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Beyond individuals' employment outcomes: wellbeing and career clarity insights from UK graduates' higher education journeys.

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Abstract: The dominant discourse about the role of higher education (HE) tends to focus on its suitability for preparing graduates for employment, measured by labour market outcomes such as graduate-level employment or wages at the expense of graduates' wellbeing and broader values. We address this gap by investigating how students' career ideas affect their wellbeing after graduation. We draw on career construction and subjective well-being frameworks informed by sociological research and use data from the longitudinal Futuretrack survey focusing on UK students' journeys through HE into the labour market. We use regression analysis to explore how 'career clarity' about future occupations affects job and life satisfaction outcomes, and analyse how these relationships are affected by subject studied and work experience undertaken. The diverse HE journeys we present illustrate the variety of factors associated with graduates' wellbeing that could be incorporated into developing a more holistic understanding of graduate transitions to employment.

Paper: In the context of higher education expanding faster than the supply of so-called 'graduate jobs' (Lauder & Mayhew, 2020, Elias & Purcell, 2013) and the fragmentation of the 'traditional career' (Rubery, 2015), graduates in the UK are positioned as 'entrepreneurs of the self' creating opportunities and developing their own employability skills (Edmond, 2017). At the same time, graduates' transitions to employment have been becoming more uncertain, turbulent, and prolonged, with over a third of graduates working in non-graduate jobs even several years after graduation (e.g. Clegg, 2017, the proportion is higher for recent graduates). The dominant discourse about the role of higher education (HE) in the UK is almost exclusively focused on its suitability for preparing graduates for employment, measured by labour market outcomes such as graduate-level employment or wages. However, graduates' wellbeing, values and broader ideas about the role of HE warrant further attention. We address this gap by investigating how strength of 'career clarity' (clarity of ideas about future careers, see, for example, Chan (2017)) at different stages of the university experience affects graduates' wellbeing after graduation. We argue that the dominant individual agency perspective on graduate employability is problematic, underplaying structural barriers to graduate employment as well as wider, non-labour-market issues.

We draw on career construction (Savickas et al., 2009), career adaptability (Akkermans et al., 2018), and subjective well-being frameworks (e.g. Ramos & Lopez, 2018) informed by sociological and psychological research. We use data from the rich, nationally representative, longitudinal *Futuretrack*

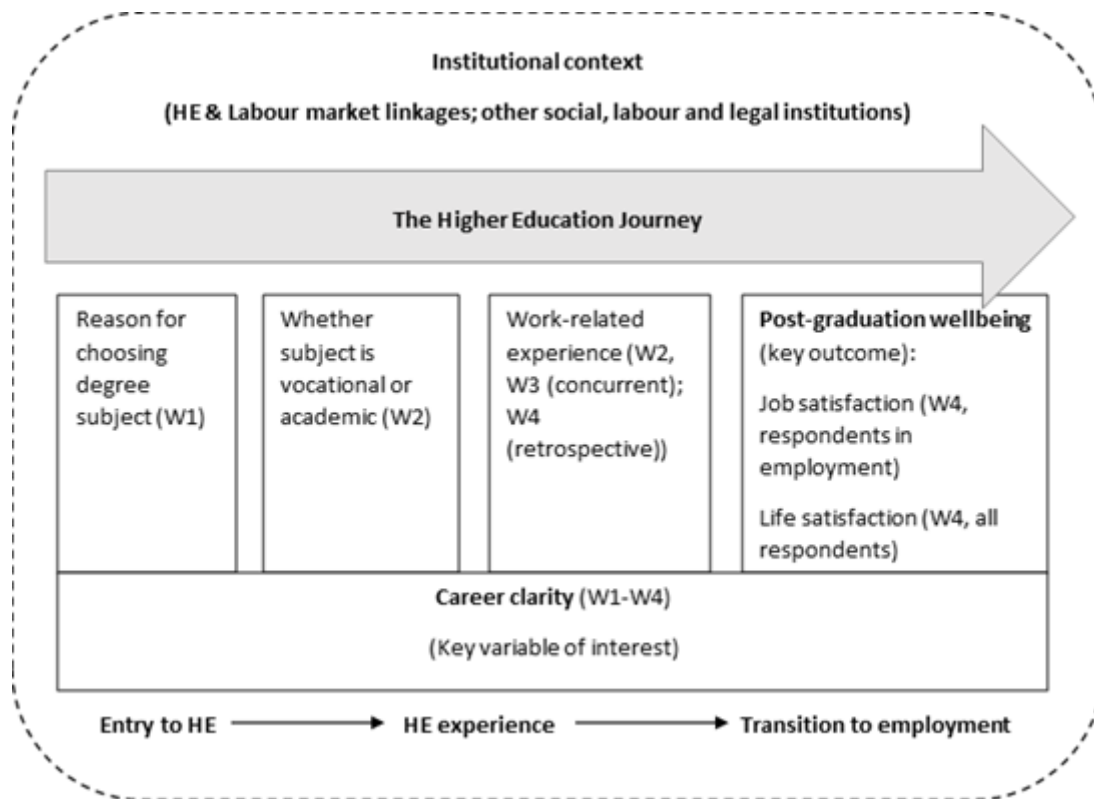
survey, which followed entrants to full-time HE in the UK in 2005/06 through their HE experiences to their early post-graduation outcomes (labour market entry, further study, or other activities). Although this cohort graduated over ten years ago, insight into *Futuretrackers'* experiences especially pertinent today as a basis for comparison for current students' situation (Johnson, 2020). The *Futuretrack* cohort graduated into a particularly turbulent labour market following the 2008 financial crisis, while current students graduating into an uncertain economic environment related to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Our methodological approach exploits the longitudinal nature of *Futuretrack*, allowing us to explore changes in students' career clarity through their HE journeys, using four waves of the survey, wave 1 (entry to HE), wave 2 (one year in HE), wave 3 (end of 3- or 4-year degree course) and wave 4 (1.5-2.5 years after graduation), as depicted in Figure 1. We use regression analysis (linear and logistic regression) to explore relationships between career clarity about future occupations (key variable of interest) and job and life satisfaction outcomes and to explore how these relationships are affected by students' choices about the subject studied, work experience undertaken, and value orientation (e.g. respondents' perceived importance of achieving high financial reward, job security, making a positive contribution to society, or being concerned about the ethics of their employer, etc.).

Our preliminary linear regression analyses suggested that career clarity scores at the time of applying to higher education and one year in (survey waves 1 and 2) were not significantly related to either job satisfaction or to life satisfaction post-graduation. However, career clarity scores in the last year of the undergraduate degree (wave 3) and especially at the post-graduation stage (wave 4) were positively and significantly associated with both job and life satisfaction outcomes. These preliminary results seem to suggest that students' ideas about career clarity in the beginning of their HE journey matter less for their wellbeing after graduation than scores later in the HE journey and after graduation. However, further analyses are required to see how HE degree choice, work experience and values affect graduates' job and life satisfaction outcomes in the career clarity-wellbeing framework. We will also explore how the relationships discussed above vary by respondents' socioeconomic background, gender, ethnicity and health status.

By critically reviewing the varied journeys that graduates have undertaken, we challenge the prioritisation of graduates as 'entrepreneurs of the self' and of attention to career readiness at the expense of overlooking wider issues and inequalities. In the dominant employability discourse, structural barriers are internalised as individual responsibility and ability in accessing graduate jobs. Our research makes a contribution to addressing this problem, illustrating the variety of factors associated with graduates' wellbeing that could be incorporated into the understanding of graduate transitions to employment in a more holistic way, and by looking at different stages of HE journeys. Our research also makes a theoretical contribution to literature on graduates' wellbeing in their transitions to work, as well as practical contributions to students, careers advisers and policymakers.

References: Figure 1



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