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Title Framing the 'Graduate Transition' in Times of Austerity and Political Upheaval

Session From 'youthquakes' to 'university bribes': Understanding Higher Education as the locus for classed, gendered and national repertoires of young people's political agency (Finn)

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Like all youth transitions of recent years, 'graduate transitions' in the UK have continually been shaped by uncertain political and social conditions (O' Regan, 2010). Youth transitions, more broadly, have come to represent a substantial 'weak spot' in the United Kingdom's social policy framework. There have been severe cuts to youth-based policy in recent years (Wenham, 2015) such as the loss of educational support grants – i.e. the Educational Maintenance Allowance in England (Howat, 2011), the continued emphasis on individual higher education tuition fees in England, Wales and Northern Ireland; the abolition of living allowance maintenance grants for university students (Hubble et al., 2015); and the removal of 18- to 21-year-olds from housing benefit allowance (Wilson, 2015: 3). Those aged 18 – 25 in receipt of both housing benefit and Jobseeker's Allowance amount to a total of 1% in national social security expenditure (Adam et al., 2015). In short, young people's concerns have become increasingly overlooked by policy makers.

Further, some aspects of the 'post-crisis' graduate transitions of the late 2000s continue to affect 'graduate transitions'. There have been significant increases in the percentage of workers who are university graduates: 35% of workers now have completed an undergraduate degree (up from 25% in 2008), and the proportion of graduates working in low-skill jobs has increased from 5.3% in 2008 to 8.1% in 2016 (IFS, 2017). Furthermore, the contemporary graduate labour market is marked by forms of labour market insecurity that disproportionately impact young people, such as 'zero-hour' contracts (Pennycook et al, 2013), 'unpaid' and 'flexible' internship arrangements (Leonard et al, 2015) and 'temping' (Cartwright, 2015). There are concerns that such positions are often occupied by socially disadvantaged graduates (Brennen, 1988; Furlong et al, 2005; Purcell et al, 2007; Rafferty, 2013). Thus, the graduate transition becomes a period whereby social inequalities are reproduced through more 'slower-tracked' transitions (MacDonald, 2011), with graduates forced to re-orient their sense of career identity in tandem with their socio-economic background (Allen, 2015).

Furthermore, these developments may posit some explanation for the increasing political engagement of young people we have seen recently in the UK, challenging long held beliefs that young people have become increasingly inactive in political and social life (Putnam, 2000) and – in particular – may explain a rise in support for new forms of progressive politics. In the 2017 General Election, Ipsos MORI

produced a series of estimates that suggested that youth turnout comprised half of all 18-34 years of age, matching the high 'youth vote' of the 2016 EU referendum (Ipsos MORI, 2017). The analysis emphasised both 'age' and 'education' as significant electoral divides when it came to supporting Labour over the Conservative party (by 17 percentage points), emphasising an alignment for progressive politics across varying groups of the young (Ipsos MORI, 2017).

This paper – drawing on several qualitative interviews with graduates that have left higher education and are approaching the labour market – will examine how these political developments are framed in regards to perceptions of 'career identity', adulthood and new configurations in forms of social structure (Shildrick et al, 2009; Gordon, 2013; Crew, 2015). The concept of the 'graduate transition' represents a pivotal point to examine these divergent political concerns and arguments as it junctures with biographies tilting towards the expectations of young adulthood. Indeed, on leaving higher education, graduates are at a point in their youth biographies where they are negotiating a range of concerns that are shared by other groups of young people – and therefore may be well placed to explain how and why an alignment towards progressive politics is taking place. These include debt accrued from higher education, 'precarity' in the labour market, welfare stigma (Formby, 2017), and a lack of access to the owner-occupied housing market (which may be exacerbated by compromised independence when returning to the family home) (Roberts et al, 2016). Therefore, this paper will attempt to deepen knowledge on how graduates frame aspects of 'post-crisis' transition in an ever shifting, wider political context that has persistently ignored the precarity of young people's positions.