

180 Is work experience during higher education gendered?: Access and outcomes in the UK

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Research Domains

Employability, enterprise and graduate careers (EE)

Abstract

In this article, we compare the early career outcomes of women and men after completing their first HE qualification in the UK. We problematise the individualised concept of career and employability as dependent only on individuals' efforts and decisions ignoring structural constraints on their choices, and the role of employer demand in labour market outcomes. We use longitudinal graduate tracking survey data from the UK (Futuretrack) to investigate graduates' transitions into the labour market. Using regression analysis, we investigate how the opportunity to access work experience activities during undergraduate education varies by gender. We then look at the labour market outcomes (getting a job, wages and perceived skills match) associated with different work experience activities. We find that access to and outcomes of work experience are gendered in the UK, shedding light on the gendered organisation of HE and labour market transition.

Full paper

Introduction

Work experience and the development of employability skills have become an essential aspect of higher education and early experiences in the labour market. However, the benefits are not evenly distributed among individuals (Hunt and Scott, 2018; Bradley and Waller, 2018; Bathmaker et al., 2013). Inequalities along social class and gender lines continue to affect students' participation in and outcomes of work experience activities. Consequently, if work experience activities continue to be uncritically promoted as a way for students to improve their chances of employment after graduation, this approach runs the risk of reproducing existing labour market inequalities rather than improving labour market outcomes for less privileged students.

Methods and analysis

In this study, we examine the early career outcomes of women and men who have completed their first higher education qualification in the UK. We question the notion of individualized careers and employability, which solely relies on individuals' efforts and decisions, disregarding the structural constraints they face and the impact of employer demand on labour market outcomes. We analyse longitudinal data from a nationally-representative graduate tracking survey in the UK (Futuretrack) to explore how graduates transition into the labour market.

The most popular type of work experience done by UK HE students was a structured work placement, undertaken by around 20% of respondents, followed by a sandwich placement (11%) and a vacation internship with an employer (9%). [1] Around a quarter of respondents also did unpaid work to get useful career-related experience. Over half of respondents did some form of paid work, whether for career-related experience or for the money only (54%). Only 19% of respondents did not do any work-related activity during higher education.

Through regression analysis, we investigate gender differences in accessing work experience opportunities (including a sandwich year undergraduate placement, shorter structured work placement/s integral to course, and a vacation internship with an employer, among others) during undergraduate education (N ≈ 9,000). Next, we examine how different types of work experience activities are associated with labour market outcomes (N ≈ 5,000-6,000), including job attainment, wages, and the perceived match of skills in their job. We also take into account whether graduates did any paid work while at university, and control for individual (e.g. socio-economic background, age, ethnicity, etc.) and HE-level (region, HEI type, subject studied, etc.) factors. We use logistic regression for all regressions, except for wages, where we use linear regression. To account for selection issues (if there is an unobserved and non-measured factor, such as 'motivation', that affects individuals' likelihood of taking on a work-related activity and their employment outcomes), we look at getting a job, wages and perceived skills match for graduates in employment only (Puhani, 2000).

Findings

We find that access and outcomes of work experience are gendered in the UK and report three main findings. First, we show that in the UK, women were more likely than men to do something than to do nothing in terms of work experience. Only 7 per cent of women did no work-related activity at all compared to 22 per cent of men.

Second, we demonstrate different participation patterns by gender in different kinds of work experience during HE. Women were more likely than men to do a work placement, paid work for the money, and unpaid work, but less likely to do a vacation internship. While subject choices might be gender segregated, our analysis suggests that gender affects patterns of participation in work experience activities even after controlling for subjects studied.

Third, our results show that different types of work experience were associated with differential labour market outcomes. For example, vacation internships with employers (less likely done by women than by men) were positively associated with getting a graduate job, wages, and perceived skills match, while doing paid work only for the money was associated with a negative effect on wages and perceived skill match.

Discussion

Our study brings attention to the constraints of an individual-focused perspective on employability and reveals the gendered dynamics within higher education (HE) and the labour market, particularly concerning subject choices and career paths. We emphasize the importance of recognizing and addressing the gendered structure of HE and the labour market, as it perpetuates inequalities in the realm of work experience, within various institutional settings.

[1] The Futuretrack survey question underpinning these data was a multiple response question, here we report the unweighted percentages of respondents who undertook these activities (unweighted percent of cases, using `mrtab` Stata command). Respondents may have done more than one activity.

References

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