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# Becoming a professional: A longitudinal qualitative study of the graduate transition in BSc Psychology.

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## Abstract

### Purpose

Research into the experience of BSc Psychology students and graduates in the graduate transition was carried out to enquire if ontology is central to educational transformation; if professional work experience is important in the process of becoming; and how graduates experience the transition from student to professional.

### Design / methodology

In this qualitative longitudinal in-depth interview investigation four one-year work placement students were interviewed twice and five graduates were interviewed at graduation and again two years later. Student transcriptions were analysed thematically and graduate transcriptions received Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA).

### Findings

Placement students became legitimate participants in professional life. Graduates thought that BSc Psychology should enable a career and were dissatisfied when it did not. Professional psychology dominated career aspiration. Relationships and participation in work communities of practice were highly significant for learning, personal and professional identity and growth.

### Practical implications

Ontology may be central to educational transformation in BSc Psychology and is facilitated by integrated work experience. A more vocational focus is also advocated.

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3 Originality/value  
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6 The UK Bachelors degree in psychology is increasingly concerned with employability  
7 however becoming a professional requires acting and being as well as knowledge  
8 and skills and Barnett and others have called for Higher Education to embrace an  
9 ontological turn. This is explored in the context of BSc Psychology student  
10 experience and reflection on work placements, graduation and early career  
11 development.  
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16 **Key words**  
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- 18 • Graduate transition
- 19 • Psychology education
- 20 • Ontology
- 21 • Work experience
- 22 • Longitudinal
- 23 • Qualitative IPA
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## Introduction

This paper is concerned with the graduate transition experience from undergraduate to professional life of BSc Psychology students in the UK, including year-long sandwich work placement (internship) experience. It aims to bring together perspectives on employability, identity development, ontology and becoming a professional with data from a longitudinal qualitative study. The studies reported take interpretative phenomenological analysis [IPA] and thematic analysis approaches however the case studies are not reported in detail here. This paper summarizes the principal themes identified in the analyses and addresses their implications for undergraduate education as preparation for professional life.

The graduate transition is conceived of here principally in terms of ontology; of identity and becoming. Thus undergraduate education is construed in the manner of Dall'Alba (2009), Barnett (2009) and Su and Feng (2008) as not only about knowledge and skills, but also about learning to become. Becoming, and the integration of knowing, acting, and being may be difficult for undergraduate education to enable, but adding professional work experience to undergraduate education may help and may lead to broad ontological development.

The focus of this paper is BSc Psychology. In the UK this popular but non-vocational degree can lead to graduate vocational training and professional psychology careers for a minority. These opportunities are fiercely competed for. Participants all attended a university with a tradition of sandwich degrees in which the majority of students take a year-long work placement between their second and final years of study. In Psychology typically two-thirds of the cohort take a placement year and the majority of these take honorary (unpaid) posts as Assistant Clinical Psychologists. The work placement year is considered here as a part of the graduate transition.

## Review

As Holmes (2013) points out, Higher Education (HE) systems have in common that individuals enter, progress as students, leave as graduates and go on to lives with social, economic and political dimensions. The way that individuals are prepared by HE for their post graduation lives, as well as individual experience of the graduate transition, is therefore of interest to a range of stakeholders. Much of this interest has centered on employability.

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2  
3 The dominant approach to employability is still based on the possession or acquisition by the  
4 graduate of a set of skills, qualities or attributes.  
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### 6 7 **Employability**

8  
9 Lowden, Hall, Elliot and Lewin (2011) distinguish between a narrow approach to  
10 employability focusing on skills and attributes, and a broader more inclusive approach  
11 embracing values, intellectual rigour and engagement (Hinchliffe and Jolly, 2011). However  
12 despite attempts to broaden the notion of skills, Holmes (2013), in offering three competing  
13 perspectives on graduate employability, concludes that this 'possession' (of skills etc.)  
14 approach has little value. It suffers from an excess of loosely based and ill-defined terms and  
15 difficulties in objective measurement. Crucially it is unable to explain differences in  
16 employment outcomes between graduates of different demographic groups.  
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### 23 24 **Social position**

25  
26 Holmes goes on to consider the power of social position to determine post graduation  
27 progress. This *can* account for demography-related outcome differences. He concludes  
28 however that the social positioning approach is a '*counsel of despair*' (p 538) and that HE  
29 '*...is merely one stage... within the biographical trajectories of students and graduates*' (p  
30 548).  
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32  
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### 34 35 **Identity**

