"

"how I unwind after a busy week"

"uses my creativity"

"Grandkids, what's not to like?"

A subsequent word analysis showed that the following 4 synonym groups were used most frequently to describe why they enjoyed the named activities:

relaxing/therapeutic/unwind/de-stress

activity/exercise/fit/healthy

together/social/meeting/team/we/people

fresh air/outside/outdoors/environment

4.2 How many activities are part of their paid work?

Of the participants who were in paid employment, only 5% named enjoyable activities which were part of their paid work. Examples were:-

"writing jokes"

"driving"

"crocheting"

"went to a works dinner at the Great Hall, Kings College Cambridge"

"designing 4-page Marcom layout for sales messaging activity"

4.3 What do the enjoyable activities cost them?

Figure 7 shows the amount people reported paying for the activity (grouped into cost categories). This is a rough guide rather than accurate amounts as it was clear people didn't usually include related costs (e.g. transport, food, materials, etc).

The surprise was that 40% of the activities cost nothing at all, e.g. walking, watching TV, playing with the kids, playing football and gardening and 70% cost less than £26. Only 1% reported spends were over £1,000. The latter were one-off holidays (up to £5k) or home renovation projects (£10k) which distorted any statistics.

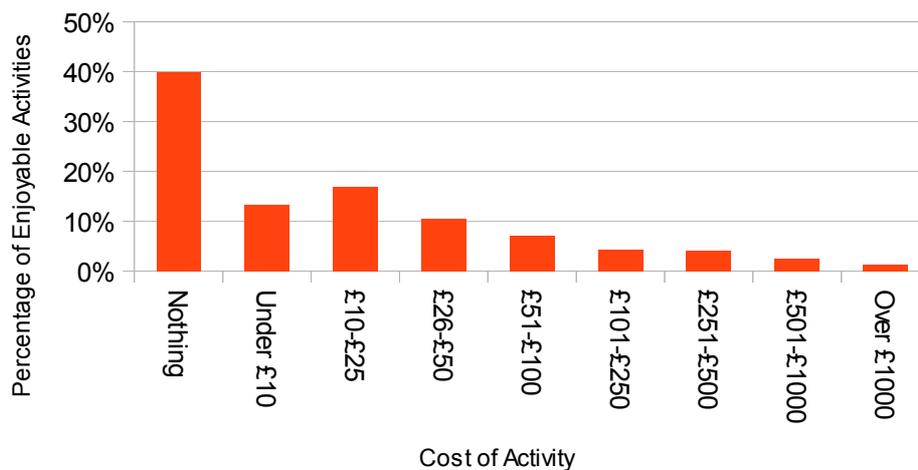


Figure 7 : Cost of enjoyable activities

4.3.1 Does the amount spent vary with income?

Figure 8a shows the percentage of participants in different income brackets whose enjoyable activity cost them nothing and Figure 8b shows the median spend (excluding the zero cost items) by each income bracket. Both figures suggest a slight increase in spend with an increase in personal income but 53% of people with incomes over £50k still described cost free activities.

The highest ticket activities were travel, holidays and major home improvements which wealthier individuals could obviously more easily afford.

Unfortunately, the small numbers (15 people) in the >£75,000 bracket make these comparisons not entirely reliable.

