

## Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (All Submissions)

0122

H11 | Chepstow

Chaired by Taina Saarinen

Thu 12 Dec 2019

09:45 - 10:15

A visual journey of graduate identity construction

Emma Mullen<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*University of Greenwich, London, United Kingdom*

**Research Domain:** Employability, enterprise and graduate careers (EE)

**Abstract:** This paper details three case study vignettes of recent graduates as they transition from university into their first post-graduation position, reporting their experiences and reflections on their transition. Visual-elicitation interviews (Warhurst and Black, 2015) were utilised as the data collection method, incorporating interpretation of visual images by the research participants (Collier and Collier, 1986). Each case study is explored through the lens of Holmes's Graduate Identity 'five modalities' framework (2001, 2015), with accompanying images drawn from visual diaries populated by the participants throughout their first year of graduate employment. The findings hold implications for a range of stakeholders, such as uncovering insights into typical struggles and expectations during the initial stages of graduate employment, which would be of interest to both employers and HE providers. Use of visual methodologies also responds to SRHE's priorities around developing and widening of research methodologies in the field.

*Key words: graduate identity, employability, career, transition, visual*

**Paper:** This paper details three case study vignettes of recent graduates as they transition from university into their first post-graduation position, reporting their experiences and reflections on their transition. Visual-elicitation interviews (Warhurst and Black, 2015) were utilised as the data collection method, incorporating interpretation of visual images by the research participants (Collier and Collier, 1986). Each case study is explored through the lens of Holmes's Graduate Identity 'five modalities' framework (2001, 2015), with accompanying images drawn from visual diaries populated by the participants throughout their first year of graduate employment. The findings hold implications for a range of stakeholders, such as uncovering insights into typical struggles and expectations during the initial stages of graduate employment, which would be of interest to both employers and HE providers. Use of visual methodologies also responds to SRHE's priorities around developing and widening of research methodologies in the field.

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, 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?*

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). Holmes's framework supports the exploration of emergent 'graduate identities', in terms of the interaction between identity claims by the graduate and identities ascribed by 'significant others'. The model presents five 'modalities' of such emergent identity; a graduate may pass through these modalities in varied post-graduation trajectories. In this sense, graduate identity is negotiated and constructed as graduates experience, make sense of and engage with their particular personal, social and professional settings. As such, application of the model allows for a discussion around the purported warranting of identity claims and ascriptions.

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 'reshaping' of their identity to fit their new environment. 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) drew attention to the emotional and relational experiences of graduates in their early stages in the workplace. Through her longitudinal qualitative UK study, Finn highlighted that 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).

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.

Three 'stories' – Rachael, Matthew and Laura - have been analysed using Holmes's Graduate Identity framework. The findings are presented through a visual 'mapping' of each participant's journey through their first year of graduate employment, highlighting and discussing crucial 'moments' involving ascription, warranting and rejection of associated identity claims. Each case study also offers a selection of illustrative visual images from the respective participant's visual diary, providing further depth and context to the analysis of their 'journey'. In terms of key themes across the three selected case studies, the value of socialising, networking and building relationships during the first few months in the workplace is pertinent across all participants. Further to this, a number of examples relating to personal and emotional struggles, and subsequent support needs are also common across the case studies. Through mapping identity formation over the one year period, the findings also offer insights into changes in priorities, feelings and challenges over time. This paper builds on a working paper outlining initial findings of this study, presented at the 2018 SRHE conference. Feedback at the 2019 conference will be invaluable for the final preparations of the paper, before submission to the 'Studies in Higher Education' journal.

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. Whilst skills remain an important feature of a graduate's employability, growing complexity in graduate employment trajectories calls for a reconsideration of conventional HE provision, extending outside of skill development. 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.

Collier, J.J. & Collier, M. (1986) *Visual anthropology: photography as a research method*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press.

Cunliffe, A. L. (2008). Orientations to social constructionism: relationally responsive social constructionism and its implications for knowledge and learning. *Management Learning* 39(2), 123-139.

Daniel, J. (1993). The challenge of mass higher education. *Studies in Higher Education*, 18(2): 197-203.

Finn, K. (2016). Relational transitions, emotional decisions: new directions for theorising graduate

employment, *Journal of Education and Work*, DOI: 10.1080/13639080.2016.1239348.

Hennekam, S. and Herrbach, O. (2015), "The influence of age awareness versus general HRM practices on the retirement decision of older workers", *Personnel Review*, 44(1), 3-21.

Hermanson, H.M., Hill, M.C. and Ivancevich, S.H. (2002), Who are we hiring? Characteristics of new entrants to the profession, *The CPA Journal*, 72(8).

Holden, R. and Jameson, S. (1999). A preliminary investigation into the transition and utilisation of hospitality graduates in SMEs. *Tourism and Hospitality Research*, 1: 231-242.

Holmes, L. (2001). Reconsidering Graduate Employability: The Graduate Identity Approach. *Quality in Higher Education*, 7(2): 111-119.

Holmes, L. (2013). Competing perspectives on graduate employability: possession, position or process? *Studies in Higher Education*, 38(4): 538-554.

Holmes, L. (2015). Becoming a graduate: the warranting of an emergent identity. *Education + Training*, 57(2): 219-238.

Kalfa, S. and Taksa, L. (2013). Cultural capital in business higher education: reconsidering the graduate attributes movement and the focus on employability. *Studies in Higher Education*, 40(4): 580-595.

King, N. and Horrocks, C (2010). *Interviews in Qualitative Research*. Sage Publications Ltd.

Marginson, S. (2013). The impossibility of capitalist markets in higher education. *Journal of Education Policy*, 28(3): 353-370.

Maxwell, G. Scott, B, Macfarlane, D. & Williamson, E. (2009). Employers as stakeholders in postgraduate employability skills development. *International Journal of Management Education*, 8(2): 13-23.

McDermott, E, Mangan, J and O'Connor, M. (2006). Graduate development programmes and satisfaction levels, *Journal of European Industrial Training*, 30(6): 456-471.

Mizikaci, F. (2006). A systems approach to program evaluation model for quality in higher education. *Quality Assurance in Education*, 14(1): 37-53.

Nicholson, N. and Arnold, J. (1991). From expectation to experience: Graduates entering a large corporation. *Journal of Organizational Behaviour*, 12: 413-429.

Tomlinson, M. (2015). Between instrumental and developmental learning: ambivalence in student values and identity positions in marketized UK higher education. *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 34(5): 569-588.

Warhurst, Russell and Black, Kate (2015) The use of photo-elicitation interviewing in qualitative HRD research. In: *Handbook of Research Methods on HRD*. Handbooks of Research Methods in Management . Edward Elgar, Cheltenham, pp. 127-140. ISBN 9781781009239

Wilton, N. (2011). Do employability skills really matter in the UK graduate labour market? The case of business and management graduates. *Work, Employment & Society*, 25(1): 85-100.