



# Rethinking Graduate Employability in Context

Discourse, Policy and Practice

*Edited by*

Päivi Siivonen · Ulpukka Isopahkala-Bouret

Michael Tomlinson · Maija Korhonen · Nina Haltia

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Editors

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## PREFACE

This book provides a critical social and cultural analysis of graduate employability in context. It was produced as part of the Higher Education Graduates' Employability and Social Positioning in the Labour Market (HighEmploy, 2018–2022) research project funded by the Academy of Finland (grant numbers 315796 and 315797). The multidisciplinary research project was conducted in collaboration with the University of Eastern Finland and the University of Turku.

The book examines graduate employability through a diversity of theoretical lenses: governmentality, positionality, capitals, identity, as well as such novel methodological approaches as narrative positioning analysis. It, thus, builds on the macro, meso and micro analyses of the book *Graduate Employability in Context: Theory, Research and Debate*, edited by Michael Tomlinson and Leonard Holmes and published in 2017 by Palgrave Macmillan. Our aim has been to formulate a critical synthesis of graduate employability research that has focused largely on the individual university student and his/her skills formation as an educational outcome.

We hope the book will serve the interests of researchers, educators, students, policymakers, career practitioners, programme developers and employers alike. Moreover, we hope it serves as essential reading on courses that focus on graduate careers and employability as well as higher education policy and practice.

We wish to thank the authors of the book placed in three continents—Europe, North America and Australia—for their insightful research contributions which have made it possible to produce this book. In addition, we are very grateful for the external reviewers for their feedback at different

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# Introduction: Rethinking Graduate Employability in Context

*Päivi Siivonen, Ulpukka Isopahkala-Bouret,  
Michael Tomlinson, Maija Korhonen, and Nina Haltia*

Universities have become central to policy concerns over the production of knowledge workers for economic growth. They have been scrutinised over how well they can maximise graduates' employment and economic potential upon leaving university (e.g. Brown et al., 2003; Tomlinson, 2017; Bridgstock & Jackson, 2019). Higher education institutions (HEIs) face increasing demands from both governments and employers for ensuring economic competitiveness, and from students who expect 'outcomes' for their higher education (HE) investment (Siivonen & Filander, 2020;

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Tomlinson, 2012). Consequently, universities worldwide face an employability imperative that pressures them to position themselves as labour market institutions (Hartmann & Komljenovic, 2021). This has resulted in a technical-rational and instrumental perspective on education that emphasises employability—that is, the ability to obtain and maintain a job, and to ensure the supply of competence in the labour market (Nilsson & Nyström, 2013; Siivonen & Filander, 2020).

Although the employability discourse is promoted worldwide, it is mobilised differently in the EU and beyond. The discourse is well established in such liberal economies as the United Kingdom, the United States and Australia, but it is also becoming prevalent in the Nordic countries, which still follow the welfare state model with its free HE system. In the flexible and competitive UK context, which has a highly differentiated mass HE system, graduates compete for scarce graduate-level jobs (Tomlinson, 2012). They expect returns on their HE degrees in which they have substantially invested in the form of tuition fees. In Finland, for example, influenced by the 2009 New University Act (University Act 558/2009), the traditional tasks of research and teaching were accompanied by a third task—an increased emphasis on societal interaction and utility, which has meant an increased focus on economic and professional goals (Laalo & Heinonen, 2016). Universities have started to offer courses and programmes that link vocational practice-based knowledge to the functional imperatives of the world of work (Siivonen & Filander, 2020).

Employability can be understood as a socially and culturally mediated phenomenon, a social process and an object of study. The term ‘employability’ implies the positional dimension of being employable, but not necessarily in employment (Brown et al., 2003). Employability has become a normative ideal that sets new kinds of demands for graduates, as they are in continual need of development, and ensuring their suitability and potential for future jobs. It is no longer enough to possess ‘hard currencies’ in the form of traditional academic qualifications (Tomlinson, 2012). Ideal graduates need to seek new challenges and signal their passion and dedication for work. They increasingly need to demonstrate personal qualities such as being accountable, agile, active, independent, self-responsible, risk-taking, creative, problem-solving, decision-making and enterprising (Laalo et al., 2019; Siivonen et al., in this book). These skills and attributes represent ‘soft currencies’ (Tomlinson, 2012) that are not based on formal expertise or university degrees as such (Brown et al., 2003), and that are supposed to be carried luggage-like from job to job (Payne,

2000), thereby enhancing graduates' successful navigation in competitive and unstable labour markets. Relatedly, the discourse of employability creates new standards for 'Homo Academicus' and challenges the traditional interpretations of what it means to be an HE student and a novice professional in working life (Komulainen & Korhonen, 2021; Laalo et al., 2019), simultaneously challenging the value of traditional academic credentials and qualifications (Mutanen et al., in this book).

Prior research on graduate employability has focused largely on the individual university student and their skills formation as an educational outcome. Whilst more recent approaches have emphasised the interaction of different forms of capital and resources with the wider structures of the labour market in a globalised world (Brown et al., 2003, 2011; Burke et al., 2017; Tholen, 2015; Tomlinson, 2017), the individualistic skills and attributes approach has remained dominant (Holmes, 2013; Holmes, in this book). Such an approach measures how well the individual has succeeded in matching their human capital profile to labour market demands. As a consequence, the individual becomes responsible for their own labour market position and success (e.g. Brown et al., 2011; Siivonen & Isopahkala-Bouret, 2016; Tholen, 2015). Viewed in this way, employability is understood as something that can be developed in absolute terms through enhancing employability-related personal qualities, skills and abilities that make one appealing to different employers (see e.g. Boden & Nedeva 2010; Brown et al., 2003; Siivonen & Isopahkala-Bouret, 2016; Tomlinson, 2010). Such a view presents a theoretically general link between education and the labour market, viewing HE as an investment that 'pays off' in subsequent employment opportunities and earnings.

This book challenges human capital assumptions and individualistic views of graduate employability. The book approaches graduate employability from positional and processual perspectives, taking into consideration both the structural dimensions of employability and the interactional nature of graduates' educational and working life trajectories (see Holmes, 2013). The positional approach views graduate employability as a structural issue that reflects social positioning and status related to the intersectionality of such social distinctions as gender, age and social class, and their interaction with labour market opportunities (e.g. Brown et al., 2003; Burke et al., 2017; Siivonen & Isopahkala-Bouret, 2016; Vuorinen-Lampila, 2016). Opportunities for graduates competing in the labour market do not depend only on their own skills, experience and abilities, but also on how other graduates act and the different forms of capital they

have acquired and can mobilise (Isopahkala-Bouret & Tholen, in this book; Siivonen & Isopahkala-Bouret, 2016; Tholen, 2015). Moreover, both the supply and the demand of graduates in the labour market determine the relative chances of acquiring and maintaining different kinds of employment (Brown et al., 2003; Brown et al., 2011; Siivonen & Isopahkala-Bouret, 2016; Tholen, 2015; Tomlinson, 2010, 2017).

The processual approach, on the other hand, emphasises the construction and negotiation of employability across time and in different contexts (Holmes, 2013). Considering temporality, there is no single end point in employability, such as having a set of skills, that could be measured as an HE outcome (Siivonen et al., in this book). Instead, employability is an ongoing process of social self-construction (Hall, 2020) in which the graduates negotiate their identity and value in different educational and labour market contexts. Higher education is only one stage, albeit an important one, within the educational and working life trajectories of students and graduates. Employability as a process involves the dynamic connection between the individuals and the social space and time also in terms of careers and organisational contexts, and their corresponding practices, norms and values (Komulainen & Korhonen, in this book; Korhonen et al., 2023). Thus, individual trajectories and graduate identities are likely to be diverse and multifaceted, but so far only a few studies have examined the identities and trajectories of graduates from a processual perspective, which is undertaken in this book in part III.

This book was edited as part of the consortium project ‘Higher Education Graduates’ Employability and Social Positioning in the Labour Market’ (HighEmploy, 2018–2022), funded by the Academy of Finland. The main objectives of the project were (1) to provide an in-depth investigation of HE graduates’ social positioning in the labour market; (2) to formulate a contextualised, cross-sectional and longitudinal account of how the positionality of higher education and employability delineates employment prospects as well as HE graduates’ labour market trajectories and (3) to provide an elaborated analysis of how gender, social class and age contribute to and intersect with the social positioning of HE graduates in relation to employability, and the ways in which HE graduates perceive and manage their employability. Around a third of the chapters in this book were written as part of the HighEmploy research project.

The book is divided into three parts that examine graduate employability from both conceptual and empirical perspectives. The first part of the book presents theoretical approaches that address employability discourse

from critical perspectives, recognising the wider social and economic structures and power relations of the employability discourse. The second part focuses on graduate employability in different national contexts as well as inequalities within these contexts. Finally, the third part addresses employability as a contextual process of identity construction and negotiation, and introduces novel methodological approaches to investigate employability as a process.

## PART I: CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON THE THEORY OF EMPLOYABILITY

The first section of the book presents theoretical approaches that address employability from a critical perspective. It is claimed that the research field of ‘graduate employability’ has thus far not been established on strong theoretical grounds. The majority of studies have been policy-oriented and have tended to provide an individualistic and descriptive account of employability and its related outcomes. The authors in this section take multiple avenues to question the individualistic assumptions and the neoliberal rationales underlining the mainstream graduate employability discourse and policy. They scrutinise the term ‘employability’ and locate its origin and further developments in the literature. Furthermore, they show the changing relationship between HE, society and the labour market. Finally, some authors put their critical theories into practice and outline new policy and research agendas for graduate employability (Holmes; Isopahkala-Bouret & Tholen; Kahn & Lundgren-Resenterra, in this book).

To advance scholarly discussions on graduate employability, sociological conflict theorists have addressed the wider social and economic structures, such as the dynamics of labour market supply and demand, HE systems and social inequalities. This understands graduates to be fundamentally involved in positional job competition and conflict, on macro, meso and micro levels (Brown et al., 2003, 2004; Isopahkala-Bouret & Tholen, in this book). Professional status groups exercise power through ‘social closure’, that is, using degrees for exclusionary purposes in the job competition (Collins, 1979; Dore, 1976; Weber, 1978), and individual degree holders are positioned in relative terms based on what they can offer to the labour market ahead of similarly qualified individuals.

The sociological theorisations regarding graduate employability also address the agency/structure dilemma. Following the theory of Pierre Bourdieu (1984), a growing number of scholars have pointed out graduates' unequal social positioning in the labour market due to the accumulation of economic, cultural and social capital, that is, the resources that shape and mobilise graduates' job searches, early transitions and subsequent career outcomes. Prior research recognises that the impact of social origins can be traced back to classed socialisation, expectations and preparedness (Bathmaker et al., 2013; Bonnard, 2020; Burke et al., 2020).

Alternatively, in governmentality research (Foucault, 1991; Miller & Rose, 2008; Rose, 1992), governance refers to an exercise of political power that subtly aims to guide and shape the subjects' self-understanding and behaviour and conduct towards broader political objectives that are considered important in society and in specific contexts. Accordingly, governmentality theorists have argued that the employability discourse entangles with neoliberal governance practices and constitutes idealised graduate subjectivities within wider socio-economic or institutional landscapes (Fejes, 2010; Handley, 2018; Handley & Millar, in this book; Hartmann & Komljenovic, 2021; Laalo et al., 2019; Laalo et al., in this book). This challenges the understanding of employability as a value-neutral and self-evidently positive response to labour market requirements (e.g. Korhonen et al., 2023).

Governmentality studies show how graduates are turned into objectives of knowledge, who learn to constitute themselves as 'employable' subjects in particular ways (Hall, 2020; Hartmann & Komljenovic, 2021). The ideal subject is an enterprising self who takes responsibility for capitalising on their own potential, capacities and desires through market-oriented self-optimisation (Rose, 1992; Vallas & Christin, 2018). Moreover, ideal graduate subjects make appropriate choices to protect against various risks, such as unemployment (Laalo et al., in this book). A growing number of scholars have focused on the micro-level of governance, that is, the perspectives of graduates as governed subjects (Breathnach, 2014; Komulainen & Korhonen, 2021; in this book; Laalo & Heinonen, 2016; Oinonen, 2018; Varman et al., 2011).

The critical theories commonly investigate social problems in an in-depth way and reveal unintentional consequences of the prevailing policy. For example, the theoretical concepts of Bourdieu have been used to demonstrate the social reproduction of elites, partly through the attainment of HE within specific institutional contexts. Bourdieu has also offered a

theory of social transformation, which offers some insights on how current institutional practices can be transformed to minimise inequalities, although this part of his work is the least known (Fowler, 2020). The governmentality theory has been instrumental in showing how powerful discourses are both oppressive and productive in making the subjects who they are (Foucault, 1991). Along these lines, the governmentality approach points out that the possibility of resisting unfavourable courses of policy and action remains within the discursive power.

As another example, in Archer's (2000) realist social theory, the interplay between agency and social structures entails potential for social transformation. Social structures condition agency, but they also provide conditions for human agency to act upon structures and to change them. Graduates have agency in terms of 'reflexive space', that is, the capacity to make sense and mediate the influence of social structures on their agency in employment: a process of morphogenesis (Archer, 2003). Critical reflexivity can contribute to building up collective identities and emancipatory agendas that tackle major societal problems such as social injustice and sustainability (Kahn & Lundgren-Resentera, in this book).

The first section of this book begins with a chapter written by Leonard Holmes. In his text, Holmes provides a policy critique and a conceptual analysis of the 'origin' of the dominant graduate employability approach (or the 'skills and attributes perspective' as he calls it here). The chapter starts with the problems of terminology and methodology. There are many synonymous terms used in this field and, more often than not, the terms are not constant or theoretically sound. What then is the object of study, if the conceptual frame is not clear? The chapter develops its argument upon C. B. Macpherson's political philosophy of 'possessive individualism' from the 1960s, and the contemporary critique of global capitalism and psychological ideals that support self-contained individualism. The chapter concludes with the thought that we need to re-conceptualise graduate employability and skills as social, contextual and interactional endeavours; they cannot simply reside in the individual.

The chapter written by Ulpukka Isopahkala-Bouret and Gerbrand Tholen is a conceptual analysis of the relative dimension of graduate employability. By applying the insights of a critical sociological tradition, graduate employability is understood as entailing positional competition and conflict between different social groups and individuals who strategise to create advantage over others in the labour market. After reviewing the existing theories, the chapter presents a conceptual mapping that

synthesises the key elements of relative employability. The mapping draws attention to three types of positioning that set up graduates' relative chances in employment: labour market positioning, educational positioning and graduates' social positioning. Furthermore, the chapter assesses the current trends in relative employability and offers a new agenda for policy and research on graduate employability.

In their chapter, Hanna Laalo, Heikki Kinnari, Heikki Silvennoinen and Nina Haltia study the discourse on employability produced by the European Union (EU). The authors note that the power exercised by the EU is soft power, which is grounded in forms of persuasion and normative pressures. Thus, they take a governmentality perspective to employability and pursue a critical discourse analysis on EU policy documents. They study these documents as governing artefacts that set the guidelines for European nations and HEIs, but also for individuals. In EU language, employability is strongly connected to the idea of entrepreneurship. The authors identify three problems for which entrepreneurship education is constructed as a solution: the lack of entrepreneurial skills among graduates, obsolete HE that is not able to meet the needs of the knowledge economy, and the risk society together with risky labour markets that the graduates need to manage. Although employability is seemingly 'taken care' of by policy, the authors argue that uncertain labour markets are constructed as a deterrent, and a structural fact to which the individuals need to adapt. Individuals are being made responsible for developing their own skills and the right kind of entrepreneurial mindset.

The chapter written by Karen Handley and Jill Millar re-examines employability and neoliberal practices that shape the subjectivities of university students. The particular focus is on the thus-far underexplored dimension of employability—namely the affective life of neoliberal employability discourse. The chapter provides a theoretical discussion about the affective governance of neoliberal subjects and then applies an affective lens to explore final-year students' affective responses to recruitment practices. The analysis reveals some interesting paradoxes and tensions: while many job-seeking graduates internalise the neoliberal language and 'psychological register' of enterprise, enthusiasm and happiness, at the same time some express deep anxiety about needing to do more, not being 'good enough' and wanting more advice, guidance and coaching. The authors conclude that in the context of graduate recruitment, the affective life of neoliberalism is opening up a space for new online 'advice' applications, whose seductive promise is to help job candidates become the

successes they want to be. Such advice effectively helps graduates to manage the recruitment process by displaying the qualities that they believe employers expect of them.

The chapter written by Peter Kahn and Mariangela Lundgren-Resenterra is an original conceptual analysis based on empirical and theoretical studies on graduate employability. The chapter rethinks graduate employability in relation to key social concerns (e.g. decent work, sustainability, equity) and develops critical realist theorising drawing on Margaret Archer's work. In this chapter, employability is re-conceptualised as a capacity for collective agency, and collective (work) identity is emphasised against the prevailing individualistic approach. If graduate employability was understood as the capacity to exercise agency in ways that contribute to collective agendas at work, graduates could potentially address global and societal challenges. As a practical implication for universities, the authors suggest bringing in collective agency and reflexivity into study programmes. This would enhance learning that promotes shared interests and concerns over narrow economic agendas.

## PART II: GRADUATE EMPLOYABILITY AND SOCIAL INEQUALITIES IN DIFFERENT NATIONAL CONTEXTS

Chapters in this part analyse employability in different national contexts and focus on social practices at societal and institutional levels. Moreover, it focuses on how employability relates to social differences and inequalities within these different national contexts. Research on social differences relating to employability have been scarce, and we need a better understanding of how class, gender, age and ethnicity, among other differences, intertwine with graduate employability (see, e.g., Bathmaker et al., 2013; Siivonen & Isopahkala-Bouret, 2016; Stevenson & Clegg, 2012; Vesterberg, 2016).

Higher education institutions (HEIs) and graduates are situated in regional, national and transnational contexts. As Laalo et al. (in this book) in part I show, transnational actors like the EU set the framework and are interconnected to national policies. They construct the ideals that steer the actions of policymakers. Policies, however, translate to the national level and manifest differently in various contexts (Lange & Alexiadou, 2010). The country contexts that are looked at in this part include Portugal (Suleman, da Conceição Figueiredo & Henriques Guimarães),

the United Kingdom (Merrill & Revers), France (Bonnard) and the United States (Hora). In addition, one chapter takes a look at the transnational context and graduate mobility between China and Finland (Cai).

Social justice in HE is often understood as equal access (McCowan, 2016), but it is also vital to look at the processes and practices within HEIs as well as differences in outcomes and the longer-term effects of HE (Waller et al., 2018). National HE landscapes have diverse forms of institutions that vary in terms of academic orientation, selectivity and prestige. The steeper the stratification in the system, the greater the differences in occupational outcomes tend to be (Boliver, 2017; Marginson, 2016; Triventi, 2013). HEIs become sites of reproduction of class differences, and those coming from more privileged backgrounds gain more advantages from their degrees (Bathmaker et al., 2013). They know how to navigate within the systems and are able to make the right kinds of choices. Even the same kind of education functions differently between students from different social classes (Reay et al., 2010). Parents who have the forms of beneficial capital are able to provide their offspring with appropriate knowledge (Burke et al., 2020; Lehmann, 2019), economic resources (Hurst, 2018) and social contacts (Abrahams, 2017) to help them mobilise the right kinds of resources that are valuable in the labour market. Conversely, graduates with less capital face more difficulties in securing high-status and high-paying jobs.

For example, Finland is a Nordic welfare state with a high rate of participation in HE but a relatively low level of stratification within the system (Välilä & Muhonen, 2018). According to prior research, family background and forms of inherited capital do have an effect on graduates' labour market entry in Finland, but this effect is only moderate (Haltia et al., *under review*; Isopahkala-Bouret & Nori, 2021). HEIs play a role in equalising and/or enforcing positional differences in graduate employability. Previous studies have also shown that activities related to enhancing employability, like internships and extracurricular activities, do not function equally, but benefit those who have more inherited capital (Bathmaker et al., 2013; Isopahkala-Bouret et al., 2022; Wright & Mulvey, 2021). Chapters in this part examine the positioning of different social groups in the labour market. The shared argument is that the emphasis on employability tends to lead to growing inequalities.

The chapters in this part can be reflected against the concept of relative employability, which Isopahkala-Bouret and Tholen (in this book) apply and develop further in their chapter in part I. They identify three types of

aspects or sources of positioning: positionings that stem from (1) the labour market, (2) the education system and (3) social differences. Labour markets vary in different country contexts, depending on the supply and demand of the workforce. In the following chapters, Suleman et al. and Cai in particular study positionings from the labour market perspective.

Education systems vary in terms of how large, diversified and stratified they are. HEIs also respond to the ideals of employability differently, and Bonnard's and Hora's chapters in particular raise issues from this viewpoint. Social differences are inherent in all positionings, but among the chapters in this part, Merrill and Revers' chapter particularly focuses on how class, but also gender and age, affects the positioning of graduates in the labour market.

In their chapter, Fátima Suleman, Maria da Conceição Figueiredo and Rita Henriques Guimarães study the Portuguese labour market. Compared to other developed countries, the educational attainment level in Portugal has been relatively low, but, recently, efforts have been made to upgrade the educational attainment of the population. The authors contextualise their study temporally to HE reform, which implemented the Bologna Process, and the economic crisis that coincided with it. The study looks at the differences between bachelor's and master's degree holders and, by drawing on linked employer-employee data, examines which types of occupations were assigned to young bachelor's and master's graduates. The expansion of HE has led to a generation gap in educational attainment levels, but the authors note that the wage level of young people has declined. They show a growing gap between bachelor's and master's degree holders on their positions and wages, and, further, inequalities in the labour market between males and females. The argument in this chapter is that employers are increasing their hiring criteria, and due to credential inflation, there are doubts about the role of bachelor's degrees. It seems that employers value master's degrees in such a way that it has become the new basic HE diploma.

Yuzhuo Cai's chapter develops and empirically tests a conceptual model that combines Tomlinson's model of employability capital and Cai's conceptualisation of employers' beliefs about graduate employability. The context of the empirical study is in international HE, more specifically Finnish-educated Chinese graduates and how they are perceived from the perspective of China-based Finnish employers. The author starts from the premise that it is important to study how employers view the graduates' employability capital. Employers' views develop in a process where private

and public learning intertwine, as employers learn from publicly shared views and their own recruitment. Employability capital is a relative term, and views concerning it are generated through information exchange between employers and graduates in context. An important question is whether employers are able to see the relevant competencies and resources that graduates have. The chapter raises the issue especially in the context of international students. Since the study relies on empirical data from employers, the author states that it needs further empirical testing with data from graduates.

Claire Bonnard's chapter studies employability in the French context. HE enrolment in France has increased in recent decades, which has led to diversification and segmentation of the HE system. As new student groups have gained entry to HE, more emphasis has been placed on the employability of the students. The chapter builds on the argument that the emphasis on students' employability has resulted in a trend that the author refers to as vocational drift in HEIs. It manifests itself in the creation of vocational HE diplomas and the development of work-related study modules within the university curriculum. These measures rely on human capital and individualistic views of employability, ignoring the differences related to the age, gender and social background of the graduates. The chapter reviews empirical studies on the vocational drift in French HE and argues that such trend mainly benefits students from more privileged backgrounds and certain HE programmes. The author suggests that more research that takes structural inequalities into account is needed to better understand the employability of graduates.

Matthew T. Hora focuses on reframing employability as a problem of perceived opportunities that emphasises students' perspectives, and a multidimensional understanding of employability. Empirically, the chapter studies internship experiences of Latinx students in one US college. Hora introduces the Student Perceptions of Employment Opportunities (SPEO) framework, which builds on the theory of intersectionality and multidimensional models that shape educational and career opportunities. By analysing qualitative data from a larger project, it is visualised through affiliation graphing techniques how different interrelated factors (e.g. identity, structural features in the labour market) play a critical role in shaping opportunity structures related to employability. The chapter criticises the view that students simply need to acquire skills and experience to enhance their employability, and argues that a critical perspective needs to be considered to show that access to these opportunities is not equal. The

chapter also argues that the problem of accessibility to such programmes as internships is not only a structural issue related to the labour market, but also that students' social categories and identities shape their perceptions of what is possible.

Barbara Merrill and Scott Revers focus on working-class adult students in the UK context. They start from the premise that universities have become more interwoven with the economy and the labour market, and that the main concern of universities today is to enhance human capital. The argument of the chapter is that the emphasis on employability has resulted in increasing inequalities between traditional and non-traditional students. As the framework of their study, they give a profound discussion on the concept of class and its relatedness to education and the labour market. They note that class intersects with age, gender and race, which they also show in their empirical analysis. Using a biographical method, they look at how non-traditional students experience the transition to the labour market and what kinds of inequalities they face. As the authors vividly describe, for adult working-class graduates, even getting the highest-level degrees at top universities does not guarantee a graduate-level job.

### PART III: GRADUATE EMPLOYABILITY AS A CAREER AND IDENTITY PROCESS

Part III is devoted to a discussion on graduate employability as a process in which graduates formulate and negotiate their identities, and navigate their labour market trajectories and careers in relation to the cultural and social surroundings and educational and labour market contexts in which they are located (see also Holmes, 2013; Finn, 2017; Siivonen & Isopahkala-Bouret, 2016; Tomlinson, 2017). Chapters in part III present qualitative bottom-up approaches that enable us to capture the different magnitudes of biography and social, institutional and organisational contexts of employability and related identity formations and negotiations.

Graduate employability as a descriptive, static and possessive notion referring to graduate skills and attributes has tended to be the dominant discursive frame that influences policy and institutional formulations around how to effectively supply the graduate labour market with suitably skilled graduates who can make a direct economic impact (Bridgstock & Jackson, 2019; Suleman, 2018). The alternative identity-based approach,

however, shifts attention towards how graduates perceive themselves in relation to future work, construct notions of their future selves, form values and goals and identify with different areas of the labour market. In viewing employability as relational, dynamic and socially mediated process, greater consideration is given to the formation of graduate identities and how these work in shaping people's employment experiences and outcomes.

There is no unified way of approaching the concept of identity, and this is partly shaped by the disciplinary approach in which it is conceived. Whilst the conceptual terrain on identity is broad, including identities formed towards and within working life, a number of common themes underscore this area. Firstly, at a fundamental level identity has been conceived as a reflexively organising dimension of human experience that involves a high degree of self-conceptualisation about who one is and what place they occupy in the world (Gergen & Gergen, 1997; Giddens, 1991). Secondly, identities are fluid rather than static in that they move through time and space, through context and social milieus, and are also mediated by individuals' wider life circumstances, including their contingent social characteristics. Third, and related, identities have a public dimension: whatever self-concepts individuals form are played out in a social sphere and entail some kind of negotiated ordering between the holder of an identity and those who may socially validate it (Goffman, 1959).

In the field of employability and career development, more sociological and socio-psychological approaches have been adopted, largely because they situate an individual's lived experience within a wider education, social and labour market context. As Fugate et al. (2004) discuss, identities in relation to work and career can be understood as having a longitudinal dimension that forms a trajectory connecting people's past, present and future selves. It provides a 'compass' that enables people to sense-make about the future, which forms the basis for their choices and behaviours and how they present different types of employability narratives to potential audiences. This process involves a continual process of negotiation, formation and reformation, all within the socially interactive spaces of labour market environments. This is not always harmoniously developed, especially when there is dissonance between one's publicly held occupational role and private identity struggles. For instance, many professionals may achieve an established public professional role, but this may be in tension with the lived private challenges it engenders—for example

values conflict, work pressures, a lack of fulfilment that prevents the formation of more authentic self-expression (Ashforth & Schinoff, 2016).

One of the most explicit identity approaches to graduate employability has been Holmes's (2013, 2015) work on graduate identity, which conceives employability as a processual dynamic that entails a graduate moving through different modalities of identity over time and across different contexts. By highlighting the continuity and change in a graduate's lived experience, rather than the fixed attainment of an employment outcome at the point of labour market entry, this approach conceives employability as a process that is actively realised and enacted by the interactional spaces that graduates move through when they enter the labour market. The most significant transitional movement is between formal study and employment, whereby a graduate transitions between student and graduate identities. During formal study or work experience, students develop emergent identities, relating to either a specific role or a wider place in the labour market, which they carry forward following graduation. The strength of this identity may depend on how much they have invested in this or have been able to develop appropriate narratives that enable it to be aligned to a chosen area of employment. Crucially, these identities need to be realised and actively warranted through lived interaction between graduates and significant others in the labour market, not least the employers. This works recursively as graduates move between educational and work-related episodes such as work placements or recruitment, where they present themselves and related achievements as warranting an employable identity.

A graduate's employability can therefore only be realised as the agential and purposive movement towards an agreed and accepted identity position as someone who can lay claim to being employable for a given job. This is often validated through the effective practices, presentation and performance of this identity. Conversely, a graduate's emergent identity may be spoiled if their claim to an identity is disaffirmed by others, and they may have to reformulate a new identity (for example, moving to a different occupational role). Given that many graduates are likely to shift occupational roles and positions throughout their working lives, the process of identity claim and negotiation is likely to occur at different points over their careers.

A more recent approach has been to view graduate identity as a form of resource that graduates can use to enhance their position in the labour market and develop employability-enhanced dispositions and behaviours.

One of these concerns the ways in which graduates might invest themselves in their employment futures and build up a career narrative that informs strategic choices and provides a framework for action. The construction of aligned, purposive and goal-directed identities becomes a form of ‘identity capital’ (Coté, 2016), which enables a graduate to make agential and purposive decisions whilst negotiating structural challenges within certain delimitations. Related approaches have conceptualised this kind of identity as constituting ‘future work selves’ (Strauss et al., 2012) and ‘possible selves’ (Papafilipou & Bathmaker, 2018) whereby individuals construct imaginative, ideational notions of how their future lives will play out, including professional roles, achievements and desired career outcomes. More recent research has explored the construction of professional identities (Jackson, 2016; Tomlinson & Jackson, 2021) through forms of professional acculturation that graduates engage in before and during graduation, and which enables them to align their emerging self-identity with anticipated occupational roles and experiences.

In analysing identity and career as processes, the chapters in part III seek to expand the methodological field of employability research by introducing novel, qualitative study designs and methodological perspectives on various phenomena related to employability. Much of the recent graduate employability research has adopted a quantitative perspective, which has proven to be useful in building macro pictures of phenomena linked to employability (Suleman, 2018). Qualitative research, utilising questionnaires and semi-structured interviews, has tended to focus on individuals’ attitudes and experiences and their ability to develop, adapt or repack their capabilities when entering the labour market (Finch et al., 2016).

In this book, specifically, narrative and discursive methods are developed to illustrate graduates’ construction of employable identities as they move in time, space and different contexts. Narrative and discursive approaches permit us to look beyond the dominant ‘possession’ as well as ‘positional’ approaches to employability (Holmes, 2013) and to challenge the hegemonic assumptions of graduate employability. This is possible by viewing graduate employability as an interactional and relational process through a magnifying glass, whereby graduates make sense of, negotiate and interact with the ideals around employability and the world of work (see also Komulainen & Korhonen, 2021). This interaction is itself constitutive of the types of labour market identities and dispositions they are developing. For example, positioning analysis (see Bamberg, 1997; De

Fina, 2015; Depperman, 2013) is a fruitful yet very rarely used methodological tool for examining how graduates strive to achieve, contest or reaffirm specific versions of their past, present and future selves in their discursive and narrative meaning-making (Mutanen et al., in this book; Siivonen et al., in this book; Korhonen et al., 2023).

By offering new bottom-up perspectives on graduates' identities and careers, the chapters in part III also show that graduates are called on to utilise new and intimate dimensions of their selves—personal identities, relational styles and affective experiences such as happiness and enthusiasm—in their work and career (Handley & Millar, in this book; Korhonen et al., 2023). In today's working life, the person's self is at the core of employability and the related demands and expectations. For example, health and well-being are increasingly perceived as employability and career potential to be invested in (Komulainen & Korhonen, in this book), and self-branding has become an essential skill and practice in the labour market and job search games for graduates (Mutanen et al., in this book). In this respect, the cultivation of an employable identity goes beyond skills and qualifications to encompass a wide range of mentalities, activities and practices not usually regarded as productive (Farrugia, 2019).

Although employability research is centrally concerned with graduates' education-work transitions and trajectories, that is, processes, many of the studies are retrospective in nature, providing a snapshot of a phenomenon at the time of the research. Research designs that are attentive to temporal and durational processes need to be further developed, especially from a qualitative point of view. In this book we seek to contribute to qualitative longitudinal research (QLR) methods, more specifically narrative ones, for analysing graduate employability as a temporally evolving identity process (Siivonen et al., in this book). QLR tends to explore change and temporality in various aspects of people's lives, focusing on what kinds of meanings and interpretations are given to changes by individuals themselves (Neale, 2020; Thomson & McLeod, 2015). QLR has caught the imagination of researchers internationally, but it has not been developed in the field of employability research. The narrative approach for QLR represented in this book allows nuanced analyses of the continuities and changes of graduates' meaning-making of employability in specific contexts.

In their chapter, Katri Komulainen and Maija Korhonen illustrate new forms and practices of employability and labour management among graduates. The chapter criticises employability research for detaching graduates from their careers and highlights the dynamic connection

between the individuals and the social space and time. Theoretically drawing on governmentality studies, career research and critical health studies, the chapter analyses how Finnish business graduates construct health as employability potential when they envisage and evaluate working life through ‘career imagination’. Thematic analysis of interviews shows that graduates imagine health as employability potential, firstly, in terms of day-to-day temporal rhythms of organisations and in the context of an intensive working life. Having constant physical and emotional energy and the ability to recognise health risks and self-manage these risks were essential virtues of an employee. Secondly, graduates displayed health in the context of flexible career in which health—as energy, vitality, happiness—was a driving force that guaranteed their top career performance. However, graduates saw their current situation just as one stage on the way to a better future career, which was associated with the ideals of work-life balance. The chapter concludes that health has become a moral duty and personal responsibility at work.

In their chapter, Inka Hirvonen, Päivi Siivonen and Katri Komulainen develop identity and process approaches to graduate employability. The study analyses how Finnish university students construct top-performing employable identities in their educational and working life trajectories. Narrative thematic analysis reveals that students perceive employability as a long-term process in which they invest before, during and after their studies. Students tend to present themselves in relation to the demands and ideals of the expertise in their own field, and seek to harness their personality to strengthen their employability by maximising efficiency at work and being passionate about what they do. As top-performing subjects, students actively create and develop their employability and skills, internalise an entrepreneurial way of thinking and take responsibility for their employability. Based on their results, the authors criticise the demands placed on students who are supposed to ‘have it all’—a degree, knowledge and skills and a certain kind of personality. They ask whether emphasising employability fails to acknowledge other aspects of students’ lives, such as academic growth, and what unwanted consequences this may have in the long term.

Adopting a processual perspective on employability, Thanh Pham’s chapter explores the development of international graduates’ employability over time, as they move from their role as HE students to recent graduates. Her chapter clearly illustrates the ways in which graduates from different cultural backgrounds and traditions negotiate their employability

and early career outcomes that evolve different perspectives over time. Her chapter documents changes in international graduates' personal constructions of employability from a more skills-based, meritocratic understanding during HE, where they are in 'possession' of the human capital and skills that they can trade in for employment, towards one where they must actively and agentially negotiate what is perceived to be a challenging labour market for migrant graduates. Whilst they are aware that they are 'positioned' by others as being a different and potentially excludable social group, they also learn that their employability can be enhanced by engaging in strategies that will improve their outcomes. One of these is building up forms of capital (networks, cultural knowledge, enhanced professional esteem) that empower them towards realising their employment goals.

In their chapter, Heli Mutanen, Maija Korhonen and Päivi Siivonen explore self-branding as a new practice for enhancing one's employability at the time of labour market entry. By approaching self-branding as situated identity performances, the study analyses how Finnish business degree graduates construct their employable identities in the framework of self-branding. Detailed interaction-oriented narrative analysis shows that the identity dilemma of difference and sameness in particular actualises in graduates' identity constructions in the context of job search. Graduates aim to solve this dilemma by presenting themselves as positively unique from and superior to other jobseekers in terms of their personal qualities. Moreover, they perform as 'same enough' compared to more experienced jobseekers and employees—as applicants who can bring equal value to the organisation through youthfulness and passion. In contrast, an academic degree and the skills and competencies associated with a business degree are not considered to differentiate graduates amongst equally qualified job candidates. Although the graduates rely on the topical language of self-branding when presenting themselves as credible labour market actors, they also strive to solve the moral dilemmas associated with self-branding—authenticity and fabrication—in the context of Finnish working life.

Päivi Siivonen, Maija Korhonen, Katri Komulainen, Heli Mutanen and Nina Haltia's methodological chapter uses a narrative positioning approach to document the change and continuity in graduate identity over time. Their research applies a 'small story' narrative research approach that enables researchers to chart key episodes in follow-up interview data, and presents how the past is made sense of in order to reconstruct a notion of a potential future position. For the purposes of employability research, this approach is particularly fruitful given that it gives researchers access to the

way in which individuals actively construct meaning in situated interaction and illustrates the movement of identities over time. Further, it can chart the intersection between the story world (what is being told), the telling of the story and societal master narratives. Using the case material of a recent graduate, the authors chart the trajectory of one mature graduate's early employment history and the change in perspective through shifting economic and social contexts, and how earlier constructions of their employability become ruptured through periods of unemployment that create a need to be accounted for.

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PART I

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Critical Perspectives on the Theory of  
Employability



## CHAPTER 2

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# Graduate Employability and Its Basis in Possessive Individualism

*Leonard Holmes*

### INTRODUCTION

It is clear that, in most of the discussions about graduate employability, this issue is understood in terms of notions of skills and attributes that, it is suggested or assumed, students must acquire or develop during their studies, and must possess in order to enhance their job and career prospects after graduating. This way of understanding what is meant by graduate employability pervades public policy documents, the literature about the policies and practices that higher education institutions (HEIs) are exhorted to adopt and in which many claim to engage, and probably most of the literature presented as research-based. Yet, this way of understanding, paradigm (Kuhn, 1970) or frame of reference (Johnston, 2003) is not the only option available (Holmes, 2013). Moreover, it has itself been shown to be problematic in terms of its theoretical robustness, empirical validity and pragmatic applicability (see e.g. Bridges, 1992; Hinchcliffe, 2002; Holmes, 1995, 2002; Tomlinson, 2017). These issues raise serious

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questions about its prevalence, pervasiveness and persistence, which this chapter will seek to examine in terms of its origins in possessive individualist assumptions about the nature of human persons and of society (Macpherson, 1962). Coupled with conceptual confusion that tends to arise from the language of skills and attributes, possessive individualist assumptions have created an almost unsurmountable barrier to the sound investigation of issues of graduate employability.

### FRAMES OF REFERENCE FOR GRADUATE EMPLOYABILITY RESEARCH

Writing about the ‘shape’ of research on graduate employment two decades ago, Johnston (2003) asserted that in every discipline and every field, research takes a particular shape. This arises from a variety of influences, including disciplinary interests, the personal interests of leading figures in the field, macro societal developments, intellectual developments and research funding arrangements. She continues:

Often the shape is relatively unquestioned, allowing particular modes of analysis and frames of reference to prevail, despite the existence of other options which may have much to contribute to an overall understanding of relevant issues. The field of higher education and graduate employment is no exception. (Johnston, 2003, p. 413)

Although her article is primarily about research on graduate employment, rather than employability, the general point applies equally to the field of graduate employability research, and perhaps more so to the institutional, national and transnational policies and interventions that are purportedly based on and supported by such research.

The particular ‘frame of reference’ that prevails in the graduate employability field is, of course, expressed in terms of skills, competencies, capabilities, attributes and so forth. Indeed, a ‘jargon generator’ may be created in which words such as ‘generic’, ‘personal’, ‘transferable’, ‘core’ and ‘key’ may be combined with words such as ‘skills’, ‘abilities’, ‘competencies’ and ‘attributes’, and with ‘graduate’, ‘employability’, and so on added into the mix, to form various phrases that have been used and are currently in vogue. At present, the terms ‘skills’ and ‘attributes’ appear to dominate and so will be used in this chapter.

This frame of reference may be characterised as a ‘possessive’ approach based on the assumption that individual persons may ‘acquire’ and ‘have’ (‘possess’) the purported skills and attributes (Holmes, 2013); this assumption then leads to particular research questions. Such questions include:

- What skills and attributes do employers of graduates require they have and demonstrate?
- What skills and attributes must students acquire and possess in order to enhance their prospects of gaining suitable/desirable employment after graduating?
- What skills and attributes do graduates actually have and use in their employment?

Although numerically outweighed by the volume of publications that treat the notion of graduate skills and attributes as unproblematic, there have been alternative and critical voices. The possessive frame of reference, or perspective, is indeed, in Johnston’s words, ‘relatively unquestioned despite the existence of other options’. These other options include what may be termed a ‘positional’ perspective and a ‘processual’ perspective (Holmes, 2013). Yet, policies and practices at macro-, meso- and micro-levels (Holmes, 2013; Holmes & Coughlan, 2008; Tomlinson, 2017) are almost always unquestioningly based on the assumptions of the dominant possessive perspective.

Other options are generally ignored in the publications based on this possessive frame of reference, so their potential contribution to the understanding of the issues at stake is not explored. In particular, we should note, such publications do not attempt to critique alternative perspectives in order to provide rational argument in support of the possessive frame of reference. Moreover, the claims of the possessive frame of reference, with its focus on notions of skills and attributes, have certainly been subjected to critical scrutiny by many scholars in the field, as we shall discuss below. Yet, publications based within it fail to respond to such criticisms; typically, they fail even to acknowledge them. That this is the case in the context of higher education itself requires examination and explanation, given that its purported values include critical enquiry and consideration of opposing claims to understanding and explanation in particular arenas of study.

As indicated above, this chapter will seek to explain the origin of the skills and attributes approach in the field of graduate employability, and its

persistence despite its problems, in terms of the concept of possessive individualism. This term was originally coined by political philosopher C. B. Macpherson (1962, 1973) to express the assumptions at the heart of liberal-democratic political theory as it developed in seventeenth-century England, then continuing as merchant capitalism changed into industrial capitalism and society changed from the latter stages of feudalism into a market society. Later writers have taken up this notion in relation to the development of managerial capitalism and neoliberalism (Bromley, 2019), and in relation to psychology (Sampson, 1988, 1993; Shotter, 1993) and the dominant assumption about the nature of human persons. These dominant possessive individualist assumptions, about the nature of persons and the nature of society, are so embedded in contemporary modes of thought that they appear to be ‘natural’ and are not questioned.

The skills and attributes perspective will be examined under these notions to show that they accord with the possessive individualist assumptions. We shall first discuss problems with the perspective to show that it lacks rational support: conceptually, theoretically, empirically and pragmatically (i.e. its potential contribution to an agenda for action). Its continued dominance will then be considered in terms of the role of governmental policy and funding regimes for research and for educational interventions, pedagogic and others. These themselves, it will be argued, are based within and informed by the neoliberal agenda that has driven Western political economy over the past four decades. The origins, however, according to Macpherson, lie much earlier, in the development of liberal-democratic thought in the seventeenth century and the possessive nature of the individual human person conceived of in such thought. We shall argue that in this notion of possessive-individualism, we may find an explanation for the continued and persisting dominance of the skills and attributes perspective on graduate employability.

### PROBLEMS WITH THE SKILLS AND ATTRIBUTES PERSPECTIVE

The problems with the skills and attributes approach are manifold and have been addressed many times (Barnett, 1994; Bridges, 1992; Green, 1994; Griffin, 1994; Gubbay, 1994; Holmes, 2000, 2001; Mason et al., 2006; Matherly & Tillman, 2015). Even the most cursory examination of the employability documentation reveals a wide range of different terms used and the nomenclature adopted. Not only are different terms used (skills, competencies, attributes, etc.), as indicated above, but even if these

were taken as synonyms, the items that are included vary. Without a clear, consistent set of terms for the phenomena under investigation (if, indeed, they exist at all), how is it possible to even begin to undertake sound research on or about them? Consistency of terms is a prerequisite for the development and deployment of the key concepts that may be used to understand and explain empirical observations, and that may be related to each other in some form of theoretical framework. The field appears to be in a similar state to that of the protoscience of chemistry before Lavoisier's work seeking to develop a systematic approach to the naming of substances (1790/2009).

Of course, empirical research, of a kind, is undertaken, most usually in the form of surveys. These typically present a list of the purported skills and attributes to members of a target audience ('stakeholders', such as students, graduates, employers, university staff), who are then asked to rate them using a Likert or semantic differential scale, for example, on their importance, whether gained during course undertaken, whether used in employment and so forth. However, the provenance of such lists is highly problematic. Some surveys adopt and/or adapt previous lists, which themselves have dubious provenance. Others seem to have been created through some form of group 'brainstorming' activity, almost a 'garbage can' framework of terms supposedly expressing what the group members wish to be included. There is no standardised, validated source nor standardised and validated methodology for deriving the survey items. Of course, proponents of skills and attributes may reply that, although using different words, there are certain phrases that have the same or 'similar-enough' meaning. This is never demonstrated and in fact has been shown to be problematic (see e.g. Hirsh & Bevan, 1988; Holmes, 2013; Otter, 1997).

Nor do the research projects succeed in locating which skills or attributes are important; they merely elicit the opinions of the members of the target audience. Although it may be useful and important to seek such opinions, there is little reason to believe that they have a better insight to the nature of the phenomena under investigation. They may use the same or similar words and phrases, as part of their mundane, everyday untechnical language (Ryle, 1954), but these should not be confused with the technical concepts used in a field of rational enquiry such as the serious investigation of the relationship between higher education and postgraduation employment.

Perhaps most damaging to the skills and attributes perspective as an agenda for action, that is, HEIs making major changes to their pedagogic practices, is that it cannot explain empirical findings on graduate labour market outcomes, which continue to be differentiated particularly by class, ethnicity and gender (Connor et al., 2005; Furlong & Cartmel, 2005; Mason et al., 2006; Moreau & Leathwood, 2006; Performance Innovation Unit, 2006; Pollard et al., 2004; Purcell & Elias, 2004; Purcell et al., 1999; Smetherham, 2006). The skills and attributes perspective may be seen as serving to obscure and discount the continued importance of these factors.

Such problems have not prevented the development of a raft of curricular and extracurricular interventions intended to enhance the likelihood of students gaining what is seen as desirable employment after graduation. These are usually expressed in terms of their anticipated success in ‘developing’ students’ skills and attributes. These range from module-/course-level initiatives to programme-wide or even HEI-wide interventions. Often, these form the basis of articles published in peer-reviewed journals, but generally only those that have low standing in the various journal-ranking systems. Usually based on a single case study, relating to a very small and particular set of students, within a limited time period, each article is disconnected from the wider context, making any cross-comparison virtually impossible. Any purported success of such initiatives lacks any theoretical explanation that affords general application to other contexts. Paradoxically, there may be many initiatives that might afford such general application if they were framed differently, in a more sophisticated theoretic approach.

Here, we may note that in her review of the ‘shape’ of research on graduate employment, Johnston refers to the ‘skills agenda’ only at the very end. In fact, the heading of a single, short paragraph is ‘the entire skills agenda’, scathingly calling it “a prime example of an area lacking in serious empirical research, on which vast swathes of institutional and national policies are based” (Johnston, 2003, p. 424). It is, she states, ‘undertheorised’ and should be investigated at a much more sophisticated level than it has been. Alas, there is little evidence that there has been any serious attempt to do that. None of this is new, as the citations above indicated. The question then arises as to why this might be so.

## POLICY ORIGINS OF THE SKILLS AND ATTRIBUTES PERSPECTIVE

Johnston gives a number of factors that give the ‘shape’ of research within any field, which we may consider here in relation to the dominance of the possessive perspective or frame of reference in the particular field of graduate employability. Research funding relating to graduate employability has overwhelmingly been linked to policy-led interventions, especially pedagogic initiatives. Access to such funding is dependent upon framing applications in terms set by the funder, and the outcomes of the ‘research’ subject to evaluation in relation to the stated aims in the approved applications. Indeed, we might view much of the findings of such ‘research’ as examples of what Boden and Epstein (2006) term ‘policy-based evidence making’. ‘Successful’ projects, as perceived by the funding bodies, will tend to place the principal investigators and co-investigators in a better place for further funding than those who have had limited engagement with the research area, within the frames of reference accepted by the funders.

Of course, those who gain significant funding will have the resources to undertake relatively larger projects, and so be able to publish more, thus becoming the ‘leading figures in the field’, whose personal interests will further influence the ‘shape’ of research (Johnston, 2003). Other researchers then tend to cite and to work within the dominant frame of reference, thus reinforcing its position (Latour, 1987). This may be seen in the case of the graduate employability field, where the skills and attributes approach is dominant. Although Johnston doesn’t use the term ‘paradigm’ (Kuhn, 1970), work within the skills and attributes perspective does appear to have the features of ‘normal science’, where investigators work within a settled, taken-for-granted frame of reference, accumulating findings but not challenging underlying assumptions. Thus, in addition to the kind of publications discussed above, based mostly on single case studies of curricular initiatives, we find many publications based on empirical investigations into the skills and attributes (purportedly) needed, possessed and/or used by graduates from particular universities (or courses within them), in various geographical locations (regions, countries), industries and so on. These generally provide no rationale for the selection of the respondents for their investigation, thus adding little or no significant empirical findings. In Lakatos’ terms, they may be regarded as examples of work within a ‘degenerative research programme’ (Lakatos, 1970).

The rise and growth of the field of graduate employability, as an arena of research, policy and practice, has been rehearsed in many publications (eg Barnett, 1994; Drew, 1998; Rothwell & Rothwell, 2017; Symes & McIntyre, 2000; Tomlinson, 2017). The term ‘graduate employability’ only became the main term, particularly in the context of the UK and Australia (in which much of the early literature was based), from the late 1990s, displacing somewhat the terms used earlier, such as ‘key skills’, ‘transferable skills’ and so on.

We should, however, note that the growing emphasis on employability was not restricted to graduates, having been a key issue in relation to the perceived need to reform schooling to address the needs of the economy and society. These were expressed in terms of notions of competence or competency (Barnett, 1994; Bates, 1995; Grant et al., 1979) and also in respect to what may be termed the ‘learning turn’ (Holmes, 2004), or the ‘learnification’ of education (Biesta, 2005), as reflected in the ideas of ‘lifelong learners’, ‘lifelong learning’ and the ‘learning society’ (Coffield, 2000; Field, 2000).

National governments have clearly played a significant role in the rise of this discourse of ‘learning-and-competence’. This may be seen in the case of the UK from the early 1980s, with the reform of vocational qualifications and the ‘vocationalising’ of schooling (Burke, 1989, 1995; Jessup, 1991), through various government policy documents (Department for Education and Employment, 1988, 1999), and so too in Australia (Australian Education Council. Mayer Committee, 1992; Curtis & McKenzie, 2001; West & Commonwealth of Australia: Department of Employment Education Training and Youth Affairs, 1998).

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) has also particularly been influential (Gonczi, 2006; Mausethagen, 2013). The DeSeCo (Defining and selecting competencies) project was established by the OECD in 1997, ostensibly to construct an “overarching conceptual frame of reference for the development of key competences and their assessment in an international setting” (Rychen, 2004, p. 317). In effect, this was intended to provide a system of inter-country comparison similar to PISA (*Programme for International Student Assessment*) but extending into a ‘lifelong learning’ perspective, the *Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC)*.

The rationale put forward for such developments is usually twofold: the needs of the economy and society, and the benefits to individuals. On the one hand, each country must invest in education to ensure it has a

workforce that can compete in an increasingly globalised competitive economy, take advantage of new technologies, address changing environmental challenges and so on. On the other, individuals will benefit by ‘investing’ in themselves, as workers and as citizens, by engaging in life-long learning to develop their skills and attributes (see e.g. Tomlinson & Holmes, 2017). In both cases, there will be some investment in anticipation of gaining reward. By developing a system of calculability, that is, based on assessable outcomes (the skills and attributes developed and acquired), such investment may be more efficiently directed. This political-economic vision is, of course, based on certain assumptions about the nature of individual persons and of society, particularly in terms of notions of ‘human capital’ and within neoclassical economic theory that has dominated since the last two decades of the last century. Its origins, however, go back further, in the rise of post-Renaissance political thought accompanying the growth of early capitalism. This may be seen by considering the concept of possessive individualism, developed by C. B. Macpherson.

### THE POLITICAL THEORY OF POSSESSIVE INDIVIDUALISM

Macpherson was a political-economy theorist who sought to rework liberal-democratic theory in the light of Marx’s critique. His major opus was his book, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: Hobbes to Locke* (1962), in which he argued that the problems of modern liberal-democratic theory lay in a ‘central difficulty’ contained within the originating seventeenth-century individualism. That difficulty was its possessive quality. This powerfully shaped the key concepts of freedom, rights, obligation and justice central to the development of that theory:

Its possessive quality is found in its conception of the individual as essentially the owner of his own person or capacities, owing nothing to society for them. (Macpherson, 1962, p. 3)

Macpherson develops his thesis through examining how political theory developed during the seventeenth century, through Levellers and Harrington to Locke. He examines how these approached the issue of obligation in society, the conditions under which market relations can be sustained. The struggles for most of the century between the rights of parliament versus those of the self-sustaining monarchy concluded in the supremacy of parliament, the members of which were subject to periodic

election. English political theory provided a rationale for a ‘possessive-market’ society in which all could exercise their individual freedom under the guarantee of property rights by government. Those property rights included the individual’s own person and capacities. The marketplace, in which everything is tradeable, including a person’s labour, was the mechanism by which freedom could be exercised without infringing on, or being infringed on by, others. In this way, any differences in wealth and power in society arose solely from individuals freely entering into contracts, one party paying wages for another’s labour, the other accepting wages in exchange for their labour.

In such a possessive market society, those who have no land or capital of their own are compelled, in order to survive, to sell their labour power to those who do, accepting a wage that permits part of the product of their labour to those who own land and capital. The contractual relationship was not truly free as the options open to the wage-labourer, lacking land or other resources to sustain life, were only to work for this or another employer—or starve. The ideas underpinning the possessive market society thus gave rise to industrial capitalism, as those who had wealth were able to use the labour of others to increase that wealth. Benthamite utilitarianism provided justification, based on the notions that each individual person seeks to maximise the satisfactions (‘utilities’) they gained and consumed from free market exchange with others.

To treat the maximization of utilities as the ultimate justification of society, is to view man [sic] as essentially a consumer of utilities. (Macpherson, 1973, p. 4)

However, such a view of human beings differs from previous humanistic ideas of a person being a “doer, a creator, an enjoyer of [their] attributes”. Macpherson states that such attributes may be taken to include

the capacity for rational understanding, for moral judgement and action, for aesthetic creation or contemplation, for the emotional activities of friendship and love, and, sometimes, for religious experience. (ibid.)

We should note that Macpherson’s use of the term ‘attributes’ is very different from that used within the employability field. These ideas of what it means to be a human being, their ‘essence’, came back into discussions, largely as a reaction against crude Benthamism. However, the possessive

individualist assumption was too deeply rooted in market society to be driven out, and so, from Mill onwards, there began an uneasy compromise between the two views, and the subsequent liberal-democratic tradition formed, “an unsure mixture of the two maximizing claims” (op. cit., p.5).

Bromley (2019) takes up Macpherson’s analysis of the possessive individualist assumptions inbuilt to Western liberal-democratic political thought in a devastating critique of contemporary global capitalism. Emeritus professor of economics from the University of Wisconsin-Madison, Bromley has written prolifically on economics and the environment, and especially has critiqued notions of the ‘objective’ nature of efficiency analysis in economics, and of rational choice theory. In his latest book, exploring the current world disorder, he asks

How is it possible that many of the successful democratic market economies—all with very high per capita incomes—are experiencing economic malaise and political revolt? [...] if democracy and market economies are mutually supportive and conduce to human well-being, why are most countries in South Asia and Africa so poor and generally dysfunctional? (Bromley, 2019, p. 4)

He locates the cause of the malaise in the underlying modern idea of the sanctity of individual choice, drawing upon Macpherson’s notion of possessive individualism, stating that this “has stymied the full realization of the promise of the Enlightenment” (p. 6).

Specifically, with individuals now liberated to pursue their own self-interest, it seems that they have developed an overarching affinity for doing precisely that, very often showing precious little regard for the interests of others. Should we be surprised? (ibid.)

Possessive individualism, he argues, is “the reigning idea of our time [...] the accepted spirit of our age and the cultural legacy of capitalism” (p. 22).

Bromley analyses the problems, the crisis of capitalism, through its historic development from pre-capitalist household provisioning, through mercantile capitalism and then industrial capitalism, on to financial capitalism and then finally in the current century being transformed into managerial capitalism. Under the latter mode, the central imperative is to reduce costs, more specifically labour costs, in order to yield greater returns to the

owners of capital, that ownership being effected through various financial instruments to spread risk and maximise investment flexibility. Those without wealth now become “highly dispensable supplier[s] of labour power” (p. 37), with uncertain prospects for continued employment. In this, the discipline of economics has played a key justificatory role and is “misleading in its assumptions, wilful in its presentation, and contrived in its conclusions” (p. x). Bromley argues that some economists, notably Gary Becker and Douglass North, have also sought to bring other social sciences under the choice-theoretic models of economics.

### SELF-CONTAINED INDIVIDUALISM

One social science field in which possessive individualist assumptions may be seen to have taken root, in some quarters, is that of psychology (Dachler & Hosking, 1995; Sampson, 1988, 1993; Shotter, 1990, 1993). These focus on the issue of how we are to understand human persons within psychological studies. Sampson (1988) expresses this as a debate between, on the one hand, ‘self-contained individualism’ and, on the other, what he terms ‘enssembled individualism’. Shortly later (1993), he identifies the former with possessive individualism, drawing upon Macpherson’s work, particularly in terms of his discussion of the seventeenth-century debates about who may vote, and so who is to count as a person.

[...] the possessive individualistic formulation defines the self-contained ideal and simultaneously establishes the negative self-other relationship that is at the root of the self-celebratory world-view. (op. cit., p33)

Dachler and Hosking (1995) use the term ‘entitative perspective’ in a similar way, contrasting this with the ‘relational perspective’.

Sampson (1993) continues that the self-contained ideal is based on the notion that the individual is a ‘kind of container’. This, he goes on to demonstrate, is a particularly Western notion and is not universal. For now, we can consider it in relation to the skills and attributes perspective on graduate employability.

As already noted, the language of skills and attributes is replete with possessive terms: ‘acquire’, ‘have’, ‘possess’, ‘demonstrate’, ‘use’. The term ‘develop’ is also used, often perhaps to try to avoid possessive language. However, this merely serves to obscure as clearly what is being developed is not separate from the individual, but ‘her’/ ‘his’/ ‘their’

skills and attributes. No explanation is given as to where a particular skill may exist, but clearly the assumption is that ‘it’ resides in the person. In this sense, the language perhaps draws upon the recognition that we use bodily parts (e.g. hand, arms, eyes, ears) in our activities, so skills may be analogous to these. We also have brains (in our heads), which are in some way related to the notion that we ‘have’ minds, a notion that Ryle (1949) sought to criticise as a category error. Yet, despite the critique by Ryle, and others, it is a commonplace notion in everyday language—and one that easily slips into a self-as-container, possessive individualist model. On this, it is worth recalling Wittgenstein’s warning:

We talk of processes and states and leave their nature undecided. Sometime perhaps we shall know more about them—we think. But that is just what commits us to a particular way of looking at the matter. (Wittgenstein, 1953, para. 308)

The warning is all part of his general warning us against “the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language” (op. cit., para. 109). Similarly, Andreski (1972) warns that

constant attention to the meaning of terms is indispensable in the study of human affairs, because in this field powerful social forces operate which continuously create verbal confusion. (p. 61)

The dominant ideology of possessive individualism may be seen as a part of those powerful social forces. It leads to the confused assumption that skills and attributes have some empirically real existence in persons, that those persons can acquire and possess them. That confusion is supported and sustained by a lack of conceptual clarification, a prerequisite for sound thinking that has historically been claimed as a distinctive contribution that universities make to civic affairs—see, for example, Stebbing’s recently re-published 1939 classic on ‘thinking to some purpose’ (Stebbing, 2022 [1939]).

## LANGUAGE AND THE NEED FOR CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION

Linguistic philosophers such as Wittgenstein, Ryle and Austin cautioned us to look carefully at the way that we use language. Rather than assuming that certain words and phrases used in different contexts have the same, or very similar, meanings (they are paronymous), we should recognise that we engage in different kinds of ‘language games’ (Wittgenstein, 1953). Indeed, Wittgenstein says that there are countless different kinds of use of symbols, words, sentences: giving order, describing the appearance of objects, reporting an event, forming an testing a hypothesis, making a joke, asking, thanking, cursing and so on (para. 23). Austin (1962) famously explored ‘different kinds of utterances’, or ‘speech acts’, pointing out that

many specially perplexing words embedded in apparently descriptive statements do not serve to indicate some specially odd additional feature in the reality reported, but to indicate (not to report) the circumstances in which the statement is made or reservations to which it is subject or the way it is to be taken and the like. (p. 3)

He distinguished between the locutionary act (what is actually said), the illocutionary act (the act that is performed, e.g., asking a question, giving information, announcing an intention, making a promise) and the perlocutionary act (the consequences that are brought about, intentionally or otherwise).