36  
37 Holmes then discusses graduate employability as a process and focuses on the development  
38 of identity. For most students HE coincides with the late adolescence to early adulthood  
39 transition and with developments in identity and vocation. Arnett (2000) refers to this as  
40 emerging adulthood, an in-between period where identity alternatives can be considered in  
41 careers, relationships, philosophy of life etc. Dahlgren, Handal, Szkudlarek and Bayer (2007)  
42 found that students developed discipline-based identities. Johnsson and Hager (2008)  
43 suggest that learning for professional practice is also about seeking and identifying  
44 connections to forms of identity (Billett and Somerville, 2004). They suggest that graduates  
45 are at a stage of life where they are in search of occupational identities (Kram, 1988) or of  
46 broader social identity (Delanty, 2003). The need for a broader identity is underlined by  
47 Nyström's (2009a) point that student identity is all pervading so that on graduation there is  
48 a life-wide vacuum to fill.  
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58  
59 Nyström (2009b) suggests that identity is central for professional development since work is  
60 important for the individual's sense of self (Billett, 2007) and that students' potential future

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3 profession contributes to their 'sense of being'. She goes on to differentiate three forms of  
4 professional identity; non-differentiated, compartmentalised and integrated. These emerge  
5 sequentially and represent different relationships between professional, personal and  
6 private life. Initially graduates adopt a work identity that is as all defining as the student  
7 identity, but adjust to the demands of a private life involving for example life-partner  
8 relationships and parenthood. Holden and Hamblett's (2007) case studies are also records of  
9 a search for self, the forming of identity and becoming. Abrandt Dahlgren, Hult, Dahlgren,  
10 Hård af Segerstad and Johansson (2006) cite Bauman (1991) who claims that people are no  
11 longer firmly rooted in one location or social system, but are socially displaced. There is  
12 therefore a need to establish a stable identity to differentiate between the inner self and the  
13 outer world, and that this needs the affirmation of social approval. Wenger (1998) also  
14 suggests that identity is neither a coherent unity nor is it simply fragmented. He describes  
15 identity formation in a community of practice as a nexus of multi-membership, identities are  
16 at the same time one and multiple.

### 27 **Making meaning and the experience of time**

28 A key feature is the 'Dream', a projection of our ideal life that we are always becoming in  
29 relation to (Tennant and Pogson, 1995). This links to Heidegger's idea of temporality (1962);  
30 the experience of time is at the heart of what it means to exist. We project forward our  
31 imagined future possibilities, we are what we are to become, a key point in the making of  
32 the meaning of self and graduation as we engage in *selving* (Heidegger, 1962). We create  
33 our existence as we live it and in order to live it. We have to make meaning, Heidegger  
34 argues, because of the temporality-related idea of *being-towards-death*. Our finite  
35 existence is inescapable and this brings with it anxiety and a need to create meaning. For  
36 Heidegger life is not intrinsically meaningful, we must create meaning so as to face the limits  
37 of our existence. It also accords with Giddens (1991) who argues that as traditional social  
38 patterns loosen and choices widen the construction of self is increasingly a 'identity project',  
39 a term also associated with Harré (1983) '*...to refer to efforts to achieve self-directed*  
40 *development and expression of self*' (Stevens and Wetherell, 1996, p.345).

