

British undergraduates' strategies for employability: The impact of a marketised higher education system

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Abstract

The marketisation of higher education (HE) and the construction of students as consumers has been impacting undergraduates' strategies for employability. Based on a Bourdieusian and poststructuralist theoretical framework, this paper draws on 37 qualitative interviews with undergraduate students attending UK universities to explore students' constructions of the relationship between HE and employability, its implications for students' positioning in HE, and the strategies used to increase their employability. The findings show that neoliberal transformations in HE have introduced forms of identity regulation that impact undergraduates' processes of identity construction, somewhat restricting their options in terms of identity work if wanting to adopt a strategy that will lead to future employability, that is, based on deploying mechanisms typical of the job market while in HE. Nonetheless, some students questioned the excessive focus on competitive strategies, showing how there is always space for resistance to hegemonic practices.

Full paper

Traditionally, employability was a by-product of higher education (HE) degrees, but that relationship has changed with the neo-liberal marketisation of HE and the construction of students as consumers. Now, degrees tend to be considered an investment made by students, and HE institutions are held responsible for their graduates' employability outcomes (Nordensvärd, 2011; Brink, 2018; Tholen, 2022). Such constructions have implications for students in terms of employability and the strategies adopted for future careers. In this paper, I analyse British students' constructions of the relationship between HE and graduate employability, the implications for students' positioning in the field of HE, and strategies to increase their future marketability and employability.

In the UK, HE policies have been implemented on the grounds of Schultz's (1961) human capital theory, which assumes that the expansion of higher levels of education leads to significant

financial and personal gains for those who participate in education (Adnett and Davies, 2002; Tomlinson, 2008). This has been used to justify the application of the principle of cost sharing, where part of the cost of a HE degree is transferred from taxpayers to students and their families through the payment of tuition fees, which are presented as 'a portion of future earnings' (Clark et al., 2019, p. 713).

However, critical research (Brown et al., 2003, 2011; Brown, 2013; Tholen and Brown, 2018) has highlighted the false promises of the seductive discourses of the human capital theory due to the changing nature of the graduate labour market and the limits of the knowledge economy and graduate employability. The more educated individuals a society has, the more the competition for highly qualified jobs increases, meaning that not all graduates can develop careers that correspond to their expectations and qualifications (Brown et al., 2011). Moreover, students from more privileged socioeconomic backgrounds are more likely to be aware of which university subjects may lead to greater employability in higher-status professions and greater earnings (Davies et al., 2013).

In this study, a Bourdieusian theoretical framework is deployed to explore English undergraduates' aspirations, expectations, and strategies for the future, specifically regarding employability. This study frames the public construction of the student as a consumer as a form of 'codification' (Bourdieu, 1990) and explores the different discourses, strategies, and practices that undergraduates adopt to resist, reshape, or reproduce this codification. Moreover, this framework is complemented with a poststructuralist understanding of identity construction, identity regulation, and identity work (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002), which allows for a less deterministic and more flexible approach to the participants' identities and enriches the understanding of the interrelationship between individuals and social structure(s).

The data collection technique for this study consists of qualitative one-on-one semi-structured interviews. I conducted 37 interviews over a period of three years and a half. At the time of the interviews, the participants were between 18 and 23 years old and attended, or would soon attend, different types of universities located in England and Scotland. The participants came from different socioeconomic and educational backgrounds. The data was analysed using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

The findings of the study show that the large majority of the participants held expectations that having a degree would present them with better employment prospects. In many cases, HE was constructed as a bridge to a future career, and students' decisions regarding what to study and where to do it were made thinking about the position that they wished to occupy in the labour market. Moreover, most participants were aware that the job market is a competitive field in terms of graduate employment due to credentials and jobs being positional goods, so they adopted competitive strategies, namely through the importance given to achieving high marks and ending their degrees with top classifications, to occupy the best possible professional positions after concluding their degrees. Finally, regardless of their socioeconomic and educational background, most participants mentioned the importance of working hard to achieve their objectives.

In this sense, neoliberal transformations in English HE have introduced forms of identity regulation that impact undergraduates' processes of identity construction, somewhat restricting their options in terms of identity work if wanting to adopt a strategy that will lead to future employability, that is, a strategy based on deploying mechanisms typical of the job market in the field of HE. Nonetheless, some students reflexively questioned the excessive focus on competitive strategies, showing how there is always space for resistance, even to hegemonic discursive practices.

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