We may apply this to utterances, speech acts, involving the various words and phrases in the (haphazard) skills and attributes lexicon. What are we doing when we say of someone that they ‘have’ a particular skill or skills, for example, ‘problem-solving skill’, or ‘communication skills’? The language of possessive individualism tends to present this as a descriptive statement, denoting some factual or hypothesised state of affairs. Yet, when we begin to ask what illocutionary act is being performed, we would consider the circumstances in which the utterance is made. An employer engaged in the selection process for a graduate employee might say this as part of the act of making a verdict on their suitability for the job. If this takes place in a panel interview or assessment centre setting, it may also be the act of attempting to persuade other members and/or justify their own recommendation, as may be seen in the studies by Silverman and Jones (1973).

What about in the context of investigations where graduate recruiters are being interviewed in a study of ‘what employers need’? Here, they may be seen as presenting themselves as knowledgeable, experienced, rational, capable, professional recruiters, deploying the shared language of skills and attributes. In fact, in the report of the large study that included interviews with employers (Harvey et al., 1997), there is very little use of the skills and attributes terms that appear in the lists that predominate. As the authors have selected the quotations used in the report, we may assume that there were no other parts of the interview transcriptions that fitted better with those lists.

We may also consider the language of skills and attributes in relation to the reported complaints by employers of a mismatch between what they want or require and what graduates ‘have’. These are usually presented as generalised complaints. That is, they are expressions of general dissatisfaction, not as the outcomes of clear investigations, documenting exactly in what circumstances the ‘problem’ occurs and how it presents itself. If the complaint is that too many graduates that are recruited are found to be underperforming, then we might suggest that their selection processes need to be improved, or other aspects of the human resource management practices need attention, such as employee training and development, mentoring, appraisal and so on. If the complaint is that too many graduates that enter their selection processes are viewed as unsuitable for the posts on offer, we might do well to suggest that those employers should look to their recruitment processes. Higher education institutions are not, after all, surrogate recruitment agencies. At the very least, we might conclude that there needs to be a ‘conversation’ about the mutual expectations between higher education and employers. What we cannot conclude is that employers’ complaints constitute factual descriptions of a particular state of affairs in relation to some purported phenomena denoted by clearly defined terms.

These issues require not more surveys, or complicated ‘garbage can’ models derived from ‘brainstorming’ sessions, but should, rather, be examined through conceptual clarification without which sound ‘thinking to some purpose’ (Stebbing, 2022 [1939]) is impossible. This is no easy task, and requires, as Andreski (1972) reminds us, ‘constant attention’ because of the tendency for confusion arising from ‘powerful social forces’, particularly those arising in the possessive individualist assumptions that pervade neoliberalism.

## CONCLUSION

We have argued that the continued dominance of the skills and attributes perspective in the field of graduate employability, its persistence despite well-documented problems and lack of conceptual, theoretical and empirical support requires explanation. This may be done by utilising Macpherson's concept of possessive individualism, developed in the political theory that developed alongside and supporting early capitalism and the market society, continuing with the development of liberal democracies into the twentieth century. This now has severe deleterious effects on society worldwide, as shown by Bromley's analysis. Under possessive individualism, the model of the human person is of a self-as-container, the contents of which include purported skills and attributes which students are told they must acquire or develop, and possess, in order to gain desirable employment. The perspective is now so ingrained in modern society that little serious investigation is undertaken, and where it is, it gains little purchase on the discourse at macro-, meso- and micro-levels.

We should also note that this is happening at a time when the numbers of students attending higher education, and so the number of persons entering the labour market as graduates, have increased enormously—the massification of higher education. In many countries, particularly the UK, the costs of higher education have been shifted to the supposed 'customer', on the implicit (sometimes explicit) promise of significant benefit (the graduate premium). Yet, the forces of globalisation and technological changes (reducing the need for labour) are seriously affecting job and career opportunities (Brown & Hesketh, 2004; Matherly & Tillman, 2015; Moreau & Leathwood, 2006; Tomlinson & Holmes, 2017).

On this analysis, the skills and attributes perspective may be seen as a consequence of, and contributor to, the malaise documented by many critics of contemporary capitalism, particularly as explored by Bromley, drawing upon Macpherson's work. Clearly, any resolution of that malaise lies beyond the scope of this chapter and, more especially, academia itself. However, what it does indicate is that there is an urgent need for higher education to develop (or regain) an alternative vision of what it is, what its purpose is, what its values are, rather than accepting the neoliberal vision (nightmare?) that has taken over under its possessive individualist assumptions. Moreover, the manifest terminological and conceptual confusion of the possessive, skills and attributes approach needs to be subjected to sustained analysis to attempt to engage in clear thinking about graduate employability, just as that applies to any other arena of academic enquiry.

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# Relative Employability: Applying the Insights of Positional Competition and Conflict Theories Within the Current Higher Education Landscape

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## INTRODUCTION

Graduate employability has been understood as having two dimensions: absolute and relative. These dimensions offer different interpretations of the relationship between higher education, the economy, and the graduate labour market. In line with the first dimension, employability is understood as something that can be developed through enhancing employability-related personal abilities and experiences. Participation in higher education is viewed as a personal investment, and the value of a degree equates to the acquired knowledge and skills. The absolute

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dimension thus places emphasis on the supply side of ‘employable’ high-skilled graduates. The second dimension, relative employability, starts from the assumption that employment opportunities are primarily determined by labour market demand rather than by individual skills and abilities (Brown et al., 2003, 2004; Siivonen & Isopahkala-Bouret, 2016). Moreover, relative employability entails that the value of higher education is attributable, in part, to the relative scarcity of graduate degrees in the population (Shavit & Park, 2016).

These two dimensions of employability differ in how they connect supply and demand in the labour market. Absolute employability measures how well individuals have succeeded to match their human capital profile to labour market demands, whereas relative employability ‘not only depend[s] on fulfilling the requirements of a specific job, but also on how one stands relative to others within a hierarchy of job seekers’ (Brown et al., 2003, p. 10). Therefore, relative employability entails positional competition and conflict between different social groups and individuals who strategise to create advantage over others in the labour market by using different kinds of resources, including graduate degrees (Brown et al., 2003; Tholen, 2017; Weber, 1978).

The absolute dimension has received a lot of attention in mainstream employability research (Hillage & Pollard, 1998; Van Der Heijde & Van Der Heijden, 2006), but the relative dimension is in need of further consideration. The purpose of this chapter is to expand the understanding of the relativity of graduate employability by applying the insights of a critical, sociological tradition. These critical theories enable us to understand the structural and social limits of graduate employability. Although various studies have outlined differences in how graduates from different higher education institutions with different types of degrees enter the graduate labour market (e.g., Isopahkala-Bouret et al., 2021; Tholen, 2014), very few have systematically outlined the interplay of labour market positioning, educational positioning, and graduates’ social positioning, as this chapter does (see: Fig. 3.1).

The first part of the chapter reviews how the concept of relative employability has developed within the literature in the last fifty years. It begins by defining ‘relativity’ through theories of screening/signalling and the labour market queue (Hirsch, 1977; Spence, 1973; Thurow, 1975). After that, the focus moves specifically to graduate employability and positional

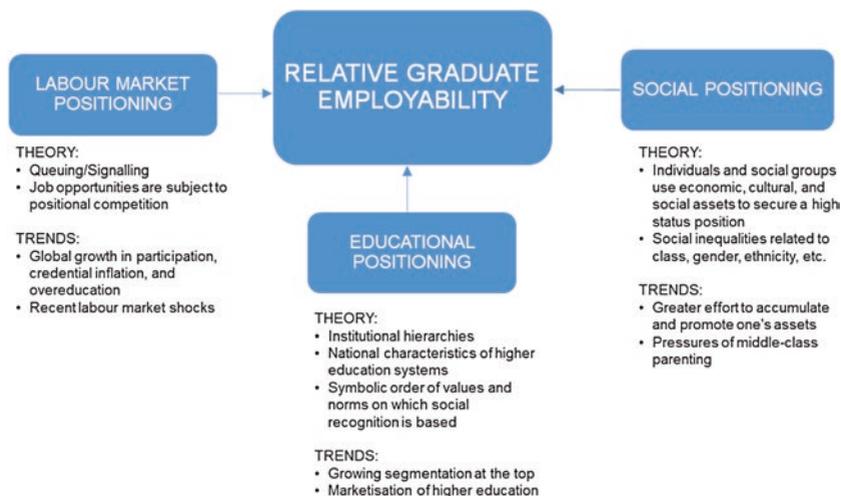


Fig. 3.1 Mapping of the concept of relative employability

conflict theory (Brown, 2000; Brown & Hesketh, 2004; Brown et al., 2003;). Then, this chapter brings into play the context of the increasingly hierarchical higher education landscape and how it affects graduates' relative employability.

After drawing together the existing theories, the second part of the chapter starts by presenting a conceptual mapping that synthesises the theoretical elements of relative employability (see: Fig. 3.1). The main idea of this concept is that employability cannot be understood without considering the actions of others and the social and cultural contexts, which structure the relative chances of graduates in the labour market. Then, by elaborating on the main elements of the concept mapping, the chapter assesses the importance of relative employability within the current economic and higher education landscapes. The emerging trends that are presented here highlight the need for a better understanding of the relativity of graduates' labour market prospects. Finally, the chapter closes with a discussion about the need for a new agenda for policy and further research on graduate employability.

## PART I: EARLY THEORIES ON POSITIONALITY OF EDUCATION AND EMPLOYABILITY

The insight that labour market opportunities fundamentally depend on the actions of others can be traced back to the 1970s, mostly in economic writings. Signalling and screening theories from that period highlighted that employers use educational qualifications not as a proof of productive skills and knowledge but as signals of desirable qualities or productivity and as a way to compare and screen applicants (Spence, 1973; Stiglitz, 1975). Here, education has a positional role to play in the allocation of jobs and workers. Moreover, according to Thurow's (1975) job competition theory or queuing model, an individual's position in the labour queue is determined by how his or her educational credentials compare to those of others. Thus, employment opportunities depend not only on the qualifications that one has but also on the levels and types of degrees that other graduates possess. Qualifications matter less in themselves than in how those credentials stack up in the total queue of job seekers (Thurow, 1975; see also: Bills, 2016). Moreover, the same kind of qualification may occupy a different position in the labour queue at different times or in different countries.

In the seminal book *Social Limits to Growth*, economist Fred Hirsch (1977) coined the concept of the 'positional good' to describe the nature of economic growth in advanced societies, highlighting the social limits to consumption. Arguing against the dominant economic idea that increases in productivity will solve distributional issues, Hirsch points out increasingly that goods, services, and work positions were scarce in a socially imposed sense or subject to congestion. The satisfaction obtained from them derives in part from scarcity and social exclusiveness.

Education is a key example of a positional good. The value of education as a positional good is based on the relative standings of different individuals in the ranks of educational hierarchies. There cannot be educational and economic advancement by all. 'What each of us can achieve, all cannot' (p. 5). Hirsch (1977) writes:

There is an absolute dimension, in which quality is added by receptive students, good teachers, good facilities, and so on; but there is also a relative dimension, in which quality consists of the differential over the educational level attained by others. (p. 6)

Hirsch warns that an expansion of educational levels in the population may lead to a race in educational credentials as everyone wants to increase their relative performance. However, there are socio-economic conditions that limit who will be able to compete (see also: Boudon, 1973, for the role of mass participation in higher education [HE] for social mobility).

One man's higher qualification devalues the information content of another's. Once again, it is a case of everyone in the crowd standing on tiptoe and no one getting a better view. Yet at the start of the process some individuals gain a better view by standing on tiptoe, and others are forced to follow if they are to keep their position. If all do follow, whether in the sightseeing crowd or among the job-seeking students, everyone expends more resources and ends up with the same position. (Hirsch, 1977, p. 42)

When education expands faster than the number of jobs requiring educational credentials, employers intensify the screening process irrespective of the educational demands of the job positions they recruit for. This means that the value of a degree depreciates as it becomes more common in the labour market if the demand for skilled workers does not increase as fast. To create an advantage over others in the labour market, prospective workers in later cohorts must distinguish themselves with more education: each successive cohort of workers needs to attain more education to secure their place in the labour market queue (Freeman, 1976; Hirsch, 1977; Thurow, 1975). Thus, the job competition model recognises that degrees may only be used to keep up with the competition between job seekers, not to get ahead of it.

### POSITIONAL CONFLICT IN THE GRADUATE LABOUR MARKET

Mass higher education has fundamentally changed the graduate labour markets in Western countries and globally. Under the rhetoric of the knowledge-based economy, all are encouraged to invest in their human capital through participation in higher education. Over time, a sociological literature emerged that explicitly looked at how growing participation affected the competition for graduate jobs. Building on earlier insights into the changing conditions for graduates and the role of the middle classes in the competition for graduate jobs (Brown & Scase, 1994), sociologist Phillip Brown (and colleagues) developed positional conflict theory (Brown, 2000, 2003; Brown et al., 2003; Brown & Hesketh, 2004),

in which graduate employability is socially structured and increasingly relative as similarly educated individuals are competing for a limited number of high-skilled jobs. Positional competition theory builds on a large sociological literature on social inequalities and the reproduction of dis/advantage within higher education and the graduate labour market.

Brown et al. (2003) distinguished between the ‘rigging’ and ‘ranking’ strategies of social groups seeking to secure a competitive advantage in the graduate labour market. ‘Rigging’ is the ability of professional status groups to influence markets and competition rules for their own advantage by using exclusionary tactics, often through the hiring process (Brown et al., 2003). Critical sociologists have emphasised the role of social closure within the allocation of work in which groups and individuals can use degrees for exclusionary purposes to exclude others from job competition (Collins, 1979; Dore, 1976; Murphy, 1988; Parkin, 1979; Weber, 1978). Relative graduate employability can be elevated by regulating access to certain professions or occupations through specific qualification requirements. The increase in educational requirements for jobs is not the result of the increasing demand for skills. Instead, employers select candidates according to their cultural or professional preferences, as participation in HE increases in the general workforce. This perspective again highlights the relativity of employability and the importance of other competitors in the labour market. (For a contemporary discussion on social closure, see: Tholen, 2017; Weeden, 2002.)

‘Ranking’ refers to the ability of individuals to mobilise social, cultural, and economic assets to secure a labour market advantage within the existing competitive framework of the labour market. Those from privileged social groups invest in social, economic, and cultural assets valued by graduate employers (Brown & Hesketh, 2003). Middle-class graduates are attuned to the ways of being and doing of the professional classes to which they aspire. Subsequently, their cultural and social background and their claims of suitability are recognised and appreciated by middle-class recruiters who predominantly recruit in their own image.

Critical, sociological literature supports the idea that in order to understand the employment opportunities for graduates, we need to understand the wider societal and economic structures including the larger capitalist social order. Disparities regarding class, gender, and ethnicity continue to shape access to, participation in, and outcomes of higher education. Here, Pierre Bourdieu’s (1984, 1990, 2005) theory on forms of capital is significant for the study of relative graduate employability. The concept of

*capitals*, which means properties and possessions operating as resources, is used to understand who wins and losses in the competition for jobs. Moreover, the use of *habitus* (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977), the unconscious dispositions formed through regular social encounters and experiences, has been used in research to make sense of social inequalities in higher education. Finally, according to the Bourdieusian approach, the labour market has often been defined as a *field*, a system of relations between actors with different amounts and types of capital.

Bourdieu's work forms a framework for understanding how individuals use their social (class) position and apply strategies of accumulation and conversion of economic, cultural, symbolic, and social capital within the field of higher education (e.g. Bathmaker et al., 2013; Reay et al., 2001). The accumulation and mobilisation of different capitals can explain the relative standing of individuals and social groups within job competition (e.g. Brown et al., 2003, 2016; Tholen, 2017; Tomlinson, 2017). In other words, relative graduate employability cannot be understood without reference to the characteristics and dispositions of other competitors, the rules of competition (capitals and field), and the unequal social relations within the economic context of advanced capitalism.

A second related body of literature deals with how students understand their own employability and how they act upon their understanding (Little & Archer, 2010; Pinto & Ramalheira, 2017; Siivonen & Isopahkala-Bouret, 2016; Tholen, 2012; Tomlinson, 2008). It tends to position the graduate labour market as a zero-sum competition, in which participants actively aim to create advantage within the competition for jobs. Brown and Hesketh (2004) identify two approaches taken by graduates to manage their employability: purists among students expect the job market to be meritocratic, aiming to preserve their authenticity to themselves and the integrity of their identity. Players understand employability through a market spectrum and adopt and shape themselves according to the expectations of the employers in order to win.

Although students' approaches to employability are far from uniform, many studies find, in particular in the UK context, that students and graduates are aware that the degree itself will no longer distinguish them from other job seekers (Tomlinson, 2008, 2010). They realise that the labour market advantage has declined as growing numbers of young people participate in higher education. In some cases, students' strategies are set around educational achievements, but increasingly students use a wide range of resources to distinguish themselves from competitors. As the

stakes for students to find graduate-level jobs remain high, instrumental approaches to employability that focus on relative positioning are likely to be widespread, depending on the national economic and educational contexts (Tholen, 2013).

Brown et al. (2003) argued that ranking and rigging are not mutually exclusive. They come together in the idea of ‘personal capital’, in which individuals combine ‘soft’ as well as ‘hard’ currencies, such as cultural attributes and educational credentials, packaged in an employability narrative. Achievements outside of formal education, such as extracurricular activities and internships, help graduates to distinguish themselves (Bathmaker et al., 2013; Tomlinson, 2008). As Tomlinson (2017) has highlighted, self-presentation and promotion of one’s valuable assets through the overall ‘personality package’ becomes a skill in its own right. Thus, relative employability depends on how university graduates are able to translate cultural capital—the high-status attitudes, preferences, and behaviours—into personal capital during the job-seeking and recruitment process (Brown et al., 2003). Social class inequalities, in particular, have been found to be crucial in the mobilisation of ‘personal capital’ (Bathmaker et al., 2013).

### HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEMS: RANKING AND STRATIFICATION

Often, higher education outputs (i.e. number of graduates) are seen as a dominant contextual factor in how education shapes relative employability. However, the influence of the educational context goes beyond the overall level of participation in HE. Relative employability involves ranking the individuals in the graduate labour market not only at the individual level but also at the institutional level, based on social and cultural capital (Brown et al., 2003). In high-participation HE systems (Cantwell et al., 2018), the value of degrees is divided between credentials offering exceptionally high positional value (cf. degrees from the elite universities) and those offering little value.

Prior research has examined especially the role of elite higher education institutions on employment opportunities (Binder et al., 2016; Rivera, 2011; Tholen et al., 2013; Wakeling & Savage, 2015; van Zanten et al., 2015). Graduates from elite universities have more favourable chances of joining an exclusive graduate labour market because of their ability to

control access to the highest occupational positions based on credentialist social closure (Brown et al., 2011; Tholen, 2017). Elite employers target their recruitment efforts and select candidates exclusively from elite universities (Rivera, 2011). Elite universities and elite employers attach higher status to credentials and graduates of particular institutions and convince others of their own (relative) worth.

The symbolic ranking between institutions and graduates alike is socially constructed. Here, the theorisation of symbolic order and categorisation can help us to understand the relationship between relative employability and stratification (Tholen, 2017). This relates to the question of how university degrees operate as symbols of prestige and power. Prestige is defined, according to a Weberian (1978) theorisation, as a social honour, restricted only to distinguished status groups, such as a group of graduates from an elite university (cf. the mechanisms of social closure). Moreover, graduates from an elite university are associated with favourable personal and moral qualities, the display of ‘cultural capital’, and the standing of the upper-middle class (Binder et al., 2016; Bourdieu, 1984).

The influence of institutional hierarchies on relative employability is formed strongly according to national characteristics of the HE system (e.g. Isopahkala-Bouret et al., 2021; Tholen, 2014; van de Werfhorst, 2011). There is a variation between countries, and over time within national HE systems, in how the degree structure, disciplinary hierarchies, and divisions between the different sectors of higher education jointly influence graduates’ positional competition and entry into the labour market. In countries with well-developed vocational higher education systems, and where educational degrees match the occupational fields, there are specific pathways from education into the labour market and occupational communities.

As an example, Isopahkala-Bouret and her colleagues (2021) investigated how graduates’ relative prospects for entering high-paid, high-status jobs are affected by the division between Finnish universities and universities of applied sciences in different fields of education. Graduates holding university master’s degrees had the highest probability of succeeding in the Finnish labour market, and their status/rank elevated them above the competition by regulating access to certain occupations through specific qualification requirements (see also: Isopahkala-Bouret, 2018). Furthermore, in countries with a strong emphasis on occupationally specific education and occupationally tracked degrees, such as Germany,

Switzerland, and the Netherlands, horizontally mismatched surplus education may even be penalised by employers (Di Stasio, 2017).

Similarly, Tholen (2012, 2013) found that Dutch and British students' understanding of the competition is shaped by how their educational system is structured. For Dutch students, there was a clear understanding that the vocationally oriented higher education system and the graduate labour market are horizontally segmented in function and level. Employability is geared towards the types of jobs that match the individual skillsets. In the British context, in which HE is distinctly vertically stratified, students understand themselves to be positioned in a more generic competition for graduate jobs. Their employability strategies are geared towards signalling relative worth through exclusive credentials and other forms of distinction (see also: Tomlinson, 2008).

## PART II: THE GROWING RELEVANCE OF RELATIVE EMPLOYABILITY

In order to assess current trends in relative employability, a synthesis of its key elements has been conducted to allow greater clarity and visibility of the concept. Specifically, the resulting conceptual mapping (see: Fig. 3.1) draws attention to three types of positioning that set up relative employability: labour market positioning, educational positioning, and graduates' social positioning. The model lays out the sociological theory and points to some key trends in these three important aspects. In what follows, the chapter will expand the understanding of what makes relative employability of key importance in the current economic and higher education landscape.

### *Labour Market Positioning: Continuous Growth in the Supply of Qualified Graduates and Recent Labour Market Shocks*

Although there are national contexts in which it is restrained by governments, continuous growth in participation in higher education can be observed globally (Cantwell et al., 2018; Marginson, 2016). Yet, the availability of traditional graduate jobs such as high-status managerial and expert positions does not automatically increase with the expansion of education. There is significant evidence that an excess supply of highly educated people has been leading to over-education, education–job

mismatch (e.g., Figueiredo et al., 2017; Di Stasio, 2017; Di Stasio et al., 2016), and credential inflation (Van de Werfhorst, 2009). A growing number of graduates find employment opportunities in the so-called new graduate occupations, that is jobs in which a degree has only recently become the norm for hired workers. Eventually, the graduates with the least valuable credentials need to find a job outside of the graduate labour market. Global competition from highly educated, low-cost workers in countries such as India and China has further increased the pressure on graduates in advanced Western economies (Brown et al., 2011).

Relative employability may mean that the labour market positions form a pyramid-type structure, with the best (i.e. highest paid, highest status, and most rewarding) positions being the scarcest and subject to positional competition (Hirsch, 1977, pp. 41–51; Isopahkala-Bouret et al., 2021). During the twenty-first century, the financial payoff from the most well-paid positions has risen sharply, whereas other types of graduate roles have seen modest growth in earnings (Green & Zhu, 2010; Holmes & Mayhew, 2015). In particular, graduates who work in the ‘new’ graduate occupations appear to earn significantly less than those who are employed in traditional graduate jobs (Figueiredo et al. 2017). Moreover, there is a growing number of ‘gig’ workers and other self-employed graduates with uncertain employment benefits and employment security (Burrell & Fourcade, 2021; Ravenelle, 2019).

Furthermore, the recent labour market shocks have impacted graduates’ labour market opportunities. Within the last two decades, we have seen the global economic crisis in 2008, the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020–2022, and, more recently, the influence of geopolitical armed conflict hurting (sections of the) graduate labour markets. For example, Euton and Heckscher (2021) summarised the broad effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the labour market and employment relations. The crisis has had consequences, especially on the working opportunities of the flexible workforce—short-term, part-time, and self-employed workers—thus affecting the job opportunities of working students and recent graduates. Moreover, an increase in remote working has destabilised especially the work–home balance of female employees with children.

We may expect a growing proportion of graduates whose work trajectories may include periods of unemployment or over-education. Research shows that the so-called labour market scarring affects the graduate labour market significantly. Entry into the labour market gets more complicated and prolonged during an economic downturn, and the quality and wages

of early-career job contracts are impacted as well. Moreover, research also shows that those affected will have to convincingly signal to employers their value to avoid biased assessment, exclusion, and discrimination (Pedulla, 2020). In other words, their labour market opportunities will depend on how they can symbolically position themselves in comparison to graduates with more stable work trajectories.

### *Educational Positioning: Growing Segmentation of Higher Education at the Top*

Within high participation HE systems, stratification has a tendency to increase over time. There is a global trend in HE systems to enhance competitiveness and performance-based funding and to concentrate resources on a few ‘world-class’ universities and nationally leading institutions. As Marginson (2016) has argued, there is a cumulative advantage in status and resources, and therefore strong institutions improve their relative position over time.

The increased stratification and concentration of resources to the ‘top’ institutions translates to social and economic inequalities in the graduate labour market. A distinguished education degree from a high prestige university still provides a direct advantage in the labour market, irrespective of skills (Posselt & Grodsky, 2017). Donnelly and Gamsu (2019) found that although elite employers recruit from a wider range of universities than the authors expected, the highest-paid graduates are still from the elite institutions.

Moreover, the increasing marketisation of higher education is accelerating institutional status hierarchies. Marketisation, the greater reliance on the use of markets in the management and functioning of higher education, changes how HE participants think about their education. When HE institutions act as market providers, students primarily become consumers or are positioned as such by both the state and the sector itself, and they are expected to choose between the educational options on offer based on perceived value for them (including price, quality, and availability). In the countries where (part of) the cost of higher education is transferred to students, it is more likely that students experience HE as a consumption good (or investment product), and the labour market outcomes are directly a result of this investment (Tholen, 2022; Tomlinson, 2017; Wilkins et al., 2013).

The marketisation of higher education is accompanied by stronger moves to demand public information about the performance of different higher education institutions (HEIs) (Tomlinson & Watermeyer, 2022). National league tables have become significant instruments in measuring the value and status of an institution. They are used as a market strategy to signal institutions' value against competing HEIs (ibid.). In particular, the selectivity of institutions is an important indicator and 'signal' that informs students' choice and employers' recruitment decisions.

At present, global university rankings contribute to the ongoing convergence of higher education institutions and, as a consequence, enforce stratification of higher education systems and social inequalities between students and graduates alike (Pusser & Marginson, 2013). As university rankings reveal differences between the university systems, they also indirectly rank countries and regions and, thus, take part in the geopolitics of higher education (Hazelkorn, 2016). Over time, global university rankings widen the gap between high- and low-value higher education institutions and degrees (Marginson, 2016). Such a trend contributes to a growing segmentation of HEIs at the top.

*Social Positioning: Greater Effort Is Afforded by Those Wanting to Distinguish Themselves*

The literature has pointed out the continuous efforts of those from elite backgrounds to enter the high-status positions within the graduate labour market (Ellersgaard et al., 2019; Lucas, 2001). The stakes have never felt higher, and more needs to be done to reach the relative top position in the educational competition and the labour market queue. In *The Meritocracy Trap*, Daniel Markovits (2019) stresses the pressure elite parents in the United States are under to prepare their children for success through admission to a top preschool, a private secondary school, and elite HEIs. Parenting practices and the education system are still set up to reproduce elites' status, yet it takes more effort to monopolise elite education for each successive generation. In her study, Zhang (2020) approached 'shadow education', the private supplementary education and tutoring, in terms of externalised parenthood. In China, where she conducted her study, as well as in many other East Asian countries, shadow education has expanded as a means for middle-class families to ensure their children's access to good schooling, high achievement, and the accomplishment of high-status credentials that open doors to the elite sector in the labour market.

The same pressures apply to individual graduates, who need to ‘package’ and promote their valuable assets to potential employers. The amount of ‘personal capital’ influences graduates’ relative standing in the competition for jobs. Furthermore, the demonstration of ‘personal capital’ needs to meet the expectations of employers in a specific occupational field. For example, UK employers have conceptualised employable graduates in their talent management approach as ‘the edge’ that needs to be ‘sharpened’ to fully realise the potential that graduates offer (McCrackena et al., 2016). Accordingly, graduates who are able to showcase their talent will have an advantage in recruitment situations. They need to ‘stand out from the crowd’, for example by displaying the relevance of their internship experiences. Employers frame and decode signals of unique personal ‘brand assets’ and qualities they associate with graduates’ standout employability (Anderson & Tomlinson, 2021).

## DISCUSSION: OUTLINING A NEW POLICY AND RESEARCH AGENDA

This chapter has presented a review and conceptual mapping of the relative dimension of graduate employability. Relative employability refers to how one stands in relation to other job seekers along some status hierarchy (Brown et al., 2003). Securing a high standing in the competition for jobs involves simultaneously (a) labour market positioning, (b) educational positioning, and (c) social positioning (see: Fig. 3.1). The task of clarifying the concept of relative employability is timely and important given the current labour market crises and increasing stratification of higher education institutions. The concept of relative employability reminds us that employability is fundamentally not an individual but also a social and relational phenomenon. It emphasises the structural boundaries of graduates’ employability prospects.

Despite the growth in understanding of the relative dimension of employability within the academic literature, key ideas put forward by the authors covered above have still not been fully accepted and acted upon within the policy domain in most countries. Too often, HE is considered solely to be a developer of skills that offers individuals from all backgrounds the opportunity to invest in their own human capital. Higher institutions are thought to instil into their students advanced knowledge and skills that are demanded by employers, which will thus lead to

employment opportunities. Improving the employability of young people lies in encouraging HE participation in combination with offering school leavers detailed and accurate information about labour market outcomes for each HE course.

Furthermore, currently, the key issues when it comes to the variability in graduate employability are seen as directly related to the quality of the teaching and how well graduates' skills and attributes match the labour market demand. This has strengthened the fundamental belief within HE institutions to improve the employability of graduates, despite evidence showing that HE may not be able to develop all work skills very well (Tholen, 2019). Likewise, as the dominant policy discourse emphasises the absolute dimension of employability, it offers few limits to employability as long as HE is accessible and can keep up with the changing skill demands thought to be driven by rapid technological change (Brown et al., 2011). Social differences related to family background, gender, age, and ability, for instance, and unequal opportunities to secure high-status positions in the labour market are ignored in the current, individualistic policy.

We argue not only that the relative dimension of employability remains relevant but also that it is *increasing* in importance. For this, we need to look beyond the supply side, that is the number and share of graduates, and the skills, knowledge, and educational credentials they bring into the labour force and labour markets. The demand side (i.e. what employers and workplaces demand) matters as much for relative employability as it does for its absolute dimension. Labour market demand shapes how graduates are positioned within the labour market queue but also shapes how labour market participants understand the positional competition and how they can utilise their social and symbolic resources to their advantage in the positional competition.

While we state that for the policymakers, HE leaders, and employers, there is a need to take the relative dimension of employability seriously, we do not deny that absolute employability matters. Therefore, we outline here the potential for a more sophisticated policy formulation of employability that links the absolute and relative dimensions, that is, assessing the context-specificity of credentials and their value in different occupational fields and country contexts. The new policy agenda should move the focus away from individual knowledge, attributes, and achievements as the main indicators of graduate employability. Instead, moving towards making the agency/structure connection clearer in this area opens up new avenues for

policy and practice to even out graduates' positional competition. Furthermore, a better understanding of the links between different national regimes of capitalism and how these shape graduates' job competition and pathways from higher education to labour market is essential for the development and deployment of policy.

The new policy agenda needs to address the significant role that educational positioning—the competition and ranking between universities in both national and global arenas—plays in graduates' relative employability. As Marginson (2016) has stated, the common public good is maximised when the level of educational equality is high and the value differentials between institutions and fields of study are moderate. This relates to the question of how state funding is distributed among HEIs, the competitiveness of funding, and how far the marketisation of national HE systems evolves (Tholen, 2022).

Moreover, educational systems have a role in mediating graduates' positional competition in the labour market. Therefore, it is important for policymakers and institutional leaders to understand critically how HE systems and institutions may equalise, to some degree, the impact of social origins, gender, and so forth on graduates' labour market positioning. For example, targeted career counselling and fairly distributed and paid internships during studies could facilitate the labour market entry of graduates with less inherited economic, cultural, and social capital. This is recommended despite higher education having limited autonomy to change the wider social structures' influence on the labour market (including the social bias of employers). Employers and human resources management (HRM) practitioners may improve their recruitment process by understanding how positional competition can exacerbate inequality in opportunities for graduates. Certain groups of graduates are better positioned to develop their personal capital. Greater reflection on how scarce credential and experience relate to privilege may allow a more egalitarian assessment of candidates.

Within our understanding of relative employability, there are plenty of areas in need of further investigation. Currently, there is a lack of understanding of how positional competition is played out within different national contexts, specifically those in non-Western contexts. To understand relative employability, there is a need to understand individuals' rationales for choosing educational programmes, developing skills, and engaging with various activities to improve their chances in the labour market. Equally important is to assess the graduate labour market—not

merely as a coordination mechanism between demand and supply of labour but as a social arena in which the acts of individuals and organisations are shaped and supported by larger societal structures, including the higher education system itself. Applying critical, sociological theories can elucidate how individual graduates are positioned towards others in particular fields, educational systems, and societies.

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## CHAPTER 4

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# Boosting Employability Through Fostering an Entrepreneurial Mindset: Critical Analysis of Employability and Entrepreneurship in EU Policy Documents

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and Nina Haltia*

### INTRODUCTION

Critical analyses on graduate employability have indicated that the relationship between higher education institutions and the surrounding society has changed and that higher education institutions (HEIs) are under growing pressure to effectively produce a skilled labour force for the needs of the economy (Tomlinson, 2019; Hartmann & Komljenovic, 2021). Moreover, critical scholars have shown how individuals have been socialised

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to the idea that they need to develop skills and qualities to maximise their chances of success in the labour market and become employable subjects (Laalo & Heinonen, 2016; Korhonen et al., [under review](#)). Further, it has been noted that these trends have created inequalities in the positionings of HEIs and individuals within the field (Merrill et al., 2020; Moreau & Leathwood, 2006).

Macro-level analyses on policies and policy discourses at the national and transnational levels, as well as how they are affecting, intertwining and connecting to the phenomena on meso- and micro-levels, have so far been relatively rare (Fejes, 2010; Campbell et al., 2019).

In most countries, educational policy has increasingly been shaped in line with the guidelines, recommendations and ideas formulated by supra-national actors, such as the European Union (EU). Furthermore, in a world of shared political rationality, similar ideas are being developed simultaneously at both the global and national levels. The educational policy reasoning of governments and decision-makers in different countries has converged, and it is now quite in line with one another. The reasoning relies on a much similar rationality: market liberalism. For example, the notion of the necessity of lifelong learning, which is embodied in the EU's employment and education policies, has been widely accepted as a truth in Europe (e.g. Lee et al., 2008). The education policies and truths these policies shape have consequences for the practices of educational institutions as well as for citizens' actions and self-understanding.

Prior research on higher education policies has shown that employability discourse is conjoined with the idea of entrepreneurship and entrepreneurship education (e.g. Tomlinson et al., 2021; Laalo et al., 2019). These themes are also visible in the multiple policy documents published by the EU during the past decade, in the context of building Europe 2020 (see Appendix A). The goal of promoting entrepreneurship in education does not only refer to developing business skills for business purposes but also aims to shape citizens' mindsets and behaviours to make them entrepreneurial and intrapreneurial<sup>1</sup> (i.e. proactive and self-responsible) in various aspects of life (Laalo et al., 2019).

<sup>1</sup>The term 'intrapreneurial' refers to entrepreneurial attitude and conduct within an organisation without being an entrepreneur. Baruah and Ward (2014, p. 1) defined intrapreneurship as 'the innovative initiatives undertaken inside an organization (...) Successful ideas within an organization occur due to the tireless persistence and practical imagination of intrapreneurs who are the smart innovators actively involved in the design and creation of new products, ventures and business models. Today there is an increasing global demand for such intrapreneurs and different universities are therefore adopting various entrepreneurship education and training programmes to cater to this'.

This study sheds light on the unintentional and unpredictable consequences of the current employability policy. In this chapter, we analyse the EU's policy language on employability and entrepreneurship; more precisely, we analyse the language on the production of employable graduates. The focus of this analysis is placed on the problems represented in the policy (Bacchi, 2012). From a governmentality perspective, we understand EU communication as a form of exercising power over member states and citizens. Instead of mandatory legislation, the Union's power in education policy is 'soft', persuasive and based on normative pressures created by the open method of coordination, monitoring, assessments and recommendations (Alexiadou, 2014; Corbett, 2005; Lange & Alexiadou, 2010).

This chapter unfolds as follows. First, we present the theoretical background for the analysis and examine how employability and entrepreneurship education are discussed in critical research literature. Next, we describe the research material and the use of critical policy analysis. Thereafter, we present the analysis and argue that, in the EU policy, entrepreneurship education is represented as an empowering solution to boost graduates' employment and economic potential. We illustrate how this endeavour embodies governing by risk or even 'through neurosis' (Isin, 2004) in controlling the hopes and fears of graduates.

#### GOVERNMENTALITY PERSPECTIVE ON EMPLOYABILITY AND ENTREPRENEURIAL MINDSET

Our theoretical perspective on pursuing graduate employability draws on the conceptualisations of governmentality (Foucault, 1991; Miller & Rose, 2008; Dean, 2010). In general, governmentality is connected to three factors: knowledge, power and truth. Every society has its 'regime of truth, its "general politics" of truth' (Foucault, 1980, p. 131). The mechanisms and instances in discourses establish true and false statements. Techniques and procedures legitimise the acquisition of truth, and those who have power are obligated to state what counts as true (Foucault, 1980, pp. 131–132). Knowledge and truth are dependent on one another, and their bond is needed for establishing power relations. Knowledge is an essential condition for the formation and further growth of an industrial, technological society; however, for Foucault, knowledge and power are not identical—they have a correlative connection that is determined in its historical specificity (Dreyfus & Rabinow, 1982). There is 'a battle around

truth' and an ensemble of rules that separate truth from fiction (Foucault, 1980).

According to the neoliberal 'truth game', all individuals in liberal democracies are responsible for their own employment—and unemployment as well. Individual responsibility is included in the concept of employability; it depicts unemployment as an individual than a structural problem. A shift from speaking about employment to speaking about employability has been going on since 1980s. In the discourses on employability, the individual is constructed as responsible for their own employability, while the state and employers are construed as enablers who make it possible for individuals to develop their qualities and characteristics that make them more employable. Although the responsibility for employability is shared in this way according to the transnational policy texts, it is ultimately the individual who is responsible (Fejes, 2010). This form of governmentality is referred as the 'responsibilisation of the self', wherein the employable self becomes an entrepreneur who has to be conducted according to the truth game of market logic (Rose, 1999). This is how neoliberal governing in an enabling state is based on citizens' seemingly free choices (Rose, 1999).

Like employability, entrepreneurship, in its emphasis on individual responsibility, is related to neoliberalism and educating neoliberal subjects (Berglund, 2013; Dahlstedt & Fejes, 2019; Mertanen et al., 2020). Critical studies have paid attention to the neoliberal values in entrepreneurship education and how students are encouraged to become creative, proactive, flexible, responsible and autonomous (e.g. Komulainen, 2006; Berglund, 2013; Laalo et al., 2019). Through entrepreneurial pedagogy, higher education graduates are expected to understand themselves as intrapreneurs who develop their entrepreneurial skills and attitudes and are entrepreneurially devoted to work.

Leaning on previous critical remarks, we argue that while for citizens, entrepreneurship education is presented as a means to gain important life skills and employability, for public authorities, it is a tool to control the population's actions as well as the competence of the workforce. We examine the creation of employable subjects as 'conduct of conduct' seeking to shape graduates' desires, interests and actions according to the expectations and demands of the labour market (Dean, 2010; Miller & Rose, 2008). Beyond the creation of new businesses, the entrepreneurial mindset is an important goal in entrepreneurship education (Lackéus, 2015; Laalo & Heinonen, 2016) and an attribute of employable citizens

(Berglund, 2013), which makes the governmentality perspective relevant. In the following analysis, we perceive entrepreneurship education as a technology of governing, a practice that aims at shaping the employable subject.

Overall, critical analysis of the policy discourse on employability has so far been marginal. In addition, the significance of risk in justifying the promotion of entrepreneurship in education and obliging individuals has not been sufficiently discussed. From the governmentality perspective, we view risk as a technique for governing education and graduates' working lives. This means that risk and uncertainty are not perceived as natural states of things but rather as powerful tools of control related to neoliberalism (O'Malley, 2004; Walklate & Mythen, 2010).

In our interpretation of risk, we draw on Engin Isin (2004), who problematises the neoliberal idea of a purely rational subject. He argues that, instead of calculating rationalities, the subject's, who he labels as a 'neurotic citizen', conduct is increasingly conducted by appealing to fears, anxieties and insecurities. Becoming an employable citizen in precarious societies requires emotional reflectiveness of the self. Isin calls this new form of governmentality as 'governing through neurosis'. Neurotic citizens govern their 'neurotic self' by calculating the risks both rationally and emotionally. As we will later point out, this form of therapeutic governing is also visible in the endeavour to develop graduates' employability.

## CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE EU'S EDUCATION POLICY DOCUMENTS

The education policy themes of employability and entrepreneurship have both been part of the EU's development of higher education during the past decade. These themes and their intertwinement are discussed in documents focusing on employment and employability (EU, 2011; Humburg et al., 2013) as well as on entrepreneurship and entrepreneurship education (EC, 2012a, 2012b, 2013a, 2013b, 2014a, 2015). They have also been addressed in the EU's development strategies and modernisation strategies for higher education (EC, 2011, 2012c, 2013c, 2014b, 2012a, 2019). Our research material comprises texts from these 15 documents (Appendix A). The documents were searched from the Commission's website using the keywords 'employability', 'entrepreneurship' and 'entrepreneurship education'. On the website, we also systematically went

through the sections focusing on higher education. Furthermore, references to previous policy alignments in the documents helped us find the relevant material. We included in the analysis those texts that, either specifically or as part of the big picture, dealt with employability and entrepreneurship in higher education. The chosen documents have been published in 2010–2020 in the context of constructing Europe 2020 by seeking growth and jobs.

The analysed documents have been produced by European Commission officials and experts in education and entrepreneurship (e.g. from ministries, businesses, education institutions and consulting companies). However, it should be noted that while not all of the analysed documents represent the European Commission's official alignments, all documents have been guided by the European Commission's officials; therefore, they indicate the European Commission's policy interests.

The documents may be seen as negotiated products of debate between various actors and interests (Lange & Alexiadou, 2010, p. 447). It should be recalled that while the EU is a powerful authority affecting national education policies, member states and stakeholders simultaneously seek reinforcement of their own interests by pursuing the transnational agendas they consider important (Moisio, 2014). Educational discourses are thus the result of the interaction and negotiation between several actors, and the emergence of new ideas on a global or local political agenda is not a result of one-way imposition. Rather, there exists a network of interaction and influence rather than a top-down exercise of power (Beech, 2009; Lange & Alexiadou, 2010; Moisio, 2014).

We approach the policy documents as governing artefacts, setting guidelines not only for European nations and higher education institutions but also for individuals by defining the necessary skills, competences and personal attributes expected from citizens. On the one hand, EU documents communicate with member states and address training recommendations, expectations and requirements. On the other hand, the documents also speak directly to European citizens, thus seeking to engage all citizens in the common goal of building a successful knowledge-based economy. Hence, in the context of the European knowledge economy and the construction of the European higher education area, the target audience of the documents is not only those who fund, steer and organize higher education, but also the entire European population. The documents bring together the societal and the personal by subjectifying the individual as an active, responsible and employable European. They aim

both to modernise Europe and its citizens and to promote European competitiveness, integration and the inclusion of citizens (See Palola, 2010, p. 189).

The critical policy analysis of our study is based on a post-structural understanding of the intertwinement of knowledge and power (see e.g. Diem et al., 2014), and we thus perceive policy as discourse (Bacchi, 2000). We understand discourse as a system of organising truth and reality (Powers, 2007). It defines right and wrong and shapes subjects' understanding of themselves and their relations to others (Jäger & Maier, 2016). In our study, communicating was recognised as an exercise of power upon subjects (Deacon & Parker, 1995).

Carol Bacchi's ideas on investigating problematisations are useful here; looking at 'what the problem is represented to be' in the policy texts reveals how policy recommendations define social 'problems' and offer solutions to them, thus legitimising certain actions and serving certain interests (Bacchi, 2012; Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016). Problematisations are at the core of the analytics of government since they can be used to regulate subjects' behaviour and actions according to a predefined moral standard (Rose, 1999).

In our reading of the research material, we focused on the control and demands articulated in the policy texts to develop the employability of graduates. Moreover, we paid attention to the position of risk in the texts to see whether and how subjects are being governed by risk (O'Malley, 2004) or, as Isin (2004) puts it, through neurosis. Based on our critical reading and categorisations of the material, we identified three interrelated 'problems' or hindrances of employability that justify the promotion of entrepreneurship in education. In this reasoning, risk is articulated simultaneously as a threat and as an empowering opportunity.

#### ENTREPRENEURSHIP EDUCATION AS A SOLUTION TO EMPLOYABILITY PROBLEMS

By paying attention to the persuasive language of the policy texts, we identified three problems, all of which represent entrepreneurship education as a source of graduate employability. First, the lack of skills and desired attributes of graduates in the context of Europe 2020 is represented as a key problem. Second, more issues are found in the quality and efficiency of higher education. It is reasoned that higher education, due to its

inadequate contents and methods, fails to offer students what they need to become employable. Third, a risk society and risky labour markets are represented as problematic. To all these three interrelated problems, entrepreneurship education is represented as a solution as it develops entrepreneurial skills, creates connections to businesses and employers and encourages students to tolerate risks.

### *Problem 1: Lack of Entrepreneurial Skills*

In the analysed documents, accounts on employability and entrepreneurship are in line with and strengthened by the EU's endeavours to increase growth and employment. Thus, in the context of Europe 2020, it is reasoned that promoting entrepreneurship in education in order to develop employability is important when fostering economic prosperity. Typically, this is the starting point of the documents:

The Europe 2020 strategy recognises that if Europe is to meet the economic and social challenges it faces, there is a critical requirement for its citizens to become more entrepreneurial across all walks of life—for example, in economic and social innovation, new business creation, employability and active citizenship (especially amongst young people). (EC, 2014a, iii)

In creating Europe 2020, citizens are thus encouraged to become entrepreneurial in all spheres of life. In this reasoning, non-entrepreneurial behaviour appears abnormal and problematic.

In the centre of the endeavours to promote entrepreneurship and employability in education is thus the fostering of citizens who are equipped with skills and competences necessary in the challenging economic circumstances and citizens who not only take care of themselves but also benefit the success of the whole continent. This rhetoric calls for a strong commitment to shared objectives and governs the attributes of individuals in the name of competitiveness:

education, and in particular higher education and its links with research and innovation, plays a crucial role in individual and societal advancement, and in providing the highly skilled human capital and the articulate citizens that Europe needs to create jobs, economic growth and prosperity. (EC, 2011, p. 2)

In the recommendations on key competences for lifelong learning (EU, 2019), the European Union identifies eight key competences that are said to be essential to citizens' employability and overall well-being. One of the identified key competences is entrepreneurship and initiative, which refers to not only citizens' enthusiasm to start businesses but also to a proactive, innovative and self-responsible mindset. The worry over citizens' competences, skills and mentality is visible in the EU's education policy and also concerns higher education, wherein educating employable entrepreneurial subjects seems to have become a central goal.

Maximising graduates' potential in labour markets has become one of the core concerns of higher education, and entrepreneurship education has been presented as a solution. Indeed, employability is a central justification for entrepreneurship education, which is presented as a necessary tool for improving the employability of graduates. Employability and entrepreneurship are intertwined in their shared efforts to govern the ideal labour market citizen, and their relation seems bilateral: one cannot be employable without being entrepreneurial (and vice versa). Entrepreneurship education 'helps to boost career ambitions' and 'leads to higher employability' (EC, 2015, p. 7–8). Similarly, it is emphasised that:

Attention should be particularly focused on the development of entrepreneurial skills because they not only contribute to new business creation but also to the employability of young people. (EC, 2012c, p. 4)

Various positive consequences of entrepreneurship education in terms of employability have been identified. For example, a study report focusing on the effects and impacts of entrepreneurship education explained that:

entrepreneurship education seems to have a positive effect on employability in terms of job experience, creativity in the current job and annual income earned by alumni presently in paid employment. It seems to be easier for entrepreneurship alumni to find employment immediately after their graduation and the chance of being unemployed in the first years after graduation is lower. (EC, 2012a, p. 12)

These conclusions are presented as strong facts, although a closer reading reveals that the reported study is based on self-evaluations of entrepreneurship alumni. On the contrary, in research, the evidence on the impacts

of entrepreneurship education has been challenging to verify (e.g. Lackéus, 2015). In policy language, employability and entrepreneurship are broad and vague concepts; therefore, it is not always easy to perceive causations between them. While entrepreneurship refers to both business behaviour and mindset, employability is related to finding and maintaining a job, wage level and individual skills and attitudes that are desirable in a candidate from an employer's perspective. One such example of a broad definition of employability is to consider it a 'combination of knowledge, competences and personal attributes that make graduates more likely to gain employment and progress during their career' (EC, 2014b, p. 15).

In entrepreneurship education, employability is parallel to intrapreneurial behaviour, which refers to an individual's ability to entrepreneurially devote to work and be innovative as an employee. Again, this is acknowledged as important for economic reasons:

Entrepreneurship education will make young people more employable and more 'intrapreneurial' in their work within existing organisations, across the social, public and private sectors. Therefore, investing in entrepreneurship education is one of the highest-return investments that Europe can make. (EC, 2013a, p. 4)

Altogether, the core problem shaped in the policy language is the lack of adequate skills and attributes needed for becoming an entrepreneurial labour market citizen. In other words, European graduates are seen as not being well-equipped to meet the demands and needs of the European knowledge economy. For example, reasons for youth unemployment are found to originate from a lack of skills and competences; thus, skills development in entrepreneurship education is a solution to the Europe's economic challenges and unemployment. Overall, describing problems in individual characteristics and responsibilities is emphasised over structural problems; thus, the current perspective on education in the policy is highly individualistic.

### *Problem 2: Obsolete Higher Education*

The role of higher education in this reasoning is to offer opportunities and to make personal development towards employability possible. Higher education is set in a key position in the knowledge economy, which has increased expectations towards higher education institutions. However,

endeavours to modernise European higher education (e.g. EC, 2012c, 2013c, 2014b) reveal the presumptions of outdated contents and methods of present-day higher education. The need to improve the contents of higher education to make it more relevant to the labour market, as well as expectations to increase connections to labour market actors, points out how higher education is currently accused of failing to prepare young people for the labour market. In this reasoning, higher education currently appears to be too academic and theoretical. There seems to be an assumption that by modernising higher education, it is possible to produce employable graduates who are skilled and updated and able to help both themselves and Europe succeed. The attributes of entrepreneurial employability pursued in entrepreneurship education emphasise productivity, adaptability and innovativeness. From the governmentality perspective, the policy texts construct a higher education system that produces able-minded citizens who can guarantee the competitiveness of Europe.

Education and training systems have to be modernised to reinforce their efficiency and quality and to equip people with the skills and competences they need to succeed in the labour market. (EU, 2012a, p. 1)

European education and training systems continue to fall short in providing the right skills for employability and are not working adequately with business or employers to bring the learning experience closer to the reality of the working environment. These skills mismatches are a growing concern for European industry's competitiveness. (EC, 2012c, p. 2)

The graduate who has received high-quality teaching is more likely to be adaptable, assured, innovative, entrepreneurial and employable in the broadest sense of the term. (EC, 2013c, p. 13)

In sum, the problem in higher education that was defined in the documents is the lack of quality and efficiency of teaching and learning, which does not meet the needs of the labour market. The discourse on employability underlines these problems, placing a strong emphasis on practical learning and connections to business and labour market actors. From the governmentality perspective, the objective seems to be the transformation of higher education institutions into more labour market and business-relevant organisations. This emerging transformation of higher education institutions to 'business institutions' will alter the roles of students, teachers and researchers in universities (see also Laalo et al., 2019).

Involving employers and labour market institutions in the design and delivery of programmes, supporting staff exchanges and including practical experience in courses can help attune curricula to current and emerging labour market needs and foster employability and entrepreneurship. (EC, 2011, p. 5)

These wishes are taken to practice and answered in the pedagogy of entrepreneurship education that leans on learning by doing, practical experiences and connections to working life and business (e.g. EC, 2013a, 2013b). For example, in higher education, it is seen as useful to

bring entrepreneurs into the classroom and involve students directly in enterprise projects. Using active learning methods is more complex than traditional teaching methods. It requires engaging students' feelings and emotions in the learning process. (EC, 2012b, p. 70)

This citation is an example of how becoming an employable graduate also requires emotional reflectiveness. This reasoning is a sign of therapeutic governmentality, which emphasises motivation and positive attitudes (see e.g. Brunila et al., 2020). To understand oneself as an employable labour market citizen, one needs to have the capability to control their emotions and affects in unsecure and unpredictable labour markets.

### *Problem 3: Risk Society and Risky Labour Markets*

In committing European graduates to pursue success in their personal lives and in global competition, risk has an important role to play. One presumption that overlaps the texts is that the uncertain nature of society and labour markets demands graduates who can deal with risks. The ability to manage risks is hence part of the desired skills and attributes of the employable subject pursued. The frequent mentioning of crises, change and uncertain circumstances in the documents creates an impression of a fully unpredictable future to which, slightly paradoxically, citizens must be well prepared. Entrepreneurship education, in its attempt to shape the entrepreneurial mindset of students, is thus an apt solution. The use of the term 'we' in the policy language indicates committing and speaking directly to Europeans. It is articulated how challenging times require the responsibility of all citizens:

We need change in Europe. We are facing considerable challenges—challenges too big to be dealt with by any one country acting alone: the economic crisis; unemployment, especially for young people; changing demographics; the emergence of new competitors; new technologies and modes of working. Europe can no longer rest on its laurels. We need to become more outward-looking, more innovative, and to put our societies on a sustainable footing for the future. (EC, 2013c, p. 4)

The analysis revealed three perspectives on risk: the risk society and risky labour markets as a neutral fact, the risk of social exclusion as a deterrence and risk-taking as an empowering skill. First, the uncertainty of the economy and the labour markets is described as a natural phenomenon that individuals cannot escape. In describing the challenges of the knowledge economy, the documents create and maintain an understanding of unavoidable risks and uncertainties that students must simply learn to tolerate. The economic crisis and the uncertainty in the labour market are taken for granted, and the risky nature of society is thus a fact that citizens must accept and adapt towards. The challenging social circumstances are thus used as a justification for shaping the mindsets of individuals.

Indeed, solutions to the challenging social circumstances are found from shaping citizens' mindset and characteristics, which reveals how citizens' attributes, rather than social structures, are constructed problematic: citizens should better fit the surrounding circumstances. Employability in itself is an example of converting structural problems of unemployment to individual problems. This reasoning is typical for neoliberal governing, where gains and losses are individualised.

Second, although risk is depicted as inevitable and acceptable, it is also used as deterrence. For example, in highlighting the importance of entrepreneurship education in order to ensure employability, the lack of entrepreneurial skills and neglecting the demand to develop employability appear as risks of unemployment and social exclusion. For instance, it is explained how 'entrepreneurship education can help to protect an individual against social exclusion' (EC, 2015, p. 12)—implying that a failure to obtain entrepreneurship education involves a social risk.

Although entrepreneurship education is seen as a tool to boost students to pursue success, it is the individual who is responsible for their own success and failure in their risky working life; students are taught to take the future in their own hands, thus bringing about the individual risk of unemployment. Demands for constant personal development and

updating of skills, which the policy documents call for, are preparations for an uncertain tomorrow.

Third, in the goals of entrepreneurial pedagogy, the ability to manage risks holds a strong empowering ethos. For example, a report showing evidence on the impact of entrepreneurship education (EC, 2015) defines the term ‘sense of empowerment’ to be part of entrepreneurial attitude. Entrepreneurial skills, such as taking and managing risk, are acknowledged as important (e.g. EC, 2013a, 2015). Furthermore, taking risks, failing and coping with uncertainty are acknowledged as part of entrepreneurial behaviour and are therefore encouraged. Furthermore, failure, as ‘an integral part of the entrepreneurial process’ (EC, 2013a, p. 53), is positively recognised as a learning experience. Bold risk-takers empowered by entrepreneurship education are to be celebrated. Accordingly, educators and facilitators ‘must be able to create an open environment in which students develop the necessary confidence to take risks’ (EC, 2012b, p. 69).

To conclude, by appealing to risk and uncertain labour markets, students are guided to internalise the importance of constant self-development for demanded knowledge, skills, attitudes and emotions, while higher education institutions are expected to adopt practices to foster such self-reflective subjects. In entrepreneurship education, tolerating uncertainty and learning from failures are important principles (Rae et al., 2012; Komulainen et al., 2020), which reflect the interpretation of risks as something that individuals must accept and adapt to and, in the most successful cases, take advantage of. In sum, risk is inherent in competitive life.

The individualisation of risks is visible in policy discourse. It constitutes the character of a neoliberal or even neurotic citizen who is constantly assessing and developing oneself to manage risks in uncertain environments. In this discourse, it is the individual who must accommodate oneself to risks and uncertainty by becoming proactive and self-responsible.

## DISCUSSION: EMPOWERED OR NEUROTIC CITIZENS?

In this chapter, we have analysed the policy documents and language of the European Union to understand how the employable higher education graduate is constructed in EU policy. Our study indicates how European graduates are governed to develop their employability and thus to benefit the European economic area. In light of our analysis, during the past decade, there has been a strong emphasis on EU policy to foster empowered citizens who actively take care of themselves and their employability,

and by doing so also benefit the economic success of the whole of Europe. It appears that entrepreneurship education in creating partnerships with labour market actors and in developing the entrepreneurial mindset and skills of graduates is suggested as an apt solution to problems represented in the policy. This empowerment of citizens is articulated as important in the context of various uncertainties. By appealing to risks and uncertainties, the documents participate in constructing the ‘risk society’ as a structural fact that individuals must adapt to.

Seemingly, the policy is about ‘taking care’ of the employability of graduates. However, our analysis also points out how uncertain and risky labour markets are used as deterrence that places pressure on individuals. This is where the image of a neurotic citizen might become materialised: in light of the policy texts, it is the individual who is responsible for constant personal development and updating of skills. This same rhetoric is also familiar with the politics of lifelong learning (Kinnari, 2020). Neglecting these demands may, according to the discourse, lead individuals to drop out of society, thus weakening the position of Europe in global competition. The role of educational institutions and entrepreneurship education as a governing technology is to offer opportunities and tools for the development of personal potential. The perspective on higher education in the policy is thus highly individualistic.

Some scholars have suggested that there is an ongoing turn from neoliberalism to neuroliberalism (e.g. Isin, 2004; Whitehead et al., 2017). In neuroliberalism, individuals are acknowledged as irrational and emotional in their economic behaviour and choices rather than rational decision-makers. This interpretation is legitimated by behavioural economics, psychology and neurological science (Rose & Abi-Rached, 2014). These points also make it interesting to consider the role of emotions in the governing practices appealing to risk. In entrepreneurship education, passion and excitement are emphasised (Berglund, 2013), and in studies addressing the topic, affects and emotions are increasingly investigated and acknowledged as important (Keller & Kozlinska, 2019). When it comes to the production of the neurotic citizen, it seems that both empowering and intimidation play an important role. Governing through neurosis in the context of entrepreneurship education seems to be about balancing threats and opportunities.

In this study, our focus has been on how the subject is objectivised in policy texts (see Deacon & Parker, 1995; Leask, 2012). By studying the policies, we have not been able to reach the level of actual subjectification;

it has been outside the scope of our research to determine how far individuals actually comply with the policies and how far these policies are materialised in practices such as national policies, developmental projects, educational institutions, and so on. The subject always has the power to resist or comply with supranational policy recommendations. This is an important point to be taken into account in future research. Our study has shed light on the unintentional and unpredictable consequences of employability policy, and we believe that investigating this more deeply in the future would be fruitful.

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# The Affective Life of Neoliberal Employability Discourse

*Karen Handley and Jill Millar*

## INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, we re-examine employability and neoliberal practices that shape the subjectivities of university students, making three interlinked arguments.

Firstly, we argue for the need to move beyond seeing neoliberal subjectivities as solely constructed by the interplay between discursive and material practices. In doing so, we take seriously the affective life of neoliberalism and those affects that saturate the formation and circulation of neoliberal reason (Anderson, 2016, p. 736). We suggest that neoliberalism has a ‘psychological register’ (Ehrstein et al., 2020, p. 198), whose ‘happy objects’ (Ahmed, 2010, p. 30) of freedom, enterprise and success resonate with individuals, encouraging them to become subject to a neoliberal discourse of employability.