### 52 **Ontology**

53 Thus ontology, learning to become, should be a key element in HE from a number of  
54 perspectives. Work on ontology by Barnett and by Dall'Alba links identity to professional  
55 development. Dall'Alba (2009) argues that ontology is central to becoming a professional.  
56 Benner (1984) makes the same point in her account of development from novice to expert  
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3 in nursing; knowing is not enough, becoming, inhabiting the professional role, walking the  
4 walk, is also essential. Both Dall'Alba (2009) and Barnett (2009) argue for the reconfiguration  
5 of professional education as a process of becoming. Learning to become a professional  
6 involves the integration of knowing, acting, and being and Dall'Alba argues that when  
7 education focuses only on the acquisition and application of knowledge and skills, it falls  
8 short of facilitating their integration into professional ways of being. A focus on knowledge  
9 and skills '*... is insufficient for skillful practice and for the transformation of the self that is*  
10 *integral to achieving such practice*' (Dall'Alba, p34).  
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18 In a similar vein Su and Feng (2008) draw on the Aristotelian concept of *phronesis*. This is  
19 practical judgment or wisdom grounded in being-in-the-world, rather like the Heideggerian  
20 idea of *dasien* (1962). Phronesis must include action (Aristotle, 1985). Su and Feng argue  
21 that phronesis focuses on process as well as outcome and engagement in action. Phronesis;  
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23  
24  
25 *'...makes an ontological turn in the practice of HE, away from learning for the sake of*  
26 *the subject discipline itself to learning for oneself and the world, from the advocacy*  
27 *of instrumentalization and fragmentation to the exploration of integration and*  
28 *creation, and hence from rigid, fixed knowing to dynamic acting and being*' (Barnett,  
29 2004; Dall'Alba and Barnacle, 2007). (Su and Feng, 2008, pp. 4-5).  
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### 33 **Situated learning in communities of practice**

34 Situated learning is proposed by Lave and Wenger as a model of learning in a community of  
35 practice (Lave and Wenger 1991, 2002, Wenger 1998). They argue that learning is a social  
36 process in a social and organisational context and takes place through 'legitimate peripheral  
37 participation' through which the learner moves towards full participation in the practices of  
38 a community. Learning is not solely in the learner's head. Legitimate peripheral  
39 participation is concerned with the relationships between new entrants and old hands in the  
40 community of practice, and with their activities, identities, knowledge and practices and  
41 with the artefacts that are produced. Lave and Wenger (1991) discuss midwives, tailors,  
42 quartermasters, butchers, and recovering alcoholics, but suggest that the processes by  
43 which participants in these communities learn can be generalized to other groups. Situated  
44 learning implies that without vocational experience students may learn not how to be a  
45 professional, but how to be a student. Becoming a student is important for first year  
46 undergraduates but as a course progresses the transformative power of work experience at  
47 an appropriate level, perhaps through a work placement, becomes more important as  
48 graduation nears. In work students may find themselves truly and legitimately participating  
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3 in professional life with profound ontological consequences for their sense of who they are.  
4 This links to debate about the function of HE, and what students gain from participating in it.  
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6

### 7 **Summary – HE is more than knowledge and skills**

8  
9 In summary to become professionals students must do more than acquire knowledge and  
10 skills and Heidegger, Barnett, Su and Feng, Dall’Alba, and Benner variously articulate the  
11 transformative potential of HE in ontological terms. Being and becoming in the early adult  
12 graduate transition is not exclusively about occupational identity but it is a key element.  
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14 Lave and Wenger describe a process of acculturation through participation in a work  
15 community of practice.  
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21 Thus the research questions below are raised to which we take a phenomenological  
22 approach aiming to add to our understanding of HE in general and the graduate transition in  
23 BSc Psychology specifically.  
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- 26 1. Do interviews with those in the graduate transition offer evidence that  
27 ontology is central to the educational transformation that Barnett and  
28 others argue that HE should provide?  
29
- 30 2. Is a period of professional level work experience, such as an integrated  
31 sandwich placement year, important in the process of becoming?  
32
- 33 3. How do individuals experience the transition from being a student to  
34 becoming a graduate professional?  
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38 To answer these questions, two longitudinal semi-structured individual interview studies  
39 with BSc Psychology students and graduates from a university in the English West Midlands  
40 are reported.  
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## 45 **Methodology**

### 46 **Participants**

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48 Participants were recruited in June 2012 and were BSc Psychology students from a UK  
49 university who were either about to complete their second year of study and start a  
50 sandwich placement year or about to graduate. Volunteers were sought by emailing the two  
51 cohorts with information about the proposed research and a request for participants.  
52  
53 Graduating volunteers already known to the interviewer were preferred as it was thought  
54 that pre-existing relationships would facilitate the research. Placement volunteers were  
55 selected according to convenience of placement location.  
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5 In the placement study four students (three women; Rada, Ella and Marie, and one man,  
6 Dave, all pseudonyms) aged 19-21 were interviewed near the start of their placements and  
7 again near the end. Marie worked as an Honorary Research Assistant; the other three were  
8 Honorary Assistant Clinical Psychologists. In the graduate study five people were  
9  
10 interviewed shortly before or after graduation and again two years later. Participants were  
11  
12 all women (pseudonyms Nadia, Louise, Amina, Suzie, Toyah), four had taken a placement  
13  
14 year, three were from ethnic minorities, all were interested in professional, particularly  
15  
16 clinical psychology. Four were awarded 2.1 degrees and one a 2.2.  
17  
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20 Research based on as few as nine participants and 18 interviews is not unusual in the  
21  
22 phenomenological and qualitative traditions where concern is with meaning and how it  
23  
24 arises through experience and with description and relationship rather than causality  
25  
26 (Langdrige, 2007). Indeed Holden and Hamblett's 2007 paper in this journal reported data  
27  
28 from five individuals and 20 interviews over the course of a year aiming to '*...address*  
29  
30 *matters of concern through the eyes of the graduate respondents.*' (p517)