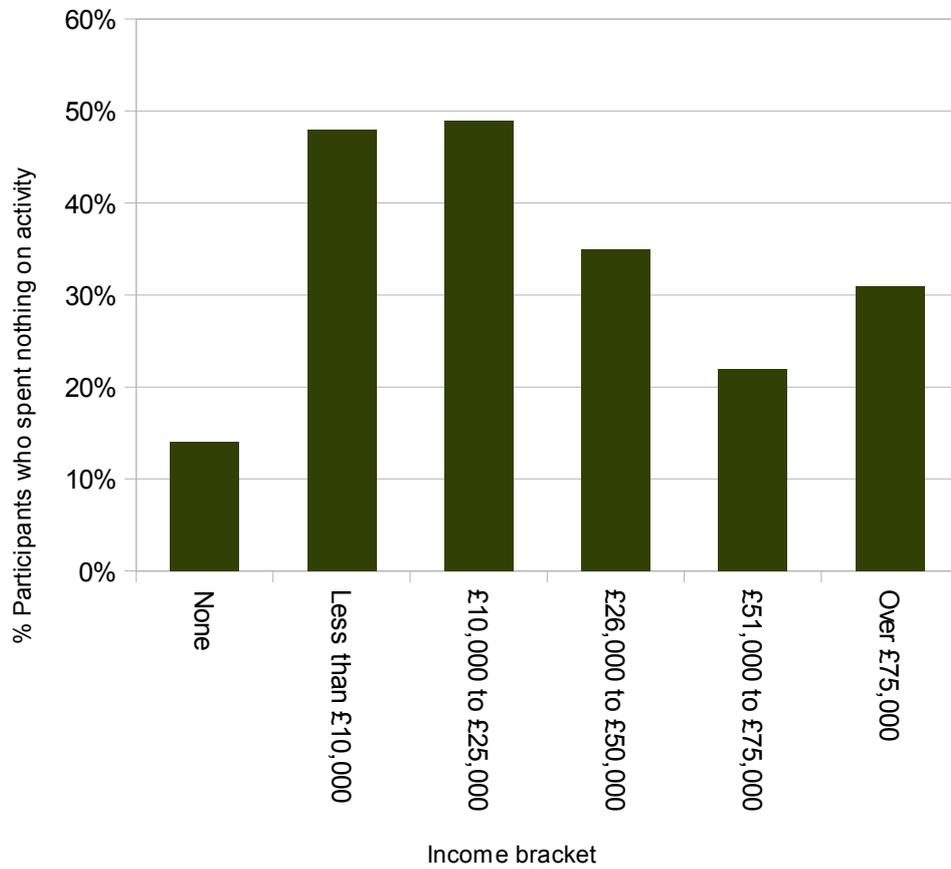


Figure 8a Relationship between income and cost free enjoyable activities

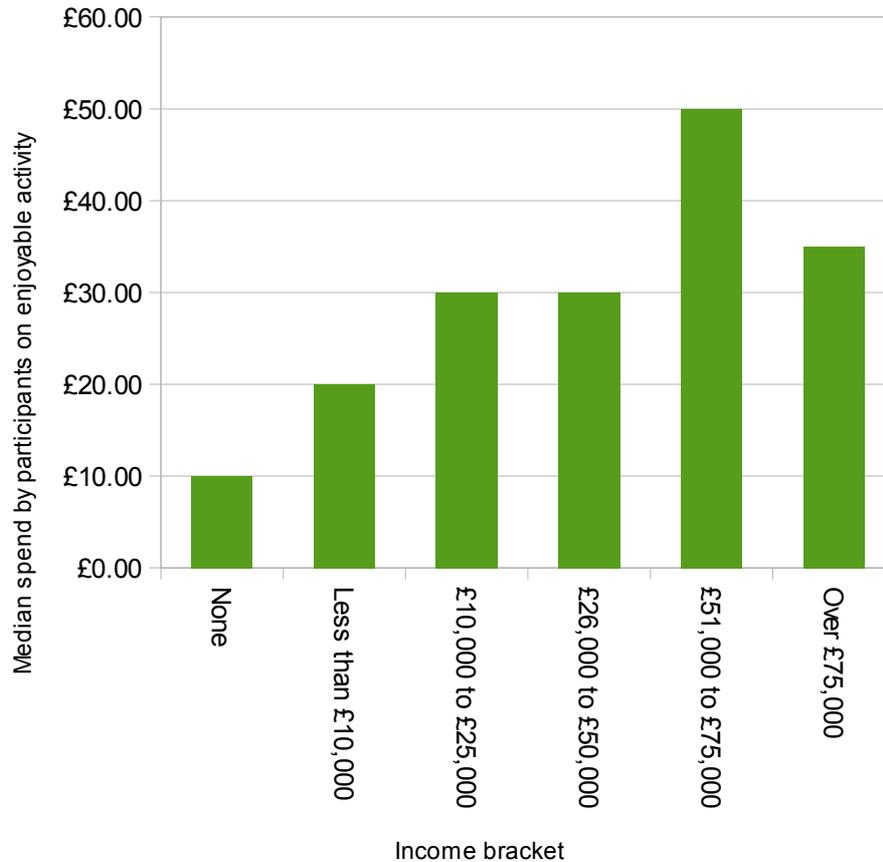


Figure 8b Relationship between income and spend on enjoyable activities

4.4 What's the environmental impact of enjoyable activities?

Excluding unknown subsidiary energy costs (e.g. transport to an activity, heating or lighting in a building, etc), then 94% of the activities named appeared to have little or no environmental impact (e.g. walking, gym, eating out). Only 5 participants mentioned shopping as their enjoyable activity (e.g. *"I enjoy buying clothes and wearing them and go hunting for good deals"*) and only 17 people (5%) mentioned the consumption of materials as a necessary component of their activity (e.g. *"having a new summerhouse built and furnishing it"*).

The only large environmental costs were overseas travel for holidays and major home improvements.

4.5 What's the economic contribution of enjoyable activities?

37% of the enjoyable activities involved service provider businesses. These included: specialist facilities (e.g. a gym, cinema, boat or bicycle hire), visitor attractions (e.g. a castle or museum), activity guides (e.g. a climbing, dance or music instructor), media producers (e.g. TV, books, video games or cinema), performers (live concerts or sports matches), and finally, eating outlets and shops.

This economic sector has grown and could continue to grow as people opt for shared services over individual ownership. It has minimal environmental cost (especially where materials and facilities are shared) and it is not readily amenable to technology takeover.

4.6 What's the contribution of enjoyable activities to social capital?

Only 5% of the enjoyable activities appeared to contribute directly to social capital, i.e. civic or cultural impact, strengthening social networks - effectively making the world a better place for others as well as yourself. Examples included:

"singing in a choir. Practice every week for upcoming concerts"

"writing a novel"

"taking part in the planning of a 17 bedroom extension to the RAF club"

"giving a talk about the situation in Palestine to a community group"

"playing snooker in a local tournament and came 2nd"

"performing at an open mic"

(We debated whether going to the local pub to drink adds to social capital whereas enjoying a drink with your family at home does not. Robert Putnam's U.S. book '[Bowling Alone](#)' would suggest this might well be the case).

5 What activities do people find meaningful?

I asked people to describe an activity they had spent time doing recently which they found meaningful or inspirational. They were again told that it didn't matter whether it was connected to their home life, work or leisure.

The activities described were again diverse. Examples included:

"finding a Bristly Oxtongue plant where it had not been seen before "

"looking at an art exhibition"

"writing my life story"

"I volunteered .. at a local food bank"

"organising an 80th birthday party"

"developing a syllabus for the leadership team"

"harvesting and preserving food"

"studying the life and times of Bonny Prince Charlie"

Whereas everyone was able to describe an activity they enjoyed, that wasn't the case with the meaningful question. 11% of participants either gave no answer or explained that they couldn't think of anything.

"can't think of anything that could be classed as meaningful"

"absolutely nothing recently"

Again, I grouped the free-form responses into similar activities. This resulted in 21 different categories. Table 3 shows the activity types mentioned 5 times or more.

Activity type	No. Mentions
helping/charity	47
doing something with family	42
learning	38
reading	15
making something	13
physical activity	11
housework	10
spiritual activity	10
nature/outdoors	9
teaching	9
art	8
travelling	7
work	5

Table 3 : Most frequently mentioned meaningful activities

70% of the meaningful activities were things they said they either did 'often' (32%) or 'sometimes' (38%).