We then apply an affective lens to explore how final-year students talk about becoming an employable graduate. We examine finalists’ discursive repertoires and their affective responses to various recruitment practices.

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In doing so, we identify some inherent tensions in becoming employable. For example, the qualities of self-confidence and resilience that are associated with the happy object of success (Ahmed, 2010)—translated in this context as ‘being an employable graduate’—seem to conflict with narratives encouraging graduates to continually seek advice, mentoring and feedback (Wright, 2011). In this light, success becomes potentially unachievable, reinscribing the imperative for ongoing self-improvement and perpetuating a dependence on external sources of validation.

Finally, we argue that in the context of graduate recruitment, the affective life of neoliberalism is opening a space for new online advice applications whose seductive promise is to help graduating students become the success (i.e. an employable graduate) they want to be, by helping them to game the recruitment process. We focus on technologies such as recruitment apps and advice platforms, which encourage students to value the practised performance of employability over the possession of employable attributes.

### IDEAS OF AFFECT

Scholarship on affect, like that of Massumi (2002), is a response to a perceived lack of recognition of the role of feeling and embodiment as part of social practice (Fischer, 2016). It is argued that this failure of recognition is reflected in an overemphasis on cognition (and thus discourse) in understanding modes of experience and meaning-making (Massumi, 2002). As a consequence, there has been a ‘turn to affect’ in some sociological analyses (Leys, 2011).

Affect, however, is a nebulous concept. The imprecision and uncertainty surrounding what is meant by affect reflects a cleavage in the psychological theories from which it has emerged (Leys, 2011; Wetherell, 2012). On one side, Massumi (and others including Thrift, 2004, as cited in Leys, 2011) seeks to sever the connection between cognition, emotion and affect. Pinning his discussion to interpretations of experiments on human subjects, Massumi makes the much quoted statement that there is a ‘missing half-second’ in which bodily responses (affect) are not conscious and act independently of thought in reaction to stimuli (2002, p. 28). Affect in this perspective does not have an intentional quality, but instead is linked to a palette of basic and hardwired emotions (see discussion in Leys, 2011).

In contrast, other theorists, including Wetherell (2012) and Ahmed (2004), rely on psychoanalytic ideas to resist any severance of cognition, emotion and affect. Indeed, they maintain that the outcome of such a severance is simply to re-inscribe the mind–body dualism of enlightenment thinking. Rather, Wetherell argues, affect is embodied meaning-making (2012, p. 4), involving ‘both sense and sensibility’ (2012, p. 13). From this perspective then, affect is not simply turbulence, a bodily upheaval beyond consciousness; instead, the links between nerves, body parts, behaviours, thoughts, feelings and narratives may have a range of organised, patterned, interactive and recursive qualities. Equally, Ahmed argues that it is unhelpful to make a distinction between emotion and affect. Such a distinction, she argues, obscures the complexity of the interlinkage between bodily and emotional responses (Schmitz and Ahmed, 2014). Instead, in her work (2010, 2014), she uses the term emotion to explore how affect/emotion operate in practice, and specifically how emotion (in the sense she uses the word) acts to structure the subject, ‘show[ing] how the subject arrives into a world that already has affects and feelings circulating in very particular ways’ (2014, p. 98).

In this chapter we follow the lead of Wetherell and Ahmed. We follow Ahmed in using the term emotion (and occasionally the formulation affect/emotion) to embrace the emotional thoughts, feelings and behaviours experienced by social actors, including university students as part of social practice and interactions involved in higher education in the United Kingdom, and in particular employability-related recruitment practices. As highlighted later, we focus in particular on emotion/affect as it appears in interview talk.

In arguing that the subject is part of a world in which emotions already circulate, Ahmed points to another dimension of affect/emotion, one taken up by several theorists. Rather than seeing emotion as only located within an individual, or focusing on emotional exchanges between individuals, Ahmed (2004), Anderson (2014, 2016), Shahjahan (2020) and Wetherell (2012) use a range of metaphors to propose that emotion extends beyond individuals, to social collectivities in terms of economies (Ahmed), affective practices (Wetherell), emoscapes (Shahjahan) or affective atmospheres (Anderson). Operating at a collective level, such affective emotional systems are understood as flowing between people, across space and to be temporally located. Thus, Anderson’s concept of affective atmospheres conjures ideas of climatic conditions, of high and low pressure and of temporary and diffuse clouds of emotions reflected in the notion of an

‘affective present’ (2016) or ‘climate of opinion’ (2016, p. 734 citing Friedman & Friedman, 1998). Drawing on the work of Stuart Hall, Anderson associates the era of Thatcherism with a mood of authoritarianism (2016, p. 748). From this perspective, affective atmospheres are the emotional backdrop and enabler of particular forms of reason, including neoliberal reasons. At the same time, Anderson argues that affective atmospheres can also be understood in terms of ‘structures of feeling’ (citing Williams, 1961), the particular atmospheric formations that serve to contribute to and influence the ‘affective present’ (2016, p. 746). Referring back to the Thatcher era, he argues that associated with an authoritarian mood is a sense of threat, a fear of internal enemies (miners) and of other races (Black) and ethnic groupings (Irish), that contributes to the reinforcement of a pervasive climate of opinion and to the legitimization of political and social policy initiatives.

Anderson stresses that there is not one singular structure of feeling that corresponds with a singular neoliberal reason. Rather, he provides a sense of jostling affective formations interacting in a ‘tangle’ (Anderson, 2016, p. 748, citing Collier, 2012) of different aspects of social practice that resonate with neoliberal logics to inform policy developments and the lived experience of individual subjects.

The pertinence of Anderson’s ideas to our chapter is illustrated by the work of Raco (2009). In his study of post-millennium Britain, Raco charts a shift in ideas of citizenship. He argues that ‘states’ (2009, p. 437), or more usefully the government of the day and associated interest groups, have sought to marshal discourses that work together to legitimate neoliberal forms of being which entail accepting responsibility, seeking status and success, and expressing positivity. What has emerged, he argues, is an aspirational form of citizenship, a subjectivity in which citizens have responsibilities, not rights, including the responsibility to be independent, to make and take opportunities, and to seek material and social success (2009, pp. 438–440). Citizenship in this account is not only a discursive construct, and it has affective dimensions (hope, despair, resilience, guilt, shame) produced and reproduced in historical epochs and particular locations, through Anderson’s tangle of affective atmospheres, structures of feeling and discursive flows.

In taking this approach, we are also adopting Ahmed’s argument that ‘emotions *do* things’ (2004, p. 119). That emotions ‘work, in concrete and particular ways, to mediate the relationship between the psychic and the social, and between the individual and the collective’ (Ahmed, 2004,

p. 119). In other words, emotions are ‘sticky’ (Ahmed, 2010, p. 29) binding constructs, values and concrete objects together into powerful configurations. It is emotions that imbue particular constructs with a tenacity that facilitates the circumvention of ‘rational discussion’, translating them into taken-for-granted ways of being, such as, for example, the requirement to be an aspirational responsabilized citizen.

Ahmed illustrates her argument of the ‘stickiness’ of emotions by reference to the role of family as both a social construct and a happy object. Marrying and being part of a family promises the happy-ever-after of fairy stories. In this sense, happiness as a positive affect is seen as the outcome of being married, being part of a family. But the reverse is also true; being married, being part of a family is already seen as being happy, an understanding achieved through a shared orientation within society that marriage is a happy state.

We argue below that employability enjoys a similar happy status in the current neoliberal affective atmosphere. As with the family, employability invokes the promise of happiness, in this case the happiness of a graduate job. Equally, *being employable* is already a taken-for-granted happy state. As a result, affect/emotions not only attach to and intensify concepts and ideas of employability; in so doing they are also implicated in the governance of neoliberal subjects (Blackman et al., 2008), requiring individuals to achieve employability. Those subjects who do not share the aim of employability become cast as awkward or problematic, and those who do not achieve employability—are not employable—become associated with the negative emotion of failure.

### AFFECT, GOVERNANCE AND GRADUATE EMPLOYABILITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

We now develop our second argument that the neoliberal valorisation of qualities such as enterprise, self-confidence and resilience seems at odds with a parallel narrative insinuating that individuals are never ‘good enough’, and which continually encourages them to seek out guidance, coaching and advice with an elusive promise of thereby achieving success. In doing so, we draw on Grey’s (1994) classic study of an accountancy firm and his conceptualisation of ‘career as a project of the self’, as well as our own research on graduate employability (Handley, 2018; Handley & den Outer, 2022).

In his 1994 article, Grey moved the debate about labour process discipline from its traditional focus on surveillance and the panoptique techniques of the workplace, towards the ‘various ways in which governmentality operates on, in and through subjects’ (p. 479) who are thereby encouraged to self-manage and self-discipline themselves. Whilst acknowledging the power of workplace practices such as performance appraisals (see also the classic work by Townley, 1993, 1994), Grey turned his attention to the self-disciplining produced as an individual crafts his or her career as an entrepreneurial project of the self. This process begins even before individuals start their first job (p. 482). The subject being constructed is not the ‘organisation man’ of Whyte’s era (1956) but an enterprising self for whom a career is likely to cross organisational and occupational boundaries in the search for new and self-serving opportunities (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996).

Of particular interest to this chapter are Grey’s observations about the affective qualities that successful recruitment candidates felt they should display and inhabit. Above all, accountancy trainees were ‘expected to display enthusiasm and commitment at all times, regardless of the tediousness of the chores assignment to them’ (1994, p. 486). The displays of enthusiasm were not necessarily instrumental acts. Although disillusioned by the tedium of basic auditing, the trainees reframed their affective experience in positive terms, as an important rite-of-passage in a longer-term career project. As one individual commented, ‘I don’t think “this is really boring”; I think “this is getting me to where I want to be” [because] it’s getting me a qualification I can do anything with’ (p. 487). A disillusioning task was thus invested with a future-oriented meaning linked to the happy object of employability and graduate employment.

Grey’s analysis shows how the affective life of trainee accountants is shaped through a range of informal and formal workplace interventions, albeit with the driving force coming from the individuals themselves as they construct their career as entrepreneurial selves. But what is it that feeds the form and substance of these workplace interventions? The governmentality literature has shone an analytical light on some of the ‘webs of knowledge and expertise’ (Grey, 1994, p. 480)—especially from the ‘psy’ disciplines including psychiatry and psychology—that have produced a range of intervention techniques such as annual appraisal procedures and practice (e.g. see Townley, 1993). We know that such schemes encourage

individuals to understand and evaluate themselves in particular ways encoded in the scheme, in a process that Ikonen and Nikunen (2019, p. 824) have called ‘steering at a distance’ (see also Foucault, 1978; Rose, 1999; Walters, 2012). But what is less well discussed is the affective dimension of governmentality.

One contention explored in this chapter is that the affective atmosphere associated with neoliberalism encourages individuals to want to become aspirational, self-reliant and adaptable. Raco (2009), for example, describes a neoliberal governance which sees the state as a facilitator of (but not an automatic provider to) individuals in a responsibilities-based politics (pp. 437–8). He contrasts this with the ‘old-fashioned policies’ (p. 436) of the UK welfare state and its emphasis on a fair distribution of collective wealth, and on a rights-based political focus. Raco contends that the path for the emergence of a neoliberal politics was enabled by a public mood (or what Anderson might call an affective atmosphere) increasingly vocal in its disdain for people deemed to be ‘living off the state’, at the same time when other citizens found working/living conditions to be precarious in what Giddens (2003) called a ‘runaway world’ of insecurity. In the context of this public mood, a neoliberal politics could flourish which celebrated active, aspirational, entrepreneurial citizens as those who deserved (and were more likely) to succeed. At the same time, however, what was lost was the security associated with a view that the Keynesian welfare state would always be there to support all citizens in times of hardship (Raco, 2009, p. 438). A fear of insecurity if one did *not* take responsibility for one’s future, alongside a positive vision of the fruits of entrepreneurial activity, fostered a shift from what Raco describes as a politics of expectation to a politics of aspiration (p. 438).

In this context, employability offers subjects the promise of happiness, and employability shapes their affective experience. In Grey’s study (as just one example), displays of enthusiasm and willingness to cheerfully endure humdrum tasks become attributes which the accountancy appraisal systems in Grey’s study valorised as being so important. Looking more widely across a range of occupations, the ‘right’ attitudes for entrepreneurial workers come to be associated with initiative, flexibility, adaptability and availability (Brown & Hesketh, 2004; Vallas & Cummins, 2015).

## AFFECT AND DISCURSIVE REPERTOIRES IN A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

In the final section of this chapter, we illustrate some of the ways that university students talk about employability. To do so, we draw on findings from an earlier study of final-year students talking about what employability means to them, how they try to demonstrate that quality during recruitment processes and how they project an employability which reflects an entrepreneurial self (Handley & den Outer, 2022). The chapter draws out discursive repertoires as well as affective dimensions of their talk about employability.

The topic explored in the study was employability in relation to the graduate recruitment process. We know that a good proportion of university students want a graduate job, and especially one that offers a formal graduate development programme combining a decent salary with structured training and mentoring opportunities. In exchange for hard work and enthusiastic commitment, graduates expect to finish such development programmes as highly marketable individuals with career options in the same organisation or with a new employer (de Vos et al., 2009; Clarke & Scurry, 2020). However, as might be expected, such graduate development programmes are highly competitive. Recruitment is often a long, drawn-out process in which applicants must regularly demonstrate their eligibility in order to pass through to the next (and subsequent) stages. The filtering and funnelling that characterises graduate recruitment processes means that to reach the final stages of face-to-face interviews or assessment centres, applicants must usually complete multiple online tasks and gamified psychometric quizzes, and create content such as recorded ‘interview presentations’, that is, answering pre-given questions to a webcam but without a live audience (Stone et al., 2015; Georgiou & Nikolaou, 2020; Jack, 2020).

Recruitment is thus a complicated journey that finalists must successfully navigate if they want the prize of a graduate job. In our study, we examined how finalists talk about their expectations and experiences of navigating recruitment processes, including how they interpret the messaging in the graduate-job promotional materials they encounter. The study complements our earlier work on how graduate recruitment websites discursively construct the notion of the employable graduate (Handley, 2018), by exploring the perspective of finalists themselves.

The design of the study combined interviews ( $n = 17$ ) and two focus groups ( $n = 7$ ) with finalists from a university in the relatively affluent southeast of England. Focus group participants also engaged in an individual interview of between 40 and 70 minutes. Of the 17 participants, 9 were female and 8 male. Finalists were from a range of disciplines including sciences ( $n = 6$ ), business and management ( $n = 9$ ), and humanities ( $n = 2$ ). The university in question is not in the top ‘Russell Group’ of research-led institutions, but nevertheless has a high proportion of privately educated undergraduates compared with most UK universities (HESA, 2020), and the participants are thus likely to be from middle-class families with relatively high career aspirations. All interviews were audio-recorded and fully transcribed. Transcripts, first-order coding and memoing were managed with the support of the proprietary software package, MAXQDA. Second-order coding and interpretation of data tended to rely on memoing and on discussions between the research team members as we read, re-read and drew out themes that pertained to finalists’ discursive repertoires and their affective responses to various recruitment practices.

As a starting point, we asked interviewees what the term ‘employability’ meant to them. The struggles which finalists expressed in trying to pin down this concept reminded us of Morley’s labelling of it as a ‘socially decontextualised signifier’ (2001, p. 131): that employability makes sense only when associated with a specific context. Without that context, many of our participants struggled to identify anything more specific than ‘having skills’ such as team-working. Some talked of employability in terms of possession (Holmes, 2013) of skills, knowledge and attitudes, and a small proportion talked of a ‘fit’ or ‘match’ with the employer, especially cultural fit. Affective dispositions were also cited, such as the importance of having and demonstrating an ‘enthusiasm and willingness’ to do more, and to give ‘all your efforts’ [Sapta, psychology<sup>1</sup>], in a manner resonant with Grey’s 1994 study reported earlier.

Interviewees seldom mentioned the substantive content of degree programmes unless we asked a direct question about that. Science students acknowledged that particular degree qualifications opened the door to technical roles such as biomedical clinician, but students on business and management programmes rarely cited or praised subjects or modules. One student [Jess] mentioned her ethics module, but implied that its value was

<sup>1</sup> All names are pseudonyms.

more in signalling her personal moral qualities, rather than in learning about ethical frameworks and their application to management dilemmas. For non-science disciplines, the degree programme was generally seen as a plain vanilla baseline, needed to meet graduate employers' recruitment filter of having an upper-second-class degree in order to meet the first hurdle for a graduate job. In our earlier research on graduate recruitment websites, we found that this narrative—that the degree is only a mere starting point—was prevalent across many sectors, particularly those that require a professional qualification for trainee practitioners, such as accountancy. None of the participants in our study chose to counter these narratives by citing higher education's broader educational and cultural values. The affective quality of students' talk about their degree programmes was thus surprisingly neutral, without either enthusiasm or anxiety. Instead, the affective life of neoliberal employability discourse flourished in discussions about how employability was *performed*, resonating with Brown and Hesketh's (2004) suggestion that finalists learn to become 'players' in a game where the happy object (Ahmed, 2010) of a successful graduate job comes to those who perform employability in desirable ways.

Most of our interviewees had much to say about the tactics required to navigate recruitment processes. Some cited templates such as S.T.A.R.<sup>2</sup> which had been learnt from university careers services as well as from graduate recruitment advice websites (such as sites from accountancy firm PwC or from third-party recruitment agents<sup>3</sup>). Indeed, it was sometimes the recruitment websites themselves that offered guidance to steer and coach finalists on how to get a graduate job. One interviewee talked of the proliferation of online situational 'tests' given to job applications. In a typical test, applicants are given a problem situation such as a customer complaint and asked to type (in 'no more than 200 words') their thinking process and response. The recruitment sites offer *both* tests and guidance on completing those tests, in a formulation that resonates with Foucault's conception of a governance practice (Foucault, 1978, 1982; see also Rose, 1999).

<sup>2</sup> S.T.A.R. = Situation, Task, Action, Result. Sometimes an E is added for Evaluation.

<sup>3</sup> For example, see <https://www.prospects.ac.uk/careers-advice/interview-tips/psychometric-tests> and <https://www.pwc.co.uk/careers/student-careers/undergraduate-graduate-careers/our-programmes/graduate-opportunities.html>

Whilst some finalists expressed confidence that they'd learned to signal employability, others were anxious about this processual aspect of employability and were continually on the lookout for yet more advice, guidance, tips and interview-response templates about how to display the right kind of employability. One might interpret this signalling activity as a form of agency around how to craft the appropriate persona, and how to manage impressions (Goffman, 1959). But this interpretation overlooks the extent to which recruitment websites and other sources of advice are already shaping assumptions about what is an appropriate performance.

When explaining how they learn to navigate recruitment processes, the finalists in our study talked of directly asking people from a wide range of information sources: family, former placement employers, alumni and—less frequently—lecturers and university careers services. Graduate recruitment websites are also used as sources, but the information is 'read' in different ways—sometimes uncritically, but sometimes from more effective positionings such as distancing or cynicism. As part of our interview protocol, we showed participants websites from well-known graduate recruiters that regularly appear in The Times Top 100 Graduate Recruiters list,<sup>4</sup> including PricewaterhouseCoopers (accountancy), Jaguar Land Rover (automotive), Aldi (food retail) and Goldman Sachs (financial services). Our working assumption was that the materials on these sites might have a governing effect by encouraging potential applicants to notice the visually and discursively represented characteristics of graduate work, to evaluate themselves against that representation, and then to copy that representation to some extent (or actively resist it). What we noticed instead was a more nuanced variation in the way our interviewees talked about the graduate recruitment websites. We identified four patterns of what Potter and Wetherell (1987) call 'discursive repertoires'. These repertoires were sometimes used in conflicting ways by the same participant, and so do not characterise individuals as such. The repertoires that we observed were reading for 'fit', reading instrumentally, distancing and benign cynicism. For comparative purposes, we include an illustrative quotation for each of these repertoires below (Table 5.1).

Finalists talked positively and enthusiastically of the prize of the happy object of a graduate job and the success that was expected to follow, but also expressed anxiety about how to manage and 'game' the process. This was especially the case for those who had already begun job-hunting.

<sup>4</sup><https://www.top100graduateemployers.com/>

**Table 5.1** Discursive repertoires

<i>Discursive repertoire</i>	<i>Illustration</i>
Reading for ‘fit’	‘Employability is about the skills needed. Does the person fit? So, usually I look at the job description, and it has “you need to be creative and analytical thinking”. It has a list, so I look at that. Employability is really whether you just fit what they’re looking for’. [Jenny, business]
Reading instrumentally	‘I prepared for the assessment Centre by trying to memorise what they had said about their values and their ethics, and then saying that <i>I completely agreed with the ethics and their values and I’m the right man for this kind of thing because ...</i> I believe we believe in the same things. Stuff like that’. [Andy, English literature, emphasis added]
Distancing	When looking at the Aldi website, Mina noted the highly structured portrayal of a working day and the activities involved, and inferred that the company probably wanted someone analytical, and ‘fitting their structure’. After a short pause, she added ‘not me’. [Mina, marketing]
Benign cynicism	Adam said his first impression of the Goldman Sachs site was ‘it’s all very CSR’, and he later commented that it is so easy for the major companies to ‘put on this façade of who they want people to think they are’. [Adam, business]

\*Corporate social responsibility

Anxiety about the process was also anticipatory, in that many had heard horror stories from other job-seekers who told of long trajectories of online tests, automated online interviews (with no real person to talk to), quizzes and other hurdles that had to be mastered before getting to the holy grail of an assessment centre or real-person interview. The early stages had to be mastered through guile and strategy, as explained by Lottie:

It’s not so much that you force yourself to be someone else but you do have to show or emphasise their values. Maybe they don’t quite match, or you don’t quite feel as strongly about them, but you have to demonstrate it to get to the next stage. It’s about getting to the face-to-face, to meeting people—getting rid of all the online things—then you can be yourself. But you’re always having to push and become the company, to get to that bit. [Lottie, marketing]

Learning to ‘get to the face-to-face’ encouraged finalists to seek out and be open to the seductive promise—of ‘happy-ever-after’ graduate employment—from the online recruitment-advice apps and graduate

websites. Finalists are routinely drawn towards new apps such as ‘Debut’ to learn to ‘be employable’: to learn what to do, say, wear, document in one’s CV and so on. These apps, sometimes contained in graduate recruitment websites and sometimes embedded in third-party commercial apps, tend to rely on algorithmic matching and profiling processes and are instantiated in psychometric tests, gamification apps, talent-spotting apps and various online and often-automated applications which offer coaching, practice runs for the psychometric tests, ‘hints-and-tips’ advice—all to beat ‘the system’ and get to those final selection stages where you can talk to a real person. The offer of a helping hand by a supportive coach (even if only a bot) is compelling. Lottie talked of the Debut phone app:

You can build your own profile on the [Debut] app and then you get talent spots, so it’s like, ‘Oh, congratulations, you have been talent spotted by BT’ and you get first slot to register for the BT video talking about their graduate scheme. You can be fast-tracked. If they’re trying new innovative ways to engage a new audience, I like that. I appreciate it. And you connect with them better because it gives you hints and tips about the application process. [Lottie, marketing]

Online games were also mentioned and were well-regarded as a youth-friendly addition to an employer’s suite of recruitment tools. Finalists seemed to assume that the apps gave them a positional (Holmes, 2013) advantage over others, although one [Mina, marketing] commented that her long-standing business interests were surely more valid than ‘comments picked up from a job site’. However, the growing proliferation of these helper apps seemed to create another existential issue for some of our participants: the continual anxiety that there must be yet another piece of advice to be sought and mastered, another S.T.A.R.-type template to be found and used. Jessica illustrates this affective crisis of confidence and feeling of failure which made her ever more dependent on advice. Her experience illustrates what Archer called fractured reflexivity (2012), where the internal conversations about how to proceed are overwhelmed by choices and advice to the detriment of agentic decision-making.

I go to university, and yet I can’t even get a job at Tesco, so what is it they want? ... It’s frustrating. I work so hard for [the online assessments], but if you can’t get past that—(sigh). I’m hardworking and I like a challenge—I think that should make me employable. I’ve done so much research. I get all of those books, and I’m looking for the type of person they want. You know,

in Careers, they have the books like TARGETjobs, and there will be a page about how to update your CV, so I'll read those and I'll make notes and then I'll go back to my CV ... I don't want it to look like 'oh, she's copied that' [Jenny, business, emphasis added]

Our exploratory study showed signs of how the advisory landscape for graduating students is changing. Whilst employability advice has traditionally been offered by real people engaged in real conversations—for example, by advisers in university career services—the advisory landscape has rapidly extended beyond universities to online and mobile apps, driven by algorithmic decisioning and possibly funded by third-party commercial mediators who may have little direct connection with the employers themselves. This implies that the mechanisms by which students are learning about employability are increasingly out of the control of universities and graduate employers. There are at least two possible reasons for this shift: one commercial, and the second connected to the purported rise of the 'therapeutic society'. The commercial reason is perhaps that as recruitment moves online, and CVs and personal data are shared with third-party apps such as Debut, recruitment becomes digitised and potentially monetised by commercial platforms in a process fuelled by surveillance capitalism and the 'new gold' of aggregated personal data (Zuboff, 2019). It is plausible that recruitment advice and practice-testing platforms are operating on a business model, whereby interactions with students are free because their data (e.g. uploaded CVs, and responses to online tests linked to personal data) are highly valuable to the data aggregator. A second reason relates to what some argue is the rise of the 'therapeutic society' (Wright, 2011; Ecclestone, 2009), whereby individuals increasingly seek out advice, mentoring and coaching. Advice is sought in anticipation of successful outcomes such as the status and rewards of a graduate job, and advice-seeking is construed as the act of responsible citizens. Yet the elusiveness of success generates anxiety, which fuels more advice-seeking in the hope of finding the 'right' guidance as a passport to getting the graduate job.

## CONCLUSION

At the beginning of this chapter we argued for the need to take seriously the affective life of neoliberalism and to move beyond seeing neoliberal subjectivities as constructed solely by an interplay between discursive and

material practices. Affective atmospheres (Anderson, 2016) become the emotional backdrop and enabler of particular forms of reasoning and drive particular forms of behaviour. We argued that the ‘psychological register’ (Ehrstein et al., 2020) of neoliberalism valorises an aspirational self-confidence that success will come provided one is enterprising, self-confident, resilient and enthusiastic. As shown in work by Grey (1994), Brown and Hesketh (2004) and others (e.g. Handley & den Outer, 2022), some graduate job candidates are led to seek the happy object of success by learning to ‘play the game’ and displaying the qualities that they believe employers expect of them. They learn the value of inhabiting a discourse of responsibility and initiative, and so demonstrate a desire and willingness to learn how to perform employability and to show that they ‘fit’. Paradoxically, our research also found that whilst many job-seeking graduates spoke the language of enterprise, enthusiasm and positivity, at the same time some expressed a deep anxiety about needing to do more, not being ‘good enough’ and wanting more advice, practice tests, guidance and coaching. It seems that although our graduate interviewees bought into an aspirational ‘happy-ever-after’ narrative, some became more dependent (and less self-reliant) on the expanding employability advice market, and on the third-party commercial organisations that feed on job-seekers’ insecurities.

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# Grounding Employability in Both Agency and Collective Identity: An Emancipatory Agenda for Higher Education

*Peter Kahn and Mariangela Lundgren-Resenterra*

## INTRODUCTION

In recent years the concept of employability has received significant attention from higher education policymakers and academics alike. The term ‘employability’ is typically used to denote the capacity of graduates to secure employment opportunities in an ever-changing working context (European Commission, 2016; Minocha et al., 2018; Peeters et al., 2019; Tomlinson, 2010). However, the concept remains one that is indeterminate, given the way in which different authors ground it in a variety of models and conceptual frameworks (Römgens et al., 2020). Most of these

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frameworks associate employability with both personal skills development and contextual factors related to finding and keeping a job (Forrier et al., 2009). Personal skills are primarily taken to refer to generic work-related competencies, such as those outlined by Römgens et al. (2020): disciplinary knowledge, transferable generic skills, emotional regulation, career development skills, self-management and self-efficacy (p. 2598). Contextual factors, meanwhile, refer to changing professional circumstances and work conditions to ensure present and future employment opportunities (Peeters et al., 2019).

The European Commission (2016) contended that higher education institutions (HEIs) should provide education programmes that develop personal skills to help graduates secure employment. The Dearing Report (NCIHE, 1997), meanwhile, argued nearly three decades ago that higher education plays a crucial role in fostering graduate employability for the global competitiveness of a nation's economy. As a result of such formulations of policy, HEIs have been pressured into providing education programmes that promote generic skills development required by the labour market over more personal experiences, enabling people to flourish on their own terms (Lundgren-Resenterra & Kahn, 2019). Alongside this, though, there is a clear tendency for HEIs to suggest that individual skills are goods that possess an ongoing market value, with graduates able to secure future work opportunities as a result of having previously engaged in a programme of education. Such a view is based on the long-standing notion from human capital theory that the performativity of employees is increased as their generic skills improve (Becker, 1975). Tomlinson et al. (2021), indeed, acknowledged the impact of both human and social capital on successful employment outcomes. They referred to human capital as the personal skills developed during higher education studies and their transference to work. Social capital, meanwhile, was taken to be a resource that stems from one's social relations and networks, a resource that enables a graduate to mobilise their human capital within a labour market—at least if they are sufficiently adaptable. Despite the recognition that employability articulates with complex social processes, however, social capital is understood by Tomlinson et al. (2021) to pertain primarily to individual and functional aspects of work relations, failing to connect to a collective dimension more fully.

What this overall policy agenda fails to recognise sufficiently clearly, however, is that employability significantly depends on the concerns and agency of graduates, and on whether or not such concerns give rise to

concrete projects and ongoing practices (Archer, 2000). It remains the case that students need to prepare for jobs that are yet to be invented, jobs which will require skills and competencies that are still to be determined (Römgens et al., 2020). What this means is that graduates are likely in due course to need to pursue further learning projects in order to achieve desired forms of employment on an ongoing basis. Furthermore, a dominant focus on individual skills development securing future employment prospects disregards and distorts the collective purposes connected with employment (Kahn & Lundgren-Resenterra, 2021). Indeed, as Ashforth et al. (2008) argued, what makes work a collective endeavour are the everyday organisational practices based on shared concerns that strengthen common values, beliefs and goal achievement, thereby linking persons to their enterprises. They defined a ‘collective’ as an entity of any scale that is constituted by people, whether a group, department, organisation or something similar. Sayer (2007), meanwhile, has argued that scope to flourish while at work is closely linked to the extent that one is dependent on others, for instance given our need for respect from others and mutual recognition.

Unfortunately, a range of serious issues arise where marketisation colonises an endeavour such as that of higher education. Fraser (2014) contended that the world is facing a severe and complex crisis, in which the biosphere is being destroyed, social cooperation is languishing and the global economy is based on paper values. The origins of this crisis are identified in this analysis by Fraser as arising from a commodification of nature, culture and money. Sandel (2012) similarly has argued that society as a whole has become marketised, rather than just economies, with higher education included within this marketised society. Even work itself, however, is closely affected by marketisation. In downplaying both agential and collective purposes associated with employment, higher education thus undercuts the possibilities for both society as a whole and for individual graduates to thrive. A significant shift will be required in policy frameworks that are dominant globally if these challenges are to be addressed.

We can highlight what is at stake here by considering the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that were set by the United Nations member states in order to eradicate poverty and address climate change (United Nations General Assembly, 2015). Steele and Rickards (2021) argued that to address the global challenges linked to the SDG agenda, HEIs should promote integrative action that generates transformational change. They

suggested, by contrast, however, given competing interpretations of the SDGs, that there is a danger that these goals might be colonised for individual and national competitiveness for economic growth. Indeed, this might seem to be likely to occur given that the very idea of development is deeply rooted in the Western ways of thinking and norms of governance. What remains evident, though, is that the conception of employability that is implicitly present within the SDGs discourse relates most directly to the human capital that Tomlinson et al. (2021) identified, whether global citizenship, critical thinking, problem-solving competencies, literacy, numeracy, and business and technology skills. It is hard to see how HEIs will be able to convert themselves into civic universities that co-produce the common good with communities, workplaces and other institutions, as Steele and Rickards (2021) have argued, if employability itself is not reconsidered in terms of a collective dimension, in order to enable production and consumption practices that are sustainable.

There is clearly a need for analyses that consider how higher education can provide learning that enables graduates to make contributions to organisations and collectives of all kinds, contributions which have the flourishing of society in mind rather than just the economic rewards that are available to individuals through complying with labour market demands. Collective action is needed to impact on effective responses to the coronavirus pandemic and to intergovernmental discussions on climate change, for instance, in coming to agreements and road maps for taking things forward in a timely and satisfactory fashion. There is a great deal at stake for society in handling both graduate employability and work on a collective level.

This chapter thus seeks to treat the collective basis for employability in close detail. It looks to rethink graduate employability in relation to key social concerns for society at large, concerns that have been downplayed in the existing discourse on graduate employability. The research design used in this chapter can best be described as conceptual analysis (Gilson & Goldberg, 2015), one that offers an original synthesis of existing theoretical and empirical studies in order to address the chapter's key concerns. This chapter develops recent critical realist theorising on the concept of employability by Kahn and Lundgren-Resenterra (2021), in order to understand the benefits of a collective approach to employability that takes into account a place for agency. The discussion draws on theoretical resources developed by the critical realist paradigm. It makes use of the realist social theory of Archer (1995, 2000), theory which highlights the

interplay between social structures and human agency for social restructuring; an interplay in which collective identity plays an important role. Critical realism relies on the idea that reality is layered, and what knowledge we have about it is acquired by identifying the causal mechanisms that lead to given effects, at least where such mechanisms are understood as tendencies and not as constant conjunctions between events (Bhaskar, 1993). More specifically, there is scope for the morphogenetic framework of Archer (1995) to generate explanatory answers to the conceptualisation of employability by incorporating references to the interplay between social structures and human agency. Social structures are essential since all human interrelations are context-dependent. Moreover, no action can be realised independently from context and a clear prospect for action. Meanwhile, human agency is activity-bound, because without human agents engaging in purposeful actions to change the structural status quo, there is no form of social restructuring (Archer, 2021).

The argument offered in this chapter concludes by focusing on ways that universities can encourage learning that promotes collective values over more economic ones in the workplace, thereby enhancing the emancipation of the larger society above the advantages within markets that can accrue to corporates and individuals. In order to understand how higher education can contribute to a widening of the scope of degree programmes that are currently framed by economic growth, however, we need first to explore and understand the causal tendencies that condition employability. If universities are to retain a social mission within society in the face of intense market pressures that prioritise the economic contributions of graduates, then a reframing of graduate employability is required.

### CONCEPTUALISING EMPLOYABILITY AS A CAPACITY FOR COLLECTIVE AGENCY

Fleetwood (2011) argued that a labour market is a set of socio-economic phenomena upon which agents act in order to pursue needs that are related to work. He further considered social structures as a key aspect of these phenomena, arguing that social structures are constituted as “latticeworks of internal relations between entities that may enable and constrain (but not determine) the plans and actions of agents who reproduce and/or transform these relations” (Fleetwood, 2017, p. 96). For instance, one key latticework of social relations for a labour market is that between

employers and employees, or between employees with different organisational roles. This definition of a labour market paves the way for a corresponding definition of employability, one in which agency has a key place. Kahn and Lundgren-Resenterra (2021, p. 541) thus defined graduate employability “as the capacity of a graduate to act as an agent within the workplace”. Clearly, one needs to exercise agency if one is to gain employment or thrive while at work.

The connection between employability and agency is a powerful one, connecting as it does to an extensive body of relevant theorising. Agency, here, is specifically understood in the sense expounded by Archer (2000), in which it is taken to refer to that process by which agents prioritise concerns, take forward projects and establish ongoing practices, a process that is directly supported by reflexivity. Reflexivity is itself a conscious activity that entails mental deliberation on one’s own social placing (Archer, 2000). Such reflexivity can support the individual self-awareness of a graduate about their own needs and interests, enhancing thus their agential power to make informed choices about their work and personal lives, as Higgs and Cloutman (2019) argued. In this model, it is the exercise of reflexivity that mediates the influence of social structures upon agency. It should be noted in Archer’s model of agency that the knowledge, skills and attitudes that someone possesses as an individual are relevant to one’s capacity to move forward the different aspects of this process, but that it is reflexivity which determines the direction that is taken by agency. One’s identity is then specifically seen by Archer (2000) in terms of the configuration taken by one’s concerns, as we shall explore further in due course.

A focus on agency within employability stands out from the dominant discourse. Nonetheless, existing empirical research offers clear support for the value of this focus, particularly in several recent studies that have seen a role for agency in relation to employability. Indeed, an exclusive focus on personal capital in framing employability can provide a misleading view of what matters to employers. Handley (2018) found that a set of graduate employers were, when recruiting, primarily interested in the extent to which graduates were ready to become a particular sort of person, and who were willing to learn what was required, work hard and take directions that suited the needs of the organisation. Graduate employers were seen to be far less interested in the kinds of generic capabilities and skills that are prioritised in the employability discourse at large, or that are promoted by bodies such as the Confederation of British Industry. The graduate recruiters considered in this study by Handley were looking for

graduates who would be positioned to exercise agency in support of organisational agendas.

Furthermore, the study by Tholen (2015), for instance, looked at the experience of 60 final-year students across two universities, one in Great Britain and one in the Netherlands, in relation to finding work within the labour market. The study demonstrated that a key aspect of employability is the capacity to establish a reflexive space within which to make sense of the competition entailed in securing work. The nature of this reflexive space is thus important to consider when seeking to understand the way in which agency affects one's employability. Archer (2003) identified several characteristic modes of reflexivity. For instance, meta-reflexivity is characterised by a concern to advance social ideals, with the pursuit of those ideals as much a focus for mental deliberation as the ideals themselves. Individuals for whom communicative reflexivity predominates, meanwhile, are those whose concerns are shaped on the basis of conversations with friends and relations. Indeed, the study by Okay-Somerville and Scholarios (2017) that surveyed 293 recent graduates in the UK found that guidance-seeking from others and networking strategies were a key aspect of what makes a graduate employable. Autonomous reflexivity, meanwhile, was identified by Archer (2003) as mental deliberation that is undertaken without reference to conversation with others, in which significant attention is given to performativity. This mode of reflexivity aligns with configurations of concerns that are focused around maximising economic rewards connected to employment.

When employability is framed primarily in terms of the personal capital that one brings to a market, though, the default position is to assume that the pursuit of economic self-interest (and thus autonomous reflexivity) dominates the perspectives of those seeking work. It is possible, though, for other modes of reflexivity to take centre stage in relation to one's working life, as empirical studies conducted by Archer (2000, 2003) have demonstrated. A recognition that different modes of reflexivity are possible thus supports a consideration of the way that employability relates to emancipation, which refers to a liberation from the influence of undesired structural mechanisms (Hartwig, 2007). The capacity of an agent to have a say in their future work life matters a great deal, however, beyond narrow economic interests (McArthur, 2011). Archer (2003), meanwhile, referred to primary agents as those people who are able to progress their own individual concerns, but who lack any say in the reshaping of social contexts. When acting within the setting of a workplace collective, for instance,

primary agents would be expected to take forward projects and practices that comply with the institutional logic(s) in play, where an institutional logic is understood to mean a shared frame of reference (Thornton & Ocasio, 2008), one that influences the agency of individuals (Delbridge & Edwards, 2013). For Elder-Vass (2010), buying into an institutional logic is essential in standardising work practices. However, for Delbridge and Edwards (2013), standardised work practices are not considered routinised work; people still have the capacity for reflexivity to decide how to act upon such norms, thereby avoiding conflation between institutional logic and human agency.

Archer (2003), furthermore, used the term ‘corporate agent’ to refer to a group of people who frame new collective interests and pursue those interests in an organised fashion through a shared pursuit of projects and practices that seek to shift the status quo. This framing and pursuit of collective interests is supported by collective reflexivity, that is by the (individual) mental deliberations that the subjects share with each other (Archer, 2013). Corporate agency can be directed towards the economic self-interest of given individuals or groupings within organisations, but it can also be focused on promoting the well-being of others (Gorski, 2017; Smith, 2010). This mode of reflexivity, indeed, entails social relations that are characterised by a reciprocity that allows for a sharing of concerns. If one takes the collective dimension to work seriously, as discussed above, it makes sense to extend the focus from agency alone in any definition of employability, to include specific attention to collective considerations. Kahn and Lundgren-Resenterra (2021, p. 541) thus went on in their study to define graduate employability more fully “as the capacity of a graduate to act as an agent within the workplace in ways that contribute to the maintenance and elaboration of collectives”. On this model, the exercise of primary agency supports the maintenance of collectives, while the practice of corporate agency leads to the elaboration of collectives. While one can evidently elaborate collectives in different directions, there is a clear need to devise new ways collectively to respond to environmental degradation, as Poteete and Ostrom (2004) have argued.

Finally, it is important to appreciate that understanding employability through agency enables one to consider how structural constraints affect employment. Kahn and Lundgren-Resenterra (2021) were clear that the capacity of a graduate to act as an agent within the workplace remains subject to the usual constraints and enablements that influence both primary and corporate agency. Indeed, the definition of a labour market cited

above enables one to take into account a comprehensive consideration of the constraints and enablements that influence employability. Given that individuals are constrained and enabled in different ways, they are hierarchically positioned in relation to each other when seeking employment (Brown et al., 2003). For instance, one can identify latticeworks of relations between people that relate to gender, race, class and so on. Characteristics such as age, gender, social class, disability and ethnicity do affect how individuals are positioned in the labour market (Siivonen & Isopahkala-Bouret, 2016). Employability not only depends on fulfilling the requirements of a specific job, but also on how one stands relative to others within a hierarchy of job seekers. Cashian (2017), indeed, contended that higher education has a lesser influence on graduate employability than causal tendencies operating from social contexts that influence how graduates' agency can unfold. The students in the study by Bradley et al. (2013), however, expected a significant amount of assistance from their universities, in looking to convert their academic credentials into employment, rather than seeing career openings as something that depended, in the first instance, on their own agency—as if constraints and enablements were primarily what determined whether or not one would gain employment after a university degree. While recognising a positional dimension, though, Archer's model highlights how it is always necessary to prioritise concerns, pursue projects and embed practices, even if the exercise of agency is constrained and enabled by the social and cultural structures operating within one's context. A positioning in relation to social and cultural structures does not negate the value in considering the lived experience of graduates in relation to these structures, and nor does it negate the scope for agency in relation to work that remains.

In overall terms, this analysis opens up the capacity to connect to issues that relate to human emancipation. Leading perspectives on graduate employability entertain the idea of a constant conjunction between the development of human capital and employment outcomes (McQuaid & Lindsay, 2005). An emphasis on skills development to comply with market demands, however, inevitably describes higher education in restricted terms. Indeed, the human capital and skills discourse concerning employability tends to restrict it to mere market arguments, thereby emphasising the influence of the political and economic dimension to higher education policy. Tomlinson (2017) argued that HEIs are closely influenced by such a dimension, investing in programmes that maximise graduates' economic potential for the employment market. What stands out here is that HEIs

defend a discourse around employability which emphasises that the more skills with economic utility the graduates gain, the more economic resources they have to secure employment. Meanwhile, understanding graduate employability in terms of agency enables one to consider graduate employability in light of the causal tendencies in play that either constrain or enable the way that agents in a labour market pursue needs that are related to work. Agency is clearly affected by structural constraints and enablements, thereby impacting how people can secure, maintain or contribute actively to work to influence values that matter to society at large.

### COLLECTIVE IDENTITY UNDERPINS AGENCY WITHIN WORKPLACES

The centrality that is given in the above argument to agency indicates that a key role is present for the concerns of graduates themselves, concerns that, according to Archer (2003), are a key aspect of one's identity. Archer (2003) saw one's personal identity as formed by the configuration of one's ultimate concerns. These are those concerns about which one cares above all else, and they lead to an associated set of commitments. Archer (2013), furthermore, identified collective reflexivity as a process that emerges from individuals who engage in social relations to deliberate together on how to tackle specific concerns in their own desired way. Archer was clear that this need not involve the separate parties actually 'thinking the same thing', and that those involved in the relation acknowledge (and reflexively deliberate upon) the value to them that arises from their relations together. Collective identity arises when uncertainty is involved, triggering then concerns and interests, which when shared in a critical way with others can enhance corporate agency. Students can feel doubts arise when having to choose among educational programmes to ensure future employment. Making choices involves, however, developing students' self-awareness about their needs and interests to increase their agential power for emancipation. Lacey (1997) argued that it takes increased agency for students to understand the impact of social structures on their educational choices. However, he noted that individuals have little or no power over the reshaping of social structures to enhance their agency. For him, it is through corporate agency triggered by shared values and concerns that empowerment occurs. Likewise, Smith et al. (2018) argued that students' agency is co-constructed through shared social relations and reflexive deliberations

about their future selves and not through skills development or specific learning programmes to ensure human capital. Burke et al. (2017) also suggested that students' agency can be enhanced through a collective reflexivity that questions how to approach the current employment market.

It is possible, indeed, to see collective identity as constituted by those ultimate concerns that one shares with others, concerns that are acted upon together for some form of mutual advancement. It is argued that this provides the basis for the sense of connection that Polletta and Jasper (2001) refer to as collective identity. While the term collective identity is one that we advance in relation to collective reflexivity in this chapter itself, Archer (2013) herself used the term 'solidarity' to refer to care, trust and other relational goods that result from mutual service. Indeed, Kramer et al. (2014) argued that group identification is closely linked to cooperation. According to Thornton and Ocasio (2008), collective identity constitutes a key mechanism that influences an institutional logic. Järvenpää and Lämsiluoto (2016), for instance, saw ways in which collective identity closely affected the use of an environmental performance measurement system within an international company. A profit and costs orientation remained an integral aspect of the focus and drive of management at the company, with decision-making framed by this orientation. This was seen to constitute a key aspect of an institutional logic of profit maximisation. The introduction of a new system to measure the company's environmental performance, even though it was potentially contradictory to an emphasis on profitability, was nonetheless integrated into the institutional logic in play.

Furthermore, according to Archer (2013), collective identity emerges from a process of engaging in social relations with others that are directed towards shared concerns. Collective identity is then closely related to the social relations that one maintains with others. Finn (2017), indeed, argued that graduates give priority to their most intimate relationships when making decisions about their working lives. The analysis by Grasso et al. (2021) would suggest, at least in some contexts, that there are fewer open opportunities now present after the coronavirus pandemic that are not dependent on family connections. The analysis of Sayer (2007), meanwhile, offers a central place for social relations within the workplace in framing work that is dignified. For instance, he highlighted ways in which inequities and power differentials between individuals mean that it is easier for some rather than others to uphold their dignity in working settings. There is evident scope for a latticework of relations between employers

and employees to closely affect the concerns that are prioritised, given the power differentials in such a latticework. While it is possible to regard social relations such as those between employers and employees as a resource that can be drawn upon by an individual, that is as a form of capital (Cunningham, 2002), such a conceptual move downplays the relevance of both agency and identity. One's social relations constitute a key element of both who one is and what it means to engage in work. Graduate trajectories within the labour market are thus closely influenced by those collectives to which graduates are attached.

This is not to suggest, though, that any collective will ever be present in a pure form, given the way in which power differentials, and inequities linked to those differentials, are always present, as Fraser (2014) argued. The reframing of workplace agency based on the pursuit of collective agendas to trigger organisational elaboration has its caveats. Institutional logics maintain conformity within an organisation (Flam, 2010). Moreover, not all actors retain the same influence, power and motivation to encourage organisational change by challenging existing corporate regulations and norms (Garud et al., 2007). Nevertheless, corporate agency is essential to shift from organisational interests supporting economic rewards towards more collective social goods that have the flourishing of the larger society at heart. Stakeholder theory, indeed, supports such a viewpoint by enhancing corporate social responsibility encompassing the larger community and stakeholders (Bird et al., 2007). Emancipatory agency is thus possible, but the conditions for structural change are nonetheless extensive, as Lacey (1997) has argued.

## PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS FOR UNIVERSITIES AND EMPLOYERS

There are a range of practical implications that emerge from this study for both universities and employers. If graduates are to experience dignified forms of work and if society is to find ways forward to address key global challenges, then it will be essential for relevant parties to take close account of the agential and collective dimension to employability.

In relation to universities, the study by Tholen (2015) suggested that the self-awareness of students in the UK around the extent to which one needs to exercise agency in order to secure work was relatively underdeveloped, in that students tended to believe that their trajectories in the labour

market were primarily decided for them by external forces. There would thus be value in following the suggestion of Burke et al. (2017) that students and graduates should be assisted to engage in reflexive deliberation about their attempts to navigate their activity within the graduate labour market. Likewise, Smith et al. (2018) claim that graduates engaging in reflexive deliberations about what learning programmes to pursue foster their emancipation for employability by taking their own interests into account. A further way forward would be for higher education to integrate collectives into programmes of learning in deliberate fashion, to enable graduates to become attuned to the nature of those value-sets and institutional logics that are promoted in workplaces, as Kahn and Lundgren-Resenterra (2021) also argued. This could entail offering students the opportunity to engage in learning activities that promote shared interests and concerns over narrowly conceived economic agendas (Farrow & Moe, 2019). Such analysis implies that higher education programmes should prioritise social connections with others during graduate studies to develop and sustain collective agency that is durable over the entire length of a degree programme (Kahn, 2017). Lundgren-Resenterra and Kahn (2019) argued that the social relations supported by the students constituted a key influence on the ability to engage in collective reflexivity. Furthermore, universities could build on students' existing prospects to contribute to collectives beyond their current studies, whether linked to student unions, extracurricular activity or anything similar (Kahn & Lundgren-Resenterra, 2021). Indeed, supplementary student activities were reported to exercise a powerful impact on graduates through connectivity (Greenbank, 2009). Such insights could inform the way in which teaching as well as learning is informed. For instance, Carrillo and Flores (2020) reported how contextualised teaching and learning practices based on shared aspirations fostered a collaborative and collective approach to teaching, shifting practice to enhance student learning and well-being.

Employers, meanwhile, are more likely to be interested in implications of this analysis that relate to core organisational interests, given that employability itself is a secondary concern in such a setting. The practical implications for employers thus depend in significant part on making connections to key considerations that shape organisational effectiveness, with more tentative suggestions thus indicated here. For instance, Luederitz et al.'s (2021) longitudinal case study on two small craft breweries, one situated in Canada and the other in Germany, showed that integrating external environments into the workplace developed collective agency

triggering jointly owned actions, thereby enhancing emergent sustainability processes for social and economic reward. They suggested that shared support enables people to debate and reflect together, allowing common aspirations to become collective intentions challenging existing organisational structures. Likewise, Coyte et al.'s (2012) research on knowledge resource management in an Australian small business highlighted how collective reflexivity is essential to support new ideas for organisational restructuring and redirection. Nonetheless, there would be scope for human resource professionals in organisations to take agency more directly, in preference to such notions as 'talent' (Nilsson & Ellström, 2012).

## CONCLUSIONS

The analysis offered in this chapter provides insights into ways in which graduates navigate trajectories through labour markets. While markets are evidently competitive, it has effectively been argued that the notion of agency offers a more fundamental basis on which to identify trajectories than competition, especially when one takes collective considerations into account. It is primarily through the exercise of agency that graduates make sense of, and interact with, the world of work. Furthermore, the work identity of graduates has been as closely linked in the above analysis to the basis for agency within workplace settings, given the role that concerns play in agency according to Archer (2003). It is the exercise of agency that is constitutive of one's identity within a labour market.

Acknowledging that collective aspects are significant for work, we need to understand how higher education can sustain a collective approach towards employability to orient students' future work lives in a way that decolonises education programmes from the undue influences of labour markets. Indeed, when associating higher education with employment opportunities dictated by a labour market, we reinforce market values and power relations over more inclusive cultural expressions (Harsin, 2018), thereby constraining students' capacity for critical reflection around their own needs and interests (Cooper, 2019). Such a narrow view on higher education impacts how students perceive the structural powers exercised by corporations that prefer economic growth over human emancipation (McArthur, 2011). Rather, it is important to recognise that graduate outcomes are dependent in significant part on the concerns and agency of graduates, and the extent to which those concerns give rise to concrete projects and ongoing practices on their own part.

What has been offered in this chapter is not simply a critique of dominant, marketised notions of graduate employability, but rather an original conceptualisation of employability that opens up new ways to advance human emancipation—one in which work is seen more as an emancipatory pursuit than as a marketised practice. Indeed, to highlight the value of a focus on collective reflexivity, Archer (2013) argued that “the orientation of all members of the social order to the common good qua relational good” is a powerful notion in that it does not downplay the well-being of anyone, unlike utilitarian and impersonal analyses that focus on goods that are absolute within their market settings. Rather, one sees ways in which reciprocity is central to social relations, a quality that Donati (2011) highlighted as distinctively human.

The account offered in this chapter around the identity of graduates shifts the debate around employability in higher education away from a passive notion of employability as the capacity of an individual to be given work by an employer to one focused on the maintenance and elaboration of collectives. Such a view of work enables one to respond directly to key challenges, to challenges that are faced at a societal level. It is evident that the current approach to markets within education and society undercuts its own long-term basis, given the limitations of a marketised response to global challenges. Wider horizons are required if HEIs are to respond effectively to current societal challenges.

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PART II

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Employability and Inequalities in  
Graduate Labour Markets



# Are Graduates Working in Graduate Occupations? Insights from the Portuguese Labour Market

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and Rita Henriques Guimarães*

## INTRODUCTION

The past century has been characterised by an enormous expansion of higher education (HE) around the world. The major motivation of such expansion is inspired in human capital arguments, in that education endows people with skills and abilities that are major drivers of economic growth and individual's earning capacity (Becker, 1964). However, the mass HE reopened the discussion surrounding educational credentialism and the role of education to position job applicants in the labour queue (Thurow, 1976). These subjects deserve proper scrutiny in the context of mass HE in Portugal.

The educational attainment of the Portuguese population has been historically lower than other developed countries. Governments from

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different political parties have implemented reforms and made huge investments to narrow the gap and meet the standards of other countries (see Figueiredo et al., 2017 for synthesis). The progress is multidimensional and results from different reforms: compulsory education and the change in the minimum school leaving age; the types of secondary education, vocational and non-vocational; the types of higher education, public and private, vocationally oriented and general, among other changes. The outcome of these education policies has been extraordinary; for example, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) recently drew attention to the increase in master's students in Portugal (33%), which is more than double the OECD average (16%) (OECD, 2019).

It is argued, however, that this supply of skilled workforce has not been accompanied by high-tech manufacturing and service sectors in Portugal (Marques et al., 2022). Policymakers have also acknowledged that the upgrading of the productive system is still lagging the supply of skilled workforce. This leads to overqualification and raises questions about the jobs assigned to skilled workers, notably graduates. Previous research has already warned that the massification of HE involves the supply of skilled workers to industries that are usually unable to attract graduates (Trow, 1973). In this context, graduates tend to accept any available job. Therefore, some research has explored the assignment of graduates to types of jobs in Portugal to determine whether they are assigned to graduate jobs (Cardoso, 2007; Figueiredo et al., 2017).

Our research is inspired by this literature and raises the following research questions: i) What kind of occupations are assigned to graduates in Portugal? ii) How does the workforce composition within occupations vary over time? iii) Are there some context or personal factors that affect the assignment? The literature exploring the inequality among graduates and their distribution across types of occupation (Figueiredo et al., 2017) used a classification of occupations based on the supply of skilled workforce and compared two generations of workers to decide on the type of occupation. However, this classification is sensitive to the proportion of graduates and impedes the analysis of demand-side changes. On the other hand, the research overlooks the distribution of bachelor's (graduate) and master's (postgraduate) degree holders across occupations, and this has evolved over time due to the increased supply of both higher education-level graduates. The research by Almeida et al. (2017) compares the two levels of higher education, focusing on specific occupations and categories of tasks. Their major concern was the wage differentials at different points

of the distribution, controlling for occupations, industries, tasks, among others.

We use data from Quadros de Pessoal, an administrative data set, from 2007 to 2019, to address our questions and concerns. The empirical analysis draws on the classification of occupations used to examine the polarisation of the labour market (CEDEFOP, 2011) and attempts to describe the distribution of graduates (bachelor's and master's<sup>1</sup>) in different types of occupations, as well as its evolution, and to compare this distribution by sector and explore wage differentials across occupations over time. Prior to this, we provide a picture of the educational attainment of the Portuguese population since 1990s.

The rest of the chapter is structured as follows. In the next section, we survey literature on the benefits of education and focus on international studies and some of the main studies on the Portuguese labour market. Section 'Data and Method' presents the quantitative data and the empirical methods. Section 'Empirical Evidence and Discussion' is devoted to empirical analysis and to a discussion of the findings. Finally, section 'Concluding Remarks' presents some of the major conclusions and discusses policy implications.

## THE BENEFITS OF EDUCATION

The relation between occupations and education levels has been the major focus of skill mismatch literature. While the first generation of studies focused on the impact of overeducation on labour market outcomes, recent research explores the demand-side and the role of employers in generating inequality among skilled workforces.

### *The Assignment of Graduates and Overeducation*

The assignment of individuals to jobs has been discussed by theoretical contributions on overeducation and its impacts on different labour market outcomes, such as wages (Sattinger, 1993), turnover (Jovanovic, 1979) and job satisfaction (Allen & van der Velden, 2001). Overeducation indicates that individuals' investments in education fail to achieve the expected

<sup>1</sup>We focus on bachelor's and master's degree holders, that is, graduation and postgraduation. In Portugal, a bachelor's degree is named *licenciatura*, and master's is *mestrado*.

returns; therefore, the skills and abilities acquired over the time spent in school are wasted or inefficiently used.

Recently, studies have moved the focus from supply to the demand side, exploring overeducation from the employer perspective (Bills, 1992; Di Stasio, 2017). This shift reopened the discussion on credentialism, notably in the context of mass HE (Bills, 2016; Tomlinson & Watermeyer, 2022), and acknowledges Thurow's job competition model (1976) as an appropriate theoretical background for this perspective of overeducation.

Thurow's arguments are among the major contributions of the informative role of education, which addresses economic agents' choice in the context of uncertainty about the quality of goods and services. It is an extension of Arrow's screening theory (1973) and assumes that employers prefer to hire more educated people. More precisely, education's role in the job competition model is to identify the applicants who possess cognitive (intelligence) and behavioural (perseverance, work discipline, punctuality, willingness to perform unpleasant tasks and follow some norms of group behaviours) attributes that facilitate learning and consequently reduce employers' training costs. Overeducation positions candidates at the front of the labour queue and improves the probability of hiring due to employers' expectation of their greater trainability. This preference has two major consequences for the labour market and for individuals' investments in education.

The first is the credentials inflation thesis, that is, increasing educational requirements for jobs due to the growing number of advanced education degrees obtained (Collins, 1979). As there are too many qualified people and a limited number of qualified jobs, not everyone will benefit from mass credentials, which consequently become a positional good; that is, although they may enable graduates to access better jobs, they matter less in themselves (Tomlinson & Watermeyer, 2022).

In this context, Elias and Purcell (2004) provide a taxonomy of occupations and discriminate between graduate and non-graduate occupations. Their proposal includes four types of graduate jobs, distinguishing between traditional and new graduate occupations. The methodological option includes a comparison between the occupation and education degree of two generations of workers. Empirical findings indicate that traditional occupations remained stable, while modern and new graduate occupations rose sharply between 1980 and 2000.

The second major consequence is that individuals struggle for advantage in the labour market. Collins (1971) has already pointed out that the

rise in educational requirements together with the renewed role of educational credentials have increased the demand for education. Bills (2016) adds that educational investments represent a defensive response on the part of individuals that, according to Di Stasio (2017), allows them to remain competitive in contexts where employers prefer overeducated applicants. While Di Stasio's empirical evidence supports job competition arguments, that is, overeducated are positioned at the front of the labour queue, this is only the case for candidates whose field of education matches the required occupational skills. In other words, it is the occupation-specific skills that give overeducated applicants a true advantage.

The literature showed that employers influence educated people's job opportunities and respond to the quality of the supply. In the context of an increasing supply of graduates, employers tend to raise educational requirements to reduce uncertainty about applicants' attributes and to hire trainable workers. Policy decisions on HE expansion gave almost all categories of population the opportunity to access HE, but skilled jobs remained scarce in the economy. It is expected that young graduates will continue to invest in education to jump to the front of the labour queue and acquire credentials that attest to their abilities and skills.

### *Education and the Labour Market: Studies from Portugal*

The literature on the relationship between education and labour in Portugal gained momentum after the expansion of higher education, and it centred on the benefits of education in the context of the increasing supply of graduates in the workforce (Portugal, 2004; Centeno et al., 2010). Since then, a couple of topics have emerged alongside the reforms and the population's educational attainment.

However, it is important to start by underlining the economic context of the expansion of higher education in Portugal. In fact, the higher education reform, which implemented the Bologna Process, virtually coincided with an economic crisis in the country. The Portuguese government formally adopted the Bologna model in 2006 (DL 74/2006 of 24th March<sup>2</sup>) implementing the 3+2 model; the enrolment of students in the new structure began in the 2006/2007 academic year in more than 40% of higher education institutions, and the process was completed in 2008/2009 (see Eurydice, 2007; Portela et al., 2009 for more details

<sup>2</sup><https://dre.pt/dre/detalhe/decreto-lei/74-2006-671387>

about the implementation). The expansion of higher education after the reform led to a rise in the number of both bachelor's and master's graduates in the Portuguese labour market (Almeida et al., 2017).