### 31 **Procedures.**

32  
33 Interview schedules to guide the in-depth semi-structured interviews were drawn up based  
34  
35 on previous research on employability and work placements (e.g. Reddy and Moores, 2006,  
36  
37 2012) tutorial experience and qualitative exemplars (e.g. Smith, 1995). Interviews took place  
38  
39 in workplaces and homes and in the researcher's office. Interviews were recorded and later  
40  
41 transcribed verbatim in an orthographic style (Gibson, 2010). Participants completed  
42  
43 consent forms and were debriefed at the end of the study. The research was approved by  
44  
45 the university ethics committee and conducted in accordance with the university's Research  
46  
47 Integrity Code of Conduct.

### 48 **Measures**

49  
50 Interviews were guided by a schedule derived from tutorial work with undergraduates and  
51  
52 designed to explore the lived experience respectively of work placements and the graduate  
53  
54 transition as a whole.

### 55 **Analysis**

56  
57 Interview recordings were listened to several times enabling reflection on the structure and  
58  
59 the emotional tone of the interviews. Transcripts were read and re-read, emerging themes  
60

and links between sections of text were noted. Transcripts were cross-referenced as themes were firming up, ordered and linked to quotes. Placement student interviews were analysed thematically (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Graduate interview transcripts received individual Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), chosen because of its concern with meaning and how it arises through experience, and with description and relationship rather than causality (Langdrige, 2007). Analysis drew on Langdrige, Shaw (2010) and Smith (2008). First interview graduate transcripts were analysed case-by-case before turning to second interviews.

## Results

The results are the themes identified in the interview analyses and are presented in two groups, placement students and graduates. Placement student results emerged from a thematic analysis and they are structured in line with the research aims in table 1 below. Graduate results are the product of a more in-depth interpretative phenomenological analysis and are presented on a case-by-case basis and are summarized in table 2.

### **Table 1: Placement student themes**

**Aim 1. Do interviews with those in the graduate transition offer evidence that ontology is central to the educational transformation that Barnett and others argue that HE should provide?**

1. Coherence, sophistication and fluency of interviewees
2. Personal development, competence
3. Connecting work and university

**Aim 2. Is a period of professional level work experience, such as an integrated sandwich placement year, important in the process of becoming?**

4. Situated learning (also aim three)
5. Broadened or crystalized career outlook
6. Supervision

**Aim 3. How do individuals experience the transition from being a student to becoming a graduate professional?**

7. Situated learning (also aim two)
8. Break from education
9. The challenge of placement

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6 **Aim 1. Do interviews with those in the graduate transition offer evidence**  
7 **that ontology is central to the educational transformation that Barnett and**  
8 **others argue that HE should provide?**  
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12 **Theme 1: Coherence, sophistication and fluency of interviewees.**  
13

14 Interviewees were impressively coherent, analytic and reasoned and placement student  
15 interview transcripts are studded with claims of enhanced confidence, independence and  
16 maturity. These are evidenced by example and by the fluency and sophistication on display.  
17 For example Ella asserts that after being on placement for most of the year;  
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22  
23 *You can rely on me to get things done, I'm pro-active, I'm organised, I can be trusted,*  
24 *you can depend on me and I will take the work on and get it done well. I'm*  
25 *confident... I can clearly express what I'm thinking or, if I have any concerns, I can*  
26 *clearly bring them to the table. I'm more analytical... more punctual... (Ella)*  
27  
28

29 The point with the example for this theme is Ella's sophistication and fluency rather than the  
30 content of her assertion, the content belongs with the next theme.  
31  
32