5.1 Why do they find the activities meaningful?

Here are some sample responses:-

"it felt as if happy memories were being created"

"I love when I can help my kid learn something"

"I felt at one with the nature around me"

"(the event) included those who are usually marginalised"

"concentrating on a job and seeing it through to the end"

"it is making me a better person - physically and emotionally"

"it's developed my imagination"

"worshipping with others is important for my Christian life"

In contrast to the enjoyable activities, there was far less coherence in a word analysis of the meaningful activities. This is not surprising when meaning is intensely personal, i.e. two people may experience similar feelings of enjoyment from a particular activity but they are unlikely to derive the same meaning. 58% of descriptions talked only of themselves – these tended to be about learning or achievement or emotional, spiritual or sensory experiences. The remainder

involved relationships, helping or caring for others or contributing to wider society through charity or volunteering.

5.2 How many meaningful activities are part of their paid work?

Of the participants in paid employment, only 6% named meaningful activities which were part of their paid work. Examples were:-

"processing our quarterly purchasing statistical data"

"helping elderly customers at work"

"diagnosed dyslexia in a naval recruit and together we drew up a plan to help him"

"I attended a training course for work around effective leadership"

"I surveyed a property and enjoyed it"

5.3 What do the meaningful activities cost them?

56% of the 290 reported activities cost them nothing at all, e.g. the outdoors, helping someone, spending time with family, reading, attending Church, attending a talk or volunteering. Of those activities they paid for, the median cost was £40. These tended to be attending events or courses, making visits or doing projects which involved making things. There were a handful of very expensive activities which involved foreign holidays and moving house. Once again, people's income bracket had no clear effect. Ironically, the single highest price activity (moving house costing £82k!) came from someone in the £10-£25k bracket.

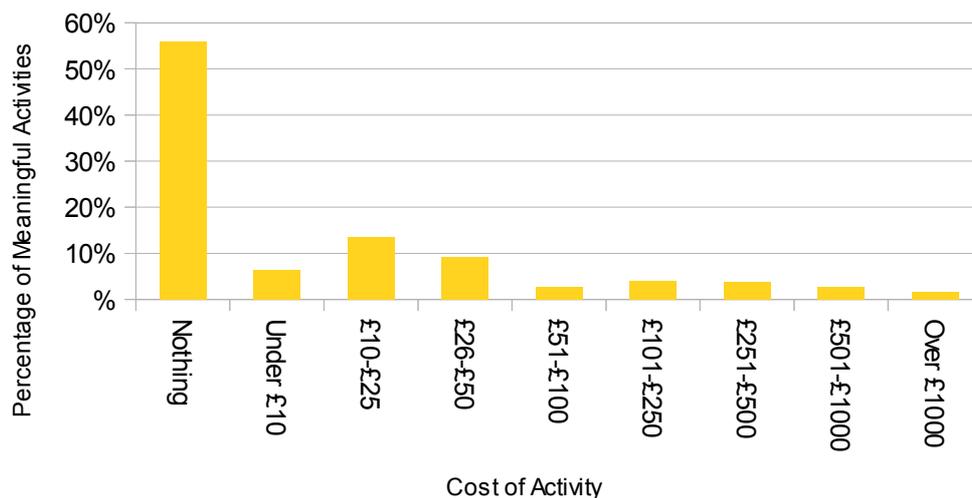


Figure 9 : Cost of meaningful activities

5.4 What's the environmental impact of meaningful activities?

Excluding unknown subsidiary costs, 94% of the activities named appeared to have little or no environmental impact (e.g. volunteering, reading, attending a yoga or maths class). Only 3% involved the consumption of materials, e.g. *"shopping for a wedding dress"*, *"decorating my house"*, *"making a bench"*. The 3 high carbon footprint activities were overseas holidays.

5.5 What's the economic contribution of meaningful activities?

75% of the meaningful activities appeared to involve no economic transaction. The remaining 25% involved a service provider business either directly or indirectly. The main one was media content generation (books, films, TV) where the content consumed had a powerful impact (*"it helped me look at things from a different point of view"*) followed by classes or training courses and one-off events or exhibitions. Retail outlets were only mentioned 3 times.

5.6 What's the contribution of meaningful activities to social capital?

19% of the meaningful activities contributed in some small way to social capital. There were 13 mentions of helping a charity (*"doing a Samaritan shift"*), 13 mentions of helping a non-family member (*"done some shopping for an elderly neighbour"*), 10 mentions of contributing one's knowledge or skills (*"working with children to improve their maths"*) and 7 mentions of creating or making something for others to enjoy or benefit from (*"writing a song to make others feel uplifted"*). There was only 1 mention of a political act (*"attended a counter-protest at a mosque when we heard anti-Islam protesters were giving them a hard time"*).

However, many of the activities people described relied on some other individual or group freely giving *their* time or skills to make the meaningful activity possible (e.g. *"I took my son to the local swimming baths for his swimming lesson and I felt inspired by what the teachers do with the children"*, or *"the sermon was spoken with a voice simulator by a teenage girl with cerebral palsy, it was very moving"*). Charities also provide an accessible framework for individuals to contribute to others' well-being in ways they find personally meaningful.

6 What activities do people feel make a difference?

I asked people to describe an activity they had spent time doing recently where they felt able to make a difference, have an effect or add some value. They were again told that it didn't matter whether it was connected to their home life, work or leisure.

This was definitely a harder question and 25% of participants responded *"none"* *"not done anything like this"*, *"can't think of anything"* or even *"nothing, I am worthless"*.

Of the 245 responses included who did respond, these are some examples:-

"designed a poster for a local charity"

"I am a narcotica anonymous sponsor and regularly help other addicts to go through the 12 step programme"

"I had to take up school trousers, which I had never done before"

"sign a local petition"

"taught my niece how to use excel"

"trimming the hedge at the front of the house to clear the footpath"

"listening to 5 year olds read at my sons' school"

"Ancient Monument monitoring- looking at sites and recording damage and stability of the sites"

75% were activities that they said they either did 'often' (41%) or 'sometimes' (34%).