On the other hand, Portugal went into an economic recession in 2008, with unemployment reaching unprecedented levels. The Portuguese government requested external financial assistance in 2011; the lenders imposed strong budget constraints on government expenditure through cuts in public investment, a reduction in public employment and cuts to the wages of civil servants (OIT, 2013).

One set of studies focuses on the impacts of the expansion of higher education on earnings (Figueiredo et al., 2013), the type of jobs assigned to graduates (Cardoso, 2007; Figueiredo et al., 2017) and a typology of graduate jobs (Ramos et al., 2014). Other literature is concerned with the graduates' transition into the labour market and the quality of jobs, notably the impact of the higher education expansion and economic recession on the quality of graduate jobs (Suleman & Figueiredo, 2020). Table 7.1 summarises this literature and highlights the major features and findings of the studies.

The administrative data set, *Quadros de Pessoal*, is the major source of data used to examine the impacts of education on labour market outcomes. It includes key information on the employment relationship, notably wages, contractual arrangements and working time. The data set has therefore been used in a range of research, especially labour market outcomes. As the data are collected annually, the research benefits from longitudinal data that allow an evolutionary perspective. Not surprisingly, most of the research using the *Quadros de Pessoal* data shows changes in labour market outcomes over time.

The findings illustrate that the returns to higher education are sensitive to the interplay between supply and demand. An increasing supply of graduates contributes to a reduction in the premium; nevertheless, there is still a reward for educated people. This downward trend started at the end of 1990, as noted by Cardoso (2007), and the expansion of higher education later impacted on the value of master's and devalued bachelor's degree (Almeida et al., 2017; Suleman & Figueiredo, 2020). While the wage differentials among bachelor's and master's degree holders was null at the beginning of the Bologna Process, the Portuguese labour market has now started to positively differentiate master's graduates. Almeida et al. (2017) add further insights on wage differentials among graduates (bachelor's) and postgraduates (master's). The postgraduation reduces

**Table 7.1** Studies on education and the labour market in Portugal

<i>Goals</i>	<i>Data and methodology</i>	<i>Main findings</i>	<i>Reference</i>
<i>Benefits of education and the impacts of higher education expansion</i>			
Provide evidence on the monetary and non-monetary benefits of HE	Employment survey (2003) and administrative data Quadros de Pessoa (1999). Calculate the costs and benefits of continuing to HE	The rate of return to education is exceptional (15%). There are also non-monetary benefits: lower probability of being unemployed, having a fixed-term or part-time job. There are also wage differentials among fields of education	Portugal (2004)
Reassess the benefits of education with expansion of schooling in the population	Quadros de Pessoa (1982, 1995, 2006). Quantile regression to examine the benefits along the wage distribution	There is an education premium, but it varies along the distribution. The returns to education have changed: in 1982 and 1995, the premium was higher due to the limited supply of graduates. In 2006, the increase in graduates led to a reduced premium. However, the Portuguese labour market continues to reward skilled workers	Centeno et al. (2010)
Examine the evolution of relative earnings premiums for young HE graduates	Quadros de Pessoa (1995 and 2009). Quintile regression model and comparison for two age cohorts: 26–36 and 45–54	There is a decline in the education premium and a great dispersion. There was a marked deterioration for graduates in lower quantiles, but the premium remained high in the upper quantile	Figueiredo et al. (2013)

*(continued)*

**Table 7.1** (continued)

<i>Goals</i>	<i>Data and methodology</i>	<i>Main findings</i>	<i>Reference</i>
Examine the returns to postgraduate education	Quadros de Pessoa (2007–2012). Quantile regression and shift-share analysis	There are significant and increasing returns to postgraduate education, while the returns to graduation are decreasing. The assignment of postgraduates to certain occupations reflects displacement effects, with postgraduates increasingly displacing graduates, and graduates subsequently displacing non-graduates in low-paid and less challenging jobs.	Almeida et al. (2017)
<i>Transition into the labour market</i>			
Examine the impacts of different contractual arrangements on wages of young bachelor's and master's degree holders. Compare the impact for post-Bologna graduates that entered labour market during the recession.	Quadros de Pessoa (2007 and 2011) and a treatment-outcome model for multinomial choice of contractual arrangements.	There are 4 types of contractual arrangement: one standard, with a stable and full-time contract, and other non-standard arrangements with different combinations of contract and/or working time flexibility. The wages vary among contractual arrangements, but there are differences over time. Non-standard jobs involve a greater penalisation than standard jobs. The crisis impacted negatively the most precarious jobs, while the expansion reduced the value of the bachelor's degree and created a reward for master's	Suleman and Figueiredo (2020)

*(continued)*

**Table 7.1** (continued)

<i>Goals</i>	<i>Data and methodology</i>	<i>Main findings</i>	<i>Reference</i>
<i>Jobs of graduates</i>			
Examine whether graduates are assigned to jobs requiring non-university degrees	Quadros de Pessoa (1986–1999) and Gottschalk and Hansen (2003) classification of college and non-college jobs	From 1986 to mid-90s, graduates enjoyed a rising wage premium relative to high school graduates, but this then declined. In this time frame, the probability of a young university graduate being employed in a non-university job fell sharply. Women are more likely to be in non-graduate jobs.	Cardoso (2007)
Classify the jobs of graduates during their transition into the labour market	Dedicated survey applied to holders of a bachelor's degree from 2 Portuguese universities who completed higher education in 2004/2005. The sample includes 1004 bachelor's degree participants whose jobs were examined through a multiple correspondence analysis	A continuum from very vulnerable and precarious situations to good employment conditions. The typology includes 5 types of insertion into the labour market: strongly fragile, fragile insertion, classical employment, qualified employment (employed) and qualified insertion (employers and public administration). The contractual arrangements, working time and wages vary from precarious, reduced time and low wages to the opposite conditions	Ramos et al. (2014)

*(continued)*

**Table 7.1** (continued)

<i>Goals</i>	<i>Data and methodology</i>	<i>Main findings</i>	<i>Reference</i>
Examine the impacts of mass HE on the type of occupation assigned to graduates. Explore its relationship with overeducation, overskilling and skill mismatch	Two data sets: Labour Force Survey to examine the share of graduates in each occupation and its change over time (2000 to 2010). Cluster analysis Elias & Purcell strategy were applied to classify occupations. REFLEX data were used to explore the relationship between occupations and skill mismatch.	3 clusters of occupations were found: traditional (TGJ), latent (LJ) and new graduate jobs (NGJ). In 2000, 56.45% of young graduates were TGJ, and the others were equally distributed between the other 2 types. In 2010, and after massification, there is an increasing share of young graduates in LJ or NGJ. Graduates in TGJ report less mismatch, while in LJ they report higher overskilling.	Figueiredo et al. (2017)

the probability of young people being assigned to low-paid and less attractive jobs. The authors assume that the wage premium of postgraduates might reflect an upskilling process and a displacement effect, where the postgraduates displace graduates, and graduates displace non-graduates in low-quality jobs.

The expansion of higher education has also impacted graduates' jobs. In the early 1990s, graduates were seldom found in non-graduate jobs, but later a non-negligible proportion of graduates worked in so-called new graduate jobs (Figueiredo et al., 2017). Furthermore, the graduate labour market is segmented, and graduates are assigned to precarious or good jobs: with flexible/stable contracts, part-time/full-time and low/high wages (Ramos et al., 2014; Suleman & Figueiredo, 2020). These authors note that different contractual arrangements impact the wages. The economic crisis has further increased the penalisation of more precarious jobs.

Until now, we have focused on the relationship between education and the labour market. However, some literature provides insights into some of the major outcomes of the Portuguese labour market.

For example, Marques et al. (2022) examine the demand side and provide evidence on the relationship between overqualification and types of

industries and services. There is a sharp increase in the share of graduates in the Portuguese economy, but high-tech manufacturing and services sectors have a low weight in GDP. This was further associated with low GDP growth. All these elements contribute to a high incidence of overqualification.

In light of the literature, we can expect an increase in the distribution of graduates in non-graduate jobs over time, notably as an outcome of growing supply. However, the differences between bachelor's and master's degree holders deserve scrutiny. The literature fails to show whether firms have become more demanding in terms of the education level. More specifically, according to the OECD data, the number of master's students in Portugal (33%) is more than double the OECD average (16%) (OECD, 2019). So, have employers upgraded the hiring criteria to require a master's degree in response to the increasing supply? In addition, to what extent are bachelor's assigned to less-skilled occupations?

## DATA AND METHOD

Like other Portuguese researchers, we use the Portuguese linked employer-employee data—*Quadros de Pessoal*, which includes employee- and firm-level information. It is a longitudinal data set compiled annually by the Ministry of Labour, Solidarity and Social Security based on a standard inquiry, which is mandatory for every firm with wage-earners (see Cardoso & Portela, 2009; Cardoso & Portugal, 2005 for details). It comprises the private sector and state-owned enterprises in Portugal. Our research focuses on young people (15–29 years old) with a HE degree and non-graduates and uses the data from 2007 to 2019 to identify changes in the distribution and composition of occupations over time. We opted for a 2-year interval, and therefore present empirical evidence on seven years.

We chose the classification used in CEDEFOP (2011)<sup>3</sup> since it allows us to address the required qualifications. The classification provided by Elias and Purcell (2004) is sensitive to the supply of skills. We therefore used four clusters of occupations to examine how graduates are assigned to different types of occupations over time, namely high skilled, skilled non-manual, skilled manual and elementary.

Table 7.2 presents the summary statistics of our sample. The figures in Table 7.2 indicate an upward trend in young graduates and postgraduates,

<sup>3</sup>[https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/files/5509\\_en.pdf](https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/files/5509_en.pdf)

**Table 7.2** Descriptive statistics

		2007	2009	2011	2013	2015	2017	2019
Education level	Bachelor (%)	12.58	15.58	17.08	17.79	17.92	18.33	19.29
	Master (%)	0.49	0.86	1.44	2.61	3.70	4.35	5.05
	Non-graduates (%)	86.93	83.56	81.48	79.60	78.38	77.32	75.66
Gender	Female (%)	47.37	48.21	48.21	48.86	48.56	47.84	47.33
Type of occupation	High skilled (%)	16.55	18.92	21.03	21.01	21.02	20.90	22.69
	Skilled non-manual (%)	42.70	45.15	44.71	44.87	44.74	45.00	44.72
	Skilled manual (%)	28.00	24.05	23.53	22.64	21.75	21.02	19.89
	Elementary (%)	12.74	11.88	10.73	11.49	12.49	13.09	12.70
Age	Age (mean)	24.92	25.09	25.20	25.35	25.15	24.96	24.90
	Age (SD)	3.09	3.00	2.95	2.85	2.90	2.97	2.99
Wage	Hourly wage (mean)	3.84	4.20	4.51	4.58	4.60	4.98	5.57
	Hourly wage (SD)	2.07	2.18	2.06	2.02	1.96	2.00	2.31

Source: Quadros de Pessoal; SD means standard deviation

and a decline in non-graduates. More specifically, the non-graduate group clusters all young workers with secondary education or less. In 2007, 56.0% of young people had basic (compulsory) education (9 years of schooling), and in 2019, this figure fell to 28.1%. The education reform in 2009, which changed the minimum education level to secondary education (12 years of schooling), certainly contributed to this dramatic transformation.

## EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE AND DISCUSSION

Our empirical analysis comprises topics that provide a picture of the supply side, that is, the supply of skills over time, and the labour market outcomes regarding the work of graduates. The next section presents an overview of investments in education, and then we move to the labour market of young graduates in Portugal. Our major focus is the type of occupation assigned to bachelor's and master's degree holders. However, we also compare with non-graduates to make our analysis clearer. Some notes are also included on gender differences when necessary to understand the impacts of the expansion of higher education.

### *The Supply of Graduates*

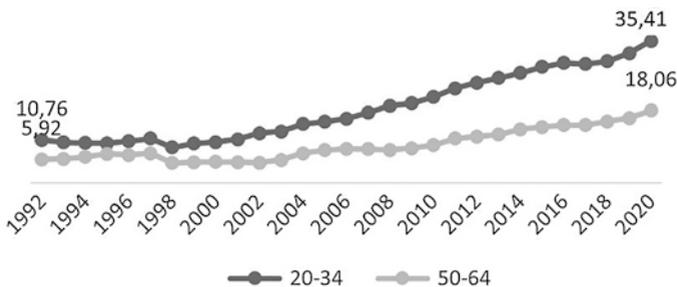
Although the skill deficit is a key feature of Portuguese society, great efforts have been taken to increase the qualifications of the population. The major outcome of the investments in education is the coexistence of older less educated people with young more educated people. This has resulted in a growing generation gap and raises concerns about the labour market outcomes of young graduates.

The data reported in Fig. 7.1 evidence a growing generation gap from 2007 that has become more marked in recent times. There is also a gender gap, with women investing more in education than men (Fig. 7.2), especially since 2014.

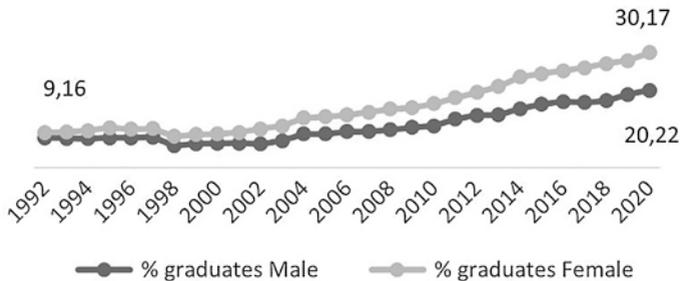
The investments made in higher education in Portugal resulted in a supply of highly skilled young people, thus raising the following question: What are the employment trends of young higher education graduates in Portugal? Our empirical analysis attempts to illustrate how bachelor's and master's graduates are distributed across the types of occupations.

### *The Distribution of Graduates Across Types of Occupation*

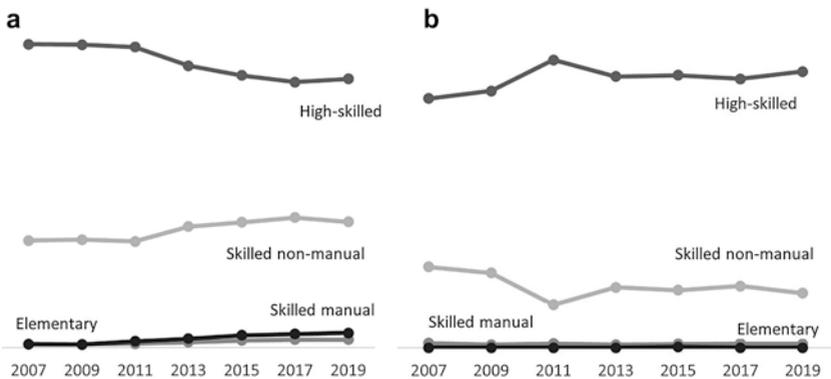
Figures 7.3a and b provide a picture of the occupations of young bachelor's and master's degree holders. The data show that high-skilled occupations continue to absorb graduates (more than 60% of bachelor's and more than 80% of master's), but we find a downward trend for bachelor's graduates and an upward slope for master's graduates from 2011. On the



**Fig. 7.1** Educational attainment: generation gap among HE graduates (%). (Source: EUROSTAT)



**Fig. 7.2** Educational attainment: gender gap among young HE graduates (%). (Source: EUROSTAT)



**Fig. 7.3** (a) Bachelor’s graduates (%). (b) Master’s graduates (%). (Source: Quadros de Pessoa)

other hand, the number of bachelor’s graduates in elementary occupations has increased.

The data in Fig. 7.4 show the composition of each type of occupation by education level. Looking at the 2007–2019 time frame, high-skilled occupations have increased the qualification requirements. The proportion of master’s degree holders rose from 2.2% in 2007 to 18.4% in 2019. It indicates a downward trend of young bachelor’s graduates and non-graduates in these occupations, which are filled by young postgraduates.

Considering these findings, we explored the specific occupations inside the broad category of high-skilled occupations (Fig. 7.5). The

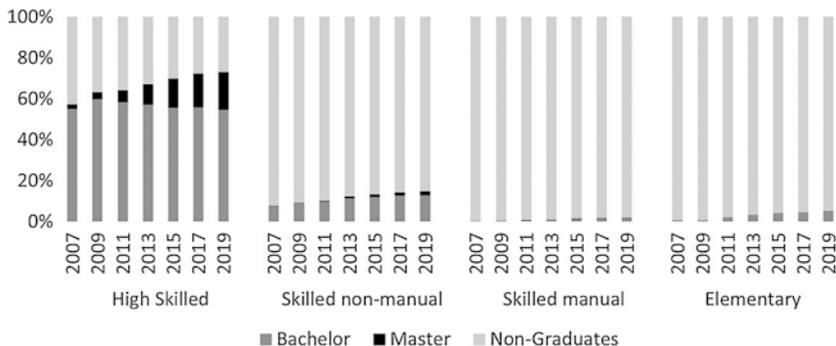


Fig. 7.4 Distribution of graduates across types of occupations classification (%). (Source: Quadros de Pessal)

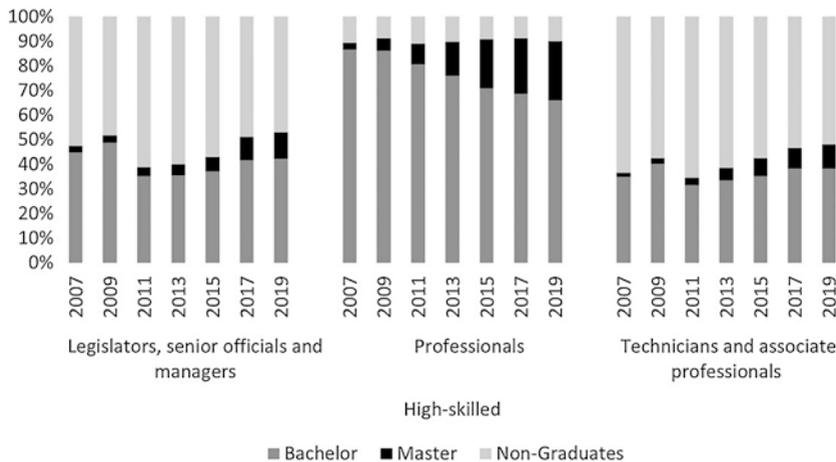


Fig. 7.5 The decomposition of high-skilled occupations. (Source: Quadros de Pessal)

decomposition highlights two features of high-skilled occupations in Portugal. Firstly, the legislator, professional and technician groups continue to hire young people without higher education. About half of the workers in these groups are non-graduates, with master’s graduates making up around 10%. In sum, the professional group seems to be the most

dynamic and shows the largest increase in postgraduates. The other two groups, legislators and professionals, had slight increases.

Figure 7.4 also shows that elementary occupations represent an option for young bachelor's graduates, especially from 2011. There are three times as many bachelor's degree holders in 2011 as in 2009. The increase has since continued, albeit slowly (5.3% in 2019). Therefore, the contribution of elementary occupations to graduate employment is still relatively small and raises no concerns about the potential underutilisation of skills.

Bachelor's graduates tend to occupy skilled non-manual occupations in clerical services. The upward trend in this type of occupation is accompanied by a decline in high-skilled occupations (Fig. 7.3a). Additional evidence presents the distribution by gender. The presence of women in high-skilled and elementary jobs decreased over time, but it increased in skilled manual and skilled non-manual occupations from 2013. Women tend to be assigned to clerical, sales or manufacturing jobs. The pattern for male workers is the inverse.

#### *Industry Affiliation: Education and Occupations*

Just as with the occupation type, the distribution of graduates varies across industries. Some can be viewed as graduate industries, while others are less attractive for holders of higher education degrees. Finance, IT, consultancy, health and education are generally graduate industries and started to recruit master's degree holders from 2013. It is important, therefore, to examine the sectors where the proportion of graduates is increasing. Figure 7.6 provides evidence on the sectors that have less than 10% of bachelor's graduates in 2007, but with a subsequent increase in this percentage.

Two industries have a regular upward trend: manufacturing and trade. A similar pattern occurs in the hospitality industry (HORECA), with a slight decrease in 2019. Trade and hospitality are labour-intensive industries and appear as job opportunities for graduates. The data also show that bachelor's graduates tend to be assigned to elementary occupations in these industries. However, whereas there is a more marked upward trend of allocating graduates to less demanding jobs in commerce until 2019, there is a downward trend in other sectors.

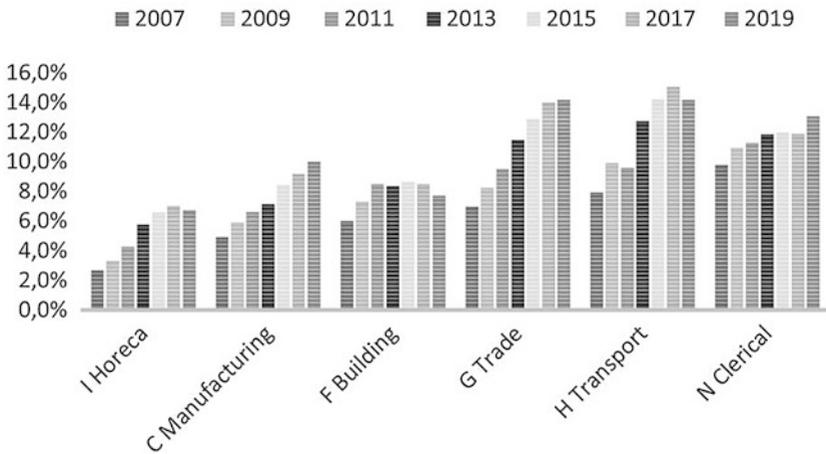


Fig. 7.6 Distribution of bachelors in non-graduates' industries. (Source: Quadros de Pessal)

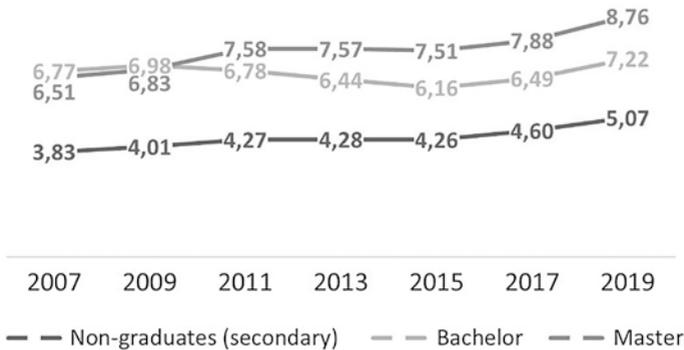


Fig. 7.7 Mean hourly wage by education level. (Source: Quadros de Pessal)

*Wages: Education and Occupations*

The literature shows that the benefits of higher education in the context of expansion is one of the major concerns among researchers. The data in Fig. 7.7 show different trends. It should be noted that we limited the non-graduates to those with secondary education.

Between 2007 and 2009, there was almost no wage differential between bachelor's and master's graduates; the divergence then started and became more accentuated between 2009 and 2011 (bachelor's: 6.98, 6.78; master's: 6.83, 7.58). The data in Fig. 7.7 show a general decline between 2011 and 2015, and then a growing gap between the wages of graduates and postgraduates.

Our analysis also focuses on the wage differentials across types of occupation. As can be noted from data in Figs. 7.8(a) and 7.8(b),<sup>4</sup> there are no visible differences between bachelor's and master's degree holders in highly skilled occupations between 2007 and 2009. The pattern changes, and bachelor's graduates lose their monetary advantage after 2009. More precisely, the postgraduates in high-skilled occupations benefit from higher wages over the years under scrutiny and are also at an advantage in skilled non-manual and skilled manual occupations. In contrast, the bachelor's degree seems to be devalued in all types of occupation, except elementary jobs.

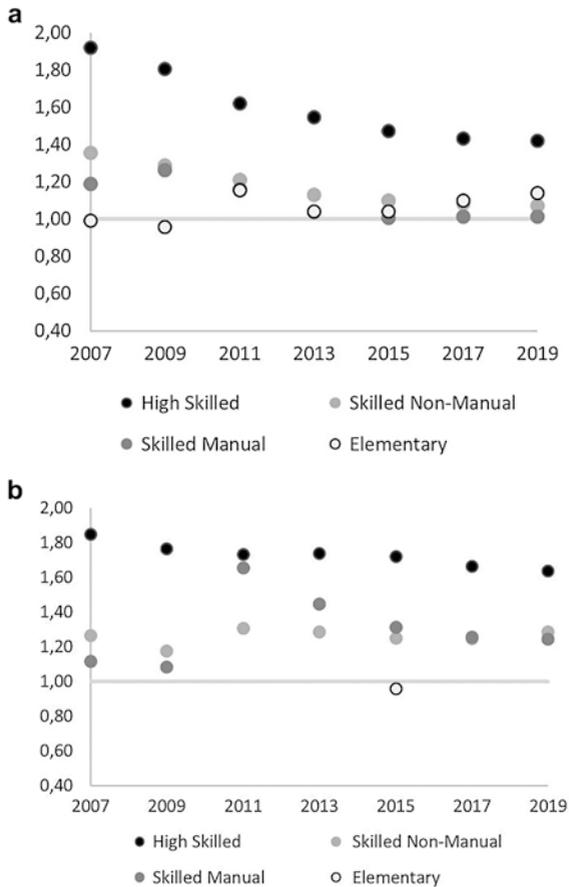
Bachelor's graduates are given skilled manual and elementary jobs with low wages. Their wages have been closer to the mean since 2013, but in 2009 they were below the mean. In sum, graduates lost their advantage in high-skilled jobs, and wage differentials in less-skilled or elementary occupations are negligible and closer to the mean. The postgraduates benefit from working in high-skilled jobs as well as in other skilled jobs. There are almost no master's degree holders in elementary occupations.<sup>5</sup> The data also revealed that those with secondary education have lower wages in all types of occupation, and their earnings tend to decrease over time. They earn slightly above the mean in high-skilled jobs (around 10%), but their wage is below average in all other occupations. The biggest penalisation is seen in elementary jobs.

### *Discussion of the Findings*

The huge investments in HE raised concerns about the jobs assigned to graduates in Portugal. Previous research has already pointed to the heterogeneity in the demand for graduates and consequently their assignment to different jobs (Figueiredo et al., 2017). Our findings show some

<sup>4</sup>The figures measure the mean hourly wage of bachelor's and master's graduates relative to the average wage of workers in each occupation.

<sup>5</sup>In 2013, 2017 and 2019, there were only 3 postgraduates; in 2015, the number was 42.



**Fig. 7.8** (a) Mean hourly wage to average wage by occupation: bachelor's. (b) Mean hourly wage to average wage by occupation: master's. (Source: Quadros de Pessal)

positive signs, but also sound some alarms. We also found that the expansion of HE most affected bachelor's degree holders.

In relation to occupation type, postgraduates are basically assigned to high-skilled jobs, taking up places previously held by bachelor's graduates (Almeida et al., 2017). In fact, postgraduation protects young people from elementary jobs as demonstrated by the small number of master's

graduates in the lowest skilled occupations. The findings suggest that a master degree helped graduates to position ahead in the labour queue for highly skilled occupations (Bills, 2016), and more importantly in the technical fields of education (Di Stasio, 2017). It remains unclear whether it represents a credential inflation (Collins, 1979) or a true productivity enhancing option of employers. Furthermore, the rise of master's degree holders in Portugal (OECD, 2019) may be a defensive strategy of young people to escalate the labour queue (Bills, 2016).

Additionally, research has already shown that employers claim that young people lack maturity, which they consider a key personal trait (Suleman & Laranjeiro, 2018). Probably, the overeducated applicants, as the master graduates might be, have competitive advantage due to employers' expectations regarding cognitive and behavioural attributes that facilitate learning and, consequently, reduce training costs (Thurow, 1976). Ultimately, the discourse on employability skills and graduates' attributes misses how market rules influence the access of graduates to different types of jobs (Tomlinson & Watermeyer, 2022).

On the other hand, we must question the concerns about the assignment of graduates in non-graduate jobs. Our findings indicate that despite the rising proportion of bachelor's degree holders in elementary jobs, the figures are insignificant (around 5% in 2019) and raise doubts about the incidence of overqualification in Portugal (Marques et al., 2022). The most relevant growth occurs in skilled non-manual work, which indicates that clerical jobs are being filled by bachelor's graduates, especially women. There are also signs of gender segregation by occupation; female bachelor's graduates are overrepresented in traditionally female-dominated occupations, such as clerical work. Furthermore, the proportion of women in high-skilled jobs is tending to decrease. Ultimately, a combination of less-skilled jobs and low pay may particularly affect women in Portugal. This finding requires further research, especially due to the investments in HE by women in Portugal. Once again, pursuing education might be a preventive action to remain competitive in the labour market (Bills, 2016).

Additionally, the increasing supply of graduates benefits the industries that graduates traditionally find less attractive (Trow, 1973). The figures on industry affiliation corroborates Trow's arguments and show that trade, manufacturing, hospitality and clerical sectors have followed a skill upgrade pattern. If this pattern maintains in the coming years, HE will be providing graduates for industries and occupations that are unable to take advantage of their high-level knowledge and skills. Herein, the credential

inflation will produce crowding-out effects, contributing to exclude non-graduates from the labour market.

The empirical evidence pointed to a high incidence of non-graduates in managing and technician positions. There has been extensive discussion in the media and among some academics about the low level of education among managers in Portugal (Cantante, 2018). According to the author, the ability for innovation and economic dynamics can be jeopardised by the low qualifications of the managers. Many workers are more educated than their managers, and if nothing is done to improve their qualifications, the economy will suffer. This pattern is most visible in small and medium businesses, which are prevalent in the Portuguese economy.

The wage gap between different levels of education is a major issue in research in Portugal. Our findings are in line with those of Suleman and Figueiredo (2020) in that the labour market did not differentiate bachelor's and master's graduates at the start of the Bologna Process. We provide evidence on the growing gap from 2009, showing a devaluation of the bachelor's diploma. More specifically, we observed a decline in wages between 2011 and 2015 that can be attributed to the economic crisis, and the gap between graduates and postgraduates since then can be attributed to the expansion of HE and probably to credential inflation. Further research should explore whether postgraduates will follow the same pattern as bachelor's degree holders so that they lose their advantage in high-skilled jobs.

### CONCLUDING REMARKS

Our study provided a picture of the graduate labour market in Portugal after the higher education reform in 2006–2007. The expansion of HE increased the supply of graduates, and the most marked consequences of this were seen at the bachelor level. We found a small but increasing proportion of holders of a bachelor's degree being assigned to elementary occupations, having job opportunities in 'non-graduate' industries, and earning lower wages than those with a master's degree. The wage decline is more marked in high-skilled occupations, but wages are closer to the mean in other occupations. It seems that a master's degree is the new basic higher education diploma; this raises doubts as to the role of bachelor's degrees in Portugal.

The relevance of postgraduation must be questioned in terms of both the distribution across occupations and the wage differentials. Does it

reflect a credential inflation or a reward for productive skills? In other words, do employers perceive more schooling as the acquisition of unobservable characteristics that they are willing to reward, or do they really need high-level knowledge and skills to face the changing economic challenges? A detailed description of jobs shed light on these questions.

Policymakers should address this consequence of expansion and implementation policies to guarantee adequate jobs for graduates and support investments in postgraduation. The employers are reacting to the supply of highly skilled workforce by raising the hiring criteria. The consequences are risky: the potential displacement of graduates and subsequently of those with only secondary education to low-skilled and low-waged jobs or even to unemployment is a paradox in a country with a low qualification structure. Stakeholders of HE and policymakers must tackle the multidimensional effects of expansion and organise the labour market to achieve a win-win outcome.

In conclusion, Portugal has made huge investments to ensure the supply of qualified labour, but employers, that is, the demand side, are the key actors to transform workers' knowledge and skills into a competitive advantage in the global market and to avoid credential inflation. Therefore, policymakers should design appropriate tools to reduce the qualifications gaps of managers. It is time to believe that qualified managers and leaders will take better advantage of workers' skills, improve their competitiveness and boost economic growth.

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# Institutionalisation of Employability Capital in Employment Markets

*Yuzhuo Cai*

## INTRODUCTION

Cai and Tomlinson (2023) argue that the key to graduate employability is the conversion of resources or capital possessed by graduates to the competencies appreciated in labour markets in different institutional contexts and, therefore, that knowing what resources are valued by employers and how they translate into future outcomes benefits all parties. They began by developing a renewed analytical framework for understanding employers' perceptions of graduate employability by incorporating Tomlinson's (2017) concept of employability capital into Cai's (2013) conceptualisation of the institutionalisation of employers' beliefs about graduate employability. The framework helps categorise various graduates' competencies and skills appreciated by employers via the lens of employability capital and explains how the norms concerning what are considered useful employability capital or resources among employers have evolved or become institutionalised. Thus, it contributes to integrating the possession and process perspectives of graduate employability research (Holmes,

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2013). However, the authors admitted that the framework needs to be tested and further developed in empirical investigations (Cai & Tomlinson, 2023). In other words, its explanatory power in graduate employability research needs to be demonstrated and possibly enhanced.

This chapter responds to Cai and Tomlinson's (2023) call for future research by asking two research questions: What is the explanatory power of Cai and Tomlinson's (2023) framework, and can it be demonstrated empirically? How can the framework be further enhanced? To approach these questions, I apply Cai and Tomlinson's (2023) framework to reinterpret an empirical investigation of China-based Finnish employers' perceptions of Finnish-educated Chinese graduates (FECGs), conducted by Cai (2012). Although the data are 10 years old, the information and stories are suitable for testing the framework.

The chapter is structured as follows. It begins with a presentation of Cai's (2012) study. Then, it introduces the analytical framework developed by Cai and Tomlinson (2023). This is followed by re-analyses of Cai's (2012) findings on institutionalising employers' perceptions of graduate employability from the perspectives of employability capital and graduate-employer information exchanges, which are both essential in Cai and Tomlinson's (2023) framework. The first analysis, from the employability capital perspective, is based on a reinterpretation of solid evidence from Cai's (2012) study. The second analysis, from the graduate-employer information exchange perspective, is somewhat hypothetical, since Cai's (2012) study only investigated employers and thus could not provide a complete picture of two-way interactions between graduates and employers. Finally, I discuss enhancements to Cai and Tomlinson's (2023) framework and its potential to contribute to graduate employability research. For instance, it has been demonstrated that applying Cai and Tomlinson's (2023) framework helps resolve some dilemmas in graduate employability research, such as contrasting views between students and employers regarding how an international education benefits graduates' employability.

### REVISITING THE EMPIRICAL STUDY

Cai's (2012) study was driven by his curiosity about a paradox: while many Chinese graduates from Finnish higher education complained that they could hardly find a job in Finnish firms, some Finnish employers based in China were struggling to find suitable Chinese employees. Insights from the literature on the employability of international graduates (at the time

Cai's study was conducted) implied that there could be a good match between FECGs and China-based Finnish employers for two reasons. First, educational attainment abroad helps students' employment both in the host countries (e.g. Bratsberg & Ragan Jr., 2002; Krahn et al., 2000; Zeng & Xie, 2004) and in their home countries (e.g. Norris & Gillespie, 2009; Teichler, 2007). Second, when screening job applicants with international education backgrounds, employers are more likely to recognise educational credentials obtained in their own countries (Krahn et al., 2000; Støren & Wiers-Jenssen, 2010).

Given many practical barriers faced by international students in the employment market in Finland (e.g. the requirement of proficiency in Finnish language skills), one can assume that international graduates have better employment prospects at Finnish companies operating in their home countries. Indeed, studies have demonstrated that foreign employers in China favour Chinese returnees (Liu, 2007; Zhang, 2008). However, according to information received from Finnish business networks in China, few FECGs were employed in China-based Finnish companies. By the time Cai's (2012) study was conducted, more than 2000 Chinese students were studying in Finland, and it was estimated that 300–400 Chinese graduates left Finland for China after completing their studies every year. At the same time, about 300 Finnish companies in China employed around 30,000 people.

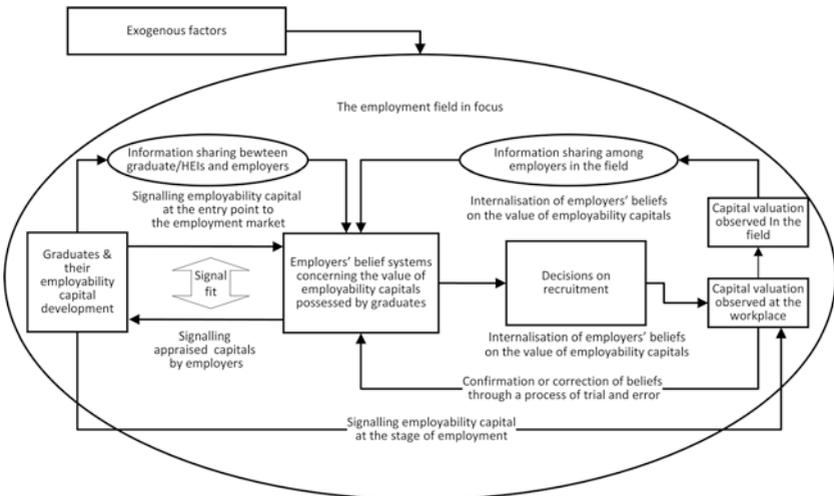
To better understand the paradox, particularly to explore how China-based Finnish employers perceive FECGs, Cai (2012) interviewed the CEOs and human resources (HR) directors of 16 Finnish companies operating in China. He began by developing an analytical framework for understanding employers' perceptions of graduate employability (Cai, 2013), integrating the new institutional theory (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Meyer & Rowan, 1977) with Bailly's (2008) conceptualisation of employers' beliefs about job seekers' education credentials. Cai's (2012) study revealed that, overall, the Finnish employers were in favour of hiring FECGs: they were easy to communicate with due to their proficiency in English and understanding of Finnish culture, they could help the companies to overcome the cultural challenges through cross-cultural perspectives and they had good professional knowledge and hands-on skills. The Finnish employers also appreciated FECGs' ability to work independently, adaptability, outspoken character, initiative, good work ethic, team spirit, leadership skills and responsibility. However, some employers indicated that FECGs' competencies varied. For instance, some FECGs had

insufficient cross-cultural skills, many lacked work experience in China and some asked for salaries that the employers could not afford.

### CONCEPTUALISING THE INSTITUTIONALISATION OF EMPLOYERS' BELIEFS ABOUT GRADUATE EMPLOYABILITY FROM A CAPITAL PERSPECTIVE

Before reinterpreting Cai's (2012) findings using Cai and Tomlinson's (2023) framework, I briefly introduce the framework (Fig. 8.1). The framework is developed by incorporating Tomlinson's (2017) concept of employability capital into Cai's (2013) framework for understanding the institutionalisation of employers' beliefs of graduate employability.

Cai (2013) developed his framework to respond to a debate on what leads to better opportunities in the labour market: graduates' increased productivity skills due to their education, as explained by human capital theory (Becker, 1964; Schultz, 1961), or their education credentials' signalling effect, as described by signalling theory (Arrow, 1973; Spence,



**Fig. 8.1** Analytical framework for understanding employers' perceptions of graduate employability capital. (Source: adapted from Cai and Tomlinson (2023))

1973; Stiglitz, 1975). Cai (2013) contended that the debate would persist unless researchers considered how employers develop beliefs about graduate employability. His position was based on Bailey's (2008) study, who argued that educational outcome, instead of being a substance (e.g. in the form of abilities or signals), is susceptible to multiple interpretations—most importantly, employers' beliefs. Further expanding Bailly's (2008) model from the institutional theory perspective, Cai (2013) developed a conceptual framework for understanding what employers conceive of as the value of graduates with similar educational backgrounds in the workplace.

It is necessary to highlight a few essential concepts in Cai's (2013) framework: employment market, institutionalisation, employers and employers' beliefs. An employment market is an organisational field, which is defined as 'those organisations that, in the aggregate, constitute a recognised area of institutional life' (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983, p. 148). In Cai's (2012) study, the field or employment market comprises Finnish companies in China. Institutionalisation is a process 'by which social processes, obligations, or actualities come to take on a rule-like status in social thought and action' (Meyer & Rowan, 1977, p. 341) in an organisational field. Employers are the individuals 'responsible for recruitment in employing organisations [who] effectively act as gatekeeper[s] to the labour market' (Maguire, 1992, p. 80), and their attitudes towards job seekers are crucial in the final recruitment decisions. In the context of Cai's (2012) study, 'employers' refers to CEOs and HR directors of China-based Finnish companies. Employers' beliefs are understood broadly, as shown by terms such as 'perceptions', 'expectations' or even 'the image that the individual presents' (Bailly, 2008, p. 963).

While Cai's (2013) framework has proven to be useful in guiding the analysis in an empirical investigation of the employment prospects of FECGs at Finnish companies operating in China (Cai, 2012), Cai and Tomlinson (2023) argued that two aspects of the framework could be enhanced. First, a wide array of graduates' values needs to be examined through a simple analytical lens. Second, the roles of other actors, such as graduates, in institutionalising employers' beliefs should be considered. Tomlinson's (2017) concept of employability capital can help in this regard.

When developing his concept of graduate employability capital, Tomlinson (2017) intended to respond to a research gap. While the existing graduate employability research predominantly focuses on what higher education institutions do to improve employment outcomes and the

attributes that employable graduates should possess, little research has paid attention to how students can take advantage of the resources available around them (Shumilova & Cai, 2023). The graduate employability capital framework (Tomlinson, 2017) links various factors and resources, going beyond human capital and acknowledging the interconnectedness among types of capital. The graduate capital perspective also regards the skill match between graduates and employers as a negotiation process. Tomlinson (2017) identified five forms of graduate capital: social, cultural, identity, human and psychological. This graduate capital approach has been widely applied in empirical studies (e.g. Nghia et al., 2020).

Besides offering a structured framework to understand graduates' value to employers, the graduate capital approach contributes to Cai's (2013) conceptualisation of employers' beliefs about graduate employability by providing a new perspective on graduate–employer information exchange. The exchange is described as follows: ‘employers process the signalling effects of employability capital possessed by graduates, and graduates try to convince employers of the values of their employability capitals’ (Cai & Tomlinson, 2023, p. 489). Such a perspective can better explain the signal fit—the extent to which the signal corresponds to the sought-after quality of the signaller (Connelly, Certo, Ireland, & Reutzel, 2011)—which is a goal of both employers and graduates.

In applying Cai and Tomlinson's (2023) framework to reinterpret Cai's (2012) findings, I mainly focus on two kinds of analysis. First, I categorise the values of employees mentioned by China-based Finnish employers using the lens of employability capital. Second, I explain how employability is a relative term depending on the information exchange between graduates and employers.

#### REINTERPRETATION OF CAI'S (2012) FINDINGS FROM THE EMPLOYABILITY CAPITAL PERSPECTIVE

While Cai's (2012) empirical data were analysed by applying Cai's (2013) conceptualisation of the institutionalisation of employers' perceptions of FECGs' values, here I categorise their values (competencies and resources) through the lens of employability capital (Tomlinson, 2017). As Cai (2012) discovered both positive and negative perceptions of FECGs, the re-analysis also distinguished both aspects. The results of the analysis are shown in Table 8.1, where the empty boxes indicate that there is no

**Table 8.1** Categorisation of FECGs' competencies and skills in terms of employability capital

<i>Employability capital</i>	<i>Reinterpretation of competencies and skills of FECGs in the eyes of China-based Finnish employers through the lens of employability capital</i>	
	<i>Employers' positive perceptions</i>	<i>Employers' negative perceptions</i>
Cultural capital Know-how (field)	The Finnish employers commonly believed that the FECGs had good cross-cultural skills. First, the FECGs were perceived as being able to facilitate communication between Finnish managers and Chinese employees. Second, their cross-cultural skills helped Finnish companies operate in the Chinese market. Third, cross-cultural skills could add value to technical production due to their understanding of both the Finnish and Chinese markets. Finally, the inter-culture experience helped FECGs adjust to a new environment.	
Human capital Know-how (professional)	Finnish employers considered Finnish higher education an advantage in developing students' practical skills and ability to solve problems. Compared to graduates from China, FECGS were perceived as having broader and more up-to-date knowledge as well as better practical abilities and professional skills. Some employers also pointed out that the ability to learn new things can be one of the advantages of graduates from Finland. Moreover, most FECGs' language proficiencies were appreciated. The employers also pointed out the merits of FECGs, including their ability to work independently and be responsible.	FECGs normally lack work experience. For many small companies, work experience is a must in recruitment.

*(continued)*

**Table 8.1** (continued)

<i>Employability capital</i>	<i>Reinterpretation of competencies and skills of FECGs in the eyes of China-based Finnish employers through the lens of employability capital</i>	
	<i>Employers' positive perceptions</i>	<i>Employers' negative perceptions</i>
Social capital Know-who (network)	A more straightforward method of communication and teamwork spirit could help better develop networks.	FECGs were disadvantaged when working with local clients compared to those domestically educated people, mainly because of their lack of experience and networks in the Chinese context.
Identity capital Know-why (career motivation and identity)		There are some elements in Chinese mentality and culture that facilitate the entrepreneurial spirit and high achievement motivation. However, some FECGs might lose these 'good' characteristics after studying in Finland.

Source: The author

evidence from Cai's (2012) study reflecting the corresponding capital. It should be noted that psychology and identity capital in Tomlinson's (2017) framework are not directly observed in Cai's (2012) findings. This could be because Cai's (2012) study only focused on employers. In other words, psychology and identity capital should probably be examined when the research subjects are students/graduates. The absence of these two types of capital in Cai's (2012) study could also indicate that the employers interviewed in Cai's (2012) study might not have considered them critical or that the graduates might not have sent clear signals concerning their psychology or identity capital to the employers.

Regarding the first research inquiry (What is the explanatory power of Cai and Tomlinson's framework, and can it be demonstrated empirically?), I found that by regrouping the values of FECGs perceived by employers into four forms of employability capital, one can better navigate the findings and draw new inferences. For instance, Cai (2012) revealed a paradox: studying in Finland could be perceived by employers as either an advantage or a disadvantage in terms of their cultural competences. However, he described the phenomenon but did not offer sufficient explanations. As shown in Table 8.1, the cultural competencies mentioned in Cai's (2012) study can be categorised into two capital forms: cultural capital and social capital. More specifically, the cultural competencies of which employers had positive perceptions pertain to cultural capital, while those perceived negatively by employers pertain to social capital. Thus, the paradox can be explained as follows: employers appreciated the intercultural experience (cultural capital) FECGs gained while studying in Finland; however, they considered their lack of professional networks in China (social capital) a disadvantage.

Regarding the second research inquiry (How can the framework be enhanced?), the re-analysis pointed out one area for further exploration, since some kinds of graduates' competencies and skills perceived by employers do not perfectly fit into the employability capital frameworks developed by Tomlinson (2017) and other scholars (Nghia et al., 2020; Pham et al., 2019). For instance, FECGs often demanded excessively high salaries. Finnish employers would have liked to offer them higher wages, but not a 'Finnish salary'. Even if FECGs accepted a 'local' salary, the employers worried that they would not likely stay for long. This raises some questions for graduates' self-reflections: think of your salary expectations and where you can invest available economic resources to become more employable. Also, what economic value can you bring to the company at which you are applying? These might be categorised as Bourdieu's economic capital, which refers to money and ownership of financial means, means of production, material goods and other assets such as property (Bourdieu, 1984, 1986).

Economic capital is crucial to FECGs' employment in Finnish companies in China. As reported by Cai (2012), Finnish employers' positive perceptions of FECGs did not necessarily lead to successful recruitment because FECGs often asked for higher salaries than the employers could afford. This suggests that graduates should realistically estimate the economic value they can bring to employers based on their employability

capital, particularly their human, cultural and social capital. The value calculation must be based on the local context. As indicated in Cai's (2012) study, one of the reasons many Finnish companies moved their operations to China was to reduce costs. Therefore, they did not intend to offer their employees too high salaries.

According to Shumilova and Cai (2023), 'economic capital can be used as a means to invest in further learning or get access to certain networks via membership fees, and as a result, graduates become more employable/get a higher salary' (p. 29). This implies that 'the ultimate goal of a graduate is to leverage different forms of employability capital (including the economic one) and convert them into economic capital in their potential employment' (p. 29). The re-analysis of Cai's (2012) data suggests this economic capital perspective: graduates need to realistically estimate possible salaries based on an understanding of their own employability capital and the state of the employment labour market. Based on such an understanding, economic capital can be understood as the valuation of other employability types of capital (Braun Střelcová et al., 2022). The valuation has two dimensions—one perceived by the graduates and the other by the employers—and graduates' success in job seeking depends on the alignment between them.

### IMPLICATIONS OF CAI'S (2012) STUDY ON INTERACTIONS BETWEEN GRADUATES AND EMPLOYERS

The graduate–employer information exchange perspective in Cai and Tomlinson's (2023) framework cannot be fully tested using Cai's (2012) study, which only investigated employers. To thoroughly examine the two-way interactions between graduates and employers, the graduates who applied for jobs offered by the interviewed employers should also be interviewed or surveyed. Nevertheless, some useful insights can be generated when applying the graduate–employer exchange perspective in revisiting Cai's (2012) study.

According to Cai and Tomlinson (2023), employability capital is a relative term that depends on the institutional contexts of the labour markets in which graduates and employers exchange information. Cai's (2013) conceptualisation suggests that the value of graduates depends on employers' beliefs, which evolve and become institutionalised in a particular field or employment market. By incorporating Tomlinson's (2017)

employability capital concept into Cai's (2013) conceptualisation, Cai and Tomlinson (2023) explain graduate–employer exchanges. Exchange processes entail two levels (See Fig. 8.1). The first level of interaction involves graduates signalling their employability capital to potential employers. Although graduates acquire this capital prior to their interactions with potential employers, its value depends on the way in which its signals are conveyed and eventually received or believed by potential employers. The second process involves the decisions of employers, which are influenced by institutionalised employers' beliefs about employability capital in the employment market (as an organisational field) as well as other possible factors in the institutional context (such as sector influences and external organisation relations). The employability capitals acknowledged by employers may, in turn, have signaling effects on students and graduates.

Cai (2012) only examined graduate–employer interactions from the employers' perspective. He found that the China-based Finnish employers developed their beliefs about FECGs' employability through two interactive processes: private learning and public learning. When they had no experience with hiring FECGs, Finnish employers' initial perceptions of them were mainly influenced by other employers in the job market (through public learning), whereas these other employers who had previous experience hiring FECGs would have developed their beliefs about FECGs' employability directly (through private learning). In the context of recruitment, employers could re-evaluate their initial perceptions of the suitability of FECGs by objectively assessing their job performance.

Cai (2012) found that, overall, initial beliefs derived from the public learning were largely confirmed by employer's private evaluations. In both the employers' initial beliefs and evaluations, professional skills were considered a strength of FECGs, while a lack of work experience was deemed a major weakness. The differences mainly concerned FECGs' cultural skills. However, he acknowledged the difficulties inherent in fully exploring private learning and its interactions with public learning due to the small number of FECGs employed at the Finnish companies he had investigated.

Although Cai (2012) solely focused on employers' perceptions, he drew some conclusions about the potential roles of graduates via graduate–employer information exchanges. The most profound proposition is that employers' perceptions or evaluations of FECGs may be inaccurate due to information asymmetry. In other words, employers might not discover some of the competencies and resources (employability capital) of

FECGs. This could be due to FECGs' tendency to pursue a skill match between their competencies and employers' requirements. In turn, FECGs might ignore some of their skills and resources that are not mentioned in job advertisements but could be valuable to employers. Cai (2012, p. 161) provided the following example:

In the last decade, China has become an important destination for Finnish business investment, with an intention of moving the two end points of the value chain to China. However, most Finnish companies mainly utilise the advantage[s] of China at the beginning of the value chain, such as cheap material[s] and workforce. They have not really entered into the local market at the end point. As it was indicated by the companies interviewed that the majority of them mainly conduct business with foreign companies or joint ventures in China rather than local clients. ... FECGs [can play] a potential role in helping ... companies to localise their business at the other end of the value chain.

The discussions above show how Cai and Tomlinson's (2023) graduate–employer exchange perspective helps engender new insights from Cai's (2012) findings. According to Cai and Tomlinson (2023), a more comprehensive picture of the institutionalisation of employers' beliefs about FECGs' employability could be drawn if FECGs' perceptions and actions had been included in Cai's (2012) investigation. Nevertheless, it can be hypothesised that FECGs need not only to send strong signals about their employability to potential employers but also to influence their beliefs through purposeful and collective actions. In other words, FECGs should strategically play their agency role, which is in line with Cai and Tomlinson's (2023) argument that 'the insights concerning institutionalisation of capitals could be broadened to conceptualise how graduates can leverage their resources in the emerging new employment landscape (e.g. establishing start-ups)' (p. 494).

Cai (2012) proposed an entrepreneurial approach to job seeking, which is about how a job seeker can strategically and innovatively create and optimise employment opportunities in the job market. In the traditional job-seeking model, a job seeker usually looks for a job advertisement, reads the requirements and then submits an application. According to Cai (2012), a job seeker taking the entrepreneurial approach follows the following steps: (1) discover and develop your own (preferably unique) advantages, (2) accordingly, identify your target employers and

understand their needs and interests, (3) develop plans or proposals on how the potential employers can achieve new economic growth by utilising your special skills and advantages, (4) try to promote and sell your ideas to the potential employers by all necessary means and (5) if an employer accepts your proposal, you are more likely to get hired.

The entrepreneurial approach could be further elaborated by applying the employability capital perspective in two ways. First, if graduates discover or identify a match between their competencies and target employers' potential needs, they can apply employability capital as a lens through which to conduct a more accurate analysis of their advantages to potential employers. While the employers interviewed in Cai's (2012) study were concerned about but could hardly assess FECGs' social capital, graduates should pay more attention to signal their social capital to employers. Of course, FECGs must first develop such capital before signalling it. Moreover, as discussed in the previous section, the employers interviewed in Cai's (2012) study might not be aware of identity and psychological capital. If some graduates are confident in their strengths in these types of capital, they should strategically signal potential employers. Second, the entrepreneurial approach is concerned with agentic and psychological capital. Shumilova and Cai (2023) argue that agentic and psychological capital, in the current framework of graduate employability capital (Nghia et al., 2020; Pham et al., 2019; Tomlinson, 2017), have different attributes than other types of graduate employability capital. Specifically, agentic and psychological capital reflect graduates' abilities to leverage other types of capital for better employability. Tomlinson (2017) also noted that psychological capital helps graduates exercise their agency. In light of this, Shumilova and Cai (2023) proposed the concept of employability entrepreneurship, which in part consists of agentic and psychological capital. They defined employability entrepreneurship as 'an iterative process of approaching one's higher education-to-work transition in a proactive and entrepreneurial way. It involves leveraging and converting one's graduate capital to create value for oneself, the employers and society in accordance with personal values, goals and strengths' (Shumilova & Cai, 2023, pp. 35–36). Such a concept can help strengthen Cai and Tomlinson's (2023) framework, particularly concerning the dynamics underlying graduate–employer exchanges.

My promotion of the employability entrepreneurship concept does not suggest that graduates should take full responsibility for their employability. The concept only has practical implications in an environment where

higher education institutions, career service providers and employment gatekeepers play important roles in graduates' transitions from higher education to the world of work. Drawing attention to employability entrepreneurship helps graduates better discover and leverage available resources and services to increase their employment opportunities.

## DISCUSSION

It should be noted that Cai's study (2012) was carried out 10 years ago. Not only has the employment market situation changed but also, more importantly, recent studies on the graduate employability of international students have provided new insights not addressed in the literature referred to by Cai (2012). One example of this change is in the relationship between international education and graduate employability or employment outcomes.

Cai (2012) found that the studies on employability of graduates with an international education often shared the following conclusions: educational attainment/experience abroad enhanced students' employability, and employers tended to appreciate job applicants with international education backgrounds, particularly with educational credentials from a higher education context with which the employers were familiar.

However, the recent literature has conflicting views about the impact of international student mobility on employability. According to Schueller and Aschenberger (2023), a growing body of literature suggests that international education experience does not necessarily guarantee better employment and labour outcomes. For instance, some scholars (e.g. Arghode et al., 2021; Di Pietro, 2019) criticised the fact that research findings on international education experience leading to better labour market outcomes are prone to biased interpretations. Others (e.g. Crăciun et al., 2020; Waibel et al., 2017) argued that the relationship between international education experience and employability enhancement is not straightforward, since individual and contextual factors can influence the processes. Recent studies also suggest that students may already possess the relevant characteristics valued in international graduates before studying abroad (Coelen, 2023).

Like Schueller and Aschenberger (2023), Coelen (2023) noted paradoxical views between students and employers. On the one hand, studies focusing on students' perceptions generally confirm that international education experience benefits students' personal development,

particularly in terms of transferable skills (e.g. Farrugia & Sanger, 2017; Potts, 2015), thus benefitting their employment opportunities. On the other hand, studies focusing on employers' perspectives report that the employability of international graduates often fails to meet employers' expectations (e.g. Green et al., 2019; Ota & Shimmi, 2019).

Cai and Tomlinson's (2023) framework, especially its application in the re-analysing of Cai's (2012) data, suggests that the paradox mentioned by Coelen (2023) can be better explained by incorporating three considerations. First, when examining whether an international education enhances employability, one must determine what specific employability capital was improved. As shown in Table 8.1, there is no single answer to the question of whether employers appreciate international graduates. Some international graduates' employability capital (competencies and resources) is appreciated, and some is not, depending on employers' perceptions and how the perceptions are institutionalised in a given employment market. Second, related to the first point, when scrutinising the consistency and contradiction between international graduates' and employers' perceptions of employability related to international experience, a more nuanced analysis should be conducted to determine whether their (dis)agreements concern the same types of employability capital. Third, special attention should be paid to graduates' actions conveying the signals of their employability to employers through employability entrepreneurship. This implies that students should also consider what kinds of employability capital might have substantial signalling value when studying abroad.

The aforementioned conflicting views in studies on the employability of international graduates show that the employment markets of international graduates are not yet highly institutionalised. There is considerable room for actors in these fields, not only employers and graduates but also universities and employment facilitating agencies (Cai, 2014; Shumilova & Cai, 2015), to learn from and influence each other.

## CONCLUSION

By applying Cai and Tomlinson's (2023) framework for analysing the institutionalisation of employers' perceptions of employability capital in Cai's (2012) empirical investigation of China-based Finnish employers' perceptions of FECEs, this paper demonstrated the explanatory power of Cai and Tomlinson's framework. Specifically, the framework offers new perspectives on Cai's (2012) research findings. For instance, the

employability capital perspective helps assign cultural competencies to cultural capital (know-how about the field) and social capital (know-how about the network), respectively. This helps explain a paradoxical finding in Cai's (2012) study—that the cultural competencies of FECGs were perceived as both advantages (regarding cultural capital) and disadvantages (regarding social capital) by employers. The framework can also potentially resolve a challenge found by Cai (2012) regarding information asymmetry between graduates and employers, with its emphasis on the graduate–employer exchange perspective.

As for improvements to the framework, it is recommended that economic capital be added to the employability capital framework. In addition, the concept of employability entrepreneurship, as a new approach to understanding agentic and psychological capital, is considered helpful in understanding the dynamics of graduate–employer exchanges.

The particular value of Cai and Tomlinson's (2023) framework lies in three contributions to the graduate employability literature. First, the framework is an advanced theoretical attempt to integrate valuable insights from the existing literature to respond to the shift in the research agenda from seeing employability from possessional and positional perspectives to viewing it as a negotiation process (Holmes, 2013). Second, the integration of employability capital and the institutionalisation of employers' beliefs facilitate analysis of the transition from higher education to the world of work, which tends to be extremely complex (Broadley et al., 2023), in a relatively simple (but also nuanced) way. Third, the framework helps resolve some puzzles in the literature, for example, regarding the impact of international student mobility on employability.

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# The Vocational Drift of French Higher Education and the Employability of Graduates

*Claire Bonnard*

## INTRODUCTION

As in other European countries, the employability of students is at the heart of higher education policies in France. The Bologna Process has redefined the role of higher education (Sin & Neave, 2016), one of the objectives being to strengthen the attractiveness and quality of higher education in a knowledge-based economy. Particular emphasis is placed on the transition to employment of higher education graduates and the development of their employability (Soldano, 2018). In the face of these European initiatives, a diversity of reforms in higher education has been observed according to national contexts, depending in particular on “*institutional and ideal legacies, as well as on the balance of power between the various groups of actors in university policy*” (Kavka, 2017).

The French university has seen its missions evolve since the 2000s. Since 2007, the mission of the professional integration of students has

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been added to the teaching and research missions of universities. The emphasis is placed on the employability of students, which has resulted in a vocational drift within the various university courses. The vocational drift of higher education will take not only different forms such as the creation of vocational higher education diplomas but also the development of different modules such as work placements within the university curriculum. The aim is to adjust the training offer to the needs of employers and the labour market and to increase the “employability capital” (Tiffon et al., 2007) of students by developing a set of skills that will enable them to enter the labour market in a sustainable way.