33 **Theme 2: Personal development, competence**  
34

35 As with theme one, interviews abound with claims of enhanced confidence, independence  
36 personal development, increasing competence and maturity  
37

38 *...it's ... changed how I view people and how I involve myself with people... before, I*  
39 *was more shy and reserved ...it's helped me to develop assertiveness and confidence*  
40 *... I'm... a stronger version of myself. (Dave)*  
41  
42

43 Ella identifies personal development benefits.

44 *...it's made me more independent ...more focused ...it's a great opportunity for me to*  
45 *prove to people that I can work and I can be a good colleague... (Ella)*  
46  
47

48 Asked what she has got to offer an employer, Ella offers a sophisticated set of personal  
49 development outcomes rather than simple competencies. Rada's communication,  
50 confidence, organisational skills and time management have similarly improved.  
51

52  
53 *...I've learned to... do things on time and even if I'm running out of time I'm able to*  
54 *work under pressure... being more adaptive ...and quick, being efficient ... and*  
55 *communication and confidence skills ...probably my writing abilities as well. (Rada)*  
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3 It seems clear that in the interviewees' eyes they have changed in significant ways, they  
4 have 'become' rather than simply learned things and this becoming is transformative and  
5 important to them.  
6  
7

### 8 9 **Theme 3: Connecting work and university**

10 Interviewees found few connections between their placement work and their academic  
11 work and this suggests that if participants are transformed in some way on placement, and  
12 themes one and two suggest that they feel that they are, it is powered by their experience  
13 of work.  
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18 *I think the only relation I probably had was with the writing. ..It's just a different kind*  
19 *of experience. (Rada)*  
20  
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### 22 23 **Aim 2. Is a period of professional level work experience, such as an** 24 **integrated sandwich placement year, important in the process of becoming?**

### 25 26 27 **Theme 4: Situated learning - legitimate peripheral participation in a community of** 28 **practice**

29 Interviewees built relationships at multiple levels. Ella made professional connections  
30 through sharing an office with clinical trainees and Rada worked with others at several  
31 different levels. This prompted skills development and changes in her sense of self as others  
32 responded to her as a professional.  
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37  
38 *... clients saw me as a professional because I was running the sessions with my*  
39 *supervisor and the other co-workers. So because they saw me as a professional... I,*  
40 *..., accepted that role... (Rada)*  
41  
42

43 By her second interview Ella is now an insider. Being treated as professional and as a  
44 colleague changes Ella's view of herself.  
45

46 *...I look quite young... but people were talking to me in quite a professional way,*  
47 *expecting me to do things... That made me feel older and more mature... (Ella)*  
48  
49

50 Rada exemplifies legitimate peripheral participation and she enjoys her new status.

51 *...sometimes I forgot I was a student ... the clients ...see me as a professional so I...*  
52 *fulfill that role... (Rada 2: 413-34)*  
53  
54

55 Similarly Ella experienced being treated as a legitimate participant.

56  
57 *...when I started ...in my head it was kind of like I was a pupil.... But then... you*  
58 *realise ...that they're looking at you as a colleague and you do feel ... on the same*  
59 *level as them.. (Ella)*  
60

Overall interviewees were surprised and delighted to find themselves accepted. However Rada ruefully notes that work is full-time and this 'learning to labour' aspect can be a shock. To be accepted students needed to find a role that enabled them to participate and while this clearly happened for the interviewees placements occasionally fail.

### **Theme 5: Broadened or crystallized career outlook**

Ella notes that her career ideas broadened after initially being quite naïve. She reports finding out about other professions and about the business side of her organisation and is more flexible about her career aim; a move away from the quest for the single 'right' career that perhaps obsesses younger students.

*I started wanting to do clinical psychology. ...still something I want to do but I'm thinking about educational psychology or even teaching or nursing... So, yes it has shifted... it keeps shifting actually. (Ella)*

*I was quite naïve when I went into the job... and that has opened my eyes to a whole load of other careers ... (Ella)*

Rada is now open to clinical work.

*... I didn't even want to do a placement ...it's all, kind of, worked out ... I'm much more open now to clinical work and occupational.... (Rada)*

For Marie her experience has crystalized her career ideas.

*...it's made me think, 'Yes, I could do a PhD'. It's hard work but I'm capable and my supervisor agrees. (Marie)*

Interviewees in general report moving on from identifying 'the career' and being more open minded about their career options. Some have clarified their aims and ambitions.

