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Exploring visual methodologies in higher education research: a case of university-workplace transition as graduate identity formation (0615)

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Part 1: Abstract (150 words)

This project tracks recent graduates as they transition from university into their first post-graduation position, exploring their experiences and reflections on their transition aligning with SRHE's research priorities around 'Employability, Enterprise and Graduate Careers'. There is a growing 'blurriness' between traditional and non-graduate roles (BIS, 2015, p. 13), and consequential changes in employer expectations. In light of this, this study focuses on an exemplifying case (Yin, 2009) of a 'new graduate occupation' portrayed via increasing numbers of students undertaking this degree discipline and dissolution of traditional career paths (CIPD, 2006, 2013). Visual-elicitation interviews (Warhurst and Black, 2015) are utilised as the data collection method, incorporating interpretation of visual images by the research participants (Collier and Collier, 1986). Although visual methods have been utilised in other studies for exploring student transitions *into* HE (Everett, 2017), this paper signposts the potential of visual methodologies for other areas of HE research, responding to SRHE's priorities around developing and widening of research methodologies in the field.

Key words: visual methodologies, graduate, identity, transition

Part 2: Paper outline (1000 words)

As a result of UK HE expansion, particularly since the 1990s (Daniel, 1993; Wilton, 2011), the economic value of graduate credentials has declined (Tomlinson, 2015), graduate supply increasingly exceeds demand, and graduate employment destinations have diversified. UK HE has undergone significant changes as a result of these pressures, including increased emphasis on 'sandwich degrees' and embedding skill development into programme curriculum (Mizikaci, 2006). Despite this, understanding job market demands remains challenging due to continuous uncertainties in employer demands. As a result, the topic of employability has received increasing attention across academic literature and UK HE policy alike during the past few decades (Maxwell et al, 2009; Holmes, 2015), indicating that this is an area worthy of discussion in both theoretical and practical terms.

According to Holmes (2001, 2013, 2015), the key to unravelling this complexity stretches past the formal stages of graduation and securing a 'graduate-level' job, into careful examination of graduate/employer interactions in the workplace. Utilising his conceptual distinction between 'possessive' (of human capital and skills) and 'processual' perspectives on graduate trajectories, and situated learning theory (Lave, 1991), this project aimed to contribute to a growing body of literature seeking to gain deeper, contextual insights into university-workplace transitions, addressing the following research question:

How do recent graduates perceive and experience their university-workplace transitions and become professionals?

Holmes (2015) conceptualises his 'processual' perspective on university-workplace transitions as the processes by which graduates and their prospective employers engage each other within their own particular social settings, such as a graduate job interview,

assessment centre, or in the workplace. Consequently, these interactions are socially and contextually bound and meaningful within these settings (Holmes, 2001). Situated learning theory (Lave, 1991) provides an ideal lens for understanding university-workplace transitions, enabling exploration of the processes through which graduates engage with 'being' and 'becoming' a graduate through constant, negotiated interaction with their employers (Holmes, 2012). In particular, this study focuses on new graduates' early adjustments to the workplace (Nicholson and Arnold, 1991), and the impact of their workplace interactions and engagement in particular communities of practice (Wenger, 1998) in 'reshaping' of their identity to fit their new environment. My SRHE 2015 conference paper, for example, highlighted findings around the role of social norms, relationships at work and support systems in new graduates' university-workplace transitions (Mullen, 2015), albeit from an employer's perspective.

In reality, the transition period can potentially be a very traumatic, stressful time for graduates, which can result in repercussions for employers. Recently, Finn (2016) has drawn attention to the emotional and relational experiences of graduates in their early stages in the workplace. Through a longitudinal qualitative UK study following 24 female graduates as they transitioned from university into employment, Finn highlights her participants' need to feel valued, receiving support but also supporting those in their close workplace networks. Other studies indicate that graduates can also overestimate their status in the workplace and have expectations of their employer, role, pay, responsibilities and skills which are not reflected in their contribution (Holden and Jameson, 1999; Hermanson et al., 2002; McDermott et al., 2006). Similar findings can be identified in the case of 'new' graduate professions. For example, Hallier and Summers (2011) emphasise that, compared with more traditional graduate professions, there is significant argument around purpose and best practice in newer graduate professions, leading to uncertainty amongst new graduates concerning their role and status.

In light of this, the intentions of this study were to understand, rather than explain (Hennekam and Herrbach, 2015), new graduates' experiences and reflections through an in-depth interpretivist study over time with a small cohort of participants (King & Horrocks, 2010). Seven recent graduates from a UK university were involved in qualitative longitudinal inquiry via three phases of data collection over a one year period. Participants were requested to keep a visual diary of their experiences, thoughts and reflections during their transition from university into employment, populating their diary with photos or other images throughout the study for the purpose of discussion during the interview phases. As previously emphasised, understanding university-workplace transitions can be particularly challenging due to growing complexity in post-graduation trajectories. Introducing visual images into the interview situation also encourages richer description of their experiences and reflexive 'meaning-making' (Cunliffe, 2008), as well as a useful means of stimulating discussion of 'hidden', difficult to access thoughts and reflections. These 'stories' and insights into university-workplace transition experiences have been analysed via narrative inquiry, with separate analysis of the visual diaries as a data set in their own right.

The findings of this study hold implications for a range of stakeholders, including students, graduates, employers and HE educators. In relation to SRHE's objectives around stimulating new forms of research and inquiry into HE, the premise of this project challenges traditional, neoliberal views (Kalfa and Taksa, 2013) of graduate employability (GE). Whilst skills remain an important feature of GE, growing complexity in graduate employment trajectories calls for a reconsideration of conventional HE provision, extending outside of skill development. In the case of 'new graduate occupations' within a 'marketised' HE environment (Marginson, 2013), such realignment with employer requirements is critical if we are to appropriately support our students into the world of work.

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