The concept of employability promoted by current policies can be understood within the framework of the development of the knowledge economy, and more generally of the human capital theory (Tomlinson, 2007, 2012). Many authors (Tiffon et al., 2007; Tomlinson, 2007) emphasise that, according to this approach, employability is inherent to graduates who have to build their own pathway. It is their responsibility—their difficulties in accessing the labour market can be attributed to them and considered as personal failure (Brown et al., 2003). The dominant approach to employability is decontextualised (Morley, 2001; Tomlinson, 2010) and does not make it possible to explain the differences in employment outcome according to social class, gender and minority group (Holmes, 2013). The literature has highlighted the importance of proposing an alternative approach to employability. Mobilising Bourdieu’s concepts of *capital*, *habitus* and *playing the game*, authors show that, according to their social capital, students will have different access to the labour market and attitudes towards managing their employability (Burke et al., 2017). Graduates will not have the same understanding of the “rules of the game” and what is expected by employers (Brown et al., 2003; Burke et al., 2017). Some authors take a different approach by emphasising the importance of taking into account the subjective dimension of employability by the construction of “identity toward labor market” (Tomlinson, 2010), “pre-professional identity” (Jackson, 2016) and “graduate identity” (Holmes, 2013). The identity towards employability will be formed by one’s history, academic background and also different interactions with the world of work. These approaches allow to better take into account the attitudes of students and young graduates towards employability and how they are formed.

The purpose of this chapter is to underline the interest in mobilising alternative approaches to the dominant approach to employability and

how these approaches would provide a better understanding of how students manage their employability and mobilise the various employability-related measures developed in higher education. To this end, we review empirical research studies on the vocational drift of French higher education and the employability of students. Studies have generally focused on the effect of the vocational drift of higher education on the academic and professional career of graduates in terms of efficiency and equity. Studies analysing students' attitudes towards the labour market and employability are relatively underdeveloped except in elite education (Brown et al., 2016; Tholen et al., 2013).

In the first part of this chapter, we introduce French higher education, which is characterised by a strong segmentation and hierarchisation of the different fields of study. In a second part, we return to the employment of graduates and the strategies of employability implemented within these fields. Finally, studies on the vocational drift of French higher education are presented. The main results are developed while highlighting how alternative approaches to employability offer new perspectives in the analysis of the effects of the vocational drift of higher education on students' employability.

## FRENCH HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM

In France, the “democratization” of access to the baccalaureate, following school explosion in the 1980s, has led to an increase in enrolment in higher education. According to the Ministry of Higher Education, in 2015, enrolment in higher education was eight times higher than in 1960. The arrival of these “new” students has resulted in a diversification of the educational offer in higher education (Duru-Bellat et al., 2008) which has reinforced the “segmentation of higher education” (Verley & Zilloniz 2010) with a hierarchy of higher education courses. Some authors (Pinto, 2008) point to a “segregative democratisation” (Merle, 2000). Indeed, there are three types of *baccalauréat*: general, technological and vocational. The general and technological baccalaureate should enable students to continue in higher education. The vocational baccalaureate is intended to allow for professional integration or continuation in higher education. Orientation towards the different types of *baccalauréat* is generally based on the student's academic record. Orientation in higher education will also differ according to the type of *baccalauréat*. The French higher education system generally opposes “elite” selective courses

(Grandes Ecoles, preparatory classes), to short selective vocational courses (BTS, IUT) and “non-selective” university courses (Duru-Bellat et al., 2008; Verley & Zilloniz, 2010).

The “elite” selective courses include the *Classes préparatoires aux Grandes Ecoles* (CPGE) and *Grande Ecoles*. The CPGE are accessible after the *baccalauréat* (usually *general baccalaureate*) on the basis of the student’s academic record and prepare students generally for two years for the entrance exams to the *Grandes Ecoles*. The *Grandes Ecoles*, including engineering and business schools, train students for top executive positions. Access to these schools is generally by *concours* (entrance examination). These streams are academically and socially selective, especially for the most prestigious schools. In 2020–2021, 49% of business school students had parents in professional and managerial position, as compared to more than 50% of CPGE and engineering school students (Ministry of education, 2021). This share exceeds 60% for the most prestigious schools. These courses have not really experienced any change in their social composition over the last fifteen years (Bonneau et al., 2021).

The short vocational courses include the *Sections de Technicien Supérieur* (STS) and the *Institut Universitaire de Technologie* (IUT). These courses were created in the 1960s to satisfy, in particular, the demand for middle managers. They are accessible after the baccalaureate on the basis of academic records and are more or less selective. The STS is a two-year technological course that prepares students for the *Brevet technicien du supérieur* (higher technological diploma). Of those entering STS, about a third have a technological *baccalaureate*, a third a vocational *baccalaureate* and the rest have a general baccalaureate or come from other higher education streams. The IUT is a three-year technological course since 2021 (previously two years), which prepares for the *Bachelor Universitaire de Technologie* (university technological diploma). Among the entrants to these streams, about 63% have a general *baccalaureate* and 34% a technological *baccalaureate*. Students from advantaged social backgrounds are under-represented in these courses. Indeed, in 2020–2021, only 15% of STS students have parents who are in professional and managerial position compared to 30% of IUT students. The short vocational courses were very attractive to students in the 2000s (Verley & Zilloniz, 2010).

The university courses welcome the largest number of students with heterogeneous educational, social backgrounds and aspirations (Verley & Zilloniz, 2010). Access to the first university cycle (Licence) is after the

*baccalauréat*.<sup>1</sup> The first academic cycle (*Licence*) lasts three years, and the second academic cycle (*Master*) lasts two years with the possibility of continuing to a doctorate. In addition, in the 1990s, a new professional degree, Vocational Bachelor's degree, was developed corresponding to an intermediate level of qualification between middle managers' degrees and those of engineers and managers (Giret, 2011). Within the university streams, a hierarchy of study fields exists (Bodin & Millet, 2011). The share of students in all university courses, whose parents are in professional and managerial position, is 33%, but it is 48% for health, 36% for law and 34% for science, compared to about 27% for humanities and social sciences. Moreover, in the 2000s, there was a "disaffection" in students from general university courses in favour of vocational courses in higher education. The heterogeneity of students admitted to university and the stagnation of enrolments in general university courses have led to a number of questions about the employability of students (Erlich & Verley, 2010).

#### GRADUATE EMPLOYMENT AND THE VOCATIONAL DRIFT IN THE FRENCH HIGHER EDUCATION

The vocational drift in the French higher education is often justified with graduates' poor labour market integration and high unemployment rate. In France, the unemployment rate of young people is much higher than that of the average working population. In 2016, one in five young people was unemployed three years after leaving the education system (Gaubert et al., 2017). The level of education remains a determining factor in access to employment. Indeed, the unemployment rate for higher education graduates is on average 10% compared to 46% for non-graduates and 22% for secondary school graduates. Nevertheless, among higher education graduates, differences in access to employment and job stability are observed according to the level of study and the type of study. There is also a hierarchisation of higher education streams in terms of access to the labour market, as shown in the Table 9.1.

Students from *Grandes Ecoles* have better access to employment than university graduates. The unemployment rate of *Grandes Ecoles* graduates, three years after graduation, is 7% compared to 12% for

<sup>1</sup> Since 2018, a digital platform, Parcoursup, has been managing the allocation of students' wishes for courses of study in higher education, introducing selectivity, particularly in the most popular courses of study.

**Table 9.1** Professional situation in 2016 of higher education graduates, 3 years later

	<i>Unemployment rate</i>	<i>% in permanent employment</i>
<b>Short vocational courses</b>	12%	68%
<b>Licence, first year of the master's</b>	13%	68%
Vocational bachelor	9%	nd
Science, sport	12%	75%
Human and social sciences, management, Law	17%	64%
<b>Master</b>	10%	82%
Science, sport	12%	80%
Human and social sciences, management, law	10%	76%
Grandes Ecoles (business and engineering schools)	7%	90%
<b>Doctoral degree</b>	5%	71%

Source: Data from “Quand l’Ecole est finie” (Henrard & Ilardi, 2017, pp. 57, 59). Health and social sectors are excluded. Permanent employments include non-salaried employments

university graduates with a master’s degree in sciences and sports and 10% in human and social sciences, management and law. Moreover, more than 90% of Grandes Ecoles graduates have a stable job compared to 80% for master’s graduates in science and sport and 76% in human social sciences, management and law. Differences are observed between vocational and “general” study. Graduates of short vocational courses and vocational bachelor’s degrees have an unemployment rate of 12% and 9%, respectively. Among general study, undergraduates in certain fields such as human and social sciences have greater difficulties in entering the job market than graduates in science and sport. The unemployment rate of undergraduates in human and social science, management and law is 17% compared to 12% in sciences and sport. These results are usually put forward for the development of vocational courses (Béduwé et al., 2019) and the need for the vocational drift of university courses.

The arrival of “new students” and the questions about the student’s employability have led to a vocational drift of higher educations, particularly in university courses. Many authors (Agulhon et al., 2012) stress that the vocational drift of higher education in France is not recent. Historically, medicine and law train students for specific professions. The *Grandes*

*Ecoles*, training engineers and managers, traditionally has a professional vocation. In addition, as already mentioned, technology and professional degrees were created to meet the needs of the workforce in the economy. Nevertheless, following European initiatives, the vocational drift of higher education will take a different turn in the 2000s where the emphasis is on the employability of students (Gayraud et al., 2011). Indeed, the vocational drift of higher education concerns the “acquisition of professional skills but also the support of students for the entry on the labor market” (Gayraud et al., 2011). The mission of the professional integration of students was integrated into the missions of the university in 2007 by the law on the freedom and responsibilities of universities. The vocational drift is spreading to all fields and levels of study in higher education. Particular emphasis is placed on vocational drift in “general” university courses and, in particular, in the first cycle of university. The vocational drift of these courses of study should lead to better both the success and orientation of students and their entry into the labour market. Vocational drift will concern both the content and the pathway of the students (Crespy & Lemistre, 2017). This will result in the implementation of work-related learnings such as apprenticeships and work placements within the university curriculum. Apprenticeship in higher education is experiencing strong development with an increase of 188% in the number of apprentices between 2005 and 2019, and of 615% in master’s level (MESRI, 2020). The work placement is also strongly promoted in general university courses, with about 55% students in master’s programme having completed a work placement in 2018 (MESRI, 2020). In addition, as in other countries (Jackson & Tomlinson, 2022), universities have been encouraged to develop “employability-related modules” within the curricula or/and by the university’s services. These modules aim to help students build their professional project, highlight their skills (help in writing a CV, skill assessment, etc.) and/or have better knowledge of the labour market (Lemistre & Ménard, 2018).

#### ACCESS TO LABOUR MARKET AND REPRESENTATION OF EMPLOYABILITY, A REVIEW OF RECENT FRENCH STUDIES

Based on a review of the literature, we propose to analyse the effects of the vocational drift of higher education on student’s employability. For this purpose, we have identified empirical research studies on this topic that

adopt a sociological or economic approach. The first body of research analyses the effect of the vocational drift of higher education on students' academic and professional careers. A second less developed type of research focuses on the relationship to employment, the labour market and the employability of students. In France, while representations of student employability have been the subject of work in elite education (Brown et al., 2016; Tholen et al., 2013), other segments of higher education have been less studied. A series of studies, even if they do not directly mobilise alternative approaches to employability, allow us to understand students' relationship to employment, the labour market and employability and how they are constructed. We present studies on all segments of French higher education. Nevertheless, particular attention is paid to university courses, which are more affected by the vocational drift of higher education.

First, a number of studies in France have sought to evaluate the effectiveness and equity of professionalisation measures, in particular, on students' entry into the labour market. Research shows that, at a given level of study, graduates of vocational higher education have a better integration into the labour market than graduates of general studies. However, this effect is reduced when the academic background of the students and the specialty of the degree are taken into account. The relatively favourable effect on the labour market of these courses is thus partly due to the selective recruitment of students by their academic level and the recruitment in particular segments of the labour market (Bédoué et al., 2019; Kergoat & Lemistre, 2014). Relatively similar findings were observed with regard to employability-related measures offered within university courses of study. Indeed, Giret and Issehnane (2012) show that work placements can facilitate access to well-paying jobs, but only under certain conditions, as the work placement must be of "quality", that is, long, rewarding and related to the studies. Furthermore, the authors show that the type of work placement is strongly dependent on the course of study, gender and social background of the student; women and students from working-class backgrounds have less access to a "quality" work placement. Regarding employability-related modules offered by universities (identifying skills, building a professional project, etc.), Lemistre and Ménard (2018) show that they can also have a positive effect on entry into the labour market. Nevertheless, these modules are more common in the vocational courses, and, for a given course, they are less used by women and students with a lower level of cultural capital. In addition, strong disparities have been

observed in the implementation of these measures between universities (Gayraud et al., 2011) and within the same university (Bonnard, 2020). The implementation of these measures will depend, in particular, on the teaching teams within the study programmes. Depending on the culture of the course of study and the student population, the question of employability and the professionalisation measures implemented in the course of study will take different forms (in terms of time volume, optional/mandatory, etc.).

In general, these studies show that the measures related to employability can, under certain conditions, facilitate the entry of young graduates into the labour market, but they are also likely to generate gender, social and educational inequalities. In order to better understand these inequalities, it is important to apprehend students' attitudes towards the labour market and employability.

Students' representations of employability will depend on the type of study as well as the discipline of study. Erlich and Verley (2010) underline "the division of higher education into socializing sectors" which will affect students' practices (Bodin & Millet, 2011), students' relationship to studies, work and labour market entry.

Firstly, the studies highlight the differences in the perception of employability or the employment of students between general and vocational courses. Delès (2017) shows that during their studies, students from generalist courses more frequently declare that they have a specific career plan than students from more vocational courses. The author explains that in the vocational courses, the career plan is self-evident and integrated into the contents of the course. In the context of generalist courses, especially in the literary and humanities fields, the link between degree and occupation is more distended, and students are required to construct their project and their integration pathway, and it is up to them to "sell themselves on a market of skills". Nevertheless, the professional project for these students is not always seen as a way of preparing their professional future but can be perceived as an "injunction to placement" for these students. Students in these tracks also show less confidence in the degree for accessing the job market (Zaffran, 2012).

The course of study has an influence on how students perceive their entry on the labour market but also in their relationship to work. In a recent study, Bene (2021) analyses the dimensions of work valued by third-year university graduates in general and vocational fields. The author highlights that graduates of vocational courses of study in higher

education will emphasise the “utilitarian” dimensions of work (salary, job security), whereas the “socializing and expressive” dimensions of work are judged to be more important by graduates from general courses of study. The social background of the student will also influence the dimensions valued, with graduates from the most privileged social classes valuing “social and expressive” dimensions more than other graduates. While these results can be explained in part by the different reasons for orientation in the various fields of study, nevertheless, they underline the formation of “discipline-based identities among students” (Jackson, 2016). These studies show that students’ relationship to the future and to the labour market is structured according to the fields of study, which are socially and academically segmented. Students’ strategies for their future professional integration will therefore be heterogeneous. Indeed, Couronné et al. (2021) stress that students’ participation in extracurricular activities and their valorisation differ according to the course of study and social origin. The authors show that the majority of students with low levels of participation in extracurricular activities are undergraduates from working-class backgrounds and who have obtained a vocational or technological baccalaureate. Furthermore, students participating in extracurricular activities will mobilise them differently in terms of employability. Students enrolled in medicine, law or teaching have extracurricular activities related to their future employment, while students in management sciences have more heterogeneous activities that they will be able to value on a “skills market”.

In addition, within the same course of study, students may approach their entry on labour market in different ways. Cohen-Scali (2001) identifies four profiles of attitudes towards the labour market entry of students enrolled in a short vocational course in higher education: “pessimists”, “wait-and-see students”, “explorers” and “strategists”. According to these profiles, students do not consider the same level of difficulty and do not adopt the same strategies for their future labour market entry: the “pessimists” anticipating difficulties in integrating, the “strategists” already having strategies for their future integration, the “wait-and-see attitude” having no real strategies and the explorers favouring other types of experience before entering the labour market. The author points out that apprenticeship students, more represented in the profile of the “strategists”, differ in their approach to employability compared to non-apprenticeship students. In a second study, the author compares the representations of the entry into the labour market of apprentices within

different study programmes according, in particular, to their perception of one's own integration within the organisation where they are doing their apprenticeship. The author shows that the quality of integration into the organisation is a determining factor in the way young people envisage their entry into the labour market and their employment. The first labour market experiences of students are thus likely to influence their relationship to employability.

Finally, studies (Bonnard, 2020; Bonnard et al., 2020) have analysed the representations of employability and access to work placement for students enrolled in a bachelor's degree of various generalist courses in a French university. These studies show that access to non-compulsory work placements during their study year is strongly dependent on the students' educational and social capital. This result can be explained by a set of barriers for students to work placement. Indeed, although the majority of students declare the interest in doing a work placement, a proportion of them declare not to have carried out a work placement because they could not find one or because they needed to have a student job. A proportion of students also stated that they preferred to focus on their studies. In addition, on the basis of a quantitative survey, the author constructs a typology of four profiles according to the students' perception of the labour market and employability. Some students described as "pessimistic" perceive the labour market as competitive, discriminatory and non-meritocratic and have low confidence in the diploma for their entry into the labour market. In contrast, the "optimists" do not perceive any difficulties when entering the labour market and consider the labour market to be rather meritocratic. For these students, non-academic experiences such as work placements and the various forms of networks are not considered important for success in the labour market. Other students, called careerists, emphasise personal effort and the degree in accessing employment. In a labour market considered competitive, they strongly value the professional network and the work placement. Finally, "strategists" will primarily seek a "positional advantage" (Brown & Hesketh, 2004) in particular through the mobilisation of various forms of networks on the labour market. These different profiles are strongly dependent on the student's social background, academic level, work experience and course of study. According to these profiles, students will not mobilise and apprehend the work placement in the same way, especially in its valorisation during the study course and on the labour market.

These different empirical research studies highlight that students' attitudes towards the labour market and employability are not homogeneous. The segmentation of higher education in France leads to different representations of employment and the labour market by students with different employability issues. Furthermore, the way in which students manage their employability will depend on their field of study, social background and first experiences on the labour market. Students do not all have the same understanding of the "rules of the game" and will not give the same meaning to employability-related measures. They also do not have the same resources to value them, especially in university courses which receive a heterogeneous public. These results raise questions about a conception of employability based on human capital theory and the implementation of employability-related measures within the curricula.

## CONCLUSION

A range of policies in higher education aim to develop the employability of graduates through the creation of new degrees, the development of work experience or/and the implementation of different employability-related modules within the curriculum. The objective of these different measures is to produce "work-ready" graduates. Students are expected to acquire a set of skills and work-related experiences that they can use in the labour market. Based on a review of the literature, we show that the vocational drift of higher education can, to some extent, facilitate entry into the labour market, but that it is also a source of inequality. It is generally students from more privileged backgrounds and enrolled in certain higher education courses that benefit from these different measures.

Alternative approaches to employability provide new perspectives in the analysis of these inequalities and student's employability. Indeed, they allow to take into account students' perspectives and their representations of employability and how attitudes towards employability differ according to the field of study, social background, academic and labour market experiences. Furthermore, they provide a better understanding of the differences in resources for students in the mobilisation of employability measures, particularly in university courses.

This type of research should be further developed. Indeed, some studies question the extent to which these measures are not primarily a "signal" for employers and could allow a "pre-selection" of candidates for the employers (Glammann, 2015; Patroucheva, 2014). This can thus reinforce

inequalities within an already highly segmented higher education system and to some extent legitimise inequalities in access to employment (Lemistre, 2015). In general, the employability of graduates will depend on the conditions and opportunities available to them on the labour market, and structural inequalities in the labour market cannot be solved only by implementing such measures in higher education (Tholen & Brown, 2017).

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# Re-Framing Employability as a Problem of Perceived Opportunities: The Case of Internships in a U.S. College Using the Student Perceptions of Employment Opportunities (SPEO) Framework

*Matthew T. Hora*

## INTRODUCTION

Employability is an influential concept that is shaping how policymakers, higher education professionals, and the public around the world think about and explain the relationships among higher education, the economy, and society in the early twenty-first century (Tomlinson & Holmes, 2017). The global recession wrought by the Covid-19 pandemic, a reckoning with racial inequality in the labour market, and geopolitical turmoil has only exacerbated these long-standing concerns, as students graduate into a highly competitive and evolving labour market, making it likely that employability will remain a driving force in higher education policymaking and practice around the world for the foreseeable future.

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However, the dominant framework that purports to explain the phenomenon of employability has long been critiqued for an over-simplistic and distorted account of the forces that actually shape a person's job prospects (e.g. Moreau & Leathwood, 2006). Known variously as the "possessive" approach that focuses on an individuals' acquisition of knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSAs) (Holmes, 2013) or a "supply-side" account that ignores contextual factors in the labour market and society, the conventional wisdom about employability assigns all responsibility for finding a job to the individual student. Fuelled in large part by neo-capital arguments that investments in education, social networks, or even cultural knowledge increase the likelihood of returns in the marketplace (Lin, 2001), this individualistic and probabilistic narrative is shaping the contours of the debate on higher education, work, and society.

Within this narrative, certain KSAs and experiences that a student can pursue and acquire while in college are considered especially important, and one of these is the college internship. While the format and regulations of work-based learning (WBL) programmes vary considerably across disciplinary and national borders, internships in the United States (U.S.) typically involve a student working off-campus for an employer for several weeks on tasks that are ideally related to their academic programme and long-term career goals. A growing body of research points to the positive impacts of internships on students' postgraduate outcomes, leading some to call them "door openers" to success and social mobility (Saniter & Siedler, 2014) and to include them in lists of "high-impact practices" (HIPs) that all college students should pursue or even be required to take (Kuh, 2008). With newly acquired KSAs and social networks theirs for the taking, an enterprising college student with initiative can take an internship, enhance their employability, and secure a well-paying job in the future. Or so the story goes.

But is getting a job really so simple—a matter of possessing skills, taking initiative, and acquiring experiences like an internship? The simple answer is no, and employability scholars have long emphasized that, instead, a students' employment prospects are influenced by the complex interaction of different forms of individual attributes, forms of capital, and structural and institutional forces in society, education, and the labour market (Forrier & Sels, 2003; Hillage & Pollard, 1998; McQuaid & Lindsay, 2005). Other notable counterarguments to the initiative employability discourse include critical accounts that focus on the reproduction of inequality in systems of education and labour (e.g. Boden & Nedeva,

2010; Brown et al., 2003; Burke et al., 2017), students' perceptions of their opportunities and potential in life (i.e. self-perceived employability) (Forrier et al., 2015; Fugate et al., 2004), and how well their environments support or inhibit them (Álvarez-González et al., 2017; Batistic & Tymon, 2017).

The growing focus on students' perceptions and opinions is based in part on the recognition that flexibility and self-awareness in the face of a volatile labour market is a critical attribute (Hall & Moss, 1998), but also that career trajectories students take are mediated by the sociocultural milieu in which they live, work, and make decisions (Holmes, 2013). As graduates make decisions about where to live, which jobs to apply for, and whether to continue "upskilling" by pursuing more education, they are influenced by their families, peers, societal pressure, and perceptions of what opportunities exist in particular cities at particular points in time. Thus, research that illuminates first-person perspective of how various factors (i.e. supply- and demand-side) shape their decisions, or what anthropologists call "emic" accounts, is essential (Gracia, 2009; Morrison, 2014).

Unfortunately, such accounts of college students' perceptions of their own internship experiences are uncommon, and are too often viewed as an unproblematic experience that can be measured solely by a "yes/no" question regarding their participation (or not). Further limiting the field is a paucity of empirical research on the multidimensional constraints that prevent some students from accessing these valuable experiences in the first place, despite growing evidence that programmes like study abroad (Covington, 2017) and internships (Hora et al., 2021) are too often pursued by well-connected and wealthy students. Consequently, a narrative has emerged that college students merely need to pursue certain programmes and HIPs to enhance their employability, as if they are unproblematic for students who are sometimes struggling with school, work, family, and health issues.

What is needed is a corrective to this fiction of both employability and access to HIPs like internships where the voice and perspective of real students is prioritized, and where a nuanced and multidimensional conception of employability advances a more realistic account of how graduates actually get jobs. At the heart of such an approach, where the lived experiences and processes whereby students interpret the complex, multi-dimensional factors shaping their internships and job prospects, is a commitment to emphasizing the emic over the etic (i.e. outsider or so-called objective accounts), and in truly focusing on student experience and

sensemaking (see Cook-Sather, 2006). In addition, a critical perspective that accounts for the ways that intersecting identities and oppressive social structures inhibit opportunities for particular students (e.g. low-income black female students) is also warranted, given extensive evidence regarding the persistence of inequality and discrimination in U.S. society (Ladson-Billings, 2006; Núñez, 2014).

While a growing body of work in employability studies is adopting such a focus on self-perceptions of employability (e.g. Forrier et al., 2015; Morrison, 2014) and critical accounts of the inequities in the educational and employment sectors (e.g. Burke et al., 2017; Gracia, 2009), the field could benefit from a robust and critically oriented framework of self-perceived job opportunities that builds on theory and method from other social sciences.

In this chapter I introduce the Student Perceptions of Employment Opportunities (SPEO), which is an approach that focuses on micro-level processes of perception and sense-making, where individuals perceive constraints and affordances in their sociocultural, economic, geographic, and political environments that impact their job prospects. This approach draws upon theories of perceived affordances from cognitive psychology and the learning sciences (Greeno, 1998), and critical perspectives of the reproduction of inequality from intersectional research (Crenshaw, 1991), particularly the multi-level framework of Núñez (2014). In elaborating Núñez's (2014) work by focusing on individual perceptions of students' employment prospects, I argue that insights into micro-level sensemaking processes make up a critical, yet understudied, aspect of the employability phenomenon.

To illustrate how the SPEO framework can be used in practice to study internships and employability, with a particular emphasis on generating actionable knowledge for campus professionals (e.g. career services and student affairs staff, faculty, and leadership), I also report findings from the analysis of data from a mixed-methods study of internships in the U.S. In this chapter I focus on qualitative data from Texas College (TC), a large comprehensive university on the U.S.-Mexico border, that are analysed using affiliation graphing techniques from social network analysis (SNA). Methods from SNA are particularly well-suited to visually capturing the dynamic interactions among multidimensional factors that are included in many employability frameworks, while also documenting how individual identity, perceptions of the environment, and structural features of labour markets all interact in a complex manner.

This complexity that characterizes actual student experiences underscores how uni-dimensional and probabilistic approaches to employability fail to capture the social reality of college students' lived experience in a complex, contested, and disruptive world.

### LIMITATIONS IN EMPLOYABILITY RESEARCH: ISSUES WITH AMBIGUITY, DIMENSIONALITY, AND CAUSALITY

Before outlining the key elements of the SPEO framework, a brief review of theoretical issues and problems in the employability literature helps to situate the work in various interdisciplinary debates on the interrelationships among cognition, culture, and context.

The concept of employability was not originally developed to address these concerns, but instead has its roots in mid-twentieth-century efforts to encourage full employment and inform policies to get chronically under- or unemployed workers back in the labour market (Gazier, 2001). The term found new life in the 1980s where a cultural and political milieu that embraced personal responsibility, reduced investments in public education, and the logic of human capital theory that conceptualized education in marketized terms as an "investment" that generated "returns," all aligned with the term "employability" which neatly and implicitly encoded these positions (Gazier, 2001; McQuaid & Lindsay, 2005; Tomlinson, 2017).

However, employability has long been critiqued as a deeply flawed and conceptually incoherent (McQuaid & Lindsay, 2005), in part because it is seen (and used) as a "fuzzy" or elusive term with no clear and agreed upon definition (Cranmer, 2006), or a "chameleon concept" that takes on different forms and serves different purposes depending on the analyst and their goals (Knight, 2001). Of course, this is not unusual in social science. Concepts such as "skills," "work," and even "education" or "training" are what Bills (2004) calls "contested sociological concepts" that can suffer from a lack of clarity (i.e. specificity about the empirical referent for the concept), scope (i.e. application across cases), and systematic import or how well the concept can be used to build theory and testable hypotheses (see Pfeffer, 1993).

The presence of such problematic concepts is not simply annoyances for academics and detriments to the research enterprise—they can have real-world impacts. As terms like employability enter the popular lexicon,

with assumptions regarding their meaning and validity, they become used by politicians, campus leaders, and other key stakeholders. As Holmes (2017) has pointed out, the observations of the philosopher Gilbert Ryle (1954) are relevant in the case of employability. Ryle (1954) argued that problems ensue when the colloquial or popular use of a term (i.e. its untechnical usage) that is rife with ambiguity and a reliance on tacit interpretations is used interchangeably with its use in formal or professional discourses (i.e. its technical usage). An important feature of a technical term is that professionals conversant in its proper usage draw upon what Ryle (1954) called “theoretical luggage,” or specific theoretical assumptions regarding its meaning and appropriate application.

In the case of employability, there is no “proper” usage or agreed upon definition, but consensus is growing that the theoretical luggage associated with the initiative employability perspective is flawed and should be rejected. Unfortunately, the term is still used colloquially in postsecondary research and policymaking as a proxy for the contested individualistic skills as possession approach, with little recognition that the term lacks consensus in the field as a technical construct. Thus, as an ill-defined “buzzword” (Philpott, 1999), employability continues to shape the discourse and policymakers’ imaginations as a narrative of meritocracy, upskilling, and personal ambition, with little attention to context or student agency. This is one reason why Holmes (2017, p. 365) argues that one of the pressing issues for employability studies is that of theory development, particularly regarding the dominance of the individualistic KSAs as “possession” narrative and its related theoretical luggage regarding causality and the long-standing structure-agency tension in the social sciences (see also Suleman, 2018).

As previously noted, critics of the individualistic approach contend that job acquisition is far too complex to be explained by a single or even a handful of variables, especially when the locus of attention is limited to a single student’s aptitudes and competencies. Other factors in the labour market, local or regional infrastructures, sociocultural forces, personal circumstances, and discrimination all may play a role in determining if a job applicant gets an interview or job offer.

More recent definitions tend to adopt a more expansive and multidimensional interpretation of the term, including the works of Fugate et al. (2004), Finch et al. (2016), Holmes (2013), Forrier and Sels (2003) and Tomlinson (2017), which is a development that generally tracks with Gazier’s (2001) observation that the field is evolving from the initiative

employability perspective to more multidimensional models (i.e. the interactive employability account). Similar accounts of different approaches to employability research include distinctions between “supply-side” or “demand-side” perspective, the former focusing on students and postsecondary education on the one hand as the supply of labour, and the latter speaking to labour markets and employers as the demand side of the equation (McQuaid & Lindsay, 2005).

This dichotomy, which implicates the classic structure-agency tension in the social sciences (i.e. does free will dictate behaviour or is it shaped by social structures?), is also the source of considerable discussion in the employability literature, as some argue that scholars should address both “individuals’ agency on the one hand and social structure on the other” (Tomlinson, 2017, p.6). Consensus is growing that this is a more accurate approach than the individualistic view, and multidimensional models that account for these varied forces are becoming more prevalent in the conceptual literature on employability and empirical work on the topic (e.g. Álvarez-González et al., 2017; González-Romá et al., 2018; Goodman & Tredway, 2016; Jackson, 2016).

However, it is important to note that a particular stance on causality underpins most individualistic and multidimensional models—that of probabilistic and linear accounts whereby certain variables predict change in other variables (i.e. student employment or wages). In other words, employability is about the “chance” or “probability” that an individual will find and secure employment, largely due to the complex array of forces that influence a person’s employment prospects in a given time and place. In some cases, this stance on causality is made explicit, as in the case of Forrier and Sels (2003), whose definition of employability emphasizes the “chance” of an individuals’ success in internal or external labour markets. For Forrier and colleagues (2015), the central issue in the field is which types of factors, such as individual-level KSAs or features of labour markets, increase or decrease the probability of a person securing a job. Thus, regardless of the locus of attention—micro-, meso-, macro-levels or a combination of them all—the primary empirical problem is one of identifying which of these factors most predicts a college graduates’ success in the labour market.

Thus, many employability researchers adopt what the sociologist John Levi Martin calls “third-person causality,” where “objective” measurements of changes in one (or more) independent variables affect or cause changes in dependent outcomes (2011). Martin (2011) critiques this

dominant stance on the grounds that social scientists have “decided that the best explanation is a ‘causal’ third-person explanation, in which we attribute causal power to something other than flesh-and-blood individuals” (p. 5), or first-person accounts. Such an argument is not to diminish the explanatory power of statistics or an endeavour to replace quantitative methodologies with qualitative approaches, as both can embrace an oversimplistic notion of human behaviour, decision-making, and social mobility. However, Martin’s (2011) argument is simply that the third-person view of causality embedded in the general linear model and many of the social sciences has become so reified and taken-for-granted that it is a default and overly simplistic model of how the world functions.

A similar situation applies to the study of employability, where the view that job acquisition or graduate wages six-months after graduation can be solely attributed to an internship, “soft” skills, or access to personal transportation is untenable. Instead, as Tomlinson (2017) and others argue, these employment outcomes are more likely due to a complex interaction of agentic and structural factors, and for Martin (2011), the corrective is not to build ever more complex multidimensional models that attempt to isolate additional variables that can predict these outcomes but instead to embrace a rigorous science of subjectivity that complicates (and complements) this narrative.

#### ADDITIONAL INSIGHTS FROM COGNITIVE PSYCHOLOGY AND INTERSECTIONALITY RESEARCH

Fortunately, many alternatives to a probabilistic approach exist, with several employability scholars actively adapting them to study the forces that shape job acquisition from a more relational and critical perspective (see Burke et al., 2017; Clark & Zukas, 2013; Kalfa & Taksa, 2015). Much of this work builds on the theoretical tradition initiated by Bourdieu (1977), whose views on field theory also animate much of Martin’s (2011) arguments for an approach that prioritizes actor-environment dynamics, where regularities or structures in the social, political, and economic fields are perceived by individuals in ways that constrain or delimit how individuals are positioned in society and their subsequent actions.

In this chapter, however, I contend that insights from cognitive psychology are particularly useful in elaborating on the ways that an individual’s perceptions of their environment shape their decisions, behaviours,

and notions of which opportunities are available (or not) to them. A core idea in early cognitive science was that people are neither passive agents subject to the structural forces in their environment, nor are they entirely rational actors who make decisions based on cost-benefit analyses (Martin, 2003; Simon, 1982). As a result, it is neither structure nor agency that dictates human behaviour, and cognition and decision-making are best viewed not as an “in the head” mental activity but a process that is shaped by our political, sociocultural, and institutional environments (Greeno, 1998).

A critical part of this process is how people internalize simplified mental models of the world to minimize cognitive load as they navigate a complex, stimulus-laden world (Goldstein & Gigerenzer, 2002). An influential type of mental model is called a “perceived affordance,” which encodes the types of actions or behaviours that a person perceives as being possible, desirable, and tenable in a given situation. For instance, a low-income, first-generation, Latinx student growing up in a border town may perceive a four-year university or a prestigious internship in New York City to be financially and socially inaccessible to them.

In addition, insights from intersectionality theory also have useful implications for employability research. For instance, we have recently drawn upon intersectionality theory to better address the structural racism that shapes college-workforce pathways in the U.S. as well as multi-level relations among individuals, organizations, and broader social structures (Hora et al., 2022). First conceptualized by Black feminist theorists in legal studies, the idea of intersectionality argues against “single-axis” or single variable explanations of inequality and oppression, instead offering a heuristic for “open-ended investigations of the over-lapping and conflicting dynamics of race, gender, class, sexuality, nation, and other inequalities,” (Cho et al., 2013, p.788). In this way, an intersectional approach is not dissimilar to employability studies that reject the individualistic turn and instead adopt a multidimensional or processual approach. In examining contextual or “supply-side” factors, however, intersectional scholars are not interested in merely identifying which ones impact student trajectories, but are explicitly focused on the ways that power, systemic racism, and historic inequalities have constrained opportunities for students of colour (Ladson-Billings, 2006; Núñez, 2014).

Some researchers have critiqued the ways that intersectionality is used in higher education research, however, for a myopic focus on individual, micro-level social categories (e.g. race, gender) at the expense of

examining the broader systemic forces that also impact individual lives and trajectories (Harris & Patton, 2019). An approach to intersectional studies that avoids this problem was offered by Núñez (2014), whose multi-level model of intersectionality is designed to examine how social identities and categories unfold and operate within different “arenas of practice as situated within particular times and places” (p. 85). Developed initially to focus on the experiences of Latinx<sup>1</sup> college students in the U.S. as they navigated an often hostile educational system and labour market, Núñez’s (2014) framework posits three levels wherein social action takes place:

- Level 1: Social categories as socially constructed and overlapping identities that shape social hierarchies and positions such as gender, race, and first-generation college student status.
- Level 2: Multiple arenas of influence represent spheres of social activity that overlap and include organizational venues, interpersonal relations, and how individuals create narratives about their opportunity structures (i.e. their experiences with and perceptions of events).
- Level 3: Historicity refers to the macro-level contexts in which social categories and arenas of influence operate, such as labour markets, international politics, historical events, and features of local geographies.

As with multidimensional frameworks of employability, Núñez’s (2014) approach takes into account a variety of forces that shape students’ opportunities or lack thereof, which is especially important for students of colour who face a variety of challenges during their lives. In particular, the way that college and university programmes and support systems help or hinder students is highlighted in this work, based on the contention that these organizations are not race-neutral or de-contextualized phenomenon (Ray, 2019), but instead embody in their very policies and practices certain views on privilege and power.

With insights from these disparate theoretical traditions in hand, and previously noted concerns regarding the limitations of the initiative employability discourse and the need to highlight student voice and experience with internships and the labour market, my colleagues and I have developed a new approach that integrates these ideas and considerations—the SPEO framework.

## A NEW APPROACH: THE STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES (SPEO) FRAMEWORK

The SPEO framework approach builds on an extensive body of prior research from my research group, where we have studied topics ranging from organizational change in higher education (Hora, 2012), faculty beliefs about teaching (Hora, 2014), disciplinary cultures in higher education (Ferrare & Hora, 2014), and employer conceptions of skills (Benbow & Hora, 2018; Hora et al., 2021), where a focus on individual perceptions of opportunity and action within the unique cultural, political, and organizational milieu of postsecondary institutions has been the central concern. In designing our studies, the following theoretically commitments guide the work:

- A multidimensional account of the forces that shape career and educational opportunity that embrace both “supply-” and “demand-side” factors;
- Emphasis on agentic perspectives and how individuals perceive how these multidimensional factors act to constrain or afford their behaviours;
- The probabilistic conception of causality is rejected in favour of a first-person perspective;
- The way that individuals’ intersecting membership in different social categories (e.g. race, gender) influence how societal structures act to oppress or support them is of primary importance;
- A critical perspective on the ways structural inequality and discriminatory practices are present throughout society and shapes employment prospects is prioritized; and
- A robust yet user-friendly methodology that generates actionable insights for key stakeholders (e.g. campus leaders, faculty, and staff) is a primary goal.

More recently, we have used these ideas and methods to study a small portion of the employability phenomenon—that of college internship participation in the U.S.

Ultimately, analyses of internship access and student employability need to avoid approaches that ignore micro-level individual student identities (Level 1 or L1 in Nuñez’s framework), the meso-level of institutional programmes and support services (L2), and macro-level forces such as the

historic and structural political and socio-economic inequalities facing Latinx students in the labour market (L3)—and how each of these levels interacts with one another in the lives of college students (Garcia et al., 2019; Nuñez & Sansone, 2016). In the SPEO framework, I extend Núñez’s (2014) framework by more explicitly emphasizing the micro-level of individual students and their perceptions about the opportunity structures available to them. Essentially, I argue that perceptions of these macro-level contexts—or perceived affordances—may dictate the types of jobs, educational opportunities, and pathways to social mobility (i.e. their employability) available to Latinx students and their families.

In the case study outlined in this chapter, I report selected findings from a larger paper and highlight a unique method used to enact these admittedly complex theoretical ideas in practice. One of the challenges facing agent-centred research that strives to account for a complex array of factors and variables that impact individual behaviours is how to do so without accounting for *all* possible variables which can result in unwieldy or unintelligible research. In my previous work, I have partially addressed this challenge by using observational and interview methods to generate textual data, which have been inductively analysed and then visualized using graphing methods to depict local accounts of organizational processes and personal decisions about studying, teaching, and hiring decisions.

While analysing qualitative data using network analytic techniques is increasingly common (e.g. Pokorny et al., 2018), it has not frequently been used to study agentic perspectives on employability or intersectionality, and in this chapter these methods are used to depict and analyse qualitative data about Latinx students’ perceptions and experiences of the ways that identity, embodied practices, and structural and systemic forces impact their internship opportunities and, subsequently, their prospects for career development and future employment.

### AN EMPIRICAL EXAMPLE: INTERNSHIP EXPERIENCES OF LATINX STUDENTS AT A TEXAS UNIVERSITY

The data reported in this chapter are drawn from a larger mixed-methods study of college internships at 14 postsecondary institutions across the U.S. undertaken by the Center for Research on College-Workforce Transitions (CCWT) at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. A more

detailed report of the analysis summarized here is included in a research article (Hora et al., 2022), and in this section I provide a snapshot of the study's methodology and key findings.

Texas College (TC) is a public regional comprehensive four-year university that became a Hispanic Majority Institution in the 1980s and is located near the Mexico-United States International Border within a mid-sized city. The sampling frame for the study included students in their second half of their degree programmes, and those not in programmes with mandatory and highly regulated practicums (e.g. teacher education). After completing a survey, students were asked to participate in a focus group, and 30 students who equally represented the intern and non-intern groups were randomly selected from this pool. Twelve Latinx students met with the study team, some who had taken an internship ( $n = 6$ ) and some who had not ( $n = 6$ ). Both were included in the focus groups given the interest on understanding barriers to internship participation, and students were asked about their experiences and potential obstacles to internship participation.

For the analysis of focus group transcripts, with the SPEO framework in mind, I engaged in an open coding process, inductively creating codes based on explicit references to a category in the framework (e.g. L1, L2, or L3) (Charmaz, 2014; Ryan & Bernard, 2003). This phase resulted in a list of 44 discrete factors grouped into the three levels, and these codes and how they were mapped onto the multi-level model of Núñez (2014) are provided in Table 10.1. Then, I documented code-code associations and organized these code “chains” according to larger themes (Miles et al., 2013). Then, techniques from social network analysis were used to visualize relationships among individual codes by creating a graph that depicted the pairs of codes that students had indicated were interrelated with one another. The size of each node in the graphs was also adjusted to represent a measure of node centrality—betweenness—which refers to the number of times a particular code lies on the shortest path between other pairs of codes (Borgatti et al., 2002).

## FINDINGS

The themes reported below were derived from an inductive analysis of the interview data, which began with the identification of individual codes that were based on the three levels of the framework—L1 of social categories (e.g. race, academic major), L2 of embodied practices, and L3 of

**Table 10.1** Themes identified in the data according to the three levels of the Student Perceptions of Employment Opportunities (SPEO) framework

<i>Level 1: Social l categories</i>	#	<i>Level 2: Embodied practices</i>	#	<i>Level 3: Historicity</i>	#
Socio-economic status: Low	5	Cultural: Hispanic familism	2	Higher education finance	1
Socio-economic status: High	2	Org: Advisors	3	Local employer community	2
gender	4	Org: Outreach to employers	1	Local community	2
Race/ethnicity	4	Org: Dept encouragement about internships	4	Employer status/prestige	1
Social networks	8	Org: General information provided	3	City/IHE status/prestige	5
Academic major	6	Org insufficient information provided	3	# internships available	2
Employment status—present	5	Org: Subsidies for internships	3	Racial dynamics of employer	3
Employment status—future student status	5	Experiential: Time constraints	5	Internship pay	6
	5	Experiential: Lack of information/knowledge	5	Housing	2
International student status	1	Experiential: Deleted emails on internships	2	Immigration law	1
New to higher education	1	Experiential: Miss info in class	1		
Highly engaged in college	2	Experiential: Desire to pursue internship	4		
		Experiential: Sense of spatial autonomy	3		
		Experiential: Sense of being uncompetitive	6		
		Experiential: Sense of few opportunities	5		
		Experiential: Sense of many opportunities	2		
		Experiential: Sense of belonging (or not)	5		
		Experiential: Sense of happiness	1		
		Experiential: Took an internships	5		
		Experiential: Distance/travel is an issue	2		
		Experiential: Simply can't take an internship	4		
		Experiential: Experienced discrimination	2		

historicity (e.g. labour market conditions). Within the L2 category of arenas of influence, we identified sub-themes that include cultural factors (e.g. family-related norms), organizational factors (e.g. features of college programmes), and experiential factors (e.g. perceived affordances about the students' environment). These themes and frequency that students discussed are included in Table 10.1.

Next, we analysed how students made connections between factors at levels 1, 2, and 3 with respect to their internship opportunities.

### FACTORS LEADING TO STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF NOT BEING COMPETITIVE/LIMITED OPPORTUNITIES

Four students spoke about how several issues (e.g. academic major, being low-income, gender) interacted to give them the sense that they were not a competitive in the local or regional internship market, much less for positions in prestigious firms located in the big cities on the East and West Coasts of the U.S. For example, one student who did not participate in an internship, stated:

(My department—computer science) brings in (former interns) from big companies like Microsoft and Google who say, “I got an internship,” but it’s one guy out of a million people that apply, so it feels kind of like a lie. It feels unobtainable. It would be nice if they brought in more obtainable internships. Because I mean, we’re not a very high achieving city. It’s nice to shoot for the stars I guess, but when it is kind of like a dream it’s hard to visualize.

For other students who discussed the issue of having limited internship opportunities, some did mention how their city is “not high achieving” along with their own race and gender (i.e. being a Latina), which collectively led to their feeling uncompetitive with other job seekers while seeking a position. In this case, the Latina student who participated in an internship described her strong feeling of “imposter syndrome” where they felt like they did not belong at financial services firm where she ended up interning, and where ultimately she was not taken as seriously as the mostly white male cohort of interns. In other cases, the main factor limiting students’ opportunities had to do with finances, where students had to work paid jobs to cover living expenses for themselves and/or their extended families. One student simply stated, “Leaving my [regular] job is simply not an option,” and thus an internship was not possible given the

low (or no) pay associated with many internships. These findings highlight the fact that a variety of interrelated factors—and no single issue, characteristics, or form of capital—led these students to feeling uncompetitive in the internship labour market.

### INFLUENCE OF PAY AND HOUSING ON STUDENTS' ABILITY TO TAKE INTERNSHIPS

Another key finding in this study was how the expenses associated pursuing an internship—specifically the low pay and/or housing and relocation costs—were prohibitive and kept them from even considering applying for one. For instance, a female art major shared that the costs of an out-of-state internship, which would be required since few art opportunities existed in their part of Texas, when coupled with the fact that many art-related internships were unpaid and that their immigration status as a non-U.S. citizen was potentially problematic, made an internship not an attractive or tenable proposition. In another case, however, two scholarships from TC enabled a student in computer science to cover the costs of housing in an expensive West Coast city during the internship.

In another case, a student discussed gendered family care obligations which her brothers and male peers do not have, as part of her life situation that impacted her ability to seek an internship, sharing that:

Being a female, we have different expectations, you know, and being Mexican like having to cook and clean and all that stuff to where like nowadays people, you know, I want to be more educated and then not really my priority to do cooking and cleaning. But, you know, it's still expected of me [by my family] to be like that perfect woman I guess you could say.

Consequently, micro-level factors often associated with supply-side and student-level accounts of employability (e.g. financial situation, racial identity, and academic major) did not shape the students' opportunities on their own, but instead intersected with organizational supports (i.e. subsidies and scholarships) and structural forces (e.g. housing costs, internship pay by industrial sector) to shape these students' opportunities and access.

## ROLE OF TEXAS COLLEGE AS VEHICLE FOR SOCIAL CAPITAL/INFORMATION RESOURCE

The final theme from the study that helps to illustrate the SPEO framework for employability in action pertains to social capital and its dynamics within Texas College. Several students mentioned the role of TC as a conduit of information about internship opportunities, and students' subsequent sense of which opportunities existed and how competitive they would be for these scarce positions in the national internship marketplace. Essentially, the structure of the institution (e.g. its courses and faculty, career services units, websites) shaped the social relationships, networks, and information resources that students had access to, and unfortunately these informational pathways were largely seen as inadequate at TC.

Overall, TC students generally felt that their departments did not provide sufficient or accessible information about internships. In one case, a working student who did not have time to review the large number of emails from TC—some of which were about internships but many were about events and programme administration—simply deleted these messages, raising questions about the best medium for reaching working students (e.g. text messages, flyers on hallways, social media.). In other cases, the best information about internships were gleaned during office hour visits with faculty or in off-hand comments during a lecture, which reflect the two primary points of contact students have with the people at TC who probably had some of the most up-to-date knowledge about internships in their fields. For too many students, however, they lacked the time required to go to office hours or missed these references to an internship opportunity, which resulted in a lack of knowledge about whether internships even existed in their fields and how to go about pursuing a position.

### HOW DO THESE MULTI-LEVEL FACTORS INTERSECT IN THE LIVES OF ACTUAL STUDENTS?

To visualize the ways that factors at the three levels of the SPEO framework operate across multiple students' lives, I graphed the data using social network analysis techniques, which illuminate the ways that multiple levels of student identity, experience, and environments intersect to shape their perceptions of internship opportunities.

In the graph (see Fig. 10.1), the thickness of the lines connecting codes depicts the frequency with which they were explicitly linked (i.e. the



complicate the employability discourse away from the individualistic and probabilistic view and towards a more dynamic account of social mobility and job acquisition.

## CONCLUSIONS AND NEXT STEPS

The discourse of employability is in dire need of re-framing, where the fiction of individual students' KSAs or capital(s) being the primary—if not the sole—determinants of their social mobility and success in the labour market is finally put to rest. Efforts towards such a correction have been made for decades (see Brown et al., 2003; Gazier, 2001; Holmes, 2013; Mcquaid & Lindsay, 2005; Tomlinson, 2012), but the dominant narrative of graduate employability remains an individualistic, human-capital dominated story of merit, hard work, and individual skills.

One of the aims of this volume is to contribute a set of new ideas and conceptual frameworks for thinking about higher education and its relationship to society and the labour market, and in this chapter I build upon prior efforts to develop multidimensional models of employability and intersectionality (Núñez, 2014) to propose a new, agent-oriented approach that embraces key elements of these earlier efforts—a critical focus on structural inequality, the primacy of student agency, and how individuals' perception of their opportunity structures plays a critical role in the employability debate. With these conceptual tools set forth in the SPEO framework, analytic techniques such as social network analysis are offered as a novel way to empirically study the multidimensionality of employability in action. Ideally, this approach can both contribute to the project of empirical studies of employability and generate data that practitioners can find useful, engaging, and actionable for making changes on their own campuses.

From the case of how students at Texas College perceive their opportunities in the internship labour market in the U.S., one key conclusion salient to campus professionals can be drawn. The students make clear that the problem of accessibility to WBL programmes like internships is not solely a structural issue related to labour market conditions, but the role that students' social categories and identities play in inhibiting access through their perceptions of *what is possible* must also be considered. The fact that female students in the study also highlighted the dynamics among race, gender, and employer discrimination indicates that such issues and constraints may be more acute problems among Latina students. Similarly,

as noted by other scholars (e.g. Medina & Posadas, 2012), family is often a source of support and motivation but also of tension for both Latinx men and women, due to the potent gendered familial expectations and obligations about work, careers, and commitment to the family (Gándara, 1995; Risco & Duffy, 2011). This suggests that career services and academic affairs personnel should begin paying more attention to the way that access—whether perceived or actual—to employment opportunities can be shaped by race, class, gender, and other individual-level attributes.

Based on evidence that minoritized students may feel a low sense of belonging in white-dominated workplaces, and women experience both gendered norms for work within their families and discrimination in the workplace, it is time to adopt an approach to “culturally appropriate” internships that dispenses with the fiction of meritocracy and enacts adequate and appropriate support systems for non-majority students.

Furthermore, an intersectional and relational lens highlights the fact that internships are subject to a variety of level 3 contextual forces that are beyond the direct control of an individual college or university, but whose potentially negative effects can be ameliorated by targeted programming and student supports. One example of these broader field effects is the discipline- and occupation-specific nature of the internship labour market, with internships in business and STEM majors being more prevalent and accessible. In addition, the geographic isolation of the city where TC is located makes relocation expenses essential for students seeking positions in firms located in distant, often expensive, cities. A depressed local economy with few internships results in a scarcity of opportunity for place-bound students. Each of these findings indicates that to meet the needs of their students, career advisors and leadership should pay close attention to helping students—especially outside of business and STEM fields—find and successfully pursue internships outside of the competitive and limited local labour market.

Ultimately, with the analytic lens offered by the SPEO framework, it is clear that employability writ large, and the landscape of internships more specifically, is one of exclusion and gatekeeping that disadvantages too many students. If the field of higher education is sincere about advancing diversity, equity, and inclusion along with the benefits of WBL for their students, it will need to deal with the fact that, at the present time, these two goals are not compatible and will require a not inconsiderable investment of time, money, and energy to rectify these long-standing inequalities.

## NOTES

1. In this chapter, I use the term Latinx which is a gender-neutral term that is increasingly used by higher education scholars to refer to peoples with Latin American ancestors (e.g. Salinas Jr & Lozano, 2019). While the term Hispanic is also widely used, some view it as an externally derived and imposed category, with the primary referent of colonial Spain (Núñez, 2014).

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# Working-Class Adult Students: Negotiating Inequalities in the Graduate Labour Market

*Barbara Merrill and Scott Revers*

## INTRODUCTION

Higher education institutions in the UK, Europe and beyond have undergone a transformation in recent years as a result of political, social and economic changes, internationalisation and globalisation. Increasingly, these changes have embodied a move towards marketisation, commodification and neoliberalism (Dahlsted & Fejes, 2019; Rikowski, 2019) at the expense of a more liberal and social purpose stance. One of the consequences of this process is that universities now have to be more attuned to the graduate labour market. Graduates have typically, in terms of their role and input, been positioned as key players on the economic stage. The discussion over ‘work-readiness’ and the economic contribution they can make has spawned a narrative and language in HE around the question of ‘employability’ which is dominated by a human capital approach. This has changed the nature of what being a student means. As Tomlinson asserts: ‘It now appears no longer enough just to be a graduate, but instead an employable graduate’ (2012, p. 25).

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The growing concern with employability by universities in Europe was also partly driven by a policy push from the EU and national governments. Employability was a key goal of the EU Bologna Process (The European Higher Education, 2012, Bologna Implementation Report). The report stressed the need for universities to modernise and thus meet the needs of society. The determination to change the nature of universities within the EU was further enhanced at the Leuven and Louvain la Neuve iCommuni-quê in 2009. It stressed the need for universities to ‘equip students with the advanced knowledge, skills, competences they need throughout their professional lives’ (2009, p. 2). Economic competitiveness and the move towards knowledge-based societies (Castells, 2001) have led to a closer relationship between universities and the labour market (Morley, 2001; Barnett, 2017). This process has changed the fundamental purpose and nature of the university, as stated above, and critics point out that this situation entails a shift away from the social purpose of a university to what Gumpert (2000) calls an industry. As Barnett explains:

The idea of the university has closed in ideologically, spatially and ethically. Ideologically, the contemporary envelope of ideas encouraged the university to pursue quite narrow interests, particularly those of money (in the service of a national—and even global—knowledge economy; spatially, the university is enjoined to engage with its region, especially with industrial and business organisations). (2013, p. 2)

The focus on employability and market needs also obscures, as Blackmore and Sachs (2003) point out, the academic and social educational benefits of education.

A key concern of many universities now is to enhance human capital. In turn, this has impacted upon the perspectives and expectations which students bring with them towards their undergraduate studies. A university education is now viewed by many students, as Tomlinson (2012) stresses, as being an investment in their future lives in the labour market, requiring them to offer more to prospective employers than just their university degree qualification. There is pressure on students to engage in activities outside of their degree work in order to gain extra credentials to assist them in the graduate labour market. This also individualises education, echoing Beck’s (1992) notion that society has become an individualised and risky business. Universities have, therefore, been more closely interwoven with the labour market (Morley, 2001), with the pressure on

universities to ensure that they educate their students to meet the needs of employers in terms of relevant skills, competences and attitudes (Barnett, 2017). Strategies such as vocational courses and degrees, work-based learning at departmental and institutional levels as well as an enhanced role for career services have been introduced to facilitate this process. The employability of students and graduate recruitment rates is now a competitive business as university league tables are published nationally and also at European and worldwide levels.

One of the outcomes of the changing nature of universities has been a move away from elite institutions (with some exceptions) to what Trow (1989) calls a mass-based system. Doors have opened since the 1990s, and the student population is now more diverse by age, class, gender and race (Merrill, 2015). Widening participation and lifelong learning policy initiatives have enabled working-class adults to return to education and study for a degree. Working-class adult students and issues of employability are at the heart of this chapter. In particular, we focus on working-class adults studying in an elite UK university, and taking a critical stance, we explore their perceptions of how they are positioned in the graduate labour market. Using biographical methods and the voices of adult students, we look at how they experience inequalities due to class, age, gender and race when accessing the graduate labour market. We draw on the findings of an EU project: Enhancing the Employability of Non-traditional Students in HE (EMPLOY), which involved eight partners from England, Germany, Ireland, Poland, Portugal, Scotland, Spain and Sweden. The project looked critically at the concept and practice of employability in European universities. The voices of adult students we interviewed revealed a different language to those of employees and some university staff (who we also interviewed). The emphasis on employability has in HEIs resulted in increasing inequalities between traditional and non-traditional students. Adult students do not share a level playing field with their younger middle-class students, and their experiences in relation to employability highlight the role of universities in reproducing class inequalities. We examine these challenges experienced by adult students and investigate how it has impacted upon them and their attempts to enter the graduate labour market by drawing on the work of Bourdieu in particular in relation to his concepts of capitals, habitus and field. The main focus is on class, but our adult students' experiences were also shaped by age, gender and, for some, race. While there is a large amount of studies which look at adult students' experiences of learning in HE, there is little research which extends this to the labour market.

## TAKING A CRITICAL LOOK AT EMPLOYABILITY

Despite its influence on the path of contemporary HE, employability remains an anomalous and beguiling concept, one that Tymon discerned as being ‘complex and multidimensional’ (2013, p. 842). This is partly due to its meaning being perceived not only differently by the respective actors involved, whether in the form of students, higher education institutions or employers (Hugh-Jones et al., 2006), but also differently within those groups.

Nevertheless, the framing of policymakers and employers concerned with identifying and satisfying market-led assumptions has featured heavily in the discourse (McQuaid & Lindsay, 2005). In this regard, employers have emphasised the importance of enhancing soft skills such as communication, team working, problem-solving and integrity (Archer & Davison, 2008) while also observing the lack of these skills evidenced by students on entry into graduate employment (Cumming, 2010).

HEIs have responded to the challenge by reproducing language associated with this demand and formulated institutional strategies and pedagogic initiatives in the endeavour to meet the needs of the market (McCowan, 2015; Holmes, 2013). As a consequence, the language of graduate employability often uncritically authenticates and reinforces a particular ideological narrative. This narrative maintains implicit ideological assumptions premised on the idea of independent self-driven rational subjects making decisions while operating within the selective pressures of a free market. In this regard, human capital theory has played a significant role (Tomlinson, 2012). It has advanced within higher education according to Hyslop-Marginson and Sears’ ‘a neoliberal education policy’ in which learning is reduced ‘to a discursive ideological apparatus’, one that ‘encourages student conformity to the market economy’ (2006, p. 14).

Such human capital-led assessments, however, fail to fully account for the relation between structure and agency in their analyses. The nature of the experience of those engaged in the process or the stakes at play are assessed in relation to a specific locus around the production of relevant skills and the discernment of a market that warrants these skills. The corollary of pursuing such an agenda is an evolving inflation of skills and attributes expected by the employment market. It is a trajectory that both threatens to shift or even displace the traditional assumptions around the value of academic knowledge insofar as HE becomes subordinate to market-led determinations of value as well as reproducing inequalities within the structure.

While theories of self and identity provide an important reference point within sociological analysis (Giddens, 1991; Beck, 1992; Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002) that addresses the way in which individuals establish themselves in their environment, these are nevertheless cultivated in relation to acknowledging the significance of the contexts and institutions in which they operate. In this vein, Brown et al. (2002) highlight that a student does not operate in a vacuum but rather operates within a context made up of others and institutions.

Furthermore, as James et al. (2013) argue, there is a wider meaning and definition of skills than those identified by employability. 'Graduate skills' are not self-similar with 'skills graduates have'. Indeed, the conflation of the two only serves to hide diverse and context-specific aptitudes. Although more nuanced attempts have been made to capture what skills are advantageous in employment settings (Bridgstock, 2009), other evidence has advanced the view that skills initiatives delivered in HE are of limited efficacy with regards to future employability (Mason et al., 2009; Wilton, 2011).