### **Theme 6: Supervision**

Supervision was important to all the placement interviewees. Ella's supervisor was an inspiration to her and Rada received more mentoring and tutoring on placement than at university. Her supervisor coached her writing and scholarship and Ella emphasised the quality, structured nature and sheer quantity of interaction that she enjoyed with her supervisor. Rada commented:

*...we were able to... speak to each other easily. She was approachable ... very friendly ... we always had supervision sessions every week, so if there was anything I wanted to tell her about, I was able to.. (Rada)*

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3 **Aim 3. How do individuals experience the transition from being a student to**  
4 **becoming a graduate professional?**  
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8 **Theme 7: Situated learning (also in aim one)**  
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10 This theme is illustrated above under aim one but also seems important in individual  
11 experience of the graduate transition even though these students will return to university  
12 for the nine months of their final year. By their second interviews placement student felt  
13 themselves to be legitimate participants in professional communities of practice.  
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16  
17 **Theme 8: Break from education**  
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19 Interviewees noted that a placement year gave them a break from education. This was  
20 welcomed by some, for example Marie will return with renewed enthusiasm but will also be  
21 glad to finish and move on;  
22

23 *I'm looking forward to the new modules... in the final year. ...But then ...I just want to*  
24 *get it over with and get out there in the world. (Marie)*  
25  
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27  
28 **Theme 9: The challenge of placement**  
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30 Interviewees found the experience of placement quite challenging and this was apparent for  
31 some in the first interview and admitted by others only in the second interview. Dave talked  
32 of being terrified and feeling out of his depth when he started work and Rada was not alone  
33 in finding the full-length working day with a nine a.m. start five days a week daunting at first.  
34 Another challenge was managing financially, including fitting in part-time shifts in pubs and  
35 restaurants, especially as most students from other courses would be on paid placements as  
36 Ella notes;  
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41 *...what's challenging is that I was unpaid... coming from a university where a lot of*  
42 *the courses are business orientated, most of your friends would have a paid*  
43 *placement... (Ella)*  
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48 **Graduate interviews**  
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50 Graduate interviews received interpretative phenomenological analysis and are presented in  
51 brief on a case-by-case basis exploring individual experience of becoming a professional.  
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54 **Table 2: Key themes for individual graduates**  
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Nadia: Clinical ambitions, expectations and fate
Louise: BSc not worthwhile, initial disappointment
Amina: Learning at work, assimilating transition
Suzie: Inspired by vocation on placement
Toyah: Paradise lost, a narrative of becoming

### Nadia

Nadia was a home-based student from a South Asian background and graduated with a very good degree. Her graduate transition was dominated by her employment status and her progress towards becoming a professional psychologist. However family and community expectations impinged on her career aims. In part this is common to all, graduation prompting questions of the ‘...and what are you going to do with your life?’ variety, but is also gender and culture specific.

Her dominant theme was ‘placement experience’. This was liberating, empowering and toxic all at once. It was the most important and challenging part of her degree and prompted painful reflection as well as ambition. Nadia was conflicted about her desire to live independently and pursue her choice of professional career, and by her loyalty to parental and community values. Nadia wanted to become professionally qualified before marriage but acknowledged that she might not have time to reach her goal before her ‘fate’ closed in. By the second interview Nadia had experience both of professional life and independent living and was concerned with the double-edge of support and control that the opportunity of returning home to study for a professional qualification offered. Nadia’s transition thus encompasses tastes of professional life and personal independence as well as the bitterness of rejected applications and low status work. Ultimately she felt that she is in the hands of fate.

### Louise

Louise, from a white British background, took a clinical placement. She was interested in a clinical career and achieved a good degree. Her first interview was dominated by disappointment at not being ‘snapped up’ by an employer, as she had been for her placement. She felt betrayed by a system that had not eased her way into becoming a professional or delivered her chosen career. This caused her to re-assess the choices she had made and the value of her degree. Bitterness was not far below the surface.

