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“Who wants a job anyway?”
Student Approaches to Graduate Employability

Ruth Brooks
HEFCE (2014) – those who can potentially benefit from a university education should be attending regardless of their background.
• 1960’s Elite less than 5%

• 1980’s Mass passed 15%

• 2011 Approaching Universal peaked at 49%

Inspiring tomorrow’s professionals
In 2015 31% of 18 year olds entered university and improving rates from disadvantaged areas.

Record entry for disadvantaged teenagers

Proportion of young cohort accepted for entry to university full-time at age 18-19 by participation rate in local area (POLAR3) for England.
• Government priority to reduce child poverty and inequality with participation in higher education being a key part of their strategy 
(Social Mobility & Child Poverty Commission, 2015)

• Brown (2014) – measure graduate outcomes rather than entry.

• HEFCE (2013) – independent school 60.4% in graduate jobs at point of finishing degree - state school 46.7%
Other challenges

- Marketisation and utilitarian approach to HE as a training ground rather than generating knowledge (Weber, 2014)
- Competitive graduate labour market - number of applicants increased.
- Risk of underemployment
- Inequality of opportunity
- More than a degree – value of non-meritocratic characteristics (Jackson, 2007)
• DLHE - Higher Education already has a strategic focus on employability

• **Student outcomes:** the extent to which all students, in particular those from disadvantaged backgrounds, achieve their educational and professional goals.
Discourse of Employability

• “ Employability is having a set of skills, knowledge, understanding and personal attributes that make a person more likely to choose and secure occupations in which they can be satisfied and successful.”

(Dacre Pool and Sewell, 2007: 280)
CareerEDGE Model
(Dacre Pool and Sewell, 2007: 280)
My study

- How do personal background factors affect a student’s approach to the completion of their undergraduate studies and their plans for life after university?
Data Gathering

- 31 participants – in-depth qualitative interviews using a semi-structured interview guide
- Timing depended upon when they joined the study.
- Pre-graduation focused on personal background, plans once completed the course, engagement with the graduate labour market.
Employability is not so simple as there continues to be inequality in graduate outcomes based on:

- Class (Greenbank & Hepworth, 2008, Burke, 2016)
- Gender (Andrew, 2009; Wilton, 2011)
- Ethnicity (Moreau & Leathwood, 2006)
Inequality based on class

• Dorling (2014) – family background, wealth and neighbourhood better markers of social position than the Standard Occupational Classification (ONS, 2010).

• Skeggs (1997) – class has become legitimised and institutionalised so less visible that people are unaware of exclusion.

• Working class children underperform educationally (Goodman & Gregg, 2010) so structurally denied job opportunities (Brown & Hesketh, 2004).
Inequality based on gender

• Strong academic performance by females (OECD, 2015)

• Persistence of horizontal and vertical segregation (Wood, 2008)

• Further disadvantage if not working to full-time, traditional pattern (Aust, Emmerson & Cameron, 2014)

• Bourdieu observed socially constructed male and female practice to form division in society (Fowler, 2003)
Inequality based on ethnicity

- Jackson (2012) - complex pattern of academic achievement depending on ethnic background.

- Also reflected in a complex pattern of social mobility relative to parents (Zuccotti, 2015)

- Ethnic minority graduates more likely to be unemployed (Li, 2015)

- Cultural challenge of the workplace (Anthias, 2001)
Alternative view of employability

• Role of agency and structure (Tholen, 2013)

• Employability is relational, contextual and conflictual.

• Competition exposes social, cultural and economic background – difficult for those from disadvantaged origins. (Marshall & Swift, 1993)

• Assumption that employment is the desired outcome
Bourdieu (1977; 1984)
Findings

- Employment is not always a priority for students
- Focus on academic studies – too much to also look for employment during final year
- Do not appreciate the timelines – are graduate schemes oversold?
- Living at home and part-time work to fall back upon – not under financial pressure
- Professional advice from careers – few had parents with experience of HE
- Lack of career plans means they are unable to strategically position themselves in relation to the field.
Findings

• **Ethnicity** – keen to stress that they are British as well as from a different cultural heritage

• Differences in expectations for males and females in some cultures (Zuccotti, 2015)

• Males under more pressure to be employed. Females want to be employed but to “use” their qualifications

• Challenges in settling in to the workplace culture (Anthias, 2001)

Inspiring tomorrow’s professionals
• **Class** – students less conscious of class (Skeggs, 1997)

• Willingness to move and cost of being mobile (Brown & Hesketh, 2004)

• Lacking confidence to live independently (and financial factor for some).

• Lack of life experience to enhance their CV
• **Gender** – moderates longer term ambitions of females (Wood, 2008)

• Males more confident and when unsuccessful moved on to the next opportunity.

• **Intersectionality** – gender and ethnicity different expectations
Graduate recruitment process

- Challenging
- Competitive
- Long
- Stressful
- Varies by industry
- Frustrating
- Feelings of success and failure
Conclusions

- Pressure within the HE sector on employment outcomes
- Not all students engage with the graduate labour market during their final year
- Difficult for some to exert their agency due to lack of knowledge as to how the field of graduate employment operates.
- Holdings of recognised capital also an issue
- In a mass market can universities offer sufficient individualised support and guidance?