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"Who wants a job anyway?": Student approaches to graduate employability

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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.





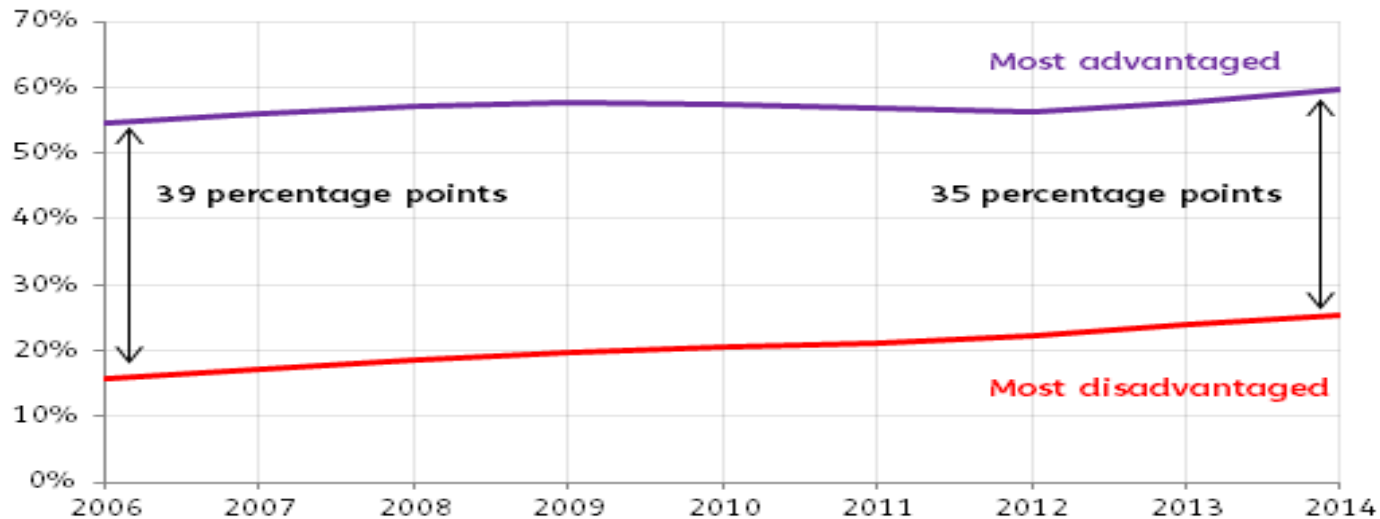
- 1960's Elite less than 5%
- 1980's Mass passed 15%
- 2011 Approaching Universal peaked at 49%



- 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%

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# 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.



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# Discourse of Employability

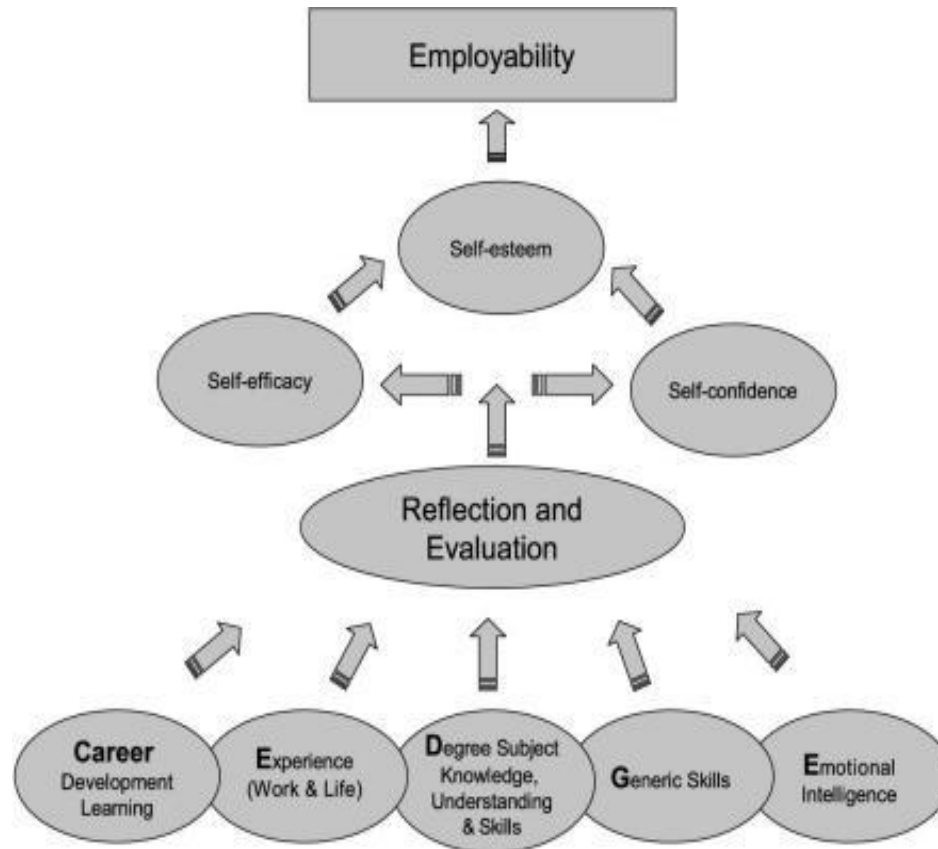
- “Employability is having a set of skills, knowledge, understanding and personal attributes that make a person more likely to choose and secure occupations in which they can be satisfied and successful.”