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3 Louise was in a different position in her second interview. She was no longer '*agitated*' and  
4 had grown in stature. She revealed leadership potential and entrepreneurial ambition. She  
5 was relaxed, brisk, on a clear path to becoming a professional and had moved on from the  
6 initial transition crisis. She was reconciled to a change in career aim to occupational  
7 psychology and had completed a qualifying MSc. She had hardened her view that her BSc  
8 was of little value and contrasted it unfavourably with the more vocational MSc.  
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### 14 **Amina**

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16 Amina, a home-based student from a South Asian background did not take a placement year  
17 but had a semi-professional part-time job throughout her course. She achieved a very good  
18 degree and began teacher training.  
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22 Amina emphasized the importance of her work experience in developing as a professional  
23 and thought that HE should prepare students for professional life. Amina thought that her  
24 work was at least as important as her course as a source of learning and development,  
25 suggesting that psychology programmes might use part-time work experience as a source of  
26 learning.  
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31 Amina was planned, purposeful and hard working. She was like others in wanting a more  
32 vocational education but also enjoyed the range of choice in HE, benefitting from  
33 opportunities that were not necessarily aimed at her. Amina was teaching by her second  
34 interview. She was frank about her expectations of marriage and children and the gendered  
35 role that this would entail. She celebrated success and adulthood but also mourned a lost  
36 stage of life. Amina's story is one of transition as work-in-progress and already partly  
37 assimilated.  
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### 44 **Suzie**

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46 Suzie, a home-based student from an ethnic minority, was passionately committed to clinical  
47 psychology. Her highly successful clinical placement year was inspiring and a wake-up call  
48 about how competitive entry to clinical training would be. She worked very hard in her final  
49 year and achieved a good degree.  
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54 The salient feature of Suzie's first interview was the depth of her commitment to a clinical  
55 career and the extent to which she had already become a 'legitimate peripheral participant'  
56 in that community of practice. She had clinical skills, maturity, a proactive approach and a  
57 sense of respect for her colleagues as well as rigorous honesty, clarity and realism. Her  
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3 passion for her career came from identifying with the caring nature of the role and  
4 compassion for people in distress. She had already become a professional in many respects.  
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8 Her second interview, when about to start clinical training, confirmed that she had found  
9 her vocation. Suzie was still in transition, she still felt like a student but of a different kind.  
10 She no longer wanted just to be a Clinical Psychologist but also a clinical supervisor. Other  
11 issues connect with other interviewees, particularly the issue of supervisor power and the  
12 power that the competition for entry to the profession may exert.  
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### 17 **Toyah**

18 Toyah, a campus-based student with a disability from a white British background, had taken  
19 a successful clinical placement year. The notion of paradise lost seemed apt for her first  
20 interview. The weaknesses of her approach to academic work had been exposed, she did  
21 little reading, did not write well and left without the good degree required to become a  
22 Clinical Psychologist. In leaving university she had lost what she felt to be an inspiring  
23 community of successful people and friends, lost an independent life and returned to live  
24 with her parents, lost the licence to dream of a future that came with being a student. Of all  
25 the interviewees Toyah described her university experience in the most positive terms, and  
26 seemed to have lost the most.  
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35 At her second interview Toyah was more at ease and sounded analytic, reflective and aware,  
36 much more a young professional than a slightly lost former student. Her ability to reflect and  
37 evaluate her experience was impressive and she took a broad view of her education as a  
38 developmental process. Vocationally it had not led her directly to a career but she had  
39 found a way of becoming a professional that fitted her circumstances. She had given up her  
40 unrealistic prestigious-career-as-identity ambition. She has also assimilated her experience  
41 into a coherent narrative about who she was becoming. There was comfort, awareness and  
42 acceptance of her identity and of her strengths and weaknesses and an embracing of her  
43 future. This included the idea of work-life balance and was much broader than a career-at-  
44 any-cost approach. It may be that the embodied constraint of her disability may lie behind  
45 this and her acceptance that she will work part-time, just as Amina and Nadia accept the  
46 reality of their constraints. These inform their vision of who they are becoming and prompt  
47 insight, awareness and maturity as well as some regret.  
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## Discussion

Results are first summarized below and then discussed in relation to the literature reviewed above under three meta-level headings (career focus, power, identity) that bring the results of both sets of interviews together. Thereafter how ontological development may be promoted is discussed, followed by limitations, conclusions, and implications for practice.