I categorised the responses according to whom or to what the difference was made. Table 4 shows the frequency of each category. Some activities appeared in more than one category.

Who or what did the activity affect?	No. mentions
Public social good (inc charity)	151
A material thing	57
Family member	44
Self	42
Work	31
New knowledge	26
Friend or colleague	13

Table 4 : Whom or what people's activities affected

The majority of activities described a difference made to public life or to a member of the public – this either happened through a charity:

"made cupcakes for the nspcc"

or through some other social organisation:

"organising a walk for my walking club of which I am a committee member"

"Speaking to LGBT group "

or as an individual act..

"picked up a bin bag full of cans while walking in local countryside"

"helping my A Level student mentee with maths questions"

Many described a difference they had made within their family.

"seen a packet of mince on the reduced shelf in Asda and bought it to make a lasagne for my daughter and myself as she really likes my lasagne and I haven't made one for a while"

"I sorted my mum in laws life insurance out"

or something which made a difference to themselves or their home

"collecting vintage Star wars"

"decorating my bedroom"

"I did some gardening and it was looking good after I finished"

This often included making a difference to a physical thing rather than another person.

"cut the hedge", "cleaned the patio", "made a model plane"

Finally, some contributed new knowledge or an idea

"coming up with the specials while the other chef was off sick"

"given advice to someone with an injury, in how to help improve their injury through exercise"

"making a suggestion at work that helped"

6.1 How many of the 'difference' activities are part of their paid work?

Of the participants in paid employment, 19% of the activities they described as making a difference happened as part of their paid work. This was a much higher percentage than the enjoyable or meaningful activities. Examples included:

"all of my work - graphic design - involves improving the user experience"

"funeral ministry"

"my work allows me to deal with statistical data and process it in a way that all can use .. I feel that very few people could do this; thus it makes me feel good"

"calming someone down on the phone and speaking to them whilst emergency services were travelling"

6.2 What do the 'difference' activities cost them?

71% of the activities which made a difference cost people nothing. Of those activities which cost them, the median cost was £25. This included donations to charity, organising events, purchasing DIY materials, travelling or buying a gift for a family member. The handful of very expensive activities included paying for a new kitchen for the stepson (£5k), visiting a sick sister abroad (£3k) and a training course (£1k).

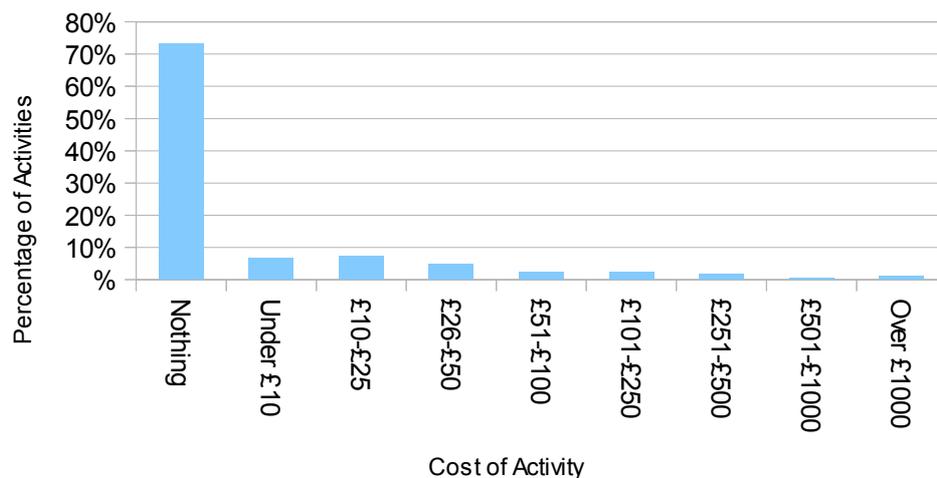


Figure 10 : Cost of Activities which made a difference

Again, people's personal income bracket had no noticeable affect.

6.3 What's the environmental impact of 'difference' activities?

Excluding unknown subsidiary effects, 98% of activities involved little or no environmental impact. The only significant ones (2%) involved the purchase of major materials (e.g. equipping a new kitchen) and overseas travel.

6.4 What's the economic contribution of 'difference' activities?

Leaving aside the 'difference' activities which were part of someone's paid work, the others did not involve any significant economic activity other than purchasing pots of paint or other home improvement materials. However, 23% of the non-work activities were reliant on making a difference via a non-profit social organisation – either a charity or a public institution (e.g. church, school) or via local volunteer run clubs or groups.

6.5 What's the contribution of 'difference' activities to social capital?

Discounting activities which only made a difference to themselves or to their immediate family, then 65% of the activities contributed more widely to social capital.

7 Which activities do people do in or out of work?

I presented participants with a list of 8 'socio-cultural' activities namely, creating/composing/designing, craft or construction, learning, discovering, collaborating, helping others and being active outdoors. The list was chosen to reflect a different kind of future prosperity for our society as outlined by Professor Tim Jackson in his book '[Prosperity without Growth](#)'. They are activities which could enrich the well-being of both self and society whilst relying less on economic growth, material consumption and full time employment.

Participants were asked which of these activities they had done (if any) in the past few months and whether they had done them as part of their paid work and/or in their own time.

Figure 11 shows the percentage of the 325 participants who had done any of these activities in the past few months. It is noteworthy that only 3 of the listed activities had been engaged in by more than 53% of the surveyed population in the past few months. These were: being active outdoors, helping someone and learning something new. The two activities which least people had engaged in were volunteering and creating, composing or designing something.