In contrast, by drawing on Bourdieu's work, and more specifically by attending to cultural, social and economic capital, our investigation delineates the ways in which securing a job in the graduate labour market can also be understood in terms of considerations and challenges that go beyond the assessments provided by the dominant skills-based discourse of employability. This is particularly useful when engaging with the experiences of working-class and non-traditional students in higher education. Bourdieu's presentation allows for a more dynamic assessment of the ways in which employability can be understood in relation to the evolving tensions between structure and agency. In the current job market, this structure is both increasingly competitive and less secure or stable in terms of its outcomes (Moreau & Leathwood, 2006). In this context, employability discourse tends to narrow the focus to one of addressing questions of market-demand and skills-based accumulation. In contrast, Bourdieu's approach allows for attention to be drawn to the broader implications of this style of market-led inflation of skills as well as to understanding the experiences of those who are directly advantaged or disadvantaged by it.

In Bourdieu's account of social capital, the emphasis is advanced with respect to the relations that can be entered into and advanced within a social group. An analysis of social capital operates in terms of being able to identify the ways in which groups identify and bond with each other. In employability terms, social capital can be discerned in the ways in which it

shapes and facilitates graduates' access to particular labour market opportunities. The participation in certain activities can advance 'bridging ties' (Putnam, 1999) with other social actors that could then open up opportunities either directly or indirectly when it comes to future employment. However, one of the consequent outcomes of such an analysis is that when it comes to those who are unable to participate in these relations, then they are liable to suffer as a result.

Similarly, Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital in terms of employability can be applied to the question of what knowledge is sought out amongst employers and what groups this applies to. A shared economy of associations has drawn from cultural dependencies that circle around sociocultural milieus and the educational contexts out of which they arose. These associations prove to be of considerable significance in relation to understanding the experiences of working-class students.

The next section will continue the debate with Bourdieu by providing a more detailed engagement with the question of class by focusing on the UK context.

## A DISCUSSION ON CLASS

As stated above, the adult students we interviewed were working-class, and this is how they defined themselves. Yet research on employability in higher education ignores, with a few exceptions, issues of inequality such as class, gender, race and age.

Social class is integral to UK society, as it is deeply rooted in the culture and structure of society so that it affects people's everyday lives. The education system is one area where class is clearly visible and persistent and where class inequalities are reproduced including in higher education. Within the academic world, social class was central in the UK sociological research in the 1960s and 1970s until postmodernism emerged and became fashionable along with the 'cultural turn' (Abbott, 2001). Postmodernists launched an attack on 'grand narratives' theory, dismissing the work of Marx, for example, and notions of class. Sociologists advocated that class had become an out-of-date concept, and as Pahl (1989) argued, it was no longer useful in categorising people's lives. Quantitative research, however, indicated that class differences had not disappeared and that wealth inequalities were increasing between the rich and the poor (Breen, 2004; Erikson & Goldthorpe, 1992). In recent years, other sociologists have begun to re-engage with research on class and re-assert that

class is still central and important in UK society, albeit in a different way to earlier UK sociological research (Sayer, 2005; Devine et al., 2005; Savage, 2000; Skeggs, 1997; Kuhn, 1995). For as Beverly Skeggs poignantly asserts: ‘To abandon class as a theoretical tool does not mean that it does not exist any more; only that some theorists do not value it’ (1997, pp. 6–7). Kuhn (1995) stresses that class encompasses a person’s whole life—not only in terms of material conditions but also in relation to the psyche. Similarly, Sayer reminds us that class ‘affects how others value us and respond to us, which in turn affects our sense of self-worth’ (2005, p. 1). Class, therefore, ‘shapes embodied experience and practical sense’ (Finnegan & Merrill, 2015, p. 3), as well as revealing power relations and inequalities in a society.

However, the ‘turn’ back to class in UK sociology led to new analyses, discussions and perspectives on what social class encompasses. Social class analysis no longer focused solely on a person’s socio-economic status and the ownership or non-ownership of the means of production as outlined by Marx. Class is more than this. Such an analysis had been criticised by feminists as it often excluded women. As Savage elaborates, ‘culture is not the product of class relations but itself a field in which class relations operate’ (2000, p. 106). From this perspective, class power is not just about economic capital but also social and cultural capital:

Thus Bourdieu (1984) argues that class should be plotted relationally according to the distribution and differentiation of various sorts of power and the composition and volume of economic, cultural and social capital at one’s disposal defines one’s class position within social space as a whole. (O’Neill et al., 2018, p. 4)

We do recognise that feminists in the past criticised Bourdieu for down-playing women and issues of class and gender. Yet some feminists such as Adkins and Skeggs (2006), in their edited book *Feminism After Bourdieu*, argued that Bourdieu’s work does have something to offer feminism, and vice versa.

In our research, Bourdieu was useful to us, as with other researchers such as Skeggs (1997) and Reay et al. (2005), because of his work on the social reproduction of class and identity, habitus, field and social and cultural capitals as well as his study on universities—*Homo Academicus* (1988). The concept of habitus allowed us to explore how the social and cultural capitals of working-class students cope and adjust or not to the

symbolic and intellectual capitals of the university. Middle-class students because of their particular cultural and social capitals, as Bourdieu elicits, are more likely to be ‘fish in water’, while working-class students may find themselves as ‘fish out of water’. A person’s habitus is a culture which shapes how they view the world, their behaviour, language and lifestyle. Habitus is linked to disposition, whereby through socialisation in the family and school, for example, a person learns how to present themselves within a particular habitus in everyday life. As other researchers in the project explain:

Bourdieu’s ideas about forms of capital and the ways they operate in specific fields offer a tool for understanding the enduring impact of social inequality in students’ lives. Stories are clearly formed by lived experiences of social power. (West, Fleming and Finnegan, 2013, p. 122)

Habitus and the levels of social and cultural capitals locate a person’s position or ‘a sense of one’s place’ (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 131) in relation to others and the social structure. While habitus reproduces and determines an individual’s class and social trajectory, Bourdieu did acknowledge that it is not necessarily static and can be transformed through the use of agency:

Habitus is not the fate that some people read into it. Being the product of history, it is an open system of dispositions that is constantly subjected to experiences and therefore constantly affected by at interview, in a way that either reinforces or modifies its structures. (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 133)

Bourdieu’s work on habitus powerfully illuminates social inequalities which are experienced by working-class students when entering the graduate labour market. Graduate employability is a problem across Europe (Tomlinson, 2008). Research indicates that non-traditional students are more affected in terms of graduateness than other students (Brown & Hesketh, 2004; Reay et al., 2005). Such students experience a longer transition period to gain employment, and when they do, it may not be at graduate level. Linking to Bourdieu & Passeron (1994) points out that those from a privileged class background have higher levels of social and cultural capital, which puts them at an advantage in the labour market or what is termed in the UK as ‘the old boys network’. Overwhelmingly, those who have been to public schools (private schools) and then graduate

from Oxford or Cambridge (Oxbridge) secure the top jobs. Middle-class students are also more likely to possess extensive social capital and networks which gives them an advantage in obtaining jobs. For Brown and Scase:

The idea of cultural capital has been helpful in understanding how individuals and families from middle class backgrounds are able to ‘capitalise’ on their cultural assets in ways that those from disadvantaged backgrounds are not...When employers reject candidates as unsuitable it could be argued that they are being rejected for lacking ‘cultural’ capital. There is absolutely no doubt that this happens when people are seen to have the wrong accent, dress inappropriately, or do not know the rules of the game when candidates are invited to a formal dinner to meet company employees. (1994, p. 28)

A study by the Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission (2015) also reinforces the role of habitus and cultural and social capital in the graduate labour market by concluding that recruitment to top jobs is now favouring ‘poshness’. In our research, there was evidence from the stories of English, Scottish and Irish adult students that after obtaining a degree, some ended up in a precarious labour market (Merrill et al., 2019). In recent years, the precariat have become a growing section of the working class in the UK (Standing, 2011; Roberts, 2020).

We recognise that class does not stand alone, as class intersects with gender and race. In our study, gender inequality was also important as the women defined themselves as working-class women. As Skeggs (1997) explains in her research on women studying in a UK further education college (post-compulsory education): ‘The women never see themselves as just women, it is always read through class’ (1997, p. 91). Their life experiences are, therefore, both classed and gendered (Thompson, 2000; Skeggs, 1997). And as Anthias states, the intersectionality of inequalities means that ‘classes are always gendered and racialised and gender is always classed and racialised and so on’ (2005, p. 33). We would argue that for our adult students, age acted as another form of inequality in relation to accessing the graduate labour market alongside class, gender and race. The adult students viewed themselves as ‘other’ in relation to younger students in terms of age and class. They recognised that they had more life experiences than younger students because of their age, but they also felt that age (and class) constrained their opportunities in the graduate labour market. While age is a social construct (Siivonen & Isopahkala-Bouret, 2014), social and institutional attitudes limit their use of agency.

## A NOTE ON METHODOLOGY: USING BIOGRAPHICAL METHODS

Biographical methods were the core of our research approach (for all our European partners), and in the UK, our focus was on using feminist biographical approaches. We wanted, in the feminist tradition, to place the participants at the centre of our research by giving them voice to enable them to tell their stories as:

such methods offer rich insights into the dynamic interplay of individuals and history. Inner and outer worlds. Self and other. We use the word ‘dynamic’ to convey the use of human beings as active agents in making their lives rather than being simply determined by historical and social forces. (Merrill & West, 2009, p. 1)

Importantly, biographical research embodies a humanistic and subjective approach to research (Plummer, 2001). The use of biographical methods is popular within European adult education research (West et al., 2007) propelled by the ‘biographical turn’ (Chamberlayne et al., 2000). The ‘turn’ signified a move away from positivistic quantitative research in adult education which had reduced and dehumanised adult students to numbers and statistics. We also embrace the work of C. Wright Mills (1957) which links biography, history, social structures and individual agency through the concept of ‘the sociological imagination’.

The Warwick team drew on critical feminist approaches for our biographical research. Such a perspective allowed us to use a dialogical approach to interviewing which can be empowering and transformative for the interviewees. In contrast to traditional interviewing methods, it takes into account emotions, feelings, subjectivities and social context. The engagement between the researcher and researched is both subjective and intersubjective. It is also challenging and strives to break down power differences, thus establishing a more democratic relationship between the researcher and the researched (Stanley & Wise, 1993). For Liz Stanley and Sue Wise, ‘personhood cannot be left out of the research process. We see the presence of the researcher’s self as central in all the research’ (1993, p. 161). It is also a relational process. Ann Oakley (1981) argues that in using a feminist approach, the interview becomes more like a conversation.

Biographical interviews appear to be individual, but in reading people's stories, shared experiences of class and gender, for example, emerge so that stories are also collective ones (Merrill, 2007), thus revealing the interaction between structure and agency. In our research, the stories and voices of working-class adult students illuminate how structural inequalities and constraints impact on their studies and labour market opportunities.

In relation to the practicalities of interviewing, the Warwick team undertook 40 interviews with 30 undergraduate and 10 graduate students. Ten of the undergraduate students were interviewed for a second time after they graduated. Biographical interviews produce a large amount of data for analysis. We immersed ourselves in the stories by reading and listening to the interview tapes. Giving voice to participants is central to feminist research as well as interpretation and relating the voices to theory. In analysing the stories, we identify how individual stories become collective ones in relation to class and other factors. In doing so, the stories reveal the interaction of structure and agency in people's lives. All were adults, and most were in their 30s and 40s. In the UK, adult students are 21 years and more, while younger students are 18–21 at undergraduate level. Lecturers, career guidance workers, university managers and employers were also interviewed to obtain their perspectives on employability. The adult students we interviewed told us their whole life story as well as their experiences of studying as an adult at university. However, for the purposes of this chapter, we are focusing on their experiences in relation to employability and the graduate labour market.

### WORKING-CLASS STUDENT PERSPECTIVES ON EMPLOYABILITY

In this section, we present the findings of the Warwick team. For an overview of the findings of the whole European team, see Finnegan et al. (2014) *Student Voices on Inequalities in European Higher Education: Challenges for Theory, Policy and Practice in a Time of Change*. It is important to note that, as referenced earlier, there remains comparatively little focus or research on the experiences of adults in HE. Biographical stories can be either presented as case studies of one or two people or by themes. For the purpose of this article, we have chosen to present the stories by themes to include as many voices as possible. This section is divided into the following themes: class, gender and age, and economic, social and cultural capital.

### *Class, Gender and Age*

In this section, we investigate the ways in which social class, age and gender are intertwined through the voices of the participants. The adult students we interviewed experienced class, gender and age inequalities when trying to access the graduate labour market. These experiences were heightened by the fact that they studied at an elite UK university. Interviews with employers and career guidance workers revealed that the top employers targeted younger middle-class students who are high-flyers through a variety of strategies in elite universities. Some of the adult students we interviewed attended the Careers Fairs hosted by the top companies on campus, but they stated that they sensed that employers were not interested in them. They felt that employers were looking for a particular type of person and that adult students do not fit in with what employers want because of their class and age. As one woman explains:

I think companies are definitely tailoring it like ‘this is our role, this is our company, this is who we want for the job’ and they are making that public’. So you can either pretend to be that person or you can make yourself into that person... If you’re not the person the company wants you’re not going to get employed. (Anne)

Paul was studying for a politics degree and was acutely aware that his class background counted against him in the high-flying graduate labour market but at the same time he did not want to be part of that lifestyle:

but in the finance industry, as much as they say they can’t discriminate for age and all these things, like I know for a fact that they wouldn’t be looking for me. Like my accent as well...They’re not going to have me sitting in a boardroom in Singapore. Do you know what I mean? I wouldn’t want to do that anyway...So when it comes to what employers are looking for, I don’t think I’m it for a lot of them.

Paul obtained a first-class degree—the highest classification—and with the help of funding later went on to do postgraduate study.

Employers also stated that they target some of the university societies with funding and other activities with the aim of recruiting potential graduates. Our adult students have work and family commitments, which makes it difficult to attend university societies as well as the fact that there is a cost involved in joining some societies.

The focus and emphasis on employability in universities ignores the everyday lives of adult students and excludes and discriminates them from the employability ‘game’ in many ways. To be employable, students are expected to get involved in internships, work placements and other graduate schemes. However, these are not practical for adult students. Often, they are not local to where they live or are during the vacation when many either have to work to earn some money or look after children. As one single parent mother explains:

Most of the graduate schemes that are available are for people without responsibilities. I can’t go travelling and leave my son at home... There doesn’t seem to be any niche for any graduate schemes that are solely based locally. The jobs I’ve looked at, they’re looking for people who are flexible and are willing to work all the hours that God sends and I have commitments. But this isn’t taken into account for the mature student in the job market. (Sally)

Sally’s experience and story illuminates that the issues are not just about age and class but also about gender. The commitment to family and place restricts many adult students from being flexible, but flexibility is something that is valued by employers. Schemes such as work placements are often unpaid, so they are not affordable for working-class adult students. Allen et al. (2013), in their qualitative study, were also critical about work placements as they argue that:

what makes a ‘successful’ and ‘employable’ student and ‘ideal’ creative worker are implicitly classed, raced and gendered. We argue that work placements operate as a key domain in which inequalities within both higher education and the graduate labour market are (re) produced and sustained. (Allen et al., 2013, p. 431)

Age discrimination was spoken about frequently by the adult students we interviewed. As Jane poignantly reflects:

Yes, at the end of this year I will have a degree but looking at my age and looking at the students—so many young students with the same degree as me when it comes to employment. Employers—maybe they will say ‘Yes you have your degree expertise but your age’ and would rather be looking at someone younger than me. (Jane)

Employers and universities largely do not take into account the social situation of their diverse students in relation to employability.

As Paul's quote illustrates, class is a key factor as perceived by the adult students and affects their opportunities in the graduate labour market in numerous ways. Previous to entering university, Paul was a roofer, and despite having obtained the highest grade in his degree (first-class honours), he could not find employment at graduate level. He was forced to return to roofing but in precarious temporary jobs. As Paul explains, 'Workwise I've been doing exactly what I was doing before because it's my easiest way to get money'. He missed university life and stated that: 'I miss engaging with the ideas and having my mind stretched and even writing essays'. Studying also came at a cost in the sense that it distanced himself from his working-class friends and fellow workers. In Hoggart's (1957) terms, he was distancing himself and getting above one's station. He did not talk to his fellow workers about his degree, as 'it's like a dirty secret—frustrating'. His friends wondered what the point was of doing a degree as he ended back up being a roofer. Paul explained that he felt that he was in two camps—the working-class world and the academic one.

Sharon studied law. The choice of this subject stemmed from her biography and a childhood experience of her father murdering her mother and his subsequent imprisonment. Entering the legal profession in the UK is a costly business, and Sharon, as a single parent on a low income, could not afford this. She lacked the social, economic and cultural capitals, in Bourdieu's terms, and middle-class background which her fellow younger students had:

Some of the students I've spoken to their parents are partners in solicitor firms so obviously they're going to walk into a job aren't they? Definitely down the barrister route—it's definitely about what private school you've been to. I think money definitely because if you haven't got money you're just not going to get to the Bar really are you. It costs too much money. Their course is £18,000—it's just not an option.

### *Economic Social and Cultural Capital*

This section will serve to highlight the ways in which different capitals are also interwoven in the experiences of our participants. The issues the adult students we interviewed experienced included challenges related to their respective circumstances that highlight social background, and cultural

milieu continue to play a part in the environment of higher education, their experience of employers and the process of entering the labour market.

One of our participants, Sophie, found her experience at an elite university led to an appreciation of the academic sense of fulfilment. Higher educational institutions in this respect ‘act as a transitional space enabling women to reflect upon their identity as a working-class woman and reshape and transform themselves’ (Merrill & Revers, 2022, forthcoming). However, she felt this was weighed against the ‘false impression’ that is produced in this environment in relation to future employment opportunities manifest by the economic and social inequalities:

Because some students make tremendous amounts of money when they leave it raises everything and it gives a false impression....At (elite university) the traditional learners that have probably had private education before they got there and they have parents with high-flying jobs and stuff...That came out, the social networks they mix in, that’s the bit that gets them the job. Not necessarily their degree. Who you know rather than what you know. (Sophie)

Furthermore, her awareness of these issues stemming from concerns with background and upbringing impacted on her impressions on what it means to fit in with the expectations of employers, to ‘exude an aura’:

I think to be employable...not only do you have to have experience, you have to sort of like, I don’t know, the way you present yourself, they have to, just by first appearance, your appearance has to feel like you’re somebody that fits. Just who are you... do you exude that aura, I don’t know!

Sophie successfully balanced her academic commitments with those of both working and raising a family. Like Paul, she excelled in her degree, attaining first-class honours. However, as became clear in a follow-up interview, as with Paul, such success didn’t remove the challenges she faced when seeking employment. In the later interview, she described that her chosen path into employment in HR could only be advanced through intern work. However, this relied on extensive travel commitments and a lack of financial remuneration.

after I graduated at uni. I worked in London for two days as a HR intern so I used to travel to London at my own expense to be an intern...No interns don’t get nothing! It was voluntary. Another sacrifice!

Low-paid internships can operate as an extension of the skills-based narrative of employability in which the inflation of prerequisites to gain higher paid jobs continue to spiral. But as is evident in this case, it serves to advantage those who already have sufficient economic capital to be able to offer or otherwise ‘sacrifice’ their labour on the premise of better future career possibilities.

Furthermore, her experience of the importance of social and cultural capital was evidenced in her identification of the social networks required in this profession to ‘get your foot in the door’:

HR is another difficult field to get into. If you know somebody who knows somebody who’s going get you in it’s the platform to actually get your foot into the door.

Similarly, another of our participants, Jane, observed that after graduating from her degree and seeking work, the expectations of employers paid little attention to the concerns of those with young families:

Some of them want you to go and stay in London for six months or Scotland and it’s impractical when you’ve got children.

As a single mother with a young son, the option of moving around to suit these requirements impacted on her ability to accept these conditions of employment. As she observed,

It’s not about the university it’s about the kind of internships that are out there as well. They could be more focused on people who don’t move around.

As Tomlinson and Nghia point out:

A graduate may be sufficiently ‘employable’ for a given job but if they are tied to a location of relative under-supply of jobs and have transportation challenges, familial ties, health, mobility and childcare responsibilities (to name a few), then their ability to access suitable jobs is compromised. (2020, p. 6)

Referring back to the case of Sharon, her lack of social, cultural and economic capitals meant that she did not become a lawyer but she felt the fact that she had studied at an elite university helped her to get a job as a personal assistant in a law firm:

Putting Warwick University on my CV got me the job. Because the first thing they said in the interview was Warwick University? ... That was the first thing they said. They didn't say 'Hi!' They said, 'Warwick University ... That's a very good university. How did you get in there?' 'What did you do?' And that basically got me the job.

The issue of eliteness also arose for Sharon in a different social situation:

so at the Christmas party was probably the first time we met the entire firm and they were all saying oh, you know, the other solicitors were saying, "What university did you go to?" And whenever you say Warwick University they 'Huuuh! (exclamation of surprise)... Okay.' It's as if you are in a different light all of a sudden, yeah.... Because they've all been educated at Eton and Oxford, Cambridge, so they felt I fitted in because I'm from Warwick University. If I told them I'd been to X university I'd have been cut out.

In short, as evidenced in the stories of our participants, getting the best level degrees at top-tier universities does not guarantee a pathway into graduate-level employment for adult learners. Obstacles remain with regards to future employment due to structural inequalities enhanced by the narrative of employability skills and the continuing inflation of employer expectations. In this climate, working-class adult students often lack the opportunities and resources to satisfy what top employers are looking for, which are particular social and cultural capitals possessed by middle-class students.

## SUMMARY

The stories of the working-class women and men we interviewed illustrate that their experiences of studying at a university and their efforts to enter the graduate labour market are not just individual ones but also collective ones in terms of primarily class but also gender, race and age. In this research, some of the participants were interviewed twice to help gauge their experiences over time within the HE setting and in relation to expectations of graduate-level work. Their voices were critical of the way that employability strategies employed by both universities and employers favoured young middle-class students. The employability discourse that they encountered in this context served only to reinforce inequalities by advancing interests based on preexisting assumptions of a graduate labour

market tailored to traditional graduates. The participants in our study had entered university to prove to themselves that they are capable of studying at university level as well as to obtain a better material and employment life for themselves and their family. In contrast to the younger working-class students we interviewed, they were less instrumental in relation to implementing employment strategies as they were realistic about the inequalities they faced. However, despite being a risky business (Reay, 2003), the transitional space of university did offer a place where the self was changed, but as Paul's story illustrates, sometimes at the cost of class distancing from their family and friends.

In relation to employability and access to the labour market, they realised that they were not operating in a level playing field, as class inequalities and class system continue to be reproduced within higher education. Having social capital, networks and cultural and economic capital, in Bourdieu's terms, is influential and essential in getting top graduate jobs so that the process of employability also perpetuates class inequalities (Sayer, 2015; Finnegan et al., 2014). Social class continues to be an important factor in the experiences of UK non-traditional students with respect to their educational background, opportunities, experiences in HE and in the labour market. As a result, social class matters a great deal in terms of biographical experiences and biography and trajectories and affects how HE is interpreted and valued, and this has an impact on their employment trajectory.

In relation to graduate employability, the question needs to be raised—access to what? (Merrill et al., 2019). For many working-class adult students, obtaining a degree has not led to social mobility and graduate-level jobs, and for some they have found themselves in a situation of precarity. Increasing commitment to employability within HEIs has raised issues of inequality for working-class students, which universities and employers need to address.

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PART III

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Graduate Employability as a Career  
and Identity Process



# Health as Employability Potential in Business Graduates' Career Imagination

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## INTRODUCTION

In contemporary working life, graduates' personal virtues and qualities of the self are understood as crucial for their employability, labour market attractiveness and success in work organisations. Employability has become a particular skill in its own right, a way of displaying and presenting oneself in a positive way to demonstrate 'potential' (Moore, 2010, p. 39; see Handley, 2018). The call for potentiality as a key criterion of employability produces the idealisation of employees trapped by demands to be continuously productive yet also forever transforming themselves (Handley, 2018).

In this chapter, we argue that health has become new areas of life—and new social practices—through which graduates display their potentiality in terms of employability, represent themselves in a positive way in workplace contexts and aim to enhance their value as workers. Drawing on the thematic analysis of interviews with 26 business graduates, we investigate how

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graduates construct health as employability potential when they envisage and evaluate working life through ‘career imagination’.

According to Cohen and Duberley (2021), the career imagination concerns how individuals view the possibilities and constraints of their working life, and chart and evaluate their route in the labour market. We suggest that prior employability studies tend to create a rather abstract and generalised picture of working life, simultaneously detaching the employable graduate from their career imagination. Following Holmes (2015), we argue that prior employability research hasn’t taken account enough the longer timescales of individuals’ lives, including their employment careers. From an individual point of view, however, working life becomes relevant and gets its meaning through career.

Career imagination concerns social time which refers to “the systems of trajectories and rhythms that human create as they engage in interaction within social institutions” (Snyder, 2016, p. 11). Social time is made up of timescapes and time maps. Timescapes, according to Snyder (2016, p. 13), are the configurations of rhythms which actors create within a space of interaction. Work timescapes involve, for example, schedules, deadlines and sequences of tasks. Each work timescape features the braiding of multiple rhythms of mental and physical energy expenditure, giving the individual employee a different experience of pace, sequence and articulation (*ibid.*, p. 14). Timescapes are themselves embedded in larger temporal structures—time maps—that make out the general shape of the remembered pasts and expected future (Snyder, 2019). Careers are such organisational time maps within institutions which structure people’s lives into certain kinds of trajectories (Snyder, 2019; Cohen & Duberley, 2021). Thus, work timescapes and time maps contribute to employee’s experience of both the texture and direction of social time. They are the resources that people use to locate themselves in time and space in their career imagination.

Previously, career has connoted predictability, order and steady progress along an organisationally prescribed timeline (Cohen & Duberley, 2021). We refer to such a career imagination with the concept of ‘bounded career’ (Snyder, 2019). As an organisational time map, it invites employees to expect—or at least wish for—security and a pathway to seniority from the future work trajectory. It has been argued, however, that contemporary capitalism has created new time maps for career imagination (Snyder, 2019; Cohen & Duberley, 2021). Contemporary careers have been characterised by increased mobility, uncertainty and greater

individual agency as opposed to the bounded career models of full-time employment in mostly single organisations (LaPointe, 2013). We use the concept of ‘flexible career’ to refer to current schemas for movement in institutions that structure people’s lives into particular trajectories. As an organisational time map, a flexible career encourages employees to relate to themselves as if they were entrepreneurs—to be constantly active, compete with oneself and others, realise their full potential and embrace risks (Scharff, 2016).

Based on their citation analysis of journal articles, Healy et al. (2022) show that graduate employability and career development research are relatively separate research fields, and a substantive exchange between these research areas has remained surprisingly limited. Moreover, although health has become a key marker of employability in contemporary labour markets, there is very little research with the explicit purpose of investigating how employability is associated with health and well-being (Berntson & Marklund, 2007). Therefore, it is important to investigate how graduates perceive themselves as healthy employable subjects in their career imagination. By tackling this topic, this chapter aims to contribute to critical employability research and illustrate the new forms and practices of employability and labour management in graduates’ career imagination.

### HEALTH AS A SOCIAL PRACTICE IN THE NEOLIBERAL GOVERNANCE OF WORKERS

Career imagination is influenced by the multi-layered structural and cultural context within which an individual is situated (Cohen & Duberley, 2021). In this study, we approach such a context from the governmentality research (Foucault 1980, 1982; Rose and Miller, 1992; Rose, 1999) and critical health research (Brown & Baker, 2012) point of view. Governmentality studies have focused not only on how the state manages its population, but also on how it shapes the self-knowledge and self-conduct of the individuals (Rose, 1999). Whereas governmental self-formation refers to ways in which authorities seek to shape the conduct of aspirations, needs and capabilities of specified categories of individuals, the ethical self-formation concerns “practices, techniques, and discourses of the government of the self by the self by means of which individuals seek to know, decipher, and act on themselves” (Dean, 1994, p. 156). We suggest that neoliberalism constitutes a form of governmentality that modifies

ethical self-formation and such a career imagination within which a specific type of individual is idealised—an enterprising self who regards themselves as autonomous and manages to put their whole self to productive work (Maravelias, 2018). Enterprising individuals are not only capable of carrying out specific labour as employees, but they act entrepreneurially in all spheres of life and aim to continually invest in themselves as ‘human capital’ and nurture, manage and develop their professional as well as private selves (Maravelias, 2015).

In contemporary labour markets, health and well-being have become important dimensions of private self, through which individuals are supposed to invest in their human capital and cultivate themselves as enterprising workers (Maravelias, 2015; Bardon et al., 2021). Neoliberal governance of healthy workers embodies the wider characteristics of capitalist production and immaterial labour, in which workers are required to mobilise new and intimate dimensions of their subjectivities to display their engagement with work (Farrugia, 2019) and to contribute to the competitiveness of the organisation (Maravelias, 2018).

From the perspective of critical health studies, the requirement to cultivate oneself as a healthy worker is a manifestation of the embodied neoliberal governance (Cairns & Johnston, 2015; Lupton, 1999) and illustrates the more general views of health in modern societies. In these views, health is individualised as a moral duty and personal responsibility for health, and good health represents markers of autonomy, rational agency, good citizenship and good life (Crawford, 1980, 2006). Accordingly, individuals must seek out, assess and act upon an endless stream of knowledge on health threats. This fosters anxieties about perceived health risks. From a governmentality perspective, risk-avoidance can be understood as a ‘technology of the self’ (Foucault, 1982), wherein personal responsibility for health promotion “becomes viewed as a moral enterprise relating to issues of self-control, self-knowledge, and self-improvement” (Lupton 1999, p. 91).

In this chapter, we approach health as a social and normative practice (Crawford, 2006; Clark, 2018) that provides dominant discourses through which graduates demonstrate their employability potential in the labour market. Thus, for us, health is not a biomedical concept, but refers to multidimensional aspects of wellness. Such a holistic understanding of health encourages individuals to recognise the whole person (physical, mental, emotional, social, intellectual and spiritual), and expands the quest for health far beyond medical priorities towards mind-over-matter

conceptions, such as positiveness, happiness, self-confidence, ability to function and productivity (Crawford, 2006). The holistic approach sees health as constructed in relation to social structures and experience and systematically articulated with other meanings and practices, such as practices of working life.

### THEMATIC ANALYSIS OF BUSINESS GRADUATES' INTERVIEWS

This study is part of a larger research project on graduate employability and social positioning in the labour market (HighEmploy, 2018–2022). In the project's qualitative sub-study, altogether 76 higher education graduates with degrees in business and administration were interviewed in 2019 for the first time and 44 of them in 2020 for the second time.<sup>1</sup> The participants had been studying in three different Finnish universities and two Universities of Applied Sciences (UAS).

The interviews covered themes such as the participants' educational and working-life routes, experiences related to university studies, employment and working life, current life and work situation, and future perceptions and goals. The interviews ranged from 1.5 to 3 hours and were conducted face-to-face, on the phone or via video conference call. The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim, and the data was pseudonymised.

For the purposes of this chapter, we selected the first interviews with university graduates from one university. Our data set consists of 26 interviews (13 women and 13 men), aged between 24 and 45 (the mean age 32.92 and median 31 years). At the time of the first interviews, 19 of them had already graduated with a master's degree in business and administration, and seven were about to graduate in the near future. The interviewees worked in business organisations with titles such as accountant, application consultant, back-office executive, business consultant, chief financial officer (CFO), credit manager, controller, human resource and marketing coordinator, investment manager, marketing manager, procurement specialist, product director or sales coordinator. In addition, one of them worked as managing director and as shareholder in his company. Two of them worked in public sector.

<sup>1</sup>We recruited the participants for the study using multiple channels: student registers and the email lists of alumni and graduates' professional associations. The ethical approval for the study was obtained from the University of Eastern Finland Committee on Research Ethics.

In our analysis, we first focused on those parts of the interviews (435 pages of the total 1261 pages of transcribed interview data), in which the interviewees constructed career imaginations. Second, we further identified all instances from the data where the topic of health (in a holistic meaning) was explicitly or implicitly referred to. Health was originally neither in the interest of the research project nor explicitly asked about or discussed in the interviews; thus, it was indeed a marginal topic in the data corpus. Most of the interviewees considered health mainly as the absence of illness: “Of course [it is important in the future] that you stay healthy, that you can work (Tom)”. Moreover, in our data, health represented a valued human capital and a competitive advantage in the job search. Although job search was one context of career imagination, we excluded this topic from this study, as it is discussed elsewhere in this book (see Mutanen, Korhonen & Siivonen).

Our method of analysis was based on the thematic analysis conducted within a social constructionist framework. Thus, our aim was not to analyse personal experiences or the reality of the participants, or to focus merely on the semantic content of the data. Instead, we identified and explored the underlying ideas, assumptions and conceptualisations that shaped or informed the semantic content of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In other words, the themes that we identified from the data were considered as socially produced and effected by a range of discourses operating within society, although no specific discourse analysis was carried out.

The focus of our analysis was on health discourses through which graduates sought to know and act on themselves as employable subjects in their career imagination. The analysis was performed jointly by the authors and proceeded with the following steps. We coded the data for specific research questions in our minds. We started our analysis by identifying the ways by which graduates constructed higher education, private and working life, careers and work life, and organisations in their talk, and understood themselves as healthy subjects in these fields. We recognised that intensive working life and bounded and flexible careers (Snyder, 2019) were the major frameworks through which graduates understood and constructed themselves as employees, as well as persons in private lives. Next, we analysed the sub-themes of these frameworks and the categories and qualities (of an employee and a healthy person) that the interviewees used in these frameworks to form knowledge of themselves as certain kinds of labouring subjects. We explored how the categories were used to create distinctions between success and failure, valuable and unvaluable,

healthy and unhealthy behaviours (such as being active—being overactive, agile—flexible), bodies (persistent—weak), minds (risk-aware—unaware) and emotions (balanced—unbalanced) of a labouring subject (Korhonen et al., 2023). Finally, we analysed how these distinctions formed the criteria for a healthy employee and how the interviewees evaluated themselves and their responsibility and success in meeting these criteria.

### HEALTH IN TERMS OF TIMESCAPES OF WORKING LIFE: NORMALISING INTENSIVE AND STRESSFUL WORKING LIFE

As stated above, our analysis aimed to trace the kinds of timescapes and time maps that shaped business graduates' knowledge of themselves as employees and thus their career imagination. We discovered that when business graduates demonstrated their employability potential, they, on the one hand, described their daily, weekly and seasonal rhythms of work tasks in their organisations and reflected on how well or badly they performed in these day-to-day duties. Thus, they formed knowledge of themselves as employees within certain kind of work timescape. On the other hand, graduates formed knowledge of themselves within larger temporal frames, that is, organisational time maps within which they described their success or lack of success in their careers. Although timescapes and time maps intertwine in career imagination in a reciprocal way such that each reflects and constitutes the other, we present our results by opening up, firstly, how graduates' knowledge of themselves was structured by a particular timescape. Then we show how careers as organisational time maps shaped graduates' construction of health as employability potential.

It turned out that an intensive and stressful working life provided a timescape and a technology of the self through which graduates displayed their (un)successfulness and (un)potentiality in their career imagination. The timescape of intensive working life, which emphasised a constant pressure on the one hand and the individual's own responsibility for handling this pressure on the other, has historically been produced for example in Finnish public discussion. Especially from the 1990s onwards, this discussion has painted a grim picture of the negative effects of a competitive economy, such as constant time pressure, uncertainty, rapid changes, as well as stress and burnout (Varje & Väänänen, 2016), and emphasised the employees' own responsibility over their mental well-being and

highlighted individual stress management abilities to regulate one's workload (Kuokkanen et al., 2020).

Business graduates imagined their career through such a timescape and presented themselves as physically and mentally strong subjects who could be in coordination with the intensive rhythms of the organisation by withstanding the pressures of working life. Tuure's quotation illustrates how graduates' notions of themselves as good and healthy employees were built through this specific organisational timescape:

Tuure: In my opinion, some stress is part of work [...] At least I need stress myself because work is not worth doing and life not worth living if there isn't enough some kind of pressure. So perhaps it's a kind of more popular concept of entropy, that there must be pressure because otherwise you cannot keep yourself together as a person [...] A being needs to have a certain surface tension to keep it together. If you don't have a goal or a purpose, why should you exist at all?

In his quotation, Tuure normalises the stressful working life by comparing it to the natural phenomena (entropy), and by seeing a sufficient amount of stress and pressure as an inevitable condition of existence which gives meaning and purpose to life itself. The idea that "life [is] not worth living if there isn't enough some kind of pressure", places 'activity' as a generic measure of virtuous behaviour; activity is good in and of itself (Till, 2018).

### HEALTH AS A DRIVING FORCE AND ENABLER OF VITALITY

The promotion of activity is the primary organising principle of the timescape of intensive working life, and the 'cult of busyness' (Till, 2018) demands vital, full-blooded and thus productive employees. In their interviews, business graduates emphasised their past and/or current ability to work endlessly in hectic work circumstances. Toughness and durability for work performance, as well as the ability to maintain vitality and deal with stress, were personal qualities through which graduates performed their success in intensive working life:

Benjamin: With regard to progressing in my career, probably working hard and, just, doing that work and that I have managed to

do it [has helped]. At some point, someone always notices that this person works [...] you mustn't try too much and also not too little, but work in a kind of unselfish manner [...] I have worked long days, been busy and so on in all of them [workplaces], so [...] I'm not afraid of the busyness and I can [...] handle pressure. Perhaps it has led me in a certain direction in working life, too.

An inexhaustible energy and vitality for work performances was seen to originate from the young, inherently enthusiastic and resilient individual, and it was realised in the value of their labour and in the success of their careers (see also Farrugia, 2019; Korhonen et al., 2023). Like Benjamin said: “with regard to progressing in my career, probably working hard and, just, doing that work [has helped]”. Thus, graduates cultivated themselves as active and energetic employees. For them, having the energy to deal with day-to-day duties and having the ability to optimise one's performance in stressful working life represented a central marker of employability potential.

### HEALTH AS RISK AWARENESS AND SKILFUL RISK MANAGEMENT

For business graduates, the intensive working life was also a danger and potential risk for well-being. Like Crawford (2006) states, health-consciousness is also danger-consciousness—an awareness of and sensitivity to increasingly ambient and omnipresent potential harms. Thus, “the ‘imperative of health’ is a mandate to identify dangers in order to control them” (Crawford, 2006, p. 403).

According to graduates' views, a good and healthy employee works in line with schedules, timetables and deadlines, that is, the ways by which organisations structure timescapes (Snyder, 2019). However, under neo-liberal governance, it is the individuals' responsibility to be in coordination with the rhythms of the organisation. This coordination requires not only self-control of time but also control over one's health. For graduates, managing their well-being was thus a skill among other employability-related skills (Maravelias, 2012), such as time management, as Sofia's quotation illustrates:

Interviewer: What do you think, what kind of competence, abilities and skills are required from you in working life now and perhaps from now on?

Sofia: Self-governance, or self-management, is required today. It doesn't matter what the position is, it is a key skill that many people do not master, however. I mean, how you inspire and motivate yourself to do things that may not be so interesting, or how you manage your use of time, or your recovery or the work-life balance. I find it an essential part of modern working life as work is so flexible [...]. It is seldom location-specific. And especially in specialist tasks, work takes over your life if you don't have the means to interrupt it.

First, in such a timescape, self-management of health includes the ability to acknowledge risks. Like Sofia says: “how you manage your recovery [...] it an essential part of modern working life”. Second, self-management of one's optimal performance in intensive working life involves controlling emotions. According to Till (2018), affective force is essential for the maximisation of productivity in contemporary capitalism. Therefore, the important task for the individual is to reconfigure the self in such a way that emotions, which might disrupt productivity (e.g., too little or too much enthusiasm), are self-managed and constrained (Brown & Baker, 2012, p. 17; see also Gill & Orgad, 2018). Like Sofia reflects: “how you inspire and motivate yourself to do things that may not be so interesting”.

Third, self-management for guaranteeing ones' productivity and efficiency in intensive working life needs the ability to maintain equilibrium between 'dangerous identities' (Till, 2018)—of being too disengaged (lacking activity) or being overactive (being burnout). In avoiding dangerous identities, the healthy employee needs to be capable of distinguishing and interpreting the bodily signs of stress and exhaustion:

Tuure: If business is war, like someone claimed in the 80s, I have experienced that war and survived it. After that, nothing has really affected me very much any more. Of course, there is sometimes more stress. My heart rate during rest can sometimes be pretty high when I measure it. I sometimes cannot sleep for a long time and sometimes sleep five hours a night for weeks and so on.

But you learn to cope with it all. And there's the personal tolerance and an understanding of what the minimum and maximum limits of your tolerance are. So when you determine what they are and notice that you coped with it, next time the challenge will not feel so strange any more.

Business graduates' bodies were their disciplinarians; their bodies schooled them into practices of self-knowledge and self-governance (see also Björklund, 2008). Like Tuure explains: "when I measure it [...] you learn what the minimum and maximum limits of your tolerance are". The lessons learnt from the body turn attention away from any social and institutional factors, instead placing emphasis on the individual's ability to manage their health. In addition, individual health management was seen as a business value: business graduates argued that health management and the related risk-avoidance as a "working life skill" is above all in the interest of the company and the customer:

Tea: So, I have had to learn working life skills [...] The content of the work is not difficult, but the working life skills are [...] If you always strive for the best possible result, you will definitely be exhausted and have a burnout. Companies are quite strict about how money is used and what people are employed for. So, usually the person has a bit more work than they have time to do during the working hours [...] Myself, I'm a person who keeps seeing things that need doing and would also like to do them well enough. So remembering to keep an eye on your own coping and that you do not work too hard, either. That's what I've had to learn. You have to learn to say no and to delegate things. So that kind of skills. I haven't learnt them in business studies and they would be really important.

Interviewer: How have you yourself [...] learnt these working life skills that you just talked about?

Tea: In the hard way a little bit, too. You have to talk about things, if you feel that you can't cope on your own, if you see some risks. I brought it up when I felt that there was a risk [...] I was a consultant at the time [...] that the success of that client or the success of the company with that client

was at risk if I didn't say anything [about the risk of burnout]. And it made it easier. So then I found more energy myself to work a bit harder.

Thus, for business graduates, the ability to recognise health risks, to communicate the recognised risks in organisation, as well as the ability to balance and to be tough under pressure were essential criteria for a healthy employee. Health thereby was a question of choice and responsibility. Business graduates' interpretations show how, under neoliberal governance, workers are to become resilient subjects who work on the self to monitor and manage their vulnerabilities related to well-being (Gill & Orgad, 2018).

### HEALTH IN TERMS OF TIME MAPS: CONSTRUCTING EMPLOYABILITY POTENTIAL IN CAREER

Careers provide time maps of 'projectivity'—the future-oriented aspects of meaning-making and action, such as expectations, predictions or plans (Snyder, 2019). We discovered that both bounded and flexible careers as kinds of organisational time maps shaped graduates' self-knowledge, thus reflecting the fact that the expectations for career security and progress have not disappeared (see also LaPointe, 2013).

However, as the career imagination is as constraining as it is enabling (Cohen & Duberley, 2021), business graduates constructed not only ideals but also dangers of bounded and flexible careers. Whereas the dangers in bounded career consisted of boredom or feelings of meaningless life, a risk of stress or even burnout was associated with the flexible career. Although graduates formed knowledge of themselves as labouring subjects who have a need and will to compete and realise their full potential, they were also critical towards the demands for constant availability, increased responsibilities, to subordinate personal life to the sphere of work and career, and desired clarity and stability in their careers (see also Loacker & Śliwa, 2018). However, in their career imagination, the contradictions between the ideals and dangers of bounded and flexible careers were conceived in different ways.

## WORK-LIFE BALANCE AS POSTPONED TO FUTURE CAREER

We have illustrated above that business graduates approached their current view of themselves through the timescape of intensive working life. In addition, they expressed appreciation for entrepreneurial challenges of the flexible career and sought to ensure their future career success by “working hard” (Samuel), “expanding their competence” (Katarina) or “making efforts and striving forward” (Andrei). However, business graduates saw their current situation just as one stage on the way to a better future career, which was imagined through the time map of work-life balance.

In the following quotation, Katriina imagines a career in which she is constantly striving to do better and advances fast and hierarchically (i.e. bounded career), but also takes risks, is confident about her coping ability and orients herself to making the best use of her time (Scharff, 2016). As a result of constant activity there is also a feeling of a lack of time and actions related to health and well-being, such as resting and relaxing after hard work, are postponed to a later date:

Katriina: It’s typical of our whole generation [...] That we work hard, but we are also [...] very demanding, like that we want things to happen now, we want to progress in our career fast and straight away, but [...] we also work even a bit too hard. We have a terrible need to show that we know how to do these things, that we are the best people in our field [...] I have a great need to expand my competence, be involved in so many things. In a way, that also backfires so that I work an awful lot [...] Of course, I [...] always think that, okay, if I do these now, in five years’ time I might... So, I’m perhaps not able to stop there yet and take a breath for a while, but always think about what this will look on my CV. It’s always there at the back of my mind. [...] So there is a slight upward trend in my career and then I try to balance with the rest of my life. But I have been thinking about having a longer summer holiday this summer and really trying to relax a bit more then.

Katriina’s example reveals that although the graduates’ career imagination contained hopes and expectations for hierarchical career advancement, it did not specifically locate this advancement within an organisation. Thus, the career was not the responsibility of the organisation but of the

entrepreneurial individual. Although Katriina does not have personal experience with work balance, she imagines it as part of her future career. A career as a balance between high-level performance at work and well-being was, thus, a cultural resource through which graduates located themselves in the future time and spaces in (working) life.

### HEALTH AS ACHIEVED EQUILIBRIUM

Whereas some business graduates postponed actions related to health and well-being to a later date (Katriina: “So, I’m perhaps not able to stop there yet and take a breath for a while”), others stressed that they have successfully managed to overcome the early career threshold and become hardened under the pressures of working life. They perceived themselves as more experienced actors in a career, who are no longer in the state of endless becoming but rather standing confidently on their own feet. They presented themselves as physically and mentally equipoised and energetic employees who are—precisely due to these qualities—both willing and capable of deploying all their strength to do the work. They imagined a more balanced and harmonious future career where they succeed in “staying healthy” according to the neoliberal ideal of self-responsible health and work management, as Samuel’s quotation reveals:

Samuel: I think I have managed to get slightly beyond the entry level and have got my foot in the door. So now I will start to work on opening that door [...] I’ll do my bit well and we’ll see where it takes me [...] I must work hard for it and keep the other things in life in balance and stay healthy so that I will have the energy, the resources and the motivation to improve myself and go forward. So, it’s about balancing things. But most of all, it’s just about trying to keep yourself motivated and being prepared to do a lot, a lot of work for it.

In the following, Andrei says that he has changed from a young, hasty and restless worker to an experienced, patient and self-confident employee who does not strive to please everyone anymore and succeeds in maintaining a healthy level of intense activity in his work. His example illustrates that, above all, optimal equilibrium means a sort of relaxed attitude, embodied in calm and bold confidence in one’s own expertise and success in career:

Andrei: Now that I'm 30, I have found certain kind of motivation [...] that I could still be really well physically, so I would want to invest in it more. This has been so hectic and mentally straining at times [...] I am now finding some kind of slight internal peace where I no longer make such an effort and strive forward so much from the point of view of schools and career. [...] For a long time, I was in a kind of crossfire where the clients bombarded me, the team members bombarded me and everyone expected something from me [...] And all the time, I should have been able to communicate, be available to them, so [...] For example, I have never had an out-of-office assistant in my email during holidays, ever. I don't even know how to set it up. Perhaps that shows my service-minded attitude and mentality [...] For example, I don't dare to ignore the phone for more than three days, so it is sometimes a little bit too much for me. I am getting there gradually [...], the patience and finding the courage and being prepared for things not always happening there and then, [...] they develop and grow through experience, which I haven't had yet because I'm a bit impatient as a person.

Andrei's interpretation also reflects the discourse of agility which is firmly rooted in neoliberal ideology and is recognisable as a form of governance (Gillies, 2011). In this discourse, the agile worker, like the agile company, is one fitted to survive and thrive in the modern labour market. Compared to the traditional flexible worker, the agile worker is more agentic and proactive and less docile, has potential and capacity for quick and well-coordinated movement, can initiate and improvise, and cannot be manipulated by others. Whereas business graduates perceived their younger labouring selves as agile, they portrayed their more experienced selves as settled and calm—although still autonomous, energetic and dynamic.

According to Till (2018), the productive power, which capitalism must appropriate now, is not just physical capacities (energy) or the psyche (resilience) but affective lives of the worker. In such a culture, happiness is an effect and resource for success, occasioned by a career imagined as an endless array of emerging opportunities and resources, including one's own emotional states (Binkley, 2013). Thus, happiness is a force which is

outside of the capitalist enterprise but is valued when channelled in such a way as to increase productivity (Cederström & Grassman, 2010).

Samuel's quotation illustrates how happiness-based technologies of the self are reshaping both the meaning and the logic of workers' self-knowledge and behavioural patterns (Cabanas & Illouz, 2017). In his career imagination, Samuel does not only picture himself as a worker who proceeds in his career (in one organisation), but as a future entrepreneur and a leader who manages to make himself—and others—happy due to his individual actions and efforts forged by a sense of self-responsible freedom (Binkley, 2013):

Samuel: I would like to have a company of my own as soon as possible. It's [...] one route to being able to do things that I care about and find important and good for me. It's the best tool for doing that and I can also use it to provide happiness, success and pleasure to other people. Like, to my employees, clients and others. That would be the best thing that could happen. And it [...] is like [...] the ultimate goal [of the future career] [...] where I feel that I can perhaps in some way fulfil myself or feel that this is important to me and that, as a whole, it has a positive influence on the people around me and others.

In Samuel's view, being an entrepreneur and the ability to harness positive emotions for the use of the company create well-being and happiness for himself, his employees and his clients. Samuel's example shows that happiness, as both a goal and means of work, is the property of an autonomous agent who regards the career not as defined by social norms and responsibilities to which one must adjust, but, rather, as a store of resources to be used in the service of self-optimisation (Binkley, 2013).

#### THE COUNTER STORIES OF INTENSIVE WORKING LIFE AND FLEXIBLE CAREER—THE DISCOURSE OF BALANCE

According to Lewis et al. (2007), work-life balance is a metaphor that, on the one side, stresses the need for personal control of time. Instead of emphasising the need for organisational change, it focuses on personal responsibility for getting the balance right, for example by prioritising different aspects of life. On the other side, the work-life balance metaphor

emphasises the need for workplace flexibility, which focuses on the working arrangements in workplaces. Lewis et al. (2007) argue that both sides of the metaphor incorporate an individual choice dimension and obscure structural and relational constraints.

As stated above, some business graduates formed knowledge of themselves within a framework of a flexible career and imagined the work-life balance to be achieved in the future. For others, however, work-life balance was a resource through which they imagined their current career and located themselves in time and space of working life. Business graduates emphasised the need for personal control of time and constructed their health against the normative background of career advancement and the moral duty to demonstrate commitment to the organisation by working long hours. Like Emilia explains, she is ready to put aside career progress—at least temporarily—to have the possibility of being in her “comfort zone” and in “balance”, although she noticed that “it’s not good in the long term, of course, but it’s good at the moment”:

Emilia: I don’t need changes workwise. It’s nice to be even in your comfort zone. It’s not good in the long term, of course, but it’s good at the moment because my private life is not necessarily so easy [talks about her child’s illness in the interview]. If I progressed in my career now and were promoted and given more responsibility, it might mean more travelling and longer days, so ... I don’t want that [laughs briefly]. I find precisely that balance important, so that work doesn’t overtake everything else, so that all areas are in balance.

Interviewer: Is there something you would like to change when you think about the coming year?

Emilia: Well, you should always invest in your own well-being, make sure that you have a healthy lifestyle and have good hobbies and so on. But it’s part of that balance. And of course, I have to look after the children all the time.

Organisations hold specific time disciplines which regulate individuals and aim to conform them to the rhythms of a social group (Snyder, 2019). A rhythmically ideal worker has long been assumed to be one who can prioritise work above all other time-consuming activities (Lewis et al., 2007). Like Emilia, Alex also challenges such an image of an ideal worker

and the demanding working hours and chooses to prioritise other aspects of life than work:

Alex: Well, would like to keep my working hours between 8 am and 4 pm. I don't work in the evenings, that time is for other things and I'm not prepared to compromise that. I will rather stay in my old job and keep these elements in balance than take on a top job. I know I would have to work about 50 hours per week and cut down other things, so I'm not prepared to do that.

Although Alex refuses to work long days and to strive for a top-job or career advancement, he does not seek security or a pathway to seniority, that is, bounced career, either. Rather, he imagines his career within the frameworks of balance and the 'flextime', stressing the ability to make choices to arrange core aspects of his (professional) life, particularly regarding where, when and for how long the work is performed (Snyder, 2019).

## DISCUSSION

Our empirical study set out to explore how business graduates construct health as employability potential and form knowledge of themselves labouring subjects when they envisage and evaluate working life through career imagination.

Our analysis showed firstly that, for business graduates, the intensive working life with the demands of constant physical and emotional energy was an organisational timescape through which they demonstrated their value and superiority as healthy employable employees and manifested their full potentials. Business graduates approached health as a constant—and challenging—task of maintaining equilibrium between well-being and high-level of performance at work, which includes the risk of overwork and exhaustion. An ideal healthy worker was aware of these risks and self-managed them skilfully, which implies practices of self-knowledge and self-control as parts of the formation of the labouring subject. Thus, health was their moral duty and personal responsibility at work.

Secondly, business graduates charted and evaluated their route in the labour market through the time map of flexible, entrepreneurial career. In such a career, health—associated with human capital such as energy, vitality and happiness—was a driving force that enabled graduates both to be in coordination with the hectic rhythms of working life and guaranteed

their top career performance, and thus their employability. However, only the current performance at work was imagined through a time map of flexible career. A career as a working life balance was a cultural resource through which graduates located themselves in the future time and spaces in (working) life and imagined themselves as employable subjects. Thus, career imagination informs ideas about future possible selves (Markus & Nurius, 1986; Cohen & Duberley, 2021).

Some graduates, however, produced counter stories of intensive working life and flexible career by imagining their current career through a time map of a working life balance. They refused to take part in the rhythms and time disciplines of flexible career and intensive working life and, thus, performing their employability. They wanted more personal control over their career and the use and management of time in their lives, and health was identified as one of the important areas of present life to be prioritised. Thus, balance has a two mutually inclusive meanings, specifically depending on whether the graduates' considered the relationship between health and excessive work load (equilibrium between high-level performance at work and health) or looked at the role of work in life as a whole (work-life balance and well-being).

In this chapter, we have criticised employability research for detaching graduates from their careers and explored employability through the concepts of governance, career imagination, time maps and timescapes in order to highlight the dynamic connection between the individuals and the social space and time. Our approach focuses on the ways by which individuals form knowledge of themselves as healthy employable subjects, while they participate in temporally structured social situations and coordinate (or dis-coordinate) their minds and bodies to these situations. We have shown that the ways by which graduates demonstrate their potentiality, and thus employability, are embedded in more profound but implicit processes of career imagination and certain kinds of time maps and timescapes reflecting embodied neoliberal governance. On the one hand, with the concept of career imagination, we have highlighted that a career is deeply entangled in the facets of one's life, thus challenging the work and non-work (Cohen & Duberley, 2021) and mind and body boundaries. On the other hand, our empirical analysis reveals that a career is also imagined through timescapes, which structure the rhythm and flow of events in (organisational) life and shape the self-knowledge and self-conduct of bodily and affective labouring subjects.

In addition to its contributions, our study has some limitations. The business graduates interviewed in this study represent social backgrounds,

education and work contexts that can be characterised as middle-class. The meanings they give to health may be typical of their social position, especially since among middle-class people, health is associated with positive meanings and morally valuable qualities, such as success in (work) life, responsibility and individual willpower (Maunu et al., 2016). Moreover, some of the business graduates viewed themselves as lacking qualities of a healthy employable subject and, thus, vulnerable in the face of the labour market demands. In future research, it is important to further investigate how health as an employability potential and the related vulnerabilities (related to ill-health, for example) provoked by the embodied neoliberal governance are intertwined with gender and class.

Moreover, participants of this study come from business schools and business organisations, where the ideal of the enterprising, employable self is built in and naturalised (McCabe, 2008; Fotaki & Prasad, 2015; see also Korhonen et al., 2023). Thus, further research is needed to explore how health as employability potential is perceived in different higher education, organisational and working life contexts, as well as from the point of views of age and employment situations. On the other hand, it would be interesting to explore whether the time maps and timescapes through which graduates approach their work and imagine their career would look similar if the attributes of employability other than health were examined.

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# Finnish University Students Constructing Their Ideal Employable Identities: A Case Study of Top Performing Experts

*Inka Hirvonen, Päivi Siivonen, and Katri Komulainen*

## INTRODUCTION

Universities across Europe invest in graduates' employability due to the Bologna Process that aims to guarantee capable workforce for the needs of the economy (Puhakka et al., 2010). Governments aim to achieve full employment of the graduates, employers seek to find the best match between the needs of the company and available skills, and graduates are being insisted on optimising their career trajectories (Guilbert et al., 2016). Although universities cannot guarantee employment outcomes, they are expected to increase graduate employability (Holmes, 2013; Puhakka et al., 2010) by educating knowledge workers and maximising

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their economic potential before leaving formal education (e.g. Laalo et al., 2019; Tapanila et al., 2020; Tomlinson, 2017b). In this turbulence of working life, a degree is not enough since the new ideal is that graduates are expected to be as employable as possible (Tomlinson, 2012).

It has been criticised that in previous research, much attention has been directed to graduate employment as a vital outcome of university education (see Holmes, 2013). Also, research has been criticised for focusing narrowly on skills and capitals that graduates possess and utilise after graduation (see Tomlinson, 2010, 2017a). Skills as an approach to describe postgraduation trajectories is a dull tool since it delivers the impression that the process of becoming employed is only about matching skills required and skills possessed (Holmes, 2001, 2013; Tomlinson, 2010). Research has paid minor attention to the temporality of employability (Guilbert et al., 2016) or employability as a process, applying an identity approach (Holmes, 2013).

In this research, we approach employability as a process where Finnish university students play out an identity project and construct their future-oriented employability. We examine the process of employability with the term employable identity that gives us an opportunity to inspect what kind of professional an individual desires to be or wants to avoid of becoming (e.g. Fugate et al., 2004; Räsänen & Trux, 2012). We understand that employability and identity construction is played out when people are sharing narratives in social interaction (see Greenbank, 2021). We tell narratives about ourselves and others, and through them we make sense of our experiences and our place in the social world (Greenbank & Marra, 2020; McAdams, 2011). Narratives involve retrospective meanings when people look back on past events and reform and rearrange them in the present moment in interaction with the audience (Chase, 2005). Prospective meanings appear in narratives that discuss the future. When examining the construction of an identity with these two, time dimensions can make themes and tendencies visible, for example (McLeod, 2003). We concentrate on university students' interviews about their educational and working-life trajectories, both in retrospective and prospective manners.

We approach employability not as a formal outcome of attaining employment but as a social, cultural, multidimensional, and life-long process that starts in youth and continues at university where university students create a relationship with the labour market (e.g. Tomlinson, 2010, 2017b). Employability is constantly developing, and it includes everything that an individual has experienced in the past, what is in the making in the

present, and what the intentions for the future are (see Komulainen et al., 2015; McAdams, 2011; Wenger, 2000). We see employability as an individual's relative chances of acquiring and maintaining different kinds of employment: being employable does not necessarily mean that one is in employment (Brown et al., 2003).

By investigating employability as a process, we can achieve a better understanding of the relationship between university students' concerns, desires, and expectations related to the world of work (Holmes, 2013). University graduates may be employable for many jobs, but they will not only tend to limit the range of jobs they apply to for the jobs they feel they have a chance of getting, but also to what they think is appropriate (Brown et al., 2003). The process approach gives us the opportunity to view employability like a movie instead of like a still frame and inspect how situations evolve (Holmes, 2013), before applying to university, during university education, and after graduation.

Our aim is to examine (I) how university students discern their employability in their educational and working-life trajectories and (II) what kind of ideal employable identity they construct in their narration. We applied narrative thematic analysis to analyse interview data and discovered that students constructed in their narration an ideal employable identity, which we designated a Top Performing Expert (TPE). Next, we will discuss previous research of ideal employable identity, and then we will introduce our interview data and thematic narrative method of analysis. Finally, in the conclusion, we will sum up the results, evaluate implementations and limitations of this paper, and make proposals about future research.

## THE IDEAL EMPLOYABLE IDENTITY

The society and culture that we are surrounded by has a great impact on defining what is a successful employable identity (see Chase, 2005; Filander et al., 2019; McAdams, 2011). Demands for graduate employability unquestionably have a lot of power to express normativeness about how employees should perform in the labour market (see Kohli, 2007). From a student's or graduate's perspective, this means that the reflection and the construction of employable identity have become crucial to pursuing opportunities in the competitive and crowded labour market (Siivonen et al., 2020). Much of the load has fallen on the graduate's shoulders since they have been responsabilised for their own employability (Boden & Nedeva, 2010; Frayne, 2015; Laalo et al., 2019).

