

**Serial number** 0257  
**Title** Exploring Institutional Habitus in the Development of Career Capital of Graduates  
**Session** Critical reflections on graduate careers: academic and practitioner perspectives (Scurry)  
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## **Exploring institutional habitus in the development of career capital of graduates**

### **Introduction**

Graduate development programmes are often held up as *the* labour market outcome for graduates to aspire to. Used to develop what in today's organisational terms would be regarded as 'pools of talent' from which future leadership requirements can be met, these programmes are well established in the public and private sector. These programmes can be seen to offer participants the opportunity to build career capital (knowing why, knowing how, know who) (DeFillipi and Arthur, 1994) to add to the educational capital that they have already accumulated. Surprisingly however, despite their history, their status within the graduate labour market and the large numbers of graduates entering such programmes – they have received limited critical attention from academic researchers. Against a backdrop of the UK mass higher education system, which arguably rests on the notion that individuals are able to develop 'capitals' (economic, social, cultural) that they can deploy to advance their future career outcomes, it is unsurprising that much of the existing work on graduate careers has a tendency to overemphasise individual effort and the role of agency. This 'meritocratic' framing of higher education and the 'returns' of individual investment in it has begun to receive criticism for failing to acknowledge barriers (for example, social class and geographic location) that can influence the extent to which individuals are able to access, develop and deploy 'capitals' to achieve 'desirable' career outcomes and advancement (Burke et al., 2016).

We propose that there is a need for an examination of the experiences of how graduates careers unfold within graduate development programme and respond to calls to re-embed our understanding of graduates early career experiences within wider social theory (Chudzikowski and Mayrhofer, 2011). We explore the development of career capital of graduates through

exploring the interaction between individual and structure. Building on Bourdieu's (1984) work that attempts to combine structure and agency we apply the concept of institutional habitus to examine the development of career capital of graduates (Burke et al., 2013). In doing so we aim to understand the social practice within graduate development programmes and consider the role of the individual in developing and deploying capital.

### **Methodology**

This paper seeks to contribute to our understanding of graduate careers through an analysis of the experiences of individuals within a UK public sector graduate development programme - which we refer to as Grad Scheme to ensure anonymity. The empirical material from this paper was collected in 2012 and taken from organisational material (recruitment website, manuals etc.) semi-structured interviews with participants on the programme (n- 48) and line managers (n-3). Interviews were on average 60 minutes in length and were conducted face-to-face or by telephone. All interviews were taped and transcribed.

### **Findings and discussion**

From the accounts of the participants, the institutional habitus of Grad Scheme can be described as expecting graduates to be pro-active and self-sufficient reflected in the need for them to identify and secure for themselves opportunities for professional development and training. In addition there were clear expectations that graduates would be able to move between different posts within the institution, some with very little connection to the previous experience – reflecting expectations of versatility, transferable skills and an ability to cope with change. All of these expectations were underpinned by the general understanding that graduates would excel in their positions most easily demonstrated through successful promotion. These expectations were put into action through the institution's practices and character. The organization of the institution was described as unstructured, particularly in comparison with other graduate programs, it operated through a "hands off" management style and had quite an informal system for internal recruitment/promotion both in terms of advertising and selection.

Within this context graduates demonstrated an ability to successfully negotiate the institutional space, or what is often referred to in Bourdieusian terms as "playing the game". Graduates' ability to manoeuvre within the institutional space manifested itself through both their

sophisticated understanding of the “rules of the game” and subsequently their ability to put their understanding into practice. Graduates pointed to the need to become acquainted with the power brokers within the institution and have the “right” resume of previous postings going forward.

However a key finding to emerge in our analysis is the importance of an a-priori capital –that is an existing knowledge of how the game is played - in influencing how individuals were able to navigate the development programme to develop career capitals (or not!). Similar to previous research by Jones (2013) on the classed nature of university admissions procedure, here too the graduates were expected to carry certain cultural competencies to get in and get on within the programme.

### **Conclusion and implications**

We conclude that there is a need to acknowledge the highly relational nature of graduate development programmes. In particular the need to consider how the cultural and social practices that operate within such programmes serve to shape the development and deployment of career capitals. The research highlights the value of drawing on the concept of institutional habitus to examine the ‘dispositions’ and competences that organisations require and how these are encouraged and rewarded through education within graduate development programmes. Our analysis highlights how within graduate development programmes, organisations encourage certain ‘dispositions’ and competence and how organisations privilege or potentially exclude certain groups. Overall our findings highlight the need for a more nuanced and multi-level understanding of graduate development programmes that acknowledges organisational context and interrelated actors. We outline an agenda for future research and consider the implications for a range of stakeholder audiences including careers and employability professionals, those responsible for the design and implementation of graduate development programmes in organisations and for graduates themselves.

### **References**

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