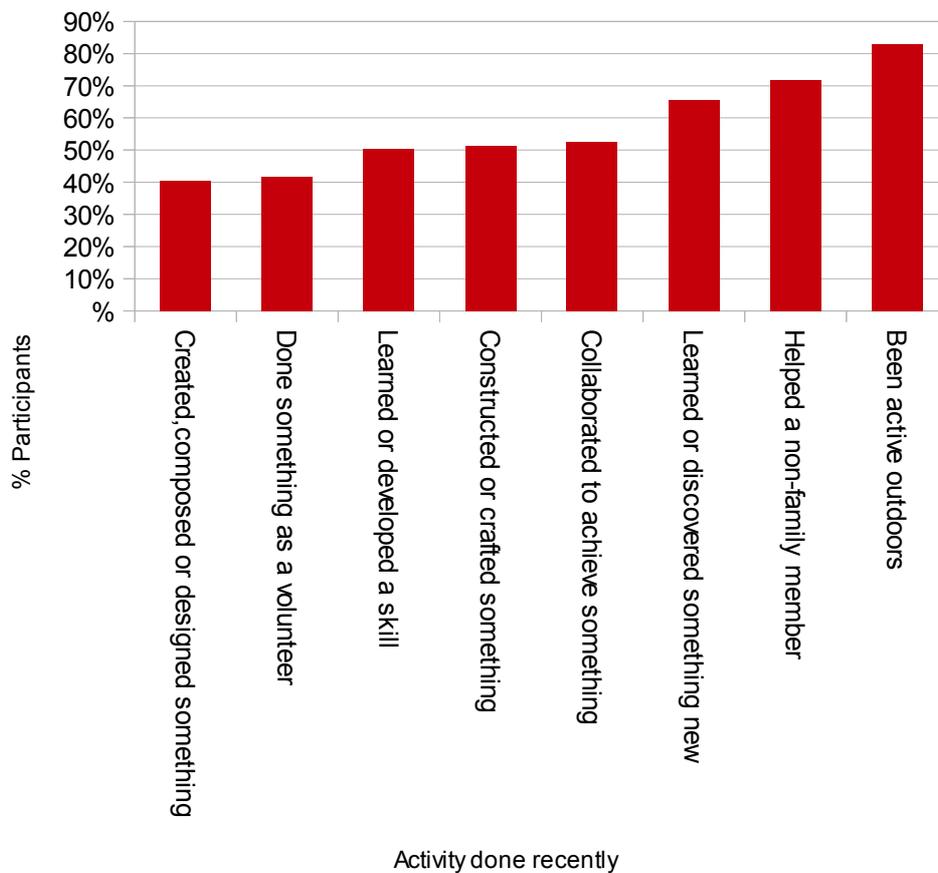


Figure 11 : Which activities do people engage in?

I was interested in the extent to which engaging in these particular activities depended on being in paid work. Overall, the participants in paid work were more likely to have recently engaged in *every* activity on the list. This could partly be a factor of age. Separating out the retired, they are 20% less likely to have engaged in the activities overall. The activities showing the biggest difference between those in paid work and those not were: collaborating, learning a new skill, helping a non family member and creating or designing something.

To try to unravel this, Figure 12 shows the breakdown for the participants who were in some form of paid employment as to whether they did the activities at

work or in their own time or in both. The chart shows that paid workers were not mostly engaging in these activities at work. They did some at work but were more likely than unemployed people to do these activities in their own time as well.

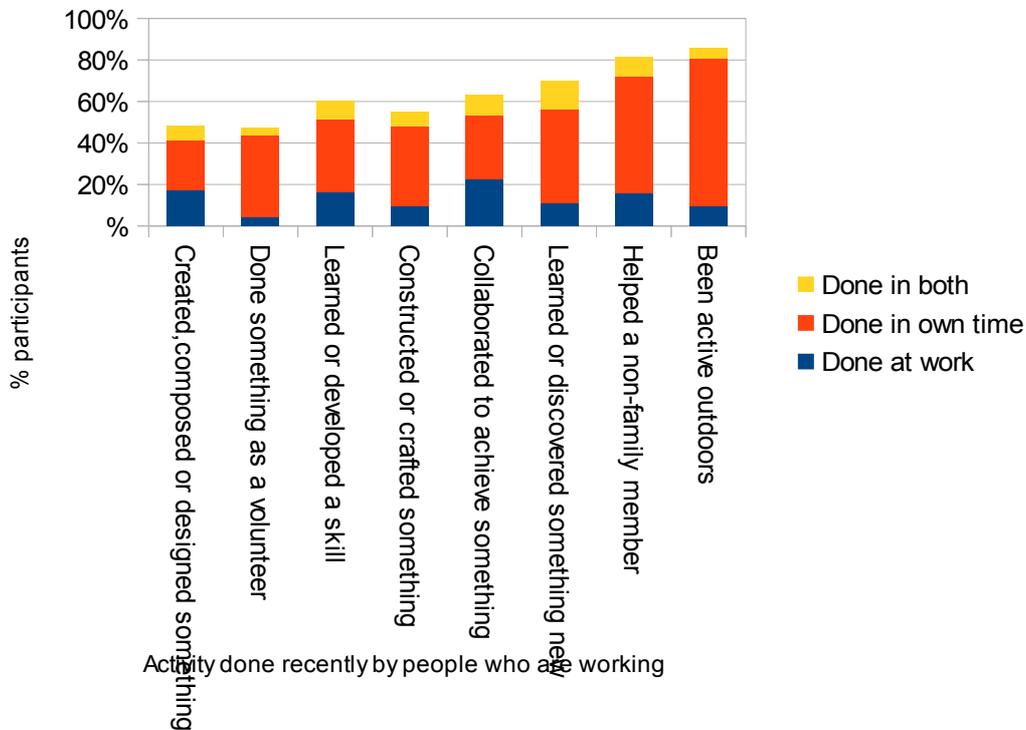


Figure 12 : Activities engaged in by people who are in paid work

8 How enjoyable, meaningful and valuable do people feel their lives are?

Having explored people's activities, I then asked participants to rate how enjoyable, meaningful and/or valuable they felt their lives overall are and whether they felt able to make a difference and change or affect things. I hoped this would capture an overall well-being measure which included both [hedonic](#) and [eudaimonic](#) factors.