Being as employable as possible (Tomlinson, 2012) requires constant development in multiple areas. Forrier and Sels (2003) have argued that graduates should seek a successful career that involves being employable during their whole working career. This means that employees are also expected to make progress constantly in their career, either to upgrade the current position or to change to the organisation that offers better work opportunities (Forrier & Sels, 2003; Nilsson & Nyström, 2013). In the spirit of life-long learning, there is a demand to educate oneself and to be aware of the latest knowledge in the field. Graduates must constantly keep their finger on the pulse and be prepared for what may emerge in the future of world of work (Fugate et al., 2004). Development also includes the individual's values and expectations to be re-evaluated in relation to the change in the demands of the labour market.

Graduates are expected to already know how to operate in working life and possess skills and knowledge relevant to an employer (Boden & Nedeva, 2010). Employable individuals are educated, qualified, independent, self-imposed, initiative, flexible, adaptable, hardworking, committed, and loyal as well as having passion and dedication for work (e.g. Laalo et al., 2019; Nilsson & Nyström, 2013). Employable graduates are expected to possess ability to collaborate and communicate with others and have knowledge of languages and experience on internationalisation (e.g., Nilsson & Nyström, 2013; Plamper & Laalo, 2017). Besides skills, employable employees need to possess the right kind of personal qualities as a matter of 'what they are about' (Tomlinson, 2008). The ideal is that graduates are expected to be efficient and aim to achieve a top-performing activity (Filander et al., 2019). In the competitive labour market, there is no room for ordinary or average; one needs to display special qualities and be judged better than others by potential employers. This also entails that employable individuals are expected to dedicate their whole life to work, and the boundary between work and free time fades away (Frayne, 2015). During their studies, students are expected to strengthen their employability with extracurricular activities such as work experience, voluntary work, and internships (see Stevenson & Clegg, 2011; Tomlinson, 2008). The ideal employable identity also includes possessing entrepreneurial skills, behaviour, and mindset, such as being self-reliant, confident, motivated, autonomous, active, risk-taking, problem-solving, and creative (see Laalo et al., 2019; Siivonen et al., 2020). Entrepreneurial thinking is seen to protect an individual from unemployment and increase an individual's employability and career development (e.g. Laalo et al., 2019; Siivonen

et al., 2020). Entrepreneurship is said to be a career opportunity for all or at least an entrepreneurial way of working in wage work (see Laalo et al., 2019).

Tomlinson (2008) has pointed out that it is not only about what skills and knowledge is needed to do a job but also what kind of competences are needed to get a job. Boden and Nedeva (2010) state that in a competitive situation, an individual needs to stand out from other candidates and make her/him appealing for potential employers. An employable employee should be able to express her/his employability in a convincing manner (see Stevenson & Clegg, 2011). Presenting one's graduate identity in terms of competence, skills, and strengths has become vital towards the aim to achieve positive employment outcomes (see Keskitalo-Foley et al., 2010).

## DATA AND METHODS

The interview data analysed in this article were produced in a four-year research project (2016–2020) funded by Academy of Finland. In 2017, we conducted 30 university student's individual interviews, including 20 females and 10 males. Interviews covered topics such as educational path, working-life experience, studying in university, and academic entrepreneurship. The participant group was heterogeneous in terms of students' fields of study and how much they had completed their studies varying from first-year students to recently graduated students. Study fields were, for example, educational science, business studies, natural science, social science, forestry, and law. The interviewees were between 20 and 65 years old; a total of 18 participants were under 30 years old and 12 participants were 30 years old or older. The participants had differing situations in life, part of them were full-time students and part of them had a part-time or full-time job. The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Pseudonyms are used throughout the reporting of the findings.

In the first stage of the analysis, we get to know the interview data consistently by reading and making highlights and notes. When we want to understand human behaviour and construction of an identity, it is convincing to approach narratives, since narratives are natural habit for individuals to construct, shape, and express their identity (see Bamberg, 2011; Linde, 1993; Riessman, 2008). We focused on the meaning-making, "what" is said, and the content of the interview data (see Riessman, 2008). We are interested in the "told" as what interviewees report about events

and experiences and minimal focus on how narrative is spoken (Riessman, 2008).

After this we concentrated on sections that contained narration about forthcoming employment after graduation and future in the labour market. We discovered that students constructed their identity at least in three different ways as top performing in their field, traditional paid employees, and through entrepreneurship including entrepreneurial employees and self-employed persons. We continued our analysis by taking a closer look at the top-performing identity and broadened the analysis back to the whole interview, paying a close attention to narration about educational and working life trajectories, both in retrospective and prospective ways.

It is important to highlight that we are interested in what students narrate and what kind of identity they construct, and not in finding the truth or whether events described really even occurred. We also recognise that interview interaction may influence what and how interviewees narrate, and that they may leave something without mentioning it (see Josselson, 2013). Most often, individuals have a need to express themselves as a good person and to avoid or talk more briefly about events where they are shown in a less flattering light (Linde, 1993).

We applied narrative thematic analysis and made an empirical observation that top performance presents one ideal employable identity in our data which we named Top Performing Expert (TPE) (see Riessman, 2008). When analysing how interviewees constructed their identity both in the past and in the future, we identified three phases that we named as follows: 1. employability as a long-term goal, 2. constructing employability in a specific field, and 3. harnessing personality to strengthen employability. We also noticed that the process of gaining employability is a life-long process that began before applying to study in university and would continue all the way through the years in the world of work (e.g. Tomlinson, 2017b).

Based on some interview data that we have from our earlier study, we identified three narrative identity positions, namely academic experts (emphasised academic education and careers), multi-talents (focused on employability by developing varied skillsets), and entrepreneurs (considered entrepreneurship as a possible future career option) (Komulainen et al., 2019; Siivonen et al., 2021). However, the focus of this study is not on academic experts, multi-talents, or entrepreneurs, but on students' top-performing identities. Next, we will demonstrate the process of employable identity construction as TPE by interpreting our interview data.

## FINDINGS

Students create their own employable identity in order to get prepared for the graduate labour market and to become employed in the future. We discovered that the ideal identity of a TPE was common in our data. It was constructed by most of the students and was particularly emphasised by six of them. In this chapter, we will illustrate the identity of TPE with examples from their interviews. Students have in common that they all have begun their studies and move on to the labour market after graduation, but what happens before, during, or after their studies? Due to our analysis, the process of becoming TPE occurs in three phases (see Table 13.1). Although analytically relevant, the three phases are not separate or linear but instead intertwine. Next, we will illustrate the identity process with citations that are selected from rich interview data.

### *1. Employability as a Long-Term Goal*

The narration of the first phase can be summarised as looking for and strengthening a working life direction. The interviewees talked about their dream jobs and how they had applied to study their chosen field at university. The narration emphasised the accumulation of work experience from one's own field during university studies and after graduation in order to construct employability.

**Table 13.1** The process of employable identity construction as a Top Performing Expert

1. Employability as a long-term goal	1a. Early vision about future employment 1b. Applying to study in university 1c. Accumulating work experience during time spent in education 1d. Gaining extensive work experience from the field after graduation
2. Constructing employability in a specific field	2a. University degree as a minimum demand 2b. Available vacancies in the field 2c. Developing one's competence continuously 2d. Free time and hobbies
3. Harnessing personality to strengthen employability	3a. Maximising efficiency at work 3b. Being passionate about work 3c. Personality as an asset

*1a. Early Vision About Future Employment*

Many interviewees told us how they thought about studying at university already when they were young. They described issues related to education and career choice that related to, for example, their interests in childhood. Master's student in business science, Leila, 41, describes her path in this way:

Interviewer: Could you tell us more about how you ended up as a university student, like in terms of the kinds of steps and choices did you make?

Leila: Yeah. Well, yes, it's... mm... a longer story than I thought it was when I was 12. When I was 12 years old, I had announced that I was going to be a Master of Business Administration. (Leila)

Leila describes how her goal has been getting into higher education (HE) since childhood. She talks about herself as someone who has always had the potential to study, but reaching the goal has not been straightforward. Leila explains her winding path to becoming a master of business and administration with her own personal choices, not with external matters (see also Komulainen et al., 2015).

*1b. Applying to Study in University*

In students' narration, choosing the field of study and plans for applying for university were strengthened during upper secondary school. They told us, for example, how they could not find a desired field of study from the university of applied sciences and how at home their parents encouraged them to apply to university. Previous research presents that, in Finland, employers have greater hierarchical value on traditional science-oriented university degrees than degrees from universities of applied sciences (Ojala & Isopahkala-Bouret, 2015).<sup>1</sup> Bachelor-level student in applied physics, Dani, 22, describes his decision to apply to university this way:

Well, I've always been, from a very young age, I've always liked to study. I was the guy, at school who was one of the few who liked to do assignments. (...) And then I've always liked science so much, especially physics, so then I started to study it more and then in high school, I really started to like it and then, with the help of my high school physics teacher, I ended up here, in this university city, to study applied physics. (Dani)

Dani has constructed continuity in his interest in learning and studying since he was a child. He has always enjoyed studying and doing exercises unlike many of his peers. His long-term interest in physics increased in upper secondary school, and Dani presents himself as a student whose innate talent was also noticed by others. Dani told us that he ended up studying applied physics with the help of his teacher. Becoming a university student in physics is constructed as a long-term and carefully thought-out process. He explains being good at natural sciences as an innate and natural talent (see also Siivonen, 2013).

*1c. Accumulating Work Experience During Time Spent in Education*

Students emphasised how important it is to accumulate work experience related to one's own field of study while at university. Employability was strengthened, for example, through placements, summer jobs, and other types of work experience, which were also constructed as advantageous in terms of employability in the future. A recent graduate with a master's degree in geography, Jasper, 26, described how he got his foot in the door in working life:

For a couple of summers, like, I was back home in the city for an internship (...), through contacts, then I found out that I'd got, like, this thesis topic, which then (...) Research Centre carried out this way. So, I was involved in it, and then I got there again through them, going there for the internship and now I'm there now, again now at least for four months on the job, that it has, like, always, conveniently always led from one place to another, like...it is now, I've gotten into the swing of things, the experience that, they have always taken it forward. (Jasper)

Jasper constructs employability while studying by accumulating work experience. He brings forth how social networks created during a placement opened up a possibility to do his master's thesis at a research centre. He presents himself as a promising and active employee in his field, someone who has created continuity for his work career and "one thing has always led to another". The extract shows how the degree is not enough to guarantee employment, but a student must strengthen his employability through extracurricular activities (Tomlinson, 2008).

*Id. Gaining Extensive Work Experience from the Field After Graduation*

Interviewees described their future plans after graduation and accumulation of work experience in the labour market. Strengthening one's own employability was constructed as a process that was presented to proceed in a determined manner one phase at a time. Bachelor-level student in law, Alisa, 24, described her future in the following way:

Well, my first plan is of course to graduate. At this point, I'll be able to graduate on time, and, I would still like to do a couple of internships during my studies. Then, if I want to work in the private sector, I would apply and then go to some international job or to some legal or accounting service, or then to some larger organisation. Then, do that and try a few different jobs, because I wouldn't want to be in the same job all the time. I'd like to try something a little different, but preferably in the areas of law that I'm interested in, for example, commercial law, contract law, intellectual property law and then, maybe, in the future, if it feels right at the time, start my own firm, but if it doesn't, I don't think about it too much at the moment, so, for now, I'm just concentrating on my studies. (Alisa)

Alisa presents herself as an active agent who constructs her employability purposefully in the desired direction. Her goal is to participate in placements and to graduate on time. She plans a smooth transition from HE to the labour market and an upward career with interesting work tasks. An ideal employable employee must continuously progress in her career by changing jobs and work tasks. As Alisa states: "I don't want to just stay at the one job forever". The ultimate career goal for Alisa is to start her own business. These visions are brought to the present moment by stating, "Now I will concentrate on my studies", implying determination to achieve her set goals.

*2. Constructing Employability in a Specific Field*

In addition to constructing their employability as life-long learning, the interviewees also considered their employability as construction of competence and expertise related to their own field. They describe demands related to their expertise and present themselves in relation to these ideals.

### *2a. University Degree as a Minimum Demand*

Interviewees constructed university degree as “a passport” to the labour market. They emphasised that in addition to the degree, it is important to strengthen employability by carefully planning one’s studies. This is how Jasper talks about employability in his field:

Well, when I don’t graduate, that is, if you don’t study to be a teacher here, the others won’t graduate into any profession. (...) if there were clear lines of what you would like to do in your working life, you should be able to take advantage of that, like pretty much independently, of the courses offered here at the university (...) I don’t really know what the major subject studies are in geography (...) surely nothing that’s very marketable, like it’s that kind of special expertise, I should, well I had that geographic knowledge kind of thing (...) I mean it’s pretty much that it requires that orientation, or something else that supports it (...) certainly for many students, it’s a tricky situation (...) that, like you don’t even know what you wanna do when you’re leaving here. (Jasper)

In Jasper’s field of study, it is possible to graduate as a subject teacher in geography or as a generalist. He constructs the difference between those who graduate into a profession and those who do not. According to Jasper, generalists must carefully plan what to study as one’s competence determines employability and success in the labour market. He constructs himself as an active and capable student, who successfully constructs his employability by accumulating special competence. He constructs difference between himself and those students who have no plans related to their employability even after graduation. They are constructed to be in a weaker position compared to those who construct their employability in a purposeful manner. An ideal employable employee has a clear plan about future employment, and he/she strives towards this goal actively by developing her/his special competence. The degree is constructed as a passport that does not guarantee employability, but an individual must also accumulate currency, that is, study the right courses to prove her/his competence.

### *2b. Available Vacancies in the Field*

The interviewees talked about the graduate labour market in their own field in relation to the employment situation and geographical location. Overall, they perceived their employability in a positive light. This is how

Amelia, 42, a master's student in health science, describes the labour market situation in her field:

Yes, I trust that, at least the hype around health economics and the fact that, like, there are really no experts in this field (...) like pretty much all the big IT companies are now working on health data, the secondary use of health data, and other things, so that someone that, like, really understands the costs of it, well I want to be like that. (Amelia)

Amelia constructs her employability in relation to the supply and demand of the workforce. She talks about strengthening her own employability by constructing difference in relation to other employees in her field by developing her competence so that "she really understands the costs". Amelia aims for a top position, which would further enhance her employability in an already good labour market situation.

### *2c. Developing One's Competence Continuously*

The interviewees emphasised that it is important to continually develop one's competence. Expertise was not constructed as static but as something that needs to be updated on a regular basis. A bachelor's student in social science, Lisa, 24, talked about continuing education:

In a field like this, you really need to have the latest information, so that you can't really leave it to the previous educational background, and you've got to instead update the information, because there is so much research coming from that area and it is so central to our wellbeing that it has to be the latest information. (...) So that, in a way, you work to preserve that expertise and know-how. (Lisa)

Lisa talks about the demand for continuous development that experts in her field are faced with. Expertise is constructed as a process that needs to be upheld through continuing education and by following the latest research in the field. Lisa constructs it as her moral duty to promote people's well-being by offering them topical information. An ideal employee in her field, thus, needs to manage her professional expertise and altruistically promote and become responsible for other people's well-being.

### *2d. Free Time and Hobbies*

Besides formal education, the interviewees also brought up their interests in matters related to their own field/work in their free time as well. This blurred boundaries between work and free time. This is how Leila describes her hobbies:

It's more that I'm genuinely and really interested in these things a lot. And, very broadly, like, I like the news a lot and I actively follow it so to speak, like international and national newspapers, and, well, professional writing and stuff like that. And then the situation has been improved by the fact that my husband has, he has two university degrees and, other things like that, and, then, we have a very similar, like, great interest in what happens, why it happens, what will happen in the future and, what leads to what. And then I've got three boys who are, like, cut from the same cloth that we have a lot of discussions at home about what's going on and why. (Leila)

Leila constructs herself as someone who is dedicated to her own field, that is business science, as she regularly follows news and professional literature related to her work in her free time as well. She emphasises her genuine interest in societal issues, thus constructing her interest as innate. She describes the situation as fortunate, as her family shares the same interests and they feed each other's curiosity and knowledge in their discussions.

## *3. Harnessing Personality to Strengthen Employability*

In the third phase, employability is further strengthened in an optimal direction. This means that the basic level is not enough, but it is desirable to reach the top. The whole personality is harnessed to enhance employability so that it is not only the skills and attributes related to work that matter, but also personal characteristics become important.

### *3a. Maximising Efficiency at Work*

The interviewees emphasised efficiency at work and discussed different means to increase it. These narratives described interviewees' knowledge about the contents of their work as well as the ways of working in an efficient manner. For example, a nine-to-five job was not considered an efficient way of working. This is how Amelia talks about efficiency:

“I am not ready to work 24/7”. Well, there’s been enough of that going on in the last few years and, in my opinion, like, everything is fine when you’re free to do it 24/7. Or at least I can do a lot of things when I have the freedom to do it and I’m fully prepared to do it, just to get a certain amount of sleep and, I mean, the basics are in order, and then organise all the studying, work, and children, into order, so, it’s definitely doable (...) it’s like the freedom is the main thing of everything, so that’s the thing. And I get so much more out of it when I’m given that freedom. (Amelia)

Amelia presents herself as a top-performing achiever who is able to organise things efficiently if only she is given sufficient freedom to do her work independently. Freedom is constructed as a prerequisite for doing more things in a more efficient manner, “you get so much more out of me”. An efficient human machine is able to combine work, family, and free time so that efficiency and the amount of work do not suffer.

### *3b. Being Passionate About Work*

Interest in work was constructed so important that it became a prerequisite and a motivational factor for working. University education was seen as important in order to get interesting work. This is how Dani talked about meaningful work:

It’s that one, a good saying (...) “when you’re doing a job you like, you don’t have to work all day.” It’s like, for me, the goal is that at some point when you like work so much that it doesn’t feel like work at all. (...) That’s at least, at the moment, how it’s been when I’ve been working there during the summer, so, no, I’ve never been so happy in work as this before. Sometimes it’s felt like, I’m just here doing a hobby and I’m getting paid for it, so that’s really cool. (...) I don’t think jobs should ever be such that you feel you’ve got to go there. It somehow feels, like, feels so wrong that you’ve got to go to work because...I go to work because I have to. (Dani)

Dani says that his goal is to get a job that would be so meaningful that it would not feel like work anymore. He talks about his former summer job as a ‘hobby’ that he was paid for. In the extract above, Dani constructs himself as a dedicated ideal employee, who is passionate about his work and does not separate between work and free time. The opposite of this ideal would be an employee who works as he is obliged to do so. Dani distances himself from such an employee as “it just feels so wrong”.

### *3c. Personality as an Asset*

The interviewees also construct their own personality as an asset in strengthening employability. Personality does not only increase a person's opportunities in the graduate labour market, but together with other assets and different forms of competence, it was seen as beneficial in working life.

When I think about my husband, for example, then like he has a huge amount of expertise in his field, so of course experts like him get the jobs. I don't have really strong expertise yet, so uh, I only have strong life experience or something like that, well, I am damn good at leading projects and such, but it's not the kind of expertise that's needed here. So, when I'm a top expert in cost effects, I think I'll pass quite a few people at that point just with the expertise, but then if you combine my personality and expertise, then it would be good. (Amelia)

Amelia positions herself as a novice in relation to top expertise, as she does not yet have the competence that her husband has. Amelia constructs employability through life experience and her ability to manage projects but does not see these as essential in her field. Her goal is to become an expert in cost effects, which would strengthen her employability. She evaluates that she would succeed well compared to other candidates looking for work in the labour market. Amelia continues that her employability "would be good" if only she could combine her personality and expertise. Amelia presents her personality as an asset in the eyes of the employer. Amelia constructs herself as an ideal employee who has top-performing expertise and has a personality that is beneficial to work.

## DISCUSSION

In this article, our aim was to examine how university students discern their employability in their educational and working life trajectories and what kind of ideal employable identity they construct in their narration. We used narrative thematic analysis and focused on the meaning-making, "what" is said, in our interview data.

Based on our analysis, we made an empirical observation that Top Performing Expert (TPE) presents an ideal employable identity in our data. With further analysis, we were able to recognise that constructing TPE contained three phases which together create a complex and life-long

process (see Tomlinson, 2017b) that had started in youth before university, continued during time in university, and in the future after graduation. During first phase, employability as a long-term goal, TPE is presented as an active agent who takes responsibility for one's own employability and constructs her/his employability purposefully in a desired direction (see Boden & Nedeva, 2010). She/he expresses having early vision in childhood about future employment, and applying to study in university is one stage to achieve this goal. TPE is presented as a capable student having innate talent that was noticed also by others, and she/him successfully constructs her/his employability by accumulating work experience during studies and after graduation (see Tomlinson, 2008).

During second phase, constructing employability in a specific field, TPE is presented as a professional who is expected to strengthen her/his competence continuously (see Forrier & Sels, 2003), for example, to achieve desired positions in the labour market. In addition to university degree, TPE is required to gain special knowledge and to uphold it through continuing education and by following the latest research in the field (see Fugate et al., 2004). In the third phase, harnessing personality to strengthen employability, TPE is presented as an ideal employee who has top-performing expertise and has a personality that is beneficial to work. An ideal employee has passion and dedication for work which fades the line between work and free time (see Frayne, 2015; Nilsson & Nyström, 2013). TPE is also presented as a top-performing achiever (see Filander et al., 2019) who is able to organise her/his different parts of life (e.g. family, free time, sleep, and work) efficiently if one is given sufficient freedom to do work independently.

Our findings support the idea that ideal employable identity is not something that one can find ready-made, but it requires individual's own activity and problem-solving in various situations (see Räsänen & Trux, 2012). Students take great responsibility about their employability and construct actively their employable identity as the three-phased process of employable identity construction this article has illustrated. Employable individuals are demanded to have it all: a degree, knowledge and skills, and certain kind of personality (see Boden & Nedeva, 2010; Tomlinson, 2008). It is obvious that the aim of being as employable as possible requires an enormous amount of goal-oriented commitment (see Stevenson & Clegg, 2011). Constructing employable identity is not a sprint—it is a life-long hike. We can conclude that when students' employability is being investigated, it is important to consider the presence of life

experiences and context, since they are involved in the construction of employability (see Greenbank, 2021).

In Finland, HE graduates have relatively smooth higher education-to-work transition and a low level of unemployment (Lindberg 2009; Merenluoto & Lindberg, 2012), but still students have doubts concerning their future employment (see Rätty et al., 2019). As we have presented earlier, there are numerous demands falling upon students. Individuals are required to start constructing their employable identity constantly at younger and younger ages and youth is filled with consideration of future employment. Access to university has become increasingly competitive (see Ahola et al., 2018; Haltia et al., 2019; Nori, 2011), and individuals face the pressure to make the ‘right’ decisions concerning education and employment already in their youth. Both employment and education standards emphasise that students should have a direct and linear transition from education to work (Saloniemi et al., 2020). Students are facing pressure on producing enough credit points and to work alongside studying to gain work experience and to finance their studies (see Honkimäki, 2001; Siivonen & Filander, 2020). Nowadays, school and work are no longer separate phases of life, which means often simultaneous statuses, for example, being a student and an employee (Merenluoto & Lindberg, 2012; Saloniemi et al., 2020). Students are expected to graduate on time and to become employed in their own field (Siivonen & Filander, 2020). Students are not immune to the demands around them, but they recognise them, for example, when they are constructing their identity: what kind of employee should I become? Younger generations (Generation Y or the millennials) have appreciation for work and towards meaningful work even though there are occasionally differing suggestions hanging in the air such as work morale becoming deteriorated (Pyöriä et al., 2017). Does intensive focusing on employability leave room for anything else such as academic growth, and what effects does it have in the long term?

Tuominen-Soini (2014) has published an article, ‘Is a young person doing well if she is doing well at school?’, and reminds us that we do not get much understanding of adolescents and their lives by only focusing on grades and study motivation. It has been noticed that different achievements and competition at school can have poor side effects such as anxiety, preoccupation with failing, and school exhaustion, which can be a risk even for those who enjoy studying (see Tuominen-Soini, 2014). In the world of work, Kirpal (2004) has presented that increasing demands can cause employees stress, weakening ability to work, increasing personnel

turnover, decreasing work commitment, and even diminished work quality. Although demands and competition can have a positive influence on success in school and working life, we should also think about at what cost and how we define success. As Tuominen-Soini (2014) points out, success at school is not the same thing as learning. Is success having good grades and labour market positions, or is it overall managing in life and well-being? Unfortunately, employability asks us to focus less on experiencing and enjoying the present, and think more about how the present can be mobilised in order to meet goals in the future (Frayne, 2015, p. 76). As we can see, possible effects of increasing demands are not in line with ideal employable identity. This increases further pressure towards individuals and equality among employees.

In this article, our focus has been limited to one ideal employable identity and how it is being constructed. The future avenue of research has an opportunity to broaden the research focus on the ideal employable identities of traditional paid employees and entrepreneurship as entrepreneurial employees and self-employed persons. It would also be fruitful to inspect employable identities with longitudinal data, which could provide information about temporality of the process of constructing employable identity.

## NOTES

1. The dual Finnish higher education system includes both traditional science-oriented universities and Universities of Applied Sciences (UAS), which concentrate on providing professional and vocational education.

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# Strategies Undertaken by International Graduates to Negotiate Employability

*Thanh Pham*

## INTRODUCTION

International education plays a significant role in Australia and in the UK's economy. The sector contributed A\$40.3 billion to Australia's economy in 2019 (Department of Education, 2019). However, Australia's position in the international education market has been threatened, because both traditional (e.g. the UK) and non-traditional (Asian countries) immigration countries have actively launched policies to attract and retain high-skilled migrants (Czaika, 2018). For example, Japan surpassed Australia to become Vietnamese students' favoured destination after it launched the Revitalization Strategy in 2014, targeting to employ 50% of international students by 2020 (Thanh Nien News, 2016). Post-study career prospects are a key goal for many international students (Department of Education, 2018). Unfortunately, in Australia, international graduates' employment rate has been found consistently low compared to that of their local counterpart. For example, it was found that the unemployment rate of this cohort was much higher than the national average (10.6% and 5.7%,

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respectively), and a large number worked either part-time or in low-skilled occupations (30% and 17%, respectively) (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2019). Consequently, 29.6% went back to studying (Department of Home Affairs, 2018), and a large number have returned to their home countries (Pham, 2021c; Singh & Fan, 2021). Therefore, to become more competitive in the international education market, different stakeholders, of which higher education (HE) is an important one, need to better support international graduates' employability outcomes.

However, there is currently a dearth of knowledge about international graduates' employability experiences. The literature has documented a few studies which have explored the connections between visa status, credentials, and international graduates' employment outcomes (e.g. Pham et al., 2018; Tran et al., 2019). Very little is known about how other resources contribute to international graduates' employability. Employability has been increasingly claimed as individuals' responsibilities (Fugate & Kinicki, 2008; Pham et al., 2019; Jackson, 2009; Singh, 2022), and graduates' future in the labour market lay mainly in their own hands (Bridgstock, 2009; Li, 2013). However, there has been little research exploring student understandings and management of their employability (Tomlinson, 2017; Tymon, 2013). In the case of international graduates, one of the areas that needs more attention is how international graduates develop strategies to prepare themselves for their long-term journey. This chapter aims to address this area of attention. The chapter consists of three main sections. It starts with a discussion of key issues of international graduates' employability to build a background for the study. It then discusses the conceptual frameworks underpinning the study. Finally, it describes how the research was conducted, followed by the concluding section, which presents and discusses the findings and implications for policy, higher education, and international graduates.

## INTERNATIONAL GRADUATES' EMPLOYABILITY FROM DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVES

The literature about international graduates' employability is still limited, and the focus has been about a wide range of difficulties this cohort faced when negotiating employability. Rich evidence has been reported that international graduates have limited English proficiency, low-level communication skills, and limitations in a range of Western personal values

such as being proactive, critical, innovative, and independent (Gribble & McRae, 2017; Kelly, 2017). Therefore, they need additional assistance to excel in their studies and gain most of their overseas study experiences (Briguglio & Smith, 2012). When international graduates enter the workforce, they have been criticised as portraying similar lacking behaviours. For instance, common comments about international, especially Asian, students are that they are “not active,” “unconfident,” and “not critical.” Howells et al. (2017) found that workplace supervisors complained that international students, particularly those from Asia, were disengaged because they did not ask questions.

Another line of research has explored how international graduates are often positioned in the labour market. Although this cohort holds similar qualifications, many employers are often reluctant to employ international graduates because they hold a biased “perception of fit” against migrants (Almeida et al., 2015). For instance, recruiters were found to have negative attitudes towards migrants because they had non-Anglicized names (Booth et al., 2009), heavy accents (Creese & Kambere, 2003), non-recognition of qualifications and skills (Madziva et al., 2014), especially in relation to Asian accented immigrants (Hosoda & Stone-Romero, 2010), ethnic and religious reasons (Madziva et al., 2014), and cultural biases (Dunn, 2004; Wong, 2010). Wong (2010, p. 191) generalised that “the recruiters examine the immigrant candidate’s expression, communication skills, confidence, grooming, appearance, accent, sense of humour and ability to make small talk to determine their ‘fit’ with the organisational work culture.” Almeida et al. (2015) evinced employers often taking attire, name, accent, and any overtly expressed religious affiliations of migrant and international graduates into consideration when making recruitment decisions. Consequently, the graduate employment market in Australia is suggested to be non-transparent, because the industry appears to favour recruiting those with a similar background to the existing workforce (Blackmore et al., 2015).

Recent research started questioning the deficit perspective that sees international students as “inferior others” who have difficulties and struggles in the host environment, and thus they need support (Samuelowicz, 1987). To survive in the host country, they need to go through a process, as described by Marginson (2014), of “adjustment” or “acculturation” to the requirements and habits of the host country. The capacities that international students possess and may develop to overcome challenges in the host country are not taken into consideration. An increasing number of

researchers have criticised these stereotypical assumptions. They have started exploring how international students exercised agency in managing their studies and careers (Marginson, 2014; Montgomery & McDowell, 2009; Pham et al., 2019; Pham, 2021b). These studies found evidence of how this cohort could make choices to decide their identities and use strategies to negotiate studies and careers in the host country. In the field of employability, Pham and Jackson (2020) and Pham (2021a) found evidence of the significance of students' agency and argued that to obtain optimal outcomes in the employability negotiation process, they needed to develop "agentic capital," that is, the capacity to develop strategies to use various forms of capital effectively and strategically, depending on one's ethnic background, areas of expertise, career plans, contexts, and personal qualities. However, while this line of research is necessary, there should be caution about the tendency for overemphasis of individual agency and underestimation of the impacts of structural factors. In employability, although international graduates' agency has been evident, we have not known much about the extent to which they could exercise agency and develop strategies to negotiate employability.

In sum, the current literature has explored employability of international graduates from different angles. However, given that employability has been increasingly claimed as individuals' responsibilities, more attention should be paid to how international graduates develop strategies to negotiate employability. This study aimed to redress this gap. The study was guided by an overarching research question: What were the strategies that international graduates deployed to negotiate employability?

### CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORKS

This study used a combination of three conceptual frameworks including Holmes' (2013) employability approaches, Tomlinson's (2017) capital model, and Pham's (2021a) Employability Agency Framework to explore the strategies that international graduates undertook to negotiate employability. Holmes' employability approaches were used as the overarching framework, whereas Tomlinson's capital model and Pham's Employability Agency Framework were used to explain key conceptual notions such as capitals and agency that were important components of Holmes' employability approaches. Specifically, Holmes (2013) offered three approaches to employability. The first is possessive perspective that emphasises that students need to possess a range of skills, knowledge, and capacities. This

approach has been the dominant approach that influences how higher education prepares students for future employment. Therefore, higher education has focused on training students in academic content and used the skills-based agenda to train students with professional skills. However, various researchers have criticised this skills-based agenda because the concepts of attributes are vague (Lowden et al., 2011; Mason et al., 2009). Jackson (2009) evidenced that there is a range of different interpretations of an attribute or skill, depending on the context, background, expertise, and position of the interpreter. This means that the skills that students learn in higher education are often interpreted and used differently in the workplace, although the name and classification might be the same.

The second approach is the positional perspective that emphasises that employability is not determined by human capital, but by “socioeconomic or cultural status, or a social positioning of graduates’ skills and achievements relative to and in competition with others” (Holmes, 2013, p. 548). Bourdieu’s cultural theory advocates this perspective. Bourdieu (1986) claimed that individuals’ positions and careers are determined by four forms of capital: economic, cultural, social, and symbolic (Maclean & Harvey, 2008). Economic capital includes tangible materials such as financial assets; cultural capital refers to material objects that do not include economic resources but cultural values; symbolic capital includes intangible values that are recognised as reputation; and social capital refers to social connections that come from one’s social position and status (Bourdieu, 1986).

A distinct feature of Bourdieu’s theory is the unequal capital possessed by different groups of people. According to him, people possess and can access different levels of capital, depending on their backgrounds and positions in society. Inequality occurs because cultural capital carries both standardised values, which are legalised and institutionalised, and embodied values, which refer to one’s preferences or perceived “correct” ways of doing things (Bourdieu, 1986). People may possess the same standardised values, but it is very often that only the dominant groups’ embodied values are acknowledged and validated. This is evidenced by how the education system uses “the mode of language (e.g., accent, vocabulary, mode of expression), set of values (e.g., on what constitutes ‘success’) and practices (e.g., dietary habits) of the dominant class” (Holmes, 2013, p. 547). This has led to students from privileged backgrounds having better employment opportunities (Tomlinson, 2013). This is not only because these cohorts have better educational outcomes, but also because of social

networks that they inherit from their families (Pham, 2021b) and the cultural values, symbolic capital, and habitus that show the types of perceptions, orientations, and postures that are often more acceptable by employers (Holmes, 2013).

The final approach is the processual perspective that argues that employability is a lengthy process that requires resources that students articulate, both during and after higher education. This process is constrained and facilitated by students' social background, labour market conditions, and many other factors. Holmes (2013) claimed that many of these factors can be outside of the individual's control or influence; however, individuals are not "mere pawns in a game, just 'victims' of a system stacked in favour of the few and against the many" (p. 548). Holmes (2013) acknowledges that individuals can and do take action with regard to their future careers, and that such action is taken "over time and in interaction with others; it is processual" (p. 548). Tomlinson (2017) advocates this by showing that while graduates may have limited control over the state of the labour market, they can still exercise some element of volition in how they approach it, including strategies and key decisions.

Tomlinson's (2017) capital model emphasises the need for graduates to build five capitals for employability negotiation. In brief, human capital refers to the knowledge and skills that graduates obtain to prepare for employment. Social capital refers to social relationships and networks with significant other, including family and peers. Cultural capital refers to cultural-valued knowledge, dispositions, and insights typically valued within organisations. Identity capital is how individuals are able to make active self-investments towards their future employment. Finally, psychological capital includes capacities that enable graduates to overcome barriers, adapt to new situations, and respond proactively to inevitable career challenges. Pham's (2021a) Employability Agency Framework further develops Tomlinson's capital model by adding employability agency as an important element for employability negotiation. Pham (2021a) conceptualises employability agency as a multidimensional phenomenon which is constrained and facilitated by a range of different structural and personal factors such as subjectivities (e.g. initial motivation), contextual structures (e.g. global recession), and agentic features and actions (e.g. beliefs, confidence). Depending on how these personal and contextual factors interact, graduates develop different forms of agency to negotiate their employability trajectories.

In sum, Holmes' employability approaches guided the design of the study and the analysis of the data, whereas the notion of capital developed by Tomlinson and Pham guided the exploration of individual strategies. A combination of these three conceptual frameworks was innovative because it allowed for a comprehensive exploration of the approaches deployed by international graduates when negotiating employability in Australia.

## METHODOLOGY

### PARTICIPANTS

This study used purposeful sampling to recruit 18 international graduates with various degrees at Australian universities, to participate in this study. The participants had to meet the following criteria: (i) they had completed a degree in Australia (undergraduate, master's, or PhD); (ii) they had stayed in Australia on a temporary graduate visa (the terms of which are that those who graduated with a bachelor's or master's by coursework degree can live and work in Australia for two years. This increases to three years for those who graduated with a master's degree, and four years for those who graduated with a doctoral degree); (iii) they were living in Australia when the research was conducted; and (iv) they had either full-time, part-time, or casual work experience. No restrictions were set on the time elapsed since the participants had graduated, but the majority had lived in Australia from one to five years. Only three had lived in the country for more than five years. All participants were made aware of the nature of the study, consented to participate, and were assured that any name used in the research publications was a pseudonym. The study obtained the necessary ethical clearance as approved by Monash University, before data collection. The participants consented to the use of obtained data in any subsequent article(s). The sample was diverse in terms of gender, nationality, educational level, and discipline.

### *Data Collection and Analysis*

This study utilised a biographical interpretive method via in-depth interviews for data collection. As informed by the research question, the semi-structured interviews focused on unpacking how the participants understood and prepared for employability during and after university.

Example interview questions included: “What kind of resources/capitals did you prioritise during university, in preparation for your career?” “What kind of resources/capitals did you prioritise to prepare for your career after you graduated?” and “How do you perceive the changes in your life during and after your graduation?” Since the graduates had different experiences, the interview questions were revised depending on each case. Each interview lasted for approximately 30–40 minutes.

The analysis began with the researcher and an assistant thoroughly reading the interview transcripts, and then repeatedly discussing and questioning any taken-for-granted assumptions until a clear understanding of the graduates’ experiences emerged. Thematic analysis was used, which was mainly theory-driven, while any remarkable new codes that emerged from the data were also recorded and used to inform the underlying theory. The thematic analysis process moved from a general to a more specific level.

## RESULTS

The findings showed that the participants engaged with different employability approaches depending on the impact of both personal and contextual factors at different stages of their career development.

### POSSESSIONAL APPROACH: BUILDING HUMAN CAPITAL AS GUIDED BY STUDY PROGRAMMES

The responses revealed that the participants were heavily engaged with the possessional approach to build human capital when they were still at university. They prioritised the performance and improvement of discipline knowledge, completion of assignments and examinations, and improvement of technology literacy. Since every job advertisement required a degree, they considered the completion of all assignments and examinations as their biggest concern during the four years of university.

The university made it clear that we could not graduate if we did not pass all the assignments and examinations. If we cannot graduate, we should not think about applying for a job. (James)

They also aimed to obtain a degree because they wanted to apply for permanent residency (PR), which was an important element for almost all job positions in Australia.

I could only apply for a PR if I had a degree. It gave me points, so no matter what else was more important, I needed to get a degree first. (Josh)

In addition to disciplinary knowledge, there were two areas to which most of the participants paid special attention. The first was information and communications technology (ICT) literature, which referred to capacities in using software, typing skills, and digital programmes used in their occupation areas. All participants were aware of the significance of having good technological literacy skills, so they invested in learning and improving these skills and capacities, both from and beyond their official curriculum programmes. One participant stated:

In my discipline, one of the main things was HTML, C-Sharp, and TSQL. It was not easy, so I invested a lot in these areas by doing extra classes during the last two years. (Nga)

Another area that bothered most of them was communication skills. Those who were not from an English-speaking country originally, like Vietnam, China, or Indonesia, were worried about having sufficient communication skills for their jobs. Several participants shared that the feedback they received from their lecturers about their assignments and examinations made them worry about their written and speaking capacities. They even lost motivation and confidence about seeking a job in the host country because they thought their English proficiency would be an issue. Others stated that their English unproficiency sometimes led to issues related to behaviours, shared interests, and values, when conducting conversations with local friends and academics. They had to deal with accidents described by Millet (2003) as “hitting icebergs” when venturing different cultures without adequate preparation. For example, one participant said:

When I was on placements, I did not know what I should talk about. I often felt left out because they spoke too fast, and I could not find a space to join.

Many respondents divulged a sense of getting stuck while obtaining appropriate communication skills and vocabulary to develop natural and smooth conversations with the local people. This was why most participants expressed that they were anxious and worried about applying for positions which required frequent and direct verbal communication with the local people.

After entering the workforce, although the participants were from various disciplines and worked in different industries, they expressed a common experience that the degree helped them significantly in obtaining immediate employment (especially in the academy), remaining employed, and earning promotions. However, the usefulness of their degree varied depending on the disciplines and types of jobs. Some felt that their qualification was “very important” or “important,” while some others felt they had to learn on the job a lot. In general, those in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) disciplines agreed that their expertise and knowledge were significant because their jobs required the knowledge and skills that they had obtained in university quite often. Those in non-STEM disciplines stated that although they could not use the content knowledge that they had obtained in university, they were advantaged in a more generic sense, having gained a stronger overall foundation of work-related knowledge. For example, one said:

I came to Australia without knowing how to write a good essay, but now I can write reports, so writing skills were something that I benefitted a lot from university, and I needed them for my current job. (Quyen)

### POSITIONAL APPROACH: BEING POSITIONED AS A DISADVANTAGED GROUP IN THE HOST LABOUR MARKET

The analysis reflected what Holmes (213) argued about how graduate employability is determined by “socioeconomic or cultural status, or a social positioning of graduates’ skills and achievements relative to and in competition with others” (p. 548) very clearly. The participants’ capitals were evaluated negatively by local employers in various aspects. The area that made them disadvantaged compared to their local counterparts the most was English competencies. They were perceived to have heavy

accent, limited terminologies, and poor writing skills. For instance, one participant said:

I applied for more than 100 jobs and failed all of them. I knew why. I was always ranked the second because they appreciated my qualifications, work experience and many other things but not English. (Andy)

A couple shared they failed to obtain positions that required rich understanding of local culture and local experiences such as a programme coordinator and a team leader.

I had a degree in leadership and rich experiences in working as a dean at my university in Vietnam, but they chose someone with much less experience simply because she was local. (Nga)

Another noticeable theme coming up in the analysis was the contested role of ethnic capitals in the participants' career trajectories. Ethnic capitals included ethnic communities, social networks with co- and similar-ethnic people, and home country habitus and native language. The current literature has reported that ethnic capitals could facilitate international graduates to obtain jobs that did not require a high level of English competencies and rich local knowledge. For instance, some could use ethnic capitals to obtain full-time, part-time, and casual jobs when they failed to compete with local graduates in the mainstream labour market (Pham et al., 2019; Pham, 2021b). Several participants in this study shared similar experiences when revealing how they used ethnic capitals for casual jobs, illustrated in the excerpt below.

I failed to apply for two positions at an Australian company mainly because of my English. I never thought about seeking something at a Chinese restaurant, but when I continuously failed, I suddenly realised that I needed to use my Chinese network.

However, there was also evidence about how ethnic capitals disadvantaged the graduates. Almost all participants who had had work experience in their ethnic community shared that their labour was exploited because they had to work more than what they had agreed. They were paid lower than the normal rate that local people with a similar degree would receive.

One spotlighted the lack of PR was one of the main reasons contributing to this exploitation as follows:

He [the shop owner] employed two of us at the same time but I was paid lower than the other girl simply because the girl already got PR. This meant she could work for him for long, so he invested in her. (Yitong)

### PROCESSIONAL APPROACH: ENACTING VARIOUS FORMS OF AGENCY TO NEGOTIATE EMPLOYABILITY

Although career trajectories of the participants were impacted by various factors that went beyond their control, the participants demonstrated that they could, to some extent, control their short- and long-term employability by enacting different forms of agency. For instance, when realising their disciplines did not embed enough work-integrated learning, a couple actively looked for advice from lecturers, friends, and alumni to find part-time work so that they could obtain work experience. They were aware of how work experience could add values to their degree to make them advantaged in both host and home countries. Although the most common types of part-time work were working in a supermarket and tutoring, which were not closely connected to their future profession, they acknowledged various benefits of this part-time work such as time management, intercultural knowledge, initiative, and teamwork.

I started working casually at a Thai shop in my second year. It was quite time-consuming, but I learned heaps of things. The most important experience I gained from this work was that I became more active and better with time management. (Sue)

A couple were more strategic when volunteering to work for organisations that were connected to their future profession. For instance, one participant persistently approached more than ten schools to ask for after-school caring volunteering work so that she could step in the school's system in an informal way. She was eventually offered a volunteering position for four months and then won an official teaching position at the school where she did the volunteering work. The type of agency these two participants enacted could be called *future-vision agency*, which refers to the capacity that they visioned the types of resources they needed to build and journeys that they needed to go through to obtain their dream job.

There was also evidence showing how the participants were willing to accept temporary work so that they could fulfil basic needs while waiting for an official position. For instance, several accepted manual, casual, and low-skilled jobs such as taxi drivers, tutoring, and supermarket serving to earn a living and obtain work experience but still engaged in completing their degrees and extra courses and preparing for PR. They committed to pursuing a dream profession that required long-term and challenging preparations but aligned with their identity. The strategies that these participants deployed during this preparation process could be called *temporary needs-response agency*.

Finally, a common constraint facing international graduates in Australia is that they need to meet high expectations and face discrimination of local industries and employers about professional skills and work experience. International and local graduates may hold the same degree, but many international graduates fail to compete with their local counterparts for job opportunities due to their perceived weaknesses in these areas. However, there was evidence that international graduates could use various strategies to deal with their limitations in professional skills. For instance, some used persistence to deeply integrate in the local context to improve English. Some engaged with self-reflection and observations to enhance understanding of local culture. Some knew how to use their strengths such as diligence, resilience, and honesty to win support of key stakeholders who then bridged them to job opportunities. Some made use of ethnic capitals like ethnic community and language and connections with similar-ethnic people to obtain casual and short-term employment. One participant said that she had obtained some work experience in the field of her studies in Indonesia. Therefore, she crafted her resume to highlight these work experiences and emphasised how this experience could help her with her job if she were employed. This was an advantage that enabled her to stand out and obtain the job—a strategy that enabled graduates to win the employment battle in many cases (Brown et al., 2004). The type of agency these graduates perform can be called “*strengths-based agency*.”

An important note was that observations and self-reflection emerged as important tools enabling the participants to engage with the process of enacting agency. For instance, a participant stated that although they held an excellent academic record, they observed and learned that they had to improve their understanding of workplace culture and demonstrate

flexibility so that they could not only deal with cultural diversity in Australia, but also use their content knowledge more effectively. This graduate said:

Sometimes, I felt frustrated because I did not know how to use what I had learned from university. I got stuck, but then I found out that sometimes people did not let you use what you had because they did not like you. I then invested in enhancing my teamwork skills.

Two other participants stated that during the journey of finding different jobs, they constantly reflected on their work and living experiences to accumulate self-knowledge, review their evolving commitments, sort their priorities, reflect on the external world as an object, and weigh their actions in relation to external factors that affect their interests. They sometimes needed to change their employability journey due to emerging personal commitments.

I had to quit my full-time job when I had a daughter. As a woman, I wanted to prioritise my child. I knew it would be extremely difficult to find something like this later, but I could not find a better way.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The findings revealed how the graduates engaged with different strategies to negotiate their employability trajectories. When they were still at university, their perceptions were largely influenced by the possessive perspective, which emphasises the need to articulate human capital. The graduates focused on enriching their disciplinary expertise, which included content knowledge, ICT literacy, and English competency. The participants held these perceptions due to two main factors. First, Australian universities continue to disseminate the human capital doxa and embed the assumption that higher education leads to improved employment outcomes (Blackmore et al., 2015; Chen, 2014). International students and their parents internalise the policy doxa about the importance of qualifications, degrees, and university-based resources promoted by universities and therefore place great emphasis on attaining academic performance and technical knowledge. Second, the graduates were also influenced by job advertisements, which often emphasised desirable recruitment criteria such as English proficiency, PR visa, high-level communication skills,

Australian work experience, and a range of Western personal values such as being proactive, critical, innovative, and independent (Blackmore et al., 2015; Pham et al., 2019). Due to limited insights about the labour market and real-life work practices, the participants mainly worked on what the universities advertised and what the employers expected, which was reflected in job advertisements.

However, the participants significantly changed their perceptions and strategies when they entered the labour market. They still acknowledged the importance of qualifications but agreed that the usefulness of qualifications depended on other factors including work experience, an understanding of workplace culture, and social networks. The graduates' employability experiences during this period align with the arguments proposed by positional and processual perspectives. In the host labour market, graduates were positioned as "inferior others" due to the hidden expectations of employers. This was reflected in their experience of using English competencies. Although their English was standardised and institutionalised because they had completed a degree in Australia, their communication was not favoured or accepted by many employers. This was because the local workforce emphasised "legitimate language," which refers to "subtle normative codes" (Cederberg, 2015, p. 34). International graduates need to show the right knowledge, appropriate communication skills, and sensitivity to cultural differences, and a "standard" accent so that they can develop natural and smooth conversations (Pham, 2021b). Those coming from non-English-speaking countries were unable to prove this "legitimate language" and as a result, failed interviews and were excluded from small talks in the workplace. It was evident that international graduates had limited knowledge about the unwritten "rules" and particular codes of behaviours and norms of the workplace, making it difficult to use their expertise and integrate it into the host labour market (Pham et al., 2019; Pham, 2021b). Recently, international graduates' inferior positions have been reinforced because Australia has been inflated with graduates with credentials. Therefore, local employers have become increasingly interested in assessing "legitimate" capitals so that they can evaluate how international graduates "fit in" the Western labour market (Blackmore et al., 2015).

Moreover, graduates only realised the importance of building a range of other resources, such as social networks, cultural understanding, and psychological capacities, after entering the labour market. The articulation of these resources enabled them to mobilise and apply their expertise.

When they were at university, they had little knowledge of the need to build these resources due to the dominant human capital embedded in official curricula. It is evident that although an increasing number of researchers have advocated that employability outcomes result from the development and utilisation of a range of forms of capital, including not only humans but also social, cultural, identity, and psychological capital (e.g. Brown et al., 2004; Tomlinson, 2017), this perspective was not emphasised enough in university programmes.

Finally, graduates' employability trajectories were well supported by Holmes' processual perspective because it reported how the participants interplayed a range of contextual and internal factors in their employability journey. They proactively cultivated their personal development by continuously reflecting on their past experiences, envisioned short and long futures, and worked on possibilities for present actions. Employability varies over time, context, and conditions. Some prioritised employment at some point, and thus had strong agentic features and took various agentic actions to achieve this goal. However, they also neglected their career at some points due to other commitments, and thus did not engage in activities associated with their career development. Their employability trajectories are connected to the development of their identities. Their identity commitment guides, directs, motivates, and hinders how they take action and engage in activities to achieve their career and personal goals (Eteläpelto et al., 2013, p. 58; Hitlin & Elder, 2006).

The findings of this research imply a significant gap between how universities prepare students for employability and what the labour market actually expects. There is a need for more collaboration between higher education and industries so that university curricula and services can be developed in a way that better prepares students for their transition to the labour market. International students should obtain more real-life insights into the workforce by doing work or engaging in the community in some way. If they view the labour market based on their "naïve" understanding, as promoted by policies and institutions, they continue to struggle.

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# Employability as Self-branding in Job Search Games: A Case of Finnish Business Graduates

*Heli Mutanen, Maija Korhonen, and Päivi Siivonen*

## INTRODUCTION

In the complex and competitive graduate labour market, personal qualities, social skills and other specific virtues such as appearance and behaviours and even personal values have become increasingly important in making oneself appealing to potential employers (Brown et al., 2011; Siivonen et al., 2019). Something “extra”, an “edge” and “standing out of the crowd” are needed to convince the employers of a “good bargain” (McCracken et al., 2016; see also Burke et al., 2017). As a consequence, self-branding (Hearn, 2008; Vallas & Cummins, 2015) has become salient for performing one’s employability for potential employers.

By the concept of self-branding (Hearn, 2008; Whitmer, 2018), we refer to a “pervasive discourse” (Vallas & Cummins, 2015, p. 293) as a framework for negotiating employability in order to be able to stand out

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in the labour market (Banet-Weiser, 2012; Whitmer, 2021). In this chapter, we suggest that graduates need to perform their employability by adopting practices of self-branding, which has become a key means to enhance one's employability, especially at the time of labour market entry.

Prior research on branding from students' or graduates' perspective has focused mostly on the benefits of branding when graduates seek to enter the labour market (see, e.g., Manai & Holmlund, 2015; Kushal & Nargundkar, 2021; Minor-Cooley & Parks-Yancy, 2020). However, critical research that focuses on self-branding of higher education graduates entering the labour market is quite rare (see Nicholas, 2018), and in Finland, virtually non-existing. Even less attention has been paid to self-branding as identity performance to enhance employability.

To fill this gap, we approach self-branding from the graduate identity point of view and use the discourse of self-branding as a lens to the construction of employable identity. More specifically, we focus on discursive and narrative practices (Bamberg, 2011) by which graduates construct their identities in relation to the ideals and demands of self-branding discourse. We adopt an interaction-oriented narrative approach in which identities are seen as situational performances—made in real or imagined audiences in mind (De Fina, 2015). The analytical focus is on the positioning strategies used by narrators to accomplish, reaffirm or contest specific versions of selves performatively in contextualized interactions (De Fina, 2015).

To investigate graduates' self-branding as identity performances around employability, we analysed interviews of 27 newly graduated or soon to be graduated Finnish business masters and focused especially on narratives of job search. We asked the following questions: (1) How business students/graduates perform their identities in the framework of self-branding and hence aim to enhance their employability potential in the context of early job search? (2) What kinds of identity dilemmas as well as dilemmas of self-branding arise, and how graduates aim to solve these dilemmas? The chapter contributes to both critical research on self-branding and employability literature by introducing an interactionally oriented approach (De Fina, 2015) and a novel identity dilemma theory approach (Bamberg, 2011) to self-branding and employability literature.

## SELF-BRANDING AS PERFORMANCES OF EMPLOYABLE GRADUATE IDENTITIES

There is a widening understanding that employability should be viewed as a processual phenomenon across time and multiple contexts referring to graduate identity (Holmes, 2001, 2013; Tomlinson, 2007; Tomlinson & Anderson, 2021). In this chapter, we approach self-branding as a lens to employable graduate identity in the context of job search.

Previous research on branding focusing on higher education students has examined business students' self-marketing brand skills as a new employability skill type (Manai & Holmlund, 2015). Prior research has also addressed employer-oriented personal branding techniques, which benefit graduates in job search (Kushal & Nargundkar, 2021) and early career job seekers' perceptions of the importance of branding on employability (Minor-Cooley & Parks-Yancy, 2020). Some prior research has compared the brands of the university and of the students (Holmberg & Strannegård, 2015). We take a different, critical approach and understand self-branding as a commodifying discourse associated with goal-oriented practices to promote oneself to gain superiority and "stand out" in the job market (Pagis & Ailon, 2017; Vallas & Cummins, 2015; Whitmer, 2021, p. 143). Furthermore, we understand self-branding as a framework for graduate identity construction, which is negotiated interactionally in narrative contexts where business graduates need to perform employability to themselves and to an audience consisting of other graduates, recruiters and employers.

We suggest that job search forms a particularly interesting narrative context to scrutinize identity construction around employability. Studies on employers' expectations of graduate employability have shown that especially in recruiting situations and job interviews, recruiters often pay attention to applicants' behaviours, appearance and overall performance as "impression management"—or as self-branding—instead of formal, baseline requirements such as education and work experience (Lepistö & Ihantola, 2018, p. 112). Accordingly, if the employers are open to the applicants' "impression management"—that is self-branding—graduates seeking a job are incited to market themselves and, in other words, brand themselves to signal both their uniqueness and authenticity and also difference from other candidates in the eyes of the employers.

In the discourse of self-branding, uniqueness and authenticity are the core concepts which constitute a special brand value (Banet-Weiser, 2012;

Gershon, 2016; also Whitmer, 2021). The uniqueness and authenticity of the brand are associated with one's "true self", which supersedes skills, experiences, assets and alliances. Paradoxically, however, in the neoliberal logic, the true self must be constantly enhanced and cultivated (Gershon, 2016). Besides uniqueness and authenticity, for personal brands, it is, thus, equally important to focus on "differentiation" and "parity", which stem from practices that allow a person to "stand out" from competitors and "fit in" with the expectations of the field and the occupation being pursued (Parmentier et al., 2013, p. 375; Keller et al., 2002). To "stand out" and to "fit in" entails a certain kind of "curation of the self" (Banet-Weiser, 2012; Duffy & Pooley, 2017), which highlights the performative nature of self-branding that incites the actors to "tune" their brand always in accordance to the audience. Furthermore, signalling "stand out" graduate employability includes narrating a personal brand (Anderson & Tomlinson, 2021, p. 688).

Narratives are sites where business graduates perform and negotiate graduate identities in relation to employability interactionally with an "audience" in mind. In job search situations, employers constitute the principal audience for self-branding (Anderson & Tomlinson, 2021) and graduates' employability performances. Following de Fina's (2015) view of an interactionally oriented approach, we analyse identities as performances and view identities as situational accomplishments (De Fina, 2015). Thus, identities are intentional projects and meaning making of how individuals want to be understood in the eyes of others (Bamberg, 2011; Georgakopoulou, 2007). Identities as interactional performances can be seen—and studied—as constant acts of positioning (Bamberg, 2011; Davies & Harré, 1990), where individuals aim to construct, affirm and contest specific versions of the self (De Fina, 2015).

Our theoretical approach is novel in the field of recent graduates' employability and graduates' self-branding studies. We approach interactional graduate identity performances through the theory of identity dilemmas introduced by Michael Bamberg (2011). The dilemmas revolve around (a) constancy and change in time and place, (b) difference and sameness regarding others and (c) agency and control concerning whether "I" is a subject in control versus "I" as an undergoer to the situation and world. In this chapter, we aim to focus on the dilemma of difference and sameness, which has proved to be central to self-branding, both in terms of difference (a conceptual analogue to differentiation and "standing

out”) and sameness (a conceptual analogue to parity and “fitting in”) (Keller et al., 2002; Parmentier et al., 2013).

By scrutinizing the identity dilemma of difference and sameness, we are able to analyse graduates’ identity navigation within job search by exploring how they deal with the question, “Who do I think I am and who should I be vis-à-vis the other graduates and employers’ expectations, the occupation pursued and the business labor market in general?”. The dilemma is particularly pertinent in the consideration of new graduates’ negotiation of employable identities as they aim to present themselves as employable graduates for potential employers.

## METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES

### *Participants*

The data set of this study consists of 27 interviews conducted in 2019 as a part of a larger research project on graduate employability and social positioning in the labour market (HighEmploy, 2018–2022<sup>1</sup>). The field of business was selected as an exemplary case, partly because it is a generalist field that does not prepare graduates for any specific professions and enables many kinds of career options and partly because it is one of the high-status fields, typically leading to well-paid positions (Isopahkala-Bouret & Nori, 2021). The interviewees of this data set were aged between 24 and 30. Fourteen of them were men and 13 women. Twenty-four of the interviewees had graduated in 2018–2019 and three were about to graduate in 2019–2020 from the university with a master’s degree. They represent a relatively privileged group of young adults in terms of their social background: most of them come from middle-class but not necessarily academic families.

The interviewees were selected on the basis that they were relatively young, finishing their first university degree and were entering their early career positions as newly or soon to be graduated. They all had been recently searching for their first jobs in their professional field and therefore had recent experience of looking for a job. Almost all the interviewees had a job which corresponded with their field and level of education at the

<sup>1</sup>In the project’s qualitative sub-study, altogether 76 HE graduates with degrees in business and administration were interviewed in 2019 for the first time, and 44 of them in 2020 for the second time. The interviewees were recruited from 4 universities.

time of graduation. Business administration and economics, the study field that we focus on in this study, is an example of a field where students enter the labour market before graduation. At the time of the interviews, the interviewees worked in business organizations with titles such as assistant controller, HR specialist/coordinator, business consultant, project manager, IT advisor, data engineer and campaign specialist.

The duration of the interviews varied from around 1 to 3 hours. The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. They were conducted and analysed in Finnish. The interview quotes presented in this article were translated into English by a professional. Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the University of Eastern Finland Committee on Research Ethics. The names of the interviewees are pseudonyms.

### *Method and Analysis*

As described above, our method of analysis is narrative, and we investigate the ways by which the interviewees perform themselves in narrative interaction. In the first phase of analysis, we read through the transcripts to identify the episodes/narratives, where dilemmatic meanings related to constellations of employable identity were negotiated. The episodes intertwined around open questions presented by interviewer like: “Could you tell about applying for early career job positions?” or “How have you promoted yourself in job search and interview situations?” or “How is it possible to gain a ‘competitive edge’ over other graduates, if possible?” The episodes were plotted narratives or fragments of talk, that is “small stories” (Bamberg & Georgakopoulou, 2008). Following the interactional approach to narratives (De Fina, 2015), we paid attention to the real or imagined audience, that is, other higher education graduates, recruiters, and other gatekeepers of the early career institutions and business labour market.

Second, the analysis was organized around the interviewees’ navigation of the identity dilemma of difference and sameness (Bamberg, 2011). In practice, we focused on the variety of identity related dilemmas constructed via self-branding (what I am, what I am not and what I should be in terms of constructing employable graduate identity), keeping in mind the concepts of “authenticity”, “fabrication”, “parity” (fitting-in) and “differentiation” (stand-out) as well. We also examined the ways of the interviewees’ positioning and how the related identity performances resonated with the discourse of self-branding.

