

Serial number 0191
Title 'Talent-spotting' or 'social magic'? Inequality, cultural sorting and constructions of the ideal graduate in elite professions
Session Critical reflections on graduate careers: academic and practitioner perspectives (Scurry)
Submitter Dr. Nicola Ingram, Dr Kim Allen

'Talent-spotting' or 'social magic'? Inequality, cultural sorting and constructions of the ideal graduate in elite professions

Graduate employability is an enduring imperative in Higher Education policy. It has also been central to national social mobility agendas and the current policy discourse of 'fair access to the professions'. High-status occupations are disproportionately composed of those from socially privileged backgrounds and inequalities within graduate transitions and earnings, related to social class, gender and ethnicity, remain stubbornly persistent. While much work on graduate transitions has focused on the experiences of students and graduates themselves, or on surveys of the destinations of graduates, this paper provides an original focus on top graduate employer practices through a discourse analysis of their recruitment material. We demonstrate that, despite espousing values of meritocracy and inclusivity, recruitment and selection practices privilege a certain type of student: one who is able to mobilise particular valued forms of capital, who is aligned with particular universities and who has particular orientations to their future. This paper exposes the ways that graduate employers' constructions of the ideal and employable graduate reproduce inequalities in access to 'top jobs'. Using Bourdieusian concepts of 'Social Magic' (1992) and 'Institutional Habitus' (Burke et al 2013) we demonstrate how graduate recruitment and selection practices operate as mechanisms of cultural sorting and exclusion which mitigate against the achievement of more equitable higher education outcomes.

The notion of graduate employability has recently increased in prominence in national policy. Universities are under increasing pressure to demonstrate that they are actively cultivating employability and prospective students are encouraged to consider employability as part of their university decision-making. This has been further cemented by the recent HE White Paper (BIS 2016a) which commits to making available 'authoritative' data on graduate outcomes and enable both students and central government to hold universities to account (2016: 58). Data on employability outcomes are also likely to be one of the core metrics used in the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) (BIS [2016b](#)). With employability located as a legitimate means to 'value' universities, such policy measures further reproduce the dominant conceptualization of higher education as a commodity that is valued only in terms of its economic benefits and outcomes.

As Behile (2016) notes, the employment of graduates in non-graduate jobs is more concentrated among certain groups such as 'those from lower socio-economic groups and those who graduated from lower tariff higher education institutions' (2016: 4). Age, gender, the subject taken and class of degree also appear to play a role ([Behile 2016](#)). Recent analysis of graduate outcome data reinforced this, demonstrating

stubbornly persistent inequalities in graduate employment rates and earning. For example, HEFCE data shows that White, male and middle class graduates have the highest employability rates (HEFCE 2016). Graduates from wealthier backgrounds earn significantly more after graduation than those from poorer backgrounds, even after completing the same degrees from the same universities (Britton et al 2016) suggesting a 'class ceiling' at work for those who do manage to access more elite sectors (Friedman and Laurson 2016).

There is also considerable variation in graduate earnings depending on university attended (Britton et al 2016). Wakeling and Savage's analysis of Great British Class Survey data (2015; 2016) demonstrates distinct stratification in graduate outcomes, locating a preponderance of alumni from a 'golden triangle' of elite institutions (Oxbridge and a cluster of London institutions) within the 'elite' class. The importance of socio-economic background, institution and geography in channeling access to the 'top jobs' has been recognized in national social mobility agendas and the current policy discourse of 'fair access to the professions' (Kirby 2016; SMCP 2014; 2015). Research demonstrates that high-status occupations are disproportionately composed of those from socially privileged backgrounds, and this is widely recognised as inhibiting the achievement of a socially mobile and meritocratic society. In response to the higher pitch of public and policy discourse around social mobility, some graduate employers have committed to transforming recruitment processes by, for example, removing education details from applications (Coughlan 2015). Others have been encouraged to sign up to (voluntary) initiatives such as the Government's Social Mobility Business Compact (<https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/social-mobility-business-compact>) and Social Mobility Employers Index (<http://www.socialmobility.org.uk/social-mobility-employer-index/>).

Despite valuable work on students' experiences of employability (and to a lesser extent on how HEI's support employability (e.g. Allen et al 2012; 2013; Pegg et al 2012)) there is a paucity of research examining the role of employers within this process. A notable exception is Ashley et al's (2015) study of elite law and professional service firms who found that, despite commitments to social inclusion and assertions of meritocratic values, firms' hiring strategies privileged middle-class graduates from elite institutions. Drawing on a Bourdieusian framework, Ashley and colleagues argue that this entailed screening applicants based on their possession of forms of capital that chime with those of existing staff and are seen to best represent the firm's image. Likewise Allen et al's (2012; 2013) research with employers within the creative industries found that their perceptions about which graduates 'fit' their organisation tended to privilege white, male and middle-class graduates.

Interventions such as these, that shift the critical spotlight onto employers' practices, are vital and necessary. Considering the practices of graduate employers helps to disrupt dominant policy discourses of HE which largely place the impetus on institutions to address problems of graduate employability, including poor outcomes for disadvantaged students, by enhancing industry links and molding students into ideal graduates who are fit for the labour market. In particular, policies and interventions that seek to 'level the playing field' by providing working class students with access to networks or raise their confidence and 'resilience' reproduce a deficit view of working

class students where to become employable they must become middle-class. In focusing on making students more employable, employers are excused from reflecting on how their recruitment practices may exclude certain groups.

Intervening into this space, this paper interrogates the hiring practices of graduate employers to consider how these contribute to social exclusion from elite professions and reproduce inequalities in graduate outcomes. While large-scale destinations data provides important insights into who goes where, they cannot explicate why this is so. Qualitative analysis of employers' practices helps us to get beneath these patterns to generate a more fine-grained understanding of *how* inequalities in graduate employment are (re)produced: to tease out the processes by which some groups get 'top jobs' and others do not.