Figure 13 shows the mean ratings given by the participants for each factor. Ratings varied from 0 (not at all) to 4 (very much). On average, people rated their lives slightly more enjoyable than meaningful and gave lower ratings on feeling able to make a difference and feeling they were valued.

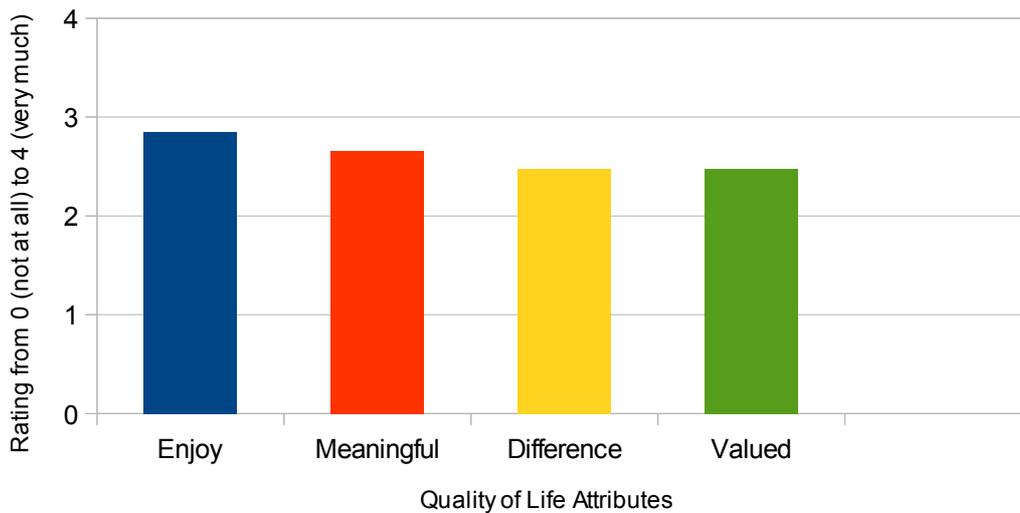


Figure 13 : Mean well-being ratings (0 = not at all, 4 = very much)

8.1 Demographic variation in well-being ratings

Overall, demographics had little effect on people's hedonic ratings (their enjoyment of life) but did affect their eudaimonic ratings (meaning, difference, value).

Women had slightly higher average ratings than men across all 4 factors but most noticeably in finding their lives meaningful (13% difference).

The 18-25 year olds had the highest ratings of any age group and were the only age group where their sense of making a difference and their sense of their own value was equal to their enjoyment level. The other age categories (26 – over 65 years) were all similar apart from a slight reduction in ability to make a difference and one's sense of one's own value in the over 65's.

Ratings increased with personal income up to the level of £51,000 after which they levelled off.

The self-employed had the highest ratings (particularly in terms of meaningfulness of their lives). Those of working age who were not in paid employment had the lowest followed by the retired.

People with a degree had higher ratings across the board than those without whilst lower level qualifications (GCSE, A level etc) made little difference. Being a graduate made a small difference to their enjoyment ratings (8% higher) but resulted in a 20% uplift in their perceived ability to make a difference and a 14% uplift in meaningfulness and their sense of self value.

People who were members of any social group, club or association had higher ratings on eudaimonic (meaning, difference and value).

The biggest difference was between people who had some form of religious faith or other spiritual practice and those than had none. Ratings for the former were

higher – even for enjoyment. The biggest difference (28%) in ratings again being in whether they felt they could make a difference.

8.2 Effect of activities on well-being

Those who had recently done *any* of the 8 socio-cultural activities listed in section 7 had higher well-being ratings than those who hadn't done that activity. The activity which had the biggest effect on ratings was whether or not they had collaborated with others to achieve something. Perhaps not surprisingly, this made a 31% difference to their rating on their own ability to make a difference. Unfortunately, only 53% of participants had recently engaged in a collaborative activity. The activity which had least effect on their well-being ratings was gaining new knowledge.

Graduates stood out as the demographic which had the largest effect on eudaimonic ratings and graduates were much more likely than non-graduates to have engaged in every one of the 8 socio-cultural activities they were asked about.

Figure 14 shows that the biggest difference between graduates and non-graduates is in: collaborating to achieve something, creating/composing/designing and learning and discovering something new. The smallest difference is in constructing or crafting something and in being active outdoors.

