

Gendered and classed graduate transitions to work: How the unequal playing field is constructed, maintained and experienced (0231)

Richard Waller, Harriet Bradley
UWE, Bristol, UK

Background

The cohort discussed here are a subset of the *Leverhulme Trust* funded *Paired Peers* longitudinal project, which mapped the experiences of 88 students through their three years at the two universities in Bristol, and for two years beyond graduation. The University of Bristol is a research intensive member of the Russell Group, whilst the University of the West of England is a large post-1992 institution from the University Alliance mission group traditionally prioritising teaching and the quality of the student experience.

The cohort were all studying one of eleven degree subjects taught at both universities, and were paired up according to subject studied and social class background. We interviewed the participants at six points during their undergraduate studies, twice annually, following them from induction week in year one to their final exams in year three. Other data was gathered in the project too, including personal journals, focus groups, time-sheets and photo diaries.

The data presented here draws largely upon the later interviews, especially from their final year, and their first year after graduation, in particular focusses on two key areas:

Their career plans upon graduation, and the manner in which they approached securing those intended career outcomes.

Theoretical underpinnings

The project generally draws heavily upon the theories of Bourdieu, especially his notion of capitals (e.g. Bourdieu, 1986), and in the project we were concerned at how the students acquired and mobilised their economic, social, and cultural capital, as they moved through university and into the workplace.

Findings

Reflecting on the last year of their studies, a considerable number of our students described how stressed and overwhelmed they had been, especially coming up to their final exams. As well as completing third-year assignments including dissertations, revising for their all-important finals, they had to be thinking about where they were going to be living next year, what they wanted to be doing and, of course, applying for jobs.

It can be argued that final-year students have always had to grapple with these competing demands on their time and energies, but we believe that there are features of the current situation which increase pressure on these young adults, above and beyond the debts they will be carrying out with them. First, there's the spiralling cost of rented accommodation, which forced many students to consider returning home (not especially common among previous generations of graduates). This is a particular problem for those wanting to move to London, but is also an issue in Bristol. Second, is the highly competitive labour market, with increasing proportions of young people taking degrees but without the commensurate increase in the number of 'graduate jobs'. Third, is the fact that 'a degree is not enough' to compete in this market, so ambitious undergraduates have to fit CV building activities (volunteering, playing in sports teams, running societies, work placements and internships) into their study schedules. Finally, the process of applying for top jobs has become extremely onerous. The burden of recruitment has shifted from graduate employers to the students themselves, witness the decline of the so-called 'milk round' which many major employers no longer participate in, except at a handful of elite universities.

Using the interview data we constructed a typology of four entry routes into graduate careers:

- **On track: Moving on up**
Many of those we categorized as being 'on track' had known from the start of the degree what they wanted to do, and had chosen courses which would lead them towards that destination. Throughout their degrees they had carefully planned the next stages in the passage towards that desired goal, continuing a personal strategic stance which we described as 'determined planning' elsewhere when considering their entry into university.
- **Pushing forward: Progress towards a goal**
As we have indicated, many of the students found their final year quite stressful, especially the run up to the all-important assessments. Thus some who had quite clear ideas of what they would like to do had not managed to as yet line up a placement or a job, but had some kind of broad plan for the year ahead.
- **Deferred career: Time for a break**

As suggested above, many students found the final year of their degree very stressful and draining. Thus a few of those who had a plan for their destination or had actually achieved a job or place on a course leading towards a graduate career had decided they needed a period of recovery before stepping onwards. This was often stressed as needing a break following long years of intensive engagement with education. The lure of travelling, with cheap flights and the almost universal availability of casual employment, is strong for some of the students.

- **Drifting: What shall I do with my life?**

Given the ages of our participants (21-23) and their lack of experience of the wider world and its opportunities, it's unsurprising a significant number were unclear about what they wanted from the future. Despite universities' efforts to orient their students towards the labour market, many students deferred crucial life decisions, concentrating on 'the here and now'. This may not be so irrational. For those without a prior idea of a career they wanted to pursue, it becomes more about serendipity, and seeing what's out there. Realistically, these drifters knew that choices made now would not necessarily be for life.

These trajectories are strongly linked to class and gender, as are choice of careers themselves. In all four routes, there may be 'critical moments' and/or 'significant others' impacting on the trajectory and affecting the outcomes, as this paper demonstrates.

Implications

These findings have implications for social theory in terms of understanding the motivations of students and the influence of their personal backgrounds to enhance or limit personal career aspirations within a mass higher education system and wider neoliberal economy.

It also has implications for policy and practice, including at an institutional level around information, advice and guidance before and during higher education, for university admissions, and for the provision of student support services.

References

Bourdieu, P. (1986) 'The forms of Capital' in J. Richardson, *Handbook of Theory and Research in Education*, Westport, CT: Greenwood pp. 241-258.