### Summary: placement students

All interviewees felt treated as professionals and situated learning makes sense of their experience. All were participants in communities of practice such that colleagues saw them as legitimate actors and insiders. This sense of participation and belonging relates to the more sophisticated thinking about careers and identity that the interviews reveal and to their personal development. Interview transcripts are full of claims of greater confidence, independence and maturity and these are well evidenced. All interviewees advocated work experience but struggled to reconcile it with university learning. Work experience appears to be transformative, university education less so. Marie for example felt that her work had transformed her approach to academic work and to life itself. Her experience is less of education preparing her for work and more of work transforming her approach to education. Ella's supervisor was an inspiration to her and offered the personal apprenticeship relationship that is thought to be so important in promoting engagement and growth in HE (Chickering and Gamson, 1987, 2002) but is so hard to provide in mass HE.

### Summary: Graduates

All except Amina saw their future professional identity tied to their discipline, suggesting that professional psychology, especially clinical psychology, dominates undergraduate career aspiration. Work experience was important for all and transformational for Suzie and Nadia. Despite the progress achieved by Suzie, Nadia and Louise, professional psychology is an unrealistic aim for most psychology graduates. In 2014-15 over two-thirds of this university's year three psychology cohort were on placement as Honorary Assistant Clinical Psychologists. The availability of these unpaid clinical placements may mislead students into thinking that graduate opportunities are similarly available – they are not. A placement can be a unique opportunity to get ahead but still leaves many hurdles to face. Students may also, falsely and unreasonably, see the psychology professions as the only valid outcomes for a psychology degree.

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3 The non-vocational model of general academic grounding seemed little understood and the  
4 graduates interviewed thought that BSc Psychology should prepare them for professional  
5 life. Despite this it is hard to engage students in careers and personal development work and  
6 undergraduates generally focus on their grades. Grades are important for university entry  
7 but graduate academic differentiation is limited, most achieve first or second-class honours  
8 with upper second degrees predominating. Thus work experience and extra-curricular  
9 activity become sources of distinction and differentiation, again emphasising the difference  
10 between learning to become a professional and learning to become a student. The  
11 expectation of a career in professional Psychology fed dissatisfaction when it did not  
12 materialize at graduation.  
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### 21 **Career focus**

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23 All interviewees focused on their careers. Emphasis on HE as a route to a high-status career  
24 has accompanied a drift towards more vocational courses (Trapp, Banister, Ellis et al, 2011)  
25 although there may also have been a move towards more academic vocational education  
26 (Burke, 2015). Interviewees regarded their placement work as a highly significant learning  
27 experience. Its benefits include being a legitimate participant, thus becoming a professional  
28 in an adult professional world, a broadened career outlook, and significant personal  
29 development. Work is generally transformative as Johnsson and Hager (2008) make clear in  
30 their study of young orchestral musicians.  
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38 For Dall'Alba (2009), Barnett (2009), Su and Feng (2008), Thompson (2005), Dall'Alba and  
39 others, HE should transform the student and ontology is central to this transformation.  
40 Johnsson and Hager (2008) argue that learning is embodied and organic rather than a  
41 transfer of knowledge and skills or stages of competency and illustrate this in showing how  
42 different the world of the professional orchestra is to that of music education. Skill in playing  
43 and musical knowledge is only part of what is required. They cite Bokeno and Gantt (2000) in  
44 suggesting that the relationships formed at work are the site of learning. They argue that we  
45 learn through social participation, through relationships that cultivate, disseminate and  
46 maintain learning in communities of practice. This is supported by the placement interviews  
47 where relationships and participation are key features. This suggests that only vocational HE  
48 with integrated work experience may be truly transformative. Work placements offer the  
49 ontological opportunity to learn, grow and become, to act and to be through work, and this  
50 is captured by the idea of situated learning (Lave and Wenger, 1991) and by phronesis (Su  
51 and Feng, 2008).  
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## Power

Power is a theme for Nadia and for Suzie in their second interviews and is evident in the placement interviews. Holden and Hamblett (2007) suggest that each of their five graduate case studies can be read as a struggle to assimilate conventions and a search for power. The search for self is a search for a place in a work community. This requires negotiation with power and the acquisition of power. This is clearly the case for Louise who relishes leadership and chafes in a more junior role as she works towards professional status. It is also the case for Marie who found a niche on placement that gave her a supervisory role. Suzie is uncomfortable with the power of her supervisor to influence her identity by schooling her in new models of psychotherapy. This power is not manifest simply in her being required to take on new views, but by the supervisor's experience, knowledge and