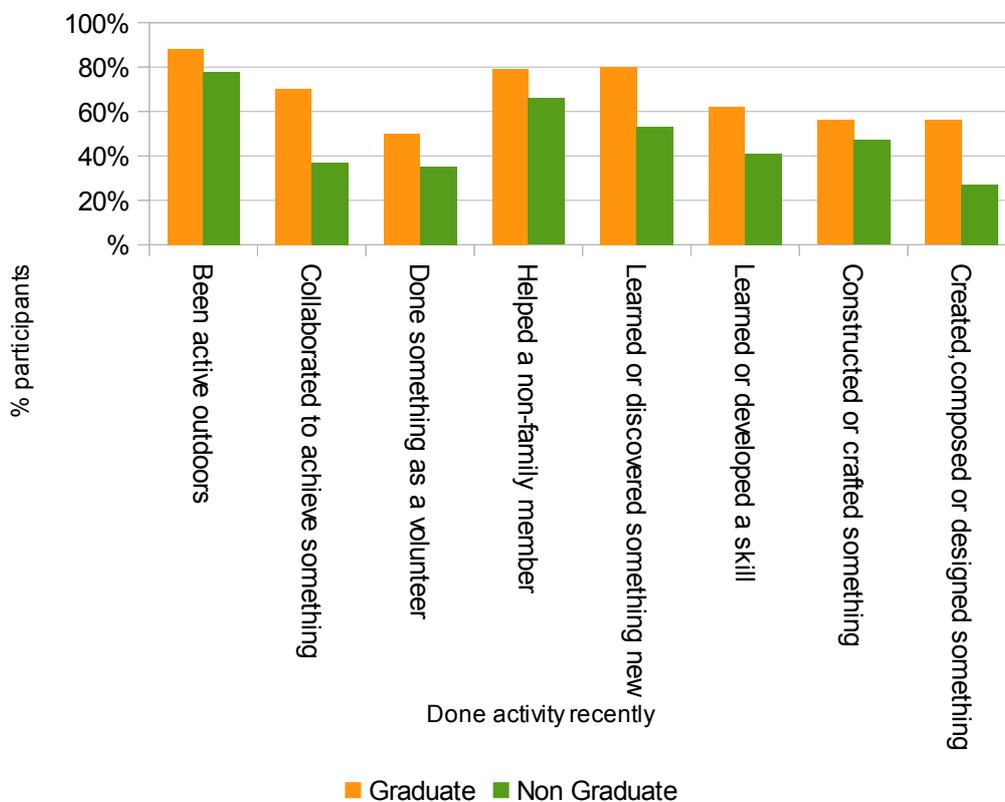


Figure 14: Socio-cultural activities of graduates compared to non-graduates

Figure 15 shows that graduates were also almost twice as likely to be members of a social club or organisation, twice as likely to support a social or political cause and 15% more likely to have a religious faith or other spiritual practice. These 3 attributes correlated with higher ratings on eudaimonic dimensions of well-being. This is not surprising as they are activities which are often related to finding, developing or expressing shared meaning and with collaborating with others to achieve shared effects.

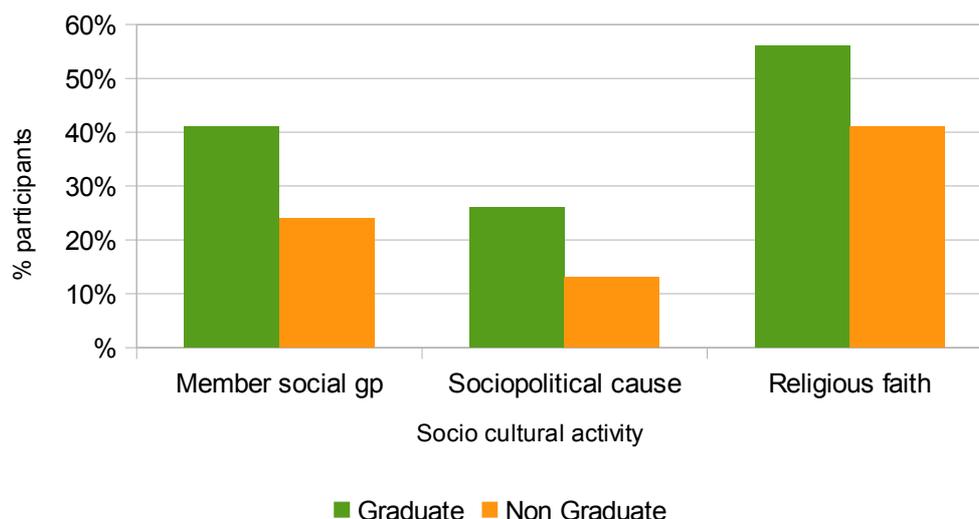


Figure 15: Socio-cultural engagement by graduates vs non-graduates

9 Concluding Comments

9.1 What does the survey show?

The activities which people enjoy are remarkably simple: walking the dog, playing with the kids, gardening, watching TV, etc. They are about: relaxing and unwinding, physically exercising, experiencing nature or doing things with friends and family. Hardly anyone named activities which are part of their paid work.

The activities cost them little or nothing and personal income levels had little effect on what they did or how much they spent. Most of the activities had minimal environmental impact and involved no material consumption. Shopping as an enjoyable activity was rarely mentioned. Where enjoyable activities make an economic contribution, it's either via services like gyms or entertainment events or via media content providers such as music, films and books.

But only 5% of the enjoyable activities contribute directly to social capital. Understandably, most are for one's own or one's family's gratification.

Not everyone could think of an activity they found meaningful. Those that did describe helping others, doing things with family and learning or experiencing new things. Emotional, spiritual or sensory experiences were important along with a sense of personal achievement. Again, only a tiny number of such activities are part of people's paid work. The activities were mostly free or cheap apart from a

handful of expensive ones involving foreign travel or home improvements. Again, personal income had little effect on the type of activities or the amount spent and there was little or no environmental impact and little material consumption.

The meaningful activities made even less economic contribution. The main beneficiary being media content providers followed by training classes and event organisers.

A minority of meaningful activities (19%) contributed directly to social capital but many more were capitalising on the social capital generated by others, e.g. local clubs, community activities and charity events.

Asked to describe a recent activity where they felt they had made a difference or had an effect, 25% of people couldn't think of anything. The activities which were named ranged from charitable acts to home improvements or activities which enriched family life.

In the case of 'making a difference', people were more likely to name activities they had done as part of their paid work (19%). Examples ranged from graphic design to managing funerals to analysing data! Again, most of the activities described were either free or cost them little and income levels again made little difference. Environmental impact was minimal and the activities rarely made an economic contribution other than those which were part of their paid work. However, they often were enabled to make a difference through non-profit social organisations such as charities, community clubs, schools and churches.

Presented with a list of 8 socio-cultural activities which reflect a different kind of prosperity for both the individual and society, around half of participants had not engaged recently in 5 out of the 8 listed. People were least likely to have engaged in: creating, composing or designing, crafting or constructing, learning or developing a new skill, collaborating or volunteering. They were most likely to have been active outdoors or to have helped a non-family member.

Although those in paid employment had occasionally engaged in these activities as part of their paid work, they were 4 times more likely to have done so in their leisure time. And people in work were much more likely than those not in work to engage in these activities in their leisure time despite the fact that they would have less of that time available.

In terms of people's well-being, people rated their overall lives more enjoyable (hedonic) than meaningful (eudaimonic) and gave significantly lower ratings on their perceived ability to make a difference and their sense of being valued. Overall well-being ratings increased with personal income up to a level of £51k and then levelled off. Demographics (age, gender, health etc) had little effect on their hedonic ratings but did affect their eudaimonic ratings.

The most significant uplift on eudaimonic ratings, was whether or not people were graduates plus those who were members of a social group or association and those with any form of religious faith or spiritual practice. These factors were also correlated. Graduates were much more likely than non-graduates to be members of a social group or association and more likely to have a religious faith or spiritual practice. Graduates were also more likely than non-graduates to have engaged in all the 8 listed socio-cultural activities and the greater the engagement in those activities the higher the hedonic and eudaimonic ratings.

9.2 And what have we learned?

What do the survey data tell us about our ability to prosper both hedonically and eudaimonically in a world of less economic growth, less consumption and less jobs?

The encouraging finding is that people across the demographic profile engage in enjoyable and meaningful lives through a diverse collection of simple, everyday activities like walking, gardening, watching TV, singing in a choir, helping a friend, visiting an art exhibition or playing with their kids. These cost them very little, don't require significant material consumption and have little environmental impact. They also don't appear to be tied to their paid work (if they are employed) nor to their level of personal income.

However, some of the data suggest that those who *are* in paid work engage in more hedonic and especially more eudaimonic activities in their leisure time and these have an effect on their overall well-being ratings. This might be the effect of them having much less leisure time which they therefore value more highly and are able to 'escape' and relax without any anxiety of finding paid work.

But, if fewer people in future had jobs and everyone was paid a Universal Basic Income, would they then struggle to fill their leisure time because there was too much of it or because they needed or valued 'free time' less. Not everyone responds positively to having too much free, unstructured time.

Many of the activities people found enjoyable and/or meaningful like walking the dog or going to the gym are not activities which would occupy more than an hour or two in any day. There is a clear difference between an activity which fills the odd hour or day and one which provides sustained meaning and pleasure through life.

Possibly the most concerning result of these data is the fact that fewer people felt able to think of activities where they felt they had made a difference and they rated their overall lives much lower on whether they felt able to make a difference or were valued compared to whether they found them enjoyable or meaningful. Even the enjoyable and meaningful activities they described were mostly about how it affected themselves or their immediate family. Only a tiny number directly contributed to social capital, i.e. creating or strengthening social networks and making the world a better place for everyone.

Tim Jackson has proposed that socio-cultural activities such as: [creativity, care, craft and culture](#) could generate prosperity of a different kind for both the individual and society in a future where there is less material consumption and far fewer paid jobs. It is therefore worrying that only half of the survey population engaged in such activities with any regularity. These are the kinds of activity which have the potential of occupying people enjoyably and meaningfully over protracted periods of time rather than for the odd hour or day. And, importantly, they contribute to enriching the lives of a wider population.

Those most likely to engage in these socio-cultural activities were graduates who were also much more likely to feel that their lives make a difference and feel themselves valued. Does this mean, that without paid work in future, graduates will enjoy better well-being than others? If this is the case, we need to ask what it is about a university educational experience which encourages socio-cultural behaviours *if* those behaviours are what individuals and society need to prosper in future. We also need to ask if that set of activities reflects a particularly graduate-centric view of well-being and prosperity.

[Other studies](#) have also shown that graduates are more likely to be active in civic life and participate in social networks which build social capital. [They are more likely](#) than non-graduates to join societies, political and environmental groups, residents' associations, religious organisations and sports clubs. My survey data suggest that this graduate effect can't be simply explained by having higher incomes or more specialist jobs.

It could result from a combination of 3 factors, none of which, interestingly, is a direct result of the specialist degree subject studied. It is more about a general and much wider understanding of 'education'. The first factor could be the experience at 18 years of leaving one's family, friends and familiar social network and activities to enter a completely different environment where you know no-one and have the opportunity to explore and develop different identities, interests and relationships. You have to build a new social network and structure for your life in order to survive. Fortunately, universities present students with a highly accessible array of volunteer-run clubs or societies to join and new activities to try. After university, graduates are likely to move to yet another new area where they know no-one and will need to again construct a life and social network from scratch.

The second factor is leaving university with a clearer knowledge of and confidence in the abilities you have which you now expect to put to effect. It might be that self-awareness and confidence, rather than the ability itself, which make it easier to identify and respond to opportunities, to find interesting uses for your time or help change your world or simply make something good happen either inside or outside of work.

The third factor is about narrative. In her book ['The Power of Meaning'](#), Emily Esfahani Smith argues that our ability to create (and recreate) a narrative of our lives is a key factor in feeling our lives are meaningful and have value. It might be that a university education (in the broadest sense) facilitates this ability and confidence to reflect on what you are doing in life and why.

If this is true, then our challenge is how these non-academic aspects of a university education could be experienced by a wider population in different ways. Unfortunately, our current school educational systems and funding are increasingly geared either towards traditional academic disciplines or training in specific technical skills necessary for the jobs of today. Arts, culture, sport and civic participation are not seen as a priority and yet these may form the critical basis for prosperity of both the individual and society outside of paid work.

Finally, with regards to any economic contribution or employment growth from the leisure activities people described, this would be in the following areas: services, specialist shared facilities, equipment hire, instructors or guides, event or activity providers, performers (music, sports, actors) and media content generators. The good news is that these are not jobs likely to be taken over by robots.