## RESULTS

In the following sections, we conduct detailed narrative analysis of the various ways by which business graduates performed their identities in the framework of self-branding discourse. Our analysis revealed that the identity dilemma of difference and sameness, in particular, actualized when the graduates reflected on themselves in the context of job search. Business graduates aimed to solve this dilemma, first, by performing difference to other highly educated and more traditional modest job seekers in terms of their personal attributes and qualities. They presented themselves as tactical and unique job seekers compared to average highly educated job seekers. Second, the business graduates strived to solve the identity dilemma of difference and sameness by negotiating their lack of work experience. In doing so, they dealt with the demands and expectations of the occupational field and performed themselves as “same enough” compared to more experienced job seekers and the actual or imagined employees in organizations. They performed themselves as credible young applicants who fit in the organization and can bring equal value to it despite their lack of work experience. Solving the identity dilemma of difference and sameness also produced a specific dilemma of self-branding, that is, the dilemma of authenticity versus fabrication to be negotiated. Next, we present our results according to the ways by which graduates aimed to solve the identity dilemma of difference and sameness and, through this, also characterize the dilemmas of self-branding.

### *Performing Difference to Other Job Seekers*

The interviewees aimed to solve the identity dilemma of difference and sameness, firstly, by performing their positive uniqueness compared to other job seekers. They seek to “stand out” from other job seekers and stressed their personal “skills”, characteristics and attributes, appearance and behaviours, tastes and even personal values, which were harnessed as one’s own unique competitive unique selling point in job seeking.

### *The Tactical and Unique Job Seeker Versus the Average Highly Educated Job Seeker*

All the interviewees had some experience in job search and preparing themselves for the related practices and situations, such as job applications and interviews. In their narratives, they performed themselves as different

from—and superior to—other job seekers by highlighting their personal attributes and qualities “beyond degrees”. In the following example, Miika positions himself as both different and same compared to others. He performs himself as a tactical and unique job seeker—an interpersonally skilful actor who has the ability to convince employers and tolerate stress and pressure (“grilling”) in job interview situations. In his interpretation, these skills enable him to stand out from the competitors who are “at the same level” in terms of formal competence and degree.

Miika: When I get to a job interview, I’m in a position of strength. If I get a chance to influence something face-to-face, I know I’m good at it and I like it. I’d say I enjoy job interviews. They’re not only exciting situations, but I find it fun to be interviewed, grilled. (...) It’s one of my advantages. But whether I stand out on paper, my certificates from the first three years of study, for example, are identical to those of 99 per cent of others.

Miika’s example illustrates how the similarity with other job seekers—the average highly educated—in terms of formal qualifications did not add value to one’s employability. Instead, academic qualifications were perceived as the foundation from which to begin to build a respectful and competitive brand, and the difference in the sense of positive uniqueness was performed by relying on one’s individual uniqueness and its successful, situation-relevant representation.

Business graduates also reflected the demands of real and imagined employers in their meaning making and aimed to answer to these demands with their identity performances. In the following quotation, Sara positions herself and other graduates in her field as agile and “keeping one’s finger on the pulse” labour market actors who are aware of the changing wishes and requirements of employers. However, she also aims to construct difference from traditional, old-fashioned job seekers.

Sara: In my trade, people are pretty well aware of the criteria. And that’s surely why I stood out in the interview or also in the application phase. I had an individual kind of CV rather than a white piece of paper with some text on it. I have kept my finger on the pulse about what the requirements of a CV are these days. I knew which questions were likely to be asked.

Business graduates also performed themselves as different from other job seekers by positioning them as “true selves” and by harnessing their

own personal values as a brand. For example, Sara—like many other interviewees—positioned herself towards the negatively associated stereotypical image of a business graduate. She performed herself as an atypical business graduate by referring to her personal life values, which emphasize soft and ethical values instead of business values. Thus, the interviewees aimed to differentiate not only from other (highly educated) job seekers or traditional job seekers, but also from other business students and graduates.

Sara: Maybe in a way I think about being my true self and that being genuine is a factor. I want to believe that it makes me stand out.—Then again, I don't think I'm the most typical business graduate. Maybe having a wide range of environmental values is another factor that makes me stand out.—It's maybe a separating factor. (...) I believe it might be an emerging trend.

### *Performing Sameness Enough*

The interviewees also aimed to solve the identity dilemma of difference and sameness, by performing “sameness enough” to the demands of the job being pursued as well as the actual or imagined expectations of employers, business organizations and the graduate labour market in general.

#### *Good Novice Employee “on paper” Versus Credible by Experience*

The interviewees also negotiated the identity dilemma of difference and sameness in terms of work-related experience. They reflected on whether they are good novice employees “on paper” or credible by experience. Business graduates dealt with their lack of work experience due to young age, which forced them to perform themselves as good and competent in relation to more experienced job seekers and the actual or imagined employees in the targeted organization. Business graduates justified why they “fit in” as credible young applicants and candidates to the organizations to which they apply for a job, while performing “sameness enough”.

As we have illustrated before, in job search games, sameness with other job seekers—just as being “on the same line” in terms of formal qualification and degree—appeared to be avoidable. However, when looking at employers' expectations about work experience, “sameness enough” in terms of “fitting in” within the organization became a virtue with which young novices were able to compensate for a lack of work experience and, thus, build their brand.

The interviewees performed “sameness enough” by addressing the equal value (parity) they can bring to the organizations they were targeting—albeit through different means and virtues than through occupation and field-related work experience. They differentiated themselves positively from more experienced applicants and professionals by emphasizing their personal qualities and capacities related to youthfulness (Farrugia, 2018), such as passion and drive, problem-solving skills and the ability to learn quickly (see also Korhonen et al., 2023, also Hinchliffe & Jolly, 2011).

In the following examples, Joakim and Otso perform “sameness enough”, aiming to convince that they are just as good “fits” for the organization as more experienced candidates and professionals in future early career organizations:

- Joakim: Well, it probably depends a little on which position I’m applying to. If you think about it, I don’t have that much work experience yet. It’s a factor that does not make me stand out if I’m applying to a position where more extensive experience is required. At that point, I think there must be another way for me to prove that I’m highly capable, that I’m a very quick learner, or that my persona is well-suitable. Things such as these.
- Otso: It’s a bit fifty-fifty whether it’s worthwhile to employ a relatively young candidate with a shorter career as they may not have sufficient skills or capacity. On the other hand, I’ve heard that (...) young people fresh from the oven or school. They are driven, full of ideas and inspired to bring something new especially to teams with more senior employees.

In their meaning making, Joakim and Otso address the problem of employability (“am I capable, good enough, do I manage”)—and the problem of differentiation from other job seekers—posed by a lack of work experience due to young age. Both perform themselves as intellectually curious and creative employees, thereby highlighting elements of the graduate identity that have been recognized as being valued by organizations (Hinchliffe & Jolly, 2011, p. 577).

The interviewees also aimed to perform themselves as same enough in terms of work experience gained during university studies. For example, Rebecca (soon to be graduated) talks about the compulsion to gain work experience at the end of the bachelor’s phase. In her interpretation,

“sameness enough” means that in terms of acquired work experience, you are on the “same line” as other graduates when there is competition for jobs. Rebecca, however, unlike Joakim and Otso, does not emphasize the competitive edge of her persona. Rather, she positions herself as a job seeker who, in a way, has to accept “lower”-level jobs in order to acquire sufficient experience to succeed in postgraduation job search.

Rebecca: When applying [for work], it’s quite certain (...) that your offset is different to that of other graduates if you have no work experience. I knowingly made such choices. (...) I think I’ve also been aware that the competition can be very tough in marketing, for example, and that I have to learn something new and start from a lower position. (Rebecca)

Birgitta also accounts for the lack of work experience, however, in a very different manner. Due to the lack of work experience—other or field specific—Birgitta positions herself as an inferior job-applicant. Lack of “learning about the job” (Hinchliffe & Jolly, 2011, p. 577) downplays the worth of knowledge acquired during studies and prefers knowledge and skills acquired through work experience resulting in knowledge or skills not necessarily being of required standard in the eyes of employers.

Birgitta: I was a bit scared that it might weaken my chances to be employed in the future. I pondered whether I’m an inferior job applicant as I didn’t work while studying.

### *The Self-branding Dilemma of Authenticity Versus Fabrication*

#### *Boundaries of Authenticity Versus Fabrication*

Difference and sameness actualized the self-branding dilemma of authenticity versus fabrication in business graduates’ narrative practices. When the graduates performed themselves as tactical and unique job seekers (vs. average highly educated) and aimed to stand out from others, they had to respond to the demand for authenticity associated with a good employable brand (see Gershon, 2016). Moreover, they had to negotiate the right kind of authenticity, that is, how to distinguish from the “mass” and be unique enough without falling into fabrication associated with self-serving competitiveness, for example. In doing so, they thus reflected on the limits of socially and morally acceptable versus unacceptable forms and practices of self-branding. Authenticity within the discourse of self-branding

involved the performing of the authentic self, which was perceived as honest, genuine and true to oneself but also true to the expectations of the occupation/work being pursued.

In the following examples, Tea and Katriina negotiate the discrepancy between their true self and the ideal of self-branding.

Tea: How hard it is to highlight your skills, and what this certain kind of modesty means. (...) It has been really difficult to market yourself like “Hey, I really am a competent and sociable person with good problem solving skills.” In a way I’m afraid that it might feel artificial and fake (...), and on one other hand I’m limited in that I can’t be good in everything. On the other hand, as everyone is part of the same great mass, I should consider my skills and capabilities and remind myself of them. I have completed the same degree as others, but they make me stand out.

Katriina: When you sit at a job interview for an hour, your skills become obvious without having to fabricate or exaggerate things. I don’t know (...) whether people exaggerate things, but I’m an honest person, so I couldn’t even do it.

Tea and Katriina position themselves as an inherently modest person, which has historically been a central virtue of work among Finns and confront authenticity with fabrication. Although Tea encourages herself to be rightly and courageously proud of her abilities and understands the obvious necessity of branding by means of “bringing out personal talents”, the demand for self-promotion appears potentially pretentious and leading to false expression and, therefore, poor job search success.

On the other hand, reflecting on the claim of authenticity also fuelled self-doubt, especially in the sense of weighing up one’s true competence and value, as the following quotation illustrates:

Tea: Being assessed or scrutinised gives rise to this certain kind of uncertainty in me. (...) I recognise the concept of impostor syndrome. Am I fooling myself or am I really as good as I say?

The right kind of authenticity in job search was strictly regulated also because it was associated with the virtues of both relaxed spontaneity as well as careful and tactical preparation. In the following extract, Sara

positions herself as an honest person and employee, and honesty refers to a sustainable professional identity and acting in accordance with the profession. However, honesty is reflected also vis-à-vis the obvious requirement to “do your homework” in order to prepare oneself for a job interview and, at the same time, stay true/perform spontaneity and “true self”.

Sara: Of course being prepared to the questions—(...) Even though you prepare yourself for the interview, your responses should be authentic rather than similar to something written on a paper. They shouldn't be too thoroughly considered. (...) In my opinion, it's important to be honest rather than try to pretend something more than you are because you'll be in trouble if you can't deliver the things you promised. Or people may get an incorrect idea about who you really are.

The self-branding dilemma of authenticity versus fabrication also occurred when the business graduates performed themselves as same enough compared to other employees. In this case, the dilemma of authenticity versus fabrication was dealt in terms of bodily appearance, and a comparison was made with other business graduates, in particular. The interviewees constructed stereotypical images of business students and graduates as self-confident professionals with the right kind of (middle-class) “tastes” and dress codes. In the following quotation, Sara positions herself as a “generally neat” business graduate who inspires confidence with her appearance but is, however, not inauthentic or fabricated:

Sara: Of course, being altogether presentable but still yourself. Authenticity. ... being a genuine person instils trust in others.

Secondly, business graduates dealt with the self-branding dilemma of authenticity versus fabrication when they aimed to prove their credibility as young novices and their equal value in early-career business organizations. Some interviewees, like Sakari in the extract below, performed themselves as being older than their age, which was considered as a sort of learned tactic or practice of self-branding—a way to act according to the expectations of occupation pursued.

Sakari: Maybe it does not play such an important role at this stage as I'm getting closer to my 30s. But earlier it did. Getting used to being a bit older has clearly had its advantages, too. It adds to my credibility. (...) If you put

on a suit as a 25-year-old who knows nothing about anything, the suit just covers the fact that you have no skills.

As Sakari's example shows, the presentation of age had to be skilful and authentic enough and stay within the proper limits, although Sakari is testing and stretching the boundaries of fabrication. Fabricating age (and experience) to "fit in" with the expectations of the employers, for example, by performing a certain style outwards and dressing like a "businessman" was seen to reveal a young employee's incompetence in the eyes of others.

Finally, Julia positions herself as a well-known actor in job search games and speaks in a guiding tone to other job seekers when she argues that eligibility for successful job search requires in-depth knowledge of yourself, which is a key resource for both the job seeker and the companies themselves.

Julia: I don't think you should excessively polish your image. (...) Certain kind of self-confidence shows without having to highlight it. (...) I'd say to people that you should explore your inner self and only then apply for work. (...) If you don't know yourself, you can't help the company nor yourself.

According to Julia's interpretation, "self-confidence" as a job seeker's virtue and competitive asset is visible to the employer as if by nature without having to emphasize it. In this way, Julia's interpretation builds a certain virtue of modesty.

### *Boundaries of the "curated self"*

In addition to performing themselves as authentic selves and drawing boundaries for the right kind of authenticity, business graduates negotiated the boundaries of fabrication. In doing so, they aimed to justify fabrication within acceptable limits, as fabrication is defined culturally undesirable—especially in relation to Finnish work values which emphasize modesty and honesty as employee virtues (Rintamäki, 2016). In branding literature, the "curated self", that is, "tuning" your own brand for different audiences (Duffy & Pooley, 2017), refers to "a minor self-polishing" from the point of view of the job you are looking for. The "curated self" can be interpreted as stretching the boundaries of the dilemma of authenticity and fabrication. Honesty and being yourself are once again the subject of negotiations. On the other hand, the need to

appear in the right light is recognized, which is probably culturally accepted, as long as you stay close to the truth.

Emil and Miro, for example, position themselves as conscious of the logic of job-seeking games, aware of the need for “sane” fabrication and the necessity/“probability” of finding a job in job-seeking situations. Emil justifies suitable fabrication by being able, if necessary, to use the skills advertised in the job application. However, he interprets that it is not appropriate to write “anything” in the application, that is, to invoke the limits of permissible fabrication. Miro also argues that it is necessary to present the “most affordable version” of himself when looking for a job, although in his interpretation he hints that recruiters do note excessive “lying”. Both Emil and Miro also, in a way, normalize and justify the “tuning” of the self.

Emil: In my opinion a job application (...) is about bolstering yourself one way or another. It’s never easy for Finns, but when you do it reasonably with solid grounds (...) and you can argue why you are capable of something, I’m fine with it. I won’t write just anything there.

## DISCUSSION

In this chapter, we have explored how newly or soon to be graduated young people with a business degree perform themselves as employable labour market actors in terms of self-branding in the context of early career job search. We have utilized self-branding discourse as a lens to identity construction around employability and adopted an interaction-oriented narrative approach to identities where identities are seen as situational performances—made with real or imagined audiences in mind (De Fina, 2015). Furthermore, the analytical focus has been on the positioning strategies used by the narrators to accomplish, reaffirm or contest specific versions of themselves in relation to self-branding.

Our results show that the business graduates aimed to solve the identity dilemma of difference and sameness by performing their positive uniqueness and superiority (standing out)—beyond degrees—compared to other job seekers. They did it by stressing their personal characteristics and attributes, appearance and behaviours and even personal values, which were harnessed as one’s own unique competitive advantage in job seeking. In sum, the business graduates performed themselves as tactical and unique actors in job search games compared to the average highly educated.

Second, they solved the identity dilemma of difference and sameness by negotiating their lack of work experience and performing themselves “same enough” than more experienced job seekers and other employees. They reflected on whether they were good novice employees “on paper”, credible by experience or fit in the organization due to their other potential and valuable personal qualities. In their meaning making, the business graduates aimed to respond to the demands of the job being pursued as well as the expectations of employers, business organizations and the graduate labour market.

Finally, the dilemma of difference and sameness actualized the self-branding dilemma of authenticity versus fabrication. The graduates had to respond to the demand for authenticity associated with a good employable brand (see Gershon, 2016). Moreover, they had to negotiate the right kind of authenticity, that is, how to distinguish from the “mass” and be unique enough without falling into fabrication. In doing so, they thus reflected on the limits of socially and morally acceptable versus unacceptable forms and practices of self-branding and negotiated the boundaries of “curating self”.

In sum, self-branding, when analysed in terms of graduate employable identity performances, seems to emphasize the cultivation of the person on the one hand, and the importance of work experience on the other. In contrast, academic degrees acquired through higher education and skills and competences associated with a business degree are not seen as things that bring value to oneself in the entry to the labour market.

The article contributes to the prominent literature on graduate employability and self-branding, first, by conceptualizing self-branding as a central manifestation of the discourse of employability and, second, by adding a narrative practice approach and identity dilemma perspective (Bamberg, 2011) to analyse how self-branding is displayed in narrative identity performances. This perspective addresses employable graduate identities as socially and culturally mediated. From the sociocultural point of view, the study shows that the various ways the interviewees position themselves embody both the labour market ideals of employability and the discourse of self-branding. However, although the ideal of self-branding, that is engaging in purposeful marketization of the self to gain success in the labour market, is strongly echoed in the business graduates’ interpretations, their identity performances invoke also different kinds of ideals, such as honesty and modesty that are attached to Finnish work values (Rintamäki, 2016). Overall, the chosen methodology is a particularly

fruitful tool to analyse how graduates aim to achieve, contest or reaffirm specific employable identities in terms of self-branding. To conclude, although the graduates embrace the topical language of self-branding and rely on it to present themselves as credible labour market actors, they also strive to solve the moral dilemmas associated with self-branding in the context of Finnish working life.

On a more local level of social surroundings, the interaction-oriented narrative analysis enables to show that self-branding as a narrative practice has situational and contextual functions, and certain kinds of contexts and environments encourage, nourish or even prohibit certain kinds of narratives (see De Fina & Georgakopoulou, 2012, p. 124). Graduates' identity performances can be understood as purposeful responses to the demands and expectations of job search games, employers and organizations. However, newly graduated young people do not embrace and repeat blindly the ideals around them: they are actively making moral judgements about what is presented as desirable and what is rejected in terms of self-branding. Engaging in self-branding entails looking at oneself as well as others from many different perspectives that might be contradictory. The demand to solve a wide range of (moral) dilemmas and negotiate the virtues and demands of both academic degrees and the labour market that are in tension with each other speaks interestingly about the demands of the self-branding phenomenon. There seem to be very personal issues to be tackled and, therefore, the sense that if you don't live up to the ideals you are a potential loser.

On the basis of the results and drawing on Vallas and Cummins' (2015, p. 309) study, we argue that the larger share of the criticisms should be pointed at the principled concerns (moral obligation to engage oneself in self-branding) of branding instead of the practical considerations (how to be trained to brand effectively). If we reflect upon the results in terms of what has been argued above, the main concern should be that graduates seem to have a (moral) duty to engage themselves in the dilemmatic discourse of self-branding in the entry to the labour market. If employability is viewed as branding the "self" beyond degrees, it is worth asking in line with Handley (2018, p. 252): "what higher education can possibly do to enhance the job prospects of their graduating students, if degrees are as a mere signal of eligibility for graduate jobs".

The findings of this study are subject to some limitations. First, the research focuses on the perspective of a unique (perhaps elite) group of business graduates, which offers a purposeful sample and a lens through

which we can increase our understanding of the generalist degrees and challenges in entering a business labour market where degrees are not enough (Tomlinson, 2008). Second, the narrative approach and a purposeful sample do not afford generalization to other professional disciplines, such as medicine or law, but rather aim to elicit deep insights to personal and shared experiences and to larger cultural narratives and discourses. Finally, future research could assess whether graduates' identity performances in terms of self-branding change when they proceed in early career organizations. Therefore, follow-up data with the same participants could provide a longitudinal perspective and the possibility to study identity construction around self-branding within early career organizations and beyond. In addition, questions of social class and gender in terms of self-branding need further investigation.

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# Negotiating (Employable) Graduate Identity: Small Story Approach in Qualitative Follow-up Research

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## INTRODUCTION

We know little about the longitudinal processes of employability that higher education (HE) graduates encounter as they enter the world of work. How do graduates interpret and manage their educational and working life trajectories? What kinds of graduate identities in relation to employability do they construct and negotiate across time? How do they negotiate continuity and/or change in relation to graduate identities? We examine these questions in this methodological chapter in which we apply and develop a small story approach in narrative life history follow-up research. This is important as there is a widening understanding that

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employability should be viewed as a processual phenomenon referring to graduate identity and evolving across multiple contexts and over time (Holmes, 2013, 2015; see also Tomlinson, 2007; Tomlinson & Anderson, 2021). This chapter contributes, first, to the graduate employability literature by examining employability as a processual phenomenon, and, second, to the literature on qualitative longitudinal research methodology from a narrative-discursive point of view, which has only rarely been examined in extant literature (see, however, Korhonen et al., 2020). We will illustrate our reading of the follow-up interview data, which was generated as part of a larger research project on HE business graduates' employability, with one Finnish mature graduate's case example. We chose Joel's example as his educational and working life trajectory consists of breaks that create a need to be accounted for. Such ruptures require identity negotiation in relation to the normative ideals of employability.

In the competitive and crowded labour market, the construction and negotiation of graduate identities has become more salient and critical to pursuing opportunities and success in working life (Siivonen et al., 2020). The transition from HE to the graduate labour market and breaks in educational and working life trajectories compel individuals to critically reflect on themselves, envisage alternatives, re-consider their previous position and create continuity and/or change between the former and new positions of graduate identities (see also Korhonen et al., 2020). The follow-up aspect of our research focuses on graduates' educational and working life trajectories, including transitions through which graduates interpret and negotiate employability and, in doing so, construct continuity and/or change in their graduate identity.

Employability is understood here as a socially constructed and culturally mediated process. The term employability implies the positional dimension of being employable, but not necessarily in employment (Brown et al., 2003). The normative ideals of employability set new kinds of demands for graduates as they are in a continual need of development and assuring their suitability and worth for prospective employers. They need to become accountable, agile, active, autonomous, self-responsible, risk-taking, creative, innovative, problem-solving, decision-making, enterprising employees, who seek new challenges and show passion for and dedication to work (e.g. Laalo et al., 2019; Siivonen et al., 2022). Consequently, an HE degree is not enough (Tomlinson, 2008), but an individual must possess the right kinds of characteristics and abilities that make her/him appealing to potential employers (Siivonen &

Isopahkala-Bouret, 2016). This creates a need to constantly reflect on one's characteristics and abilities in relation to the normative ideals of employability.

By the concept of graduate identity, we refer to an interactional process of interpretation and negotiation of the question, "who am I?" through time in the narrative environment in which employability is being constructed (Bamberg, 1997, 2004; Gubrium & Holstein, 2008; Holmes, 2013). Understanding graduate identity as socially constructed, emergent and fluid opens up room for identity work (Bamberg, 2011; Holmes, 2013). In addition to making sense of "who I am", anti-identity positions focusing on "who I am not" in relation to the ideals of employability also play a central part in the identity work (Siivonen et al., 2020). Bamberg (2011) suggests that identity work as narrative interaction includes three dilemmas within which individuals must navigate in order to answer the question, "Who am I?". The first dilemma is between constancy and change, which refers to a sense of self across time: How am I the same person I used to be versus how have I changed? According to Bamberg (2011), identity construction takes off from the continuity and change dilemma. The second dilemma relates to sameness and difference: How am I with regard to others? The third dilemma deals with the perception of agency: Am I a subject who is in control versus am I an undergoer subjected to the situation?

Next, we will discuss our data and methodological approach and then illustrate our reading of follow-up interview data with Joel's case example. Finally, we will discuss the contribution of the small story approach to qualitative follow-up and employability research.

## DATA AND METHODS

The data of this study were generated in a larger research project: Higher education graduates' employability and social positioning in the labour market (HighEmploy, 2018–2022).<sup>1</sup> We first interviewed the participants, 76 Finnish business graduates, at the time of graduation in 2019, and followed up on them in 2020 (n = 44). The interview themes covered education and working life trajectory, experiences about university studies, employment and working life, current life situation and future prospects

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and goals. The duration of the narrative life history interviews varied from around 1 to 3 hours. The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. They were conducted and analysed in Finnish. The interview quotes presented in this article were translated into English by a professional. Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the University of Eastern Finland Committee on Research Ethics.

We chose the case example of Joel (aged 35 in 2019) for this study as it was analytically interesting in terms of continuity and change across time. Joel's educational and working life trajectory and his transition from university to graduate labour market did not proceed smoothly nor as expected. Instead, he talked about periods of unemployment and dismissals from his job, which created ruptures that needed to be accounted for. Such ruptures in HE-graduate labour market transition require identity negotiation in relation to employability, which makes normative ideals in relation to employability visible (Korhonen et al., 2020). Joel's case example also shows how the construction of employability and the related ideals pertain to specific contexts and, in this case, unemployment and dismissal in particular (see also Greenbank & Marra, 2020). Moreover, Joel's example is interesting in terms of age and class—he is a mature student and graduate, he does not have a middle-class academic background and his parents work in blue-collar jobs. Joel's case example is, thus, in many ways in contrast with the young middle-class business graduates in our data, who positioned themselves as easily employable and successful young employees equipped with such personal characteristics as social skills, enthusiasm and youthful energy and drive (Korhonen et al., 2023).

In our reading of the data, we apply and develop a small story approach and narrative positioning analysis (Bamberg, 1997, 2004; De Fina, 2013) to examine continuity and change of graduate identity in relation to employability through time in our follow-up interview data. The small story approach has the potential to make visible change and continuity in the construction of graduate identity positionings in relation to employability in situated interaction. Small stories refer to short narratives, descriptions or fragments of speech about past, present and future incidents (Bamberg & Georgakopoulou, 2008) that are produced in social interaction in the narrative environment (Gubrium & Holstein, 2008) of the interview interaction and the wider social surroundings. We suggest that the small story approach is well suited for analysis of Joel's interview data that include fragments of talk as well as short sequential narratives (Riessman, 2008).

Small stories unfold interaction and narrative positioning vis-à-vis the story world, the storytelling world and societal master narratives (Bamberg, 1997; Bamberg & Georgakopoulou, 2008), and allow the analysis of multiple identities, positionings and meanings in HE graduates', in this case Joel's, narrative life history. The story world refers to how the characters of the story are constructed: how they are positioned in relation to one another. The telling of the story focuses on how the narrator positions himself in relation to the audience, the interviewer and/or the imagined audience, in Joel's case, especially potential employers: What is the narrator trying to accomplish with the story? (Bamberg, 1997, 2004). The analysis of societal master narratives implies the analysis of narrative positioning in relation to the cultural discourses, and in this case, employability. Normative social positions may display neutrality or they may be embraced, distanced, critiqued, subverted or resisted (Bamberg, 2004). Although analytically relevant in concrete analysis, the distinction between the different levels is not straightforward (Bamberg, 2004), and, thus, in our analysis, we do not differentiate them.

Our analysis, then, consists of interpretation of continuity and change in a person's construction of meanings at two time points of the narrative life history interviews (2019, 2020), the educational and working life trajectory running from the past to the present and future. Our approach permits the analysis of continuity and change constructed in the situated interaction of small stories in the context of life history. The approach also allows the analysis of such life historical positions as class.

In practice, we first read both interviews thoroughly and identified all the small stories related to identity and employability construction. Second, we analysed the small stories that related to the same themes and that were told at two time points (2019 and 2020). This allowed the analysis of continuity and/or change of graduate identity positions across time. In the analysis of the small stories, we applied narrative positioning analysis and also read the negotiation of identity dilemmas suggested by Bamberg (2011). Next, we will illustrate our reading of the data with Joel's case example.

## SMALL STORY APPROACH IN THE READING OF JOEL'S FOLLOW-UP INTERVIEWS

During both narrative life history interviews, Joel talked about periods of unemployment, ruptures that needed to be explained for the interviewer and the imagined audience, especially the potential employers. Such breaks in the working life trajectory create a need to reflect on oneself and negotiate continuity and/or change in the construction of graduate identity positionings. We interpret the small stories constructed in situated interaction through the lens of ruptures in Joel's working life trajectory.

During the first interview, back in autumn 2019, Joel talked about his winding educational and working life trajectory. In 2003, he completed vocational education in data processing, after which he worked as an IT designer until 2009, at which point he was made redundant. He explains this, first, with the financial crises that began in 2008 and, second, with the level of his degree that did not meet the labour market requirements. He was unemployed for 3–4 years, during which time he changed to a different field and started taking open university courses in law. He completed more and more courses and decided to shift to accounting and finance because getting into university to study a degree in law would have been “quite an impossible task” because of the selectiveness of admissions. He evaluated that accounting was more accessible and that “there are always vacancies in finance”. He sat for the entrance examination twice, after which he was accepted as a student in business studies in 2015. During his studies at the university, he changed his focus from finance to accountancy to ascertain his employability in the future. In the first interview, Joel told a small story in which he evaluated his current situation:

### **Successful Student and Employee 2019**

Päivi: I just wanna start off and ask what's your life situation like at the moment?

Joel: Well, I'm about to start a new job [in the metropolitan area] next week on Tuesday. And—

P: Mm-hm.

J: I've been, like, polishing my MA thesis, so I need to go and present it at some point (...). Basically I'm not in a hurry or anything, so umm, it's okay as long as I do it in December at the latest, you know.

P: Yeah, yeah.

(...)

J: Though I do have some other applications, applications in the works, so—

P: How many jobs have you applied to?

J: Well, I've applied to three, three jobs, three jobs elsewhere and to some audit firms, to those, to those and—

In his small story, Joel positions himself as a successful student and employee, whose future looks bright: he is about to graduate from the university with a master's degree in business and administration and he is starting in a new (although temporary) job. He also positions himself as an active and ambitious jobseeker who continuously applies for work in audit firms in order to progress in his career as a professional accountant. Moreover, he positions himself as a resilient job seeker, as getting work was not easy but demanded continuous effort: "that resilience, resilient, resilient attitude, not giving up, giving up, keep on, keep on applying". He encourages himself to continuously look for work and constructs his future aim to gain three years of work experience to be able to sit for an exam to qualify to audit accounts. In this small story, Joel positions himself as an active and agentive employee and jobseeker who is in control of his situation in relation to employability, also implying that he meets the expected norm.

One year later in the follow-up interview, however, the situation has changed: Joel had started working in a new permanent job in an audit firm but had been made redundant during the trial period. He evaluates his position in the labour market as discouraging:

### **Unemployed MBA 2020**

P: How's life been treating you since last time?

J: I don't find the current situation a pleasant one or anything, as umm, my employment contract ended [in the summer], and umm, it wasn't renewed, the contract; it was like a trial period termination. I did auditing work for six months. Now I'm once again looking for work, so at the moment I'm like an unemployed economist, so that's...it's not a very good situation or anything, but I've been applying to like 20 places, but for most of them I haven't even got an interview. Basically it was like, (do) I have too little experience for the job, so they said that that was the reason for the, the termination, so it was like that, and the auditing work didn't just end because of covid, you know, so (—)

Joel positions himself as an unemployed master of business and administration who was made redundant from his previous job during the trial period. He continues to position himself as an active although now also unsuccessful and frustrated jobseeker who has sent applications to “20 firms” but who is often “not even invited for an interview” and for whom “looking for a job lasts and lasts” and he “does not find, find, find work”. He thus constructs continuity as an active and resilient jobseeker in the competitive graduate labour market, also implying that the fierce competition is beyond his control. Joel negotiates agency and whether he is an agent or an undergoer in the labour market. By showing resilience in job-search, he positions himself as an agent in the situation where he is unemployed and not even invited for an interview despite constant effort. This implies that he acts according to the expected norm: in Finland, due to the activation policy, unemployed jobseekers are expected to actively look for work.

However, Joel also positions himself as responsible for the situation and interprets his lack of work experience as a reason for his unemployment. Joel emphasises his self-responsibility by stating that the amount of work did not decrease due to the COVID-19 pandemic, so as to emphasise that this was not the reason for being made redundant. He repeats his evaluation of the situation as “not pleasant” to emphasise the gloomy situation. He hopes for “regularity in terms of income” as he has “had no income for two months”. Later on in the interview, Joel evaluates the redundancy: “I should’ve been asking for more, asking for advice right there and then when I got stuck, and like that (—) ask more and ask more on my own, be more independent and ask more, so there was like room for improvement in my actions as well, so yeah”. Joel, thus, negotiates his graduate identity in the small story and evaluates that he did not have enough work experience and that he was not “active” and “independent” enough as an employee, implying that he did not meet the expected norm.

To summarise, Joel accounts for his weakened labour market situation: at the time of the first interview, he was starting in a new (although temporary) job, whereas at the time of the second interview, he was unemployed having been made redundant during the trial period from a new permanent job. He would have been able to accumulate the necessary three-year work experience in the job in order to sit for an exam to qualify to audit accounts. Such work experience would have been crucial for his progress in his career as an accountant. His future prospects in relation to employability were, thus, gloomy during the second interview. This

reflects change in his graduate identity: whilst in 2019, he positions himself as a successful student and employee, in 2020, he positions himself as an unemployed master of business and administration who was neither active nor independent enough but who was still an active and resilient, and thus agentive, although unsuccessful and frustrated jobseeker.

### *The Creation of Accounts for Ruptures*

During the first interview in 2019, Joel explains how he manages and accounts for the 3–4 year unemployment “gap” in his CV for potential employers. In this small story, he constructs the account in interaction with the interviewer:

#### **First Account for Rupture 2019**

- P: Yeah. So, you think there’s something that would have prevented you from getting the job you wanted or pushing your career forward in this case?
- J: Well, I guess there was the small, there was, umm, it wasn’t just a small gap in the work experience, so I guess that’s something I have to keep explaining, like what happened between there, so...
- P: You mean the unemployment period?
- J: Yes, yes.
- P: Mm-hm.
- J: Like why it has been so long—
- P: Yeah.
- J: So I guess that’s one but—
- P: Mm-hm.
- J: I’ve managed to explain it quite well, so—
- P: Mm-m, mm-m.
- J: It hasn’t been a problem, really.
- P: How do you explain it when you apply for a job?
- J: Well, I tell them that I started open studies in between jobs and that’s—
- P: Mm-hm.
- J: That’s usually when—
- P: Right, that the study path has been—
- J: Yeah.
- P: In that way—
- J: Yeah, right.

P: Step by step—

J: Yeah.

P: Progressing.

J: Yeah.

P: That you've been looking for direction.

J: Exactly, exactly, so...

The 3–4-year unemployment period creates a rupture in Joel's CV and working life trajectory that needed to be accounted for and legitimised; it was something he needs “to keep explaining”, for the interviewer who asks for an explanation and the imagined audience, especially for potential employers. He evaluates that he has found a way to explain the gap: open university studies that he started one course at a time provide a legitimate explanation. As forms of self-development and continuing learning (Haltia, 2018), the courses provided a positive way out by implying that they are means to construct employability, a new direction to become productive in working life. Also, during the second interview in 2020, Joel constructs an account for unemployment:

### Second Account for Rupture 2020

P: Yeah, right. What do you think is the reason that they didn't, you know, where you last worked, extend the contract after the trial period?

J: It was actually, the work sorta burned me out, so umm, I, that's, that's why I went on sick leave for a week, and then I went back to work, and then they said that no need to, no need to, umm, that it won't be extended but that I can continue to the end [of the month] if I want, or I could've just quit right then if I'd wanted to, but, but (—) I needed a few more things to get the reference from there, so...

P: Okay. So how did it like, what was it, from your perspective that led to this burnout at that point?

J: Well, it was actually that there, that it, there wasn't much, there was so much work, and it just kept coming, and as I didn't have much experience of that job after all, I couldn't independently really, really manage the workload, so umm, there was still some uncertainty about the, you know, about the actual work, and they talked about it when covid came, that like, I could've used some extra help to succeed, but then covid came, so they couldn't really offer the help anymore, so that was it—(...) but in the end I keep looking forward about it all, I know that these things can sometimes just happen.

For the interviewer's question about having been made redundant during the trial period, Joel provides burnout and sick leave as explanations. However, by referring to the employer and what "they told me", he posits that the work contract was not continued after the one-week sick leave. He emphasises his rational and strategic agency as he does not give up but continues working till the end of the trial period in order to get the reference. He explains the burnout with a heavy workload and his lack of experience and negotiates agency in a situation where he was faced with a heavy workload in a hectic work situation. He negotiates his graduate identity and positions himself as an unsure employee who was unable to manage the workload and to work independently, implying that managing a heavy workload in a hurry is a norm. He provides the COVID-19 pandemic as a partial explanation for the situation: without the pandemic and working from home, he would have received more support at work, and managing the work would have been easier. Nevertheless, he positions himself as an agentive employee who looks ahead and who is resilient in the face of adversity.

To summarise, during both interviews, Joel talked about periods of unemployment that needed to be explained for the interviewer and the imagined audience, especially for the potential employers. During the first interview, he constructs a legitimate explanation about self-development and continuing learning that employers are also ready to accept. During the follow-up interview, Joel provides burnout and sick leave as explanations for having been made redundant during the trial period, implying that they were not legitimate explanations for Joel's employer in the audit firm. Joel negotiates his graduate identity: he presents himself as an unsure employee who does not manage the workload constructed as a norm in audit firms. Nevertheless, he positions himself as a resilient employee who looks ahead.

*Negotiation of Continuity Versus Change as a Good  
and Valuable Employee*

In both interviews, Joel positions himself as a hard-working and meticulous employee. He thus constructs continuity in relation to his graduate identity as a particular kind of employee in his small stories. However, in the small story told in the follow-up interview, he also evaluates that he is lacking qualities needed to do his work well.

*Hard-working and meticulous employee 2019**Meticulous but not a valuable employee 2020*

P: What would you say that your career means to you at the moment?

J: Well, it means quite a lot, a lot, that the work career, career, the future work career, that nowadays I try to do everything thoroughly and well, well and—

P: Mm-hm.

J: I try to work hard, you know—

J: Something that I've noticed is that I have quite a few flaws when it comes to like, you know, being an employee in a way, so that's what actually scares me a bit, like how will I manage in the fast-paced, fast-paced work life?

Hurry is always reflected in mistakes, mistakes can, it can lead to mistakes, and the rapid pace of work always reflects that. And that's when you start fearing the mistakes, and as I usually, I prepare things very carefully, I check, make sure, that it must be correct (—) double check, so umm, that's the thing that you no longer have time for the double-check in a hurry, so that's on that, yeah.

In the small stories above, Joel constructs a future career that demands a lot of effort and positions himself as a hardworking employee who does his work as well and as meticulously as possible. This is in contrast with his past self that he described as “extremely lazy” in relation to studying in comprehensive school in the first interview. Joel explains that his current self “has grown as a person” since those times. We interpret that he positions himself as a traditional good worker, not as an ideal enterprising employee who actively innovates and presses forward in a hurry. Joel constructs continuity between the first and follow-up interviews in relation to his graduate identity as a hardworking and meticulous employee, but his evaluation of himself as a worker diminishes in the second small story. He positions himself as a good but not as a valuable and right kind of employee in the context of hectic working life.

In the follow-up interview, Joel negotiates his graduate identity and evaluates himself as lacking as an employee. Meticulous work with “double-checking” is no more constructed as unequivocally positive. An ideal actor is self-confident and agentive and manages a heavy workload in a hurry. However, he also positions himself as an experienced employee who knows that he makes mistakes when he is in a hurry and there is no time for “double-checking”, implying that he does not manage to do his work as well as he would like to in the busy audit firm. He evaluates the situation as scary: he is unsure how he will manage in hectic working life. The problems in working life are, thus, turned inwards, and they become the employee's internal barrier to manage the meticulous accounting in a hurry.

*Continuity in the Construction of a Jobseeker Who Is Not  
Well-Networked*

In our larger data, most interviewees framed social networks as important in finding employment (Haltia et al., [In Review](#)). Joel, however, constructs continuity of himself between the first and the follow-up interviews as a jobseeker and employee in relation to social networks and relations, stating that they have played no role for him:

<i>No help from social networks 2019</i>	<i>No help from social networks 2020</i>
P: Yeah, yeah. So what do you think, have your social connections affected how, where you have found work? (...)	P: Yeah, yeah. Right, did you know anyone or have social connections that you could use to get that job?
J: But in my, in my case it hasn't been like that—(...) I've just had to like—	J: No, I didn't have any connections to them, so, or to the industry in the first place, so I sorta had to (—) from scratch, from scratch, so—
P: Mm-hm.	
J: Build it all myself, so—	
P: Mm-m.	
J: The story that I tell when I apply, you know, that—	
P: Mm-hm, mm-hm, right.	
J: So there hasn't been like, well, it's not that I have that many social connections, but I do have some, so—	
P: Yeah.	

In the small stories above, Joel positions himself as a jobseeker who manages on his own without social networks. He is an active agent who creates and performs his own story for the potential employers without help from others. Again in contrast to an enterprising, networking and extroverted employee, Joel positions himself as a traditional good worker who relies on his own merits rather than on his networks. However, as it has been argued in prior research, besides meritocratic competence and abilities, the so-called enterprising abilities, including social skills, have become more and more important to prove one's employability in the eyes of prospective employers (see, e.g. Komulainen et al., [2011](#); Korhonen et al., [2012](#)).

*Change in the Construction of Experience as a Jobseeker  
and Employee*

As a mature student, Joel was older than most of his fellow students at business school, which was reflected in his educational and working life path. He had graduated in 2003 as an IT designer and had several years of work experience from the IT sector. He constructs change in his graduate identity in relation to age and work experience between the first and the follow-up interviews:

<i>Experienced jobseeker and employee 2019</i>	<i>Jobseeker and employee with too little experience 2020</i>
P: Yeah. Who do you think competes with you for the same jobs?	P: Hm. But how do you see your own age and education and experience, if you compare it to those, those umm, who went to university straight from upper secondary school and then got their like MAs quite quickly, so when you are competing for a job, where do you see yourself in that situation?
J: Well, I guess, well, the other students from there are actually my competitors, they compete for the same jobs, so—	J: Well, it's not that much better than what they have, so umm, it's like... like umm, I'm not quite sure, for my age I should have over 10 years of experience, but I have only four, so it's like, it can also be bad thing, like what have I done in between jobs, so (—) so.
P: Mm-hm.	
J: So I guess that played a role why I didn't really get along with them that much. So— (...)	
P: Mm-hm, mm-hm, mm-hm. Were you aware of it when you studied that they are like your competitors in the job market after you graduate?	
J: Yeah, definitely.	
P: Right, so you think that you have reflected, it has reflected on the relationships somehow?	
J: It might, well, it has actually reflected very much, so—	
P: Okay, yeah.	
J: So, umm, but I've tried to emphasise it at every stage, that I have [tries to find the word] previous work experience, so I've tried to use that to my advantage—	
P: Yeah.	
J: When it comes to work, you know.	
P: Yeah, yeah, compared to like younger people—	
J: Yeah.	
P: Then.	
J: That's something I've tried to use to my advantage, so...	
P: Right, so that's your trump card?	
J: Yeah, I do hope so—	

In the first interview, Joel negotiates sameness versus difference in relation to his fellow students who compete for the same jobs with him and with whom he preferred to keep some social distance. He compares himself with his fellow students and positions himself as more experienced in working life. He evaluates previous work experience as a merit that differentiates him from younger students and gives him a head start in the labour market. In line with our analysis above, Joel negotiates his graduate identity as a jobseeker: he does not construct himself as an enterprising jobseeker who is well-networked and would form social relations with his fellow students. Rather, he positions himself as a traditional employee who concentrates on accumulating work experience and merits to convince prospective employers.

In the follow-up interview, however, as Joel negotiates sameness versus difference, he constructs himself and younger jobseekers as being in the same situation with regard to employability. He no longer constructs age and work experience as his assets, but evaluates that he is lacking in work experience in relation to his age—he should have 10 and not four years of work experience—which is harmful in relation to his employability. This also reflects change in his identity positions: in the first interview, he positions himself as an experienced employee, whereas in the second interview he positions himself as an employee who lacks work experience with respect to his age. Linear accumulation of work experience without rupture and rapid progress in working life is constructed as an ideal that determines employability. Lack of work experience in relation to age needs to be negotiated in relation to fellow students and competitors as well as accounted for potential employers: “what I have done between jobs”.

### *Changing Positions Towards the Future and a Dream Job*

In line with our analysis above, Joel’s positioning in relation to future prospects and employability changes between the first and the follow-up interviews.

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#### *Future 2019*

P: Mm-hm, yeah, right, right. Well, how do you see your chances for employment and position in the job market?

J: Well, at the moment, it looks like they are quite good, like the jobs that I’ve applied to, applied to, I’d say the chances for employment are quite good (...) I see them as positive, so—

#### *Future 2020*

P: So, what do you think about your future work and working life?

J: Well, I’m slightly, slightly worried, worried about the future, as umm, I still can’t seem to find a job, but I still haven’t, I haven’t given up on it yet, you know?

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Joel sees his future as positive in 2019, and his work prospects are good. In 2020, however, he constructs change in relation to his employability, “I still can’t seem to find a job”. He constructs the situation as more pessimistic than in the first interview: “There are simply so many applicants for a single job, so it’s always like they have someone, someone better, a better option, so I guess that’s the reason, the reason for it, so”. He negotiates sameness versus difference in relation to other jobseekers and positions other jobseekers as better and more employable than he is. The crowded graduate labour market also provides a legitimate explanation for the difficulties of getting a job: unemployment is, thus, not constructed solely as an individual responsibility. Joel also negotiates agency in relation to employability: Am I a jobseeker worthy of employment? Nevertheless, he positions himself as a resilient, hard-working and active jobseeker, encouraging himself that he does not easily give up, but keeps looking for work.

<i>Dream job 2019</i>	<i>Dream job 2020</i>
P: Well, what do you think, what would be your dream job in the future?	J: Well, my dream would be some easy job in the city, like teaching financial administration at a vocation school or somewhere, and if I could get paid three thousand for it, it would be OK, and (-) experience grows, then it rises to four thousand, so it’s basically quite, there’s no reason to work your fingers to the bone anymore, you know, like there are so many irreplaceable people at the cemetery, so it’s like, I guess that at that some point, (my) dream job is an easier job, so at the moment it’s like that—
J: Well, I guess auditing would be a dream job.	
P: Mm-hm.	
J: And if I could then progress into being a slightly more experienced auditor, I guess that would be one	

While reflecting on the possible future in the first interview, Joel constructs accountancy as his dream job in which he would like to work and progress in more demanding tasks. In 2020, however, the possible future has changed, and he positions his dream job in the public sector and in teaching financial management in vocational education. He dreams of an “easy job” in teaching despite weaker wage developments. An easier job would enhance quality of life, and there would be no risk of burnout or falling ill. “Working your fingers to the bone” can be interpreted as an enterprising employee position in the hectic and stressful business world

that Joel constructs as undesirable. Instead, he prefers a teaching job that would allow easy work in the public sector. His position in relation to work has changed, and other things in life have become more meaningful: “The hurry actually had an impact, as it made me look at life outside of work, take care of this other life better, so in a way it shifted to a situation where work, work wasn’t as meaningful in life anymore, so”.

### NEGOTIATION OF GRADUATE IDENTITY IN RELATION TO EMPLOYABILITY IN SMALL STORIES

In this methodological chapter, we chose Joel’s narrative life history interviews conducted in autumn 2019 and 2020 as a case example to illustrate how the small story approach and narrative positioning analysis can be applied in the reading of follow-up interview data. Joel’s case example illustrates the temporally evolving positioning in relation to employability and, as such, reveals continuity and/or change in the ways graduate identity is constructed in situated interaction in the context of life history.

In contrast to the other participants in our larger HighEmploy research project, Joel’s educational and working life trajectory was not successful in the sense that the transition from HE to working life with a master’s degree in business and administration did not progress smoothly and as expected. His educational and working life trajectory consisted of many changes, and he had also been made redundant that created ruptures that needed to be legitimately accounted for the interviewer as well as for the imagined audience, especially prospective employers.

Our analysis illustrates how such ruptures as unemployment are negotiated in situated interaction in the small stories across time (Bamberg, 1997, 2004). This is fruitful, as such analysis makes ideals related to employability visible in a situation where these ideals are broken (Korhonen et al., 2020). We read Joel’s small stories as accounts for making a difficult and tragic situation understandable in relation to enterprising ideals of employability (Laalo et al., 2019). A good and valuable employee is active, independent but also networking, resilient and hard-working, and manages a heavy workload in hectic working life; he continually develops himself and accumulates work experience without “gaps” in the CV. The small story approach makes visible the socially constructed conditions for identity negotiations: Am I good enough as an employee in the graduate labour market and in the world of business?

Based on the small story approach and narrative positioning analysis, two main narratives can be interpreted across the small stories analysed in this chapter. Joel's interpretations construct continuity in relation to his graduate identity as a traditional good worker and as a resilient and active jobseeker and change in his identity positioning in relation to employability. These narratives also clash: the graduate identity of a traditional good worker is not positioned as employable in the graduate labour market that demands such qualities as being active, autonomous, innovative, problem-solving, enterprising, energetic and well-networked (Laalo et al., 2019). Despite and because of difficulties in job-search, however, as a traditional good worker, Joel constructs agency as a resilient employee and jobseeker. He also constructs an alternative possible future as "easy" teaching in the public sector, as other things besides work have become important in life.

Joel constructs continuity in positioning himself as a traditional good, hard-working and meticulous employee, not as a middle-class enterprising employee (see also Skeggs, 2004; Siivonen et al., 2016). In the small stories constructed in the follow-up interview, he positions himself as a good but not as valuable and the right kind of worker who manages in hectic working life. As Skeggs (2005) argues, the possibility to position oneself as an "enterprising self" is quite different for those coming from a working-class background. Also Joel's "traditional" rather than "enterprising" graduate identity can be interpreted in relation to his social background; his family background was non-academic and his parents worked in blue-collar jobs.

## CONCLUSION

As we have tried to make visible in this chapter, the small story approach and narrative positioning analysis permit subtle and systematic reading and analysis of graduate identity in relation to employability in narrative follow-up research. The chapter contributes to extant literature in two important ways. First, it provides a contribution to employability research on graduate identity as a process across time (see also, e.g., Holmes, 2013, 2015). Our reading of Joel's case example illustrates how graduate identity is under continuous negotiation in the labour market, relating not only to employment and/or unemployment (cf., Holmes, 2013, 2015), but also to the ideals related to employability that a graduate worthy of employment is expected to meet. The need for continuous negotiation of graduate identity implies that there is no single end-point in employability,

such as a set of skills or attributes (see, e.g., Holmes, 2013, 2015), that could be developed or measured as an HE outcome. Instead, employability is a socially constructed and mediated process in which identity work has become salient and critical to pursuing opportunities and success in working life (Siivonen et al., 2020). Moreover, making visible the negotiation of graduate identity in relation to normative ideals also brings forth inequalities related to, for example, the social class inherent in the employability discourse: enterprising graduate identity is not equally available for those coming from a working-class background. Consequently, good employees may be viewed as not good enough if they do not display enterprising qualities related to the neoliberal ideals of employability. This is a challenge for both employees and employers: the former looking for work, the latter looking for capable workforce. This is also a challenge that cannot be solved by graduates alone.

Second, the chapter contributes to the literature on qualitative longitudinal research methodology, which has only rarely been examined in extant literature (see, however, Korhonen et al., 2020). Follow-up interviews generated at two time points (2019, 2020) allow the analysis of continuity and change of graduate identity across time, while the small story approach permits the nuanced analysis of juxtaposed accounts generated at these two time points and pertaining to the same themes. The small story approach allows the narrative analysis of continuity and/or change of graduate identity as an emergent phenomenon, making diverse positionings in relation to employability visible. Moreover, the theory of identity dilemmas (Bamberg, 2011) provides a useful tool to analyse the negotiation of continuity and change of graduate identity across time. In the qualitative research methodology literature, life story research has often focused on the creation of coherence (Linde, 1993) rather than on interaction-oriented analysis of temporally evolving positioning activities through which continuity and/or change in relation to graduate identity is negotiated. Such tendencies have been criticised as middle-class as the focus on the creation of coherence marginalises different kinds of stories told by diverse individuals and groups (Hyvärinen et al., 2010). The small story approach, however, does not exclude or marginalise but includes the diversity of stories and fragments of talk in the analysis as the interest lies both in the multiplicity and in the sameness.

Combining the small story approach and narrative positioning analysis with the reading of narrative life history allows the analysis of the meanings constructed in the situated interaction of small stories in the context

of life history. This approach also allows the analysis of such life historical positions as class. In this chapter, our aim has been to illustrate with Joel's case example the construction and negotiation of continuity and/or change across time in relation to (employable) graduate identity in a situation where the HE graduate labour market transition has not progressed smoothly or as expected. However, we acknowledge that although Joel's case example is interesting in terms of continuity and change, the small stories consist of only a little reflexivity and negotiation. In our project, it is also an exceptional case. Nevertheless, we suggest that the methodological approach presented and illustrated in this chapter is an important contribution to future research for examining employability as a processual rather than possessive phenomenon (see Holmes, 2013), as it permits the analysis of different kinds of stories and positionings across time.

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## Epilogue

*Michael Tomlinson*

This edited collection has offered conceptually informed and innovative scholarship on graduate employability. The approach developed in these chapters has been informed by sociological, social-psychological and philosophical approaches which recognise the relational dimension of employability across different institutional levels. In shifting analysis away from normative and performative framings of ‘what works’ and ‘how can it be best measured’, the chapters presented here capture the socially constructed nature of employability. In different ways, the authors have applied a range of socio-cultural, social-psychological and philosophical lenses in understanding how employability is enacted and negotiated by different stakeholders. Such approaches offer an advanced and nuanced framing of this problem through the application of diverse conceptual frameworks and methodological approaches.

The problems with dominant policy approaches to employability have been discussed during this collection and elsewhere. Despite policy influencers continuing to foreground immediate and measurable graduate outcomes ahead of sustainable and meaningful employability across working life, there have been some important developments in the field. One has

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also been the expansion of research adopting a more processual perspective that troubles the restrictive temporal framing of employability as simply the preparation for initial employment. The dominant depiction of graduate employability as finding and maintaining employment confines individuals' employability to initial job entry and the presentation of skills or achievements gained before entry. Reorienting towards a more processual analysis is important for understanding both how individuals manage the transition from education to the labour market and how they negotiate their career development across their working life, especially as this is not likely to be stable.

The way individuals manage the transition from education or training into initial careers and work roles has consequences for understanding employability as both a process and an outcome. As a process, this needs to be actively negotiated through different employment cycles and stages, including recruitment, initial training, changes within professional roles and beyond (De Vos et al., 2020). Essentially, a processual and interactional perspective acknowledges how employability is contextually mediated and enacted by employers and employees through over time and different contexts (Forrier et al., 2018; Holmes, 2013). It is not statically owned and possessed in transactional terms, rather it is a process of becoming and rebecoming; of continual negotiation across job roles, workplace context, time and place: all within a fluctuating labour market.

As revealed in its title, this collection has embraced a more contextual and critical framing of graduates' employment realities beyond individualistic or reductive depictions of how individuals fare in the labour market. Employability is not simply a private exchange between employees and employers; instead, its meaning is derived in and through context. Whatever individuals privately own in terms of skills and human capital only gains relevance in the contexts in which this is appraised, applied and further enriched. Whilst some of the chapters here have explored graduates' subjective positionings and schematic frameworks within the labour process, this is further contextualised through individuals' educational and work trajectories and their interaction with wider social forces and influences, not least pertaining to students' and graduates' socio-cultural milieu.

There has been a greater emphasis on seeing employability as a multi-stakeholder problem, including the mediatory role of those operating at the demand-side of the labour market: employers. Shifting the approach from supply-side factors, and purely the agential effort of individuals, to

demand-side, and other external boundary conditions, allows the remit of analysis to extend to contextual mediators that influence the extent to which graduates can capitalise on their potential and capabilities. The workplace context becomes a significant reference in the employer-graduate interaction, and demand-side factors are crucial influences in framing how graduates' career potential is facilitated and further realised. Relatedly, the role of employers is not simply about regulating the flow of signals provided by the highly qualified or discerning different types of graduate talent, a process that has been shown to be skewed towards specific graduates (Handley, 2018). Instead, this entails appropriating the potential economic value graduates have and further boosting this during key employment phases, including processes of skills formation and workplace learning that are significant to the formation and ongoing enhancement of employees' human capital (Makarius & Stevens, 2019).

### WAYS FORWARD IN THE FIELD

The field of research in this area has clearly expanded over the past decade, even though much research continues to be confined to pedagogic approaches concerning how employability can be enhanced at an institutional level. Some of this research has pointed towards innovative approaches, including the advancement of strategic interventions within institutions to enhance graduates' employability before they transition to the labour market (Bennett, 2019; Bridgstock & Jackson, 2019; Dalrymple et al., 2021). The more encouraging of these have moved beyond 'employability skills' development towards more wholistic notions of career management, the integration of formal, co- and extracurricula dimensions, and the construction of future professional identities (Jackson, 2019; Tuononen et al., 2019).

There will undoubtedly be a continued appetite amongst employability-focused practitioners and other strategic decision-makers in HE for developing and embedding efficacious practices that help enrich graduates' preparedness for a challenging labour market. A challenge moving forward is finding a balance between strategic approaches that have a pragmatic orientation and those that acknowledge employability as a lifelong process that is shaped by a multiplicity of factors, not least the condition of the labour market and other external societal events. Despite, therefore, the considerable body of literature on graduate employability that has emerged over the past few decades (see Artess et al., 2017; Dalrymple

et al., 2021; Tomlinson, 2012), the need for further innovative, conceptual and critical scholarship is ever more pressing.

One welcome development has been the conceptual reframing from employability as skills and attributes towards richer, dynamic and socially referenced forms of capital and identities (Clarke, 2018; Peeters et al., 2019; Tomlinson, 2017). This development has brought into stronger focus the types of employment-related resources that graduates acquire over the course of their education and work-related and wider life experiences which can potentially empower them when negotiating different labour market fields. This is an important development as it emphasises how the formation of a range of social, cultural, identity and psychological capitals works towards shaping how graduates develop and present their career narratives. Further research is needed on this area, including the interrelationship between capital development and related forms of career learning and the formation of capitals through work-related experiences and different career stages (Brown et al., 2022). More longitudinal and cross-organisational analysis would help explore the development and mobilisation of capitals over the course of graduates' working life.

Welcome also are methodological advancements that can chart the intersectional influence on graduates' career development and outcomes. Key contingent factors in graduates' socio-cultural profiles, not least their socio-economic profile, gender and ethnicity, have been shown to have some bearing on graduates' career prospects, but they are often treated independently rather than interactively. Moreover, how these further interact with region, sector and organisational types would help build a comprehensive picture of mediatory contextual drivers in graduates' employment experience and outcomes. Employability continues to raise important ethical and distributional questions, including access to competitive and sought-after economic returns. In social equity terms, we would support further research that explored the career trajectories and outcomes of 'at-risk' groups, including those with special educational needs, disabilities or mental health challenges. There is also a need for further research on the employability and career progression of international graduates, both in home and returning contexts (Nghia et al., 2019; Pham, 2021). This would enable better understanding, for example, of important interactions between agency and structure, including how international graduates are able to acquire and mobilise career capital and work identities and the extent to which these are delimited (or otherwise) by structural barriers.

Moving forward, measures of graduate outcomes including those linked to graduates' career success require further enhancement to capture what constitutes appropriate and meaningful graduate work. Graduate surveys need to complement both 'objective' markers of graduate success with 'subjective' dimensions, including how much meaning, value and autonomy they derive from work and how much they are able to utilise their skills and talents. By extension, key dimensions including job quality, meaningfulness, well-being and dignity need to be more prominent features of future outcome surveys.

We support the continued integration of graduate employment and career development literatures as advocated by different researchers (Akkermans & Kubasch, 2017; Healy et al., 2022), which would potentially result in greater theoretical and methodological enrichment across these fields of research. Certainly, there can be further conceptual openness within employability research towards informative career development research, including conceptual lenses from career development scholarship. The latter may also find some enrichment from the institutional and sociological approaches used in employability research. This also extends to a potentially fruitful interplay between the research literatures of graduate entrepreneurship and employability, including shared conceptual repertoires that might exist between these two fields (Eriksson et al., 2021).

We have entered a period of major social and economic upheaval emanating from not only the global economic recession of 2008 but also more recent challenges following COVID-19, inflationary pressures and domestic and international political turbulence. This has also occurred at a time of significant digital innovation and disruption with attendant debates about the future of work, impacts on skills distribution, employment stability and a decline in so-called middle-level jobs. Whilst the effect of these changes impacts across the workforce, those entering the labour market for the first time, including university graduates, are potentially most affected. School leavers and graduates are potentially most impacted by these developments, including risks of early employment scarring, so research is needed to chart longer-term effects and specific ways in which different societal and economic changes shape future graduate opportunities and outcomes.

At this significant social and economic juncture, profound implications emerge for public policy and how the policy, practitioner and academic community might approach understanding the relationship between

adult, post-compulsory and higher education and the changing economy. Central to these challenges is providing further insight, novel ideas and practical scope that can help enrich both the preparation of university graduates and the quality and value of their future working lives. There remains considerable scope and opportunity in this field.

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