

## Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (Included Submissions)

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Understanding old and new inequalities in graduate employment: bridging Bernstein and Bourdieu

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**Research Domain:** Employability, enterprise and graduate careers (EE)

**Abstract:** While investment in higher education is at the forefront of the policy agenda, to form high-skilled lifelong learning individuals, the economic crisis of 2008 and the covid pandemic that followed have brought changes in the labour market, increasing difficulties of access, competition and precaritization. In this context, it is crucial to understand how social inequality persists and in what ways it operates through higher education for one's access to relevant employment and sustainable career. The paper investigates structuring forms of transition from higher education to work by elaborating a holistic approach to discuss the role of HE curriculum and its intersection with social class. This research adds to the field of research in graduate employability by emphasizing the affordances of a Bernsteinian approach to HE curriculum, rarely used in this field, and its articulation with Pierre Bourdieu's theory of practice, to provide a novel account of the heterogeneity of graduate transitions to employment.

**Paper:**

Investment in higher education systems is set at the forefront of the policy agenda, to form high-skilled lifelong learning individuals who can contribute to the development of a knowledge-based economy. Young people are called to enhance their entrepreneurship, and embrace flexibility, including their capacity to move within the labour market. At the same time, youth employment conditions have significantly deteriorated in the global North, especially after the economic downturn of 2008 followed by the 2020 pandemic crisis. The possibility for highly skilled youth to access sustainable careers in their field of study is being put into question. In this context, it is crucial to understand how social inequality persists and in what ways, old and new, inequalities operate through higher education for one's employment and social mobility.

The paper presented seeks to contribute to the scholarly debate on understanding structuring forms of transition from higher education to work in contemporary societies. Specifically, it attempts to elaborate a holistic approach in order to discuss the role of HE curriculum and its intersection with social class. This research adds to the field of research in graduate employability by emphasizing the affordances of a Bernsteinian approach (2000), rarely used in this field, and its articulation with Pierre Bourdieu's theory (1997; 1998), to provide a novel account of the heterogeneity of graduate transitions to employment. A fundamental contribution of this study is to associate the two theoretical frameworks in a way that power relations 'external' to higher education are considered alongside 'relations within' higher education itself. The first is provided by a bourdieusian analysis, based on a theory of practice, the field-habitus-capital nexus, the second by a Bernsteinian analysis founded on a structuralist sociology of the curriculum and of knowledge structures. Reconnecting

with sociological theory seems crucial in order to grasp the role of educational structures and how these can interact with the labour market in individual life pathways.

The results derive from a research project 'YouthTrams' (2019-2021) which adopts a mixed-methods research design, combining quantitative survey data of university graduates (from 2009 to 2020, n=785) with narratives of transition from higher education to work of 80 graduates. The project focuses on the case of Humanities and Social Sciences, whose graduates, as a result also of the impact of crisis and austerity on the public and third sectors, are more disadvantaged, frequently found in mismatch, under- or unemployment. The study considered graduates from different categories of fields of study within the same academic sector to understand common features as well as potentially divergent patterns with regard to their relation with employment, by using Bernstein's typology of educational structures: a) singulars or discipline-based fields of study (Type A, i.e. History, Sociology, Political Science, Psychology, Classical and Modern Greek Studies), b) old regions or profession-centred fields (Type B, i.e. Primary Education, Law, Journalism, Social Work), c) New market-oriented regions of knowledge (Type C, i.e. Communication and Internet Studies, European Studies).

The articulation of Bernstein's theoretical framework with Bourdieu's allows grasping specific forms of social inequality that can result from higher education and can enhance our understanding, policy and practice for tackling them. The findings raise questions about social inequality related to three points. The first derives from the degree of specialisation of knowledge and pedagogic identity that graduates acquire from HE, based on relations of hierarchy and segmentation internal to a given HE curriculum. This refers to the question of transferability of competencies and thus the potential of mobility for graduates, that is how graduates can move between occupational areas, horizontally, associated however to one's social mobility. The second question related to social inequality emerges from the degree of control and regulation over access to relevant employment, that can be collective, based on professional bodies for instance, institutionalized or not. This bares the issue of (in)visibility of rule for graduates to recognize and thus realize successful transitions, whether these are more direct and with clearly set-pathway or indirect, requiring more elaborated strategies for securing access into an occupational area.

The study reveals that the effects of stratified social backgrounds could be better understood by shedding light on their specific intersections with stratifying educational structures in 'high participation systems' (Marginson 2016). Moreover, these intersections appear to take particular forms in a given societal context such as labour market crisis, like Cyprus, which should be further explored. Finally, as regards policy debate, the observations suggest that understanding the mismatch between higher education and employment requires moving beyond readings of dichotomy between a negative and a positive pole based on higher education adequacy towards the labour market or even employers' demand. This requires identifying and providing a comprehensive insight into social processes that shape graduates' perceptions and enactment of employability in their transitions to work and enable grasping the social heterogeneity.

**References:** Bernstein, B. 2000. *Pedagogy, Symbolic Control, and Identity: Theory, Research, Critique*. London: Rowman & Littlefield.

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