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(Dacre Pool and Sewell, 2007: 280)

# CareerEDGE Model

(Dacre Pool and Sewell, 2007: 280)



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# My study

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



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# 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)

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# 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).

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# 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)

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# 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)



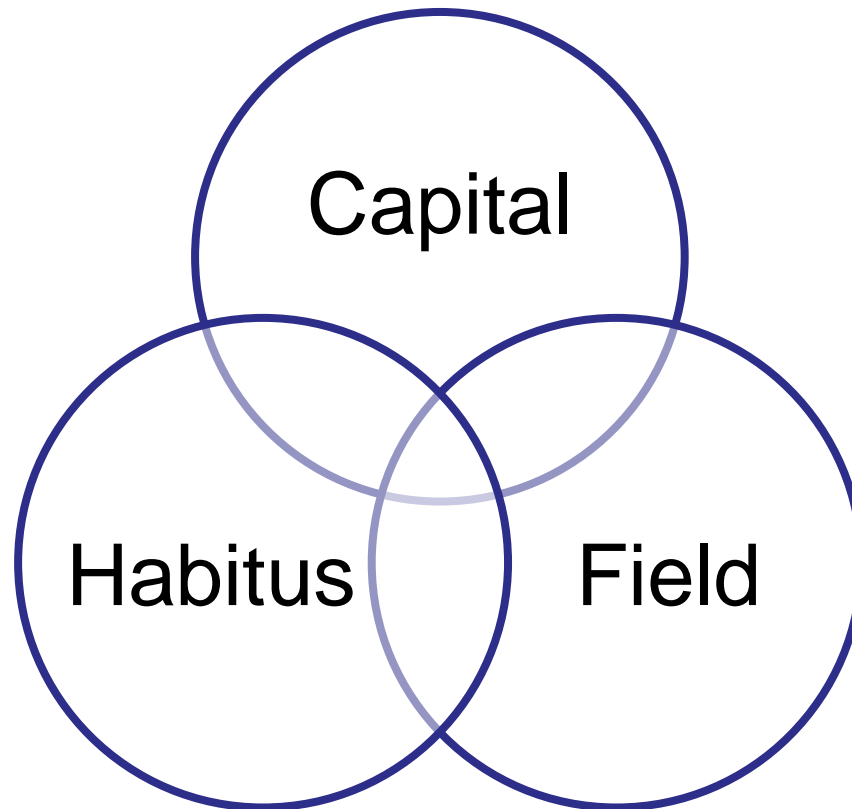
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# Alternative view of employability

- 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

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# Bourdieu (1977; 1984)



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# 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.

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# 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)

- **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



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# Graduate recruitment process

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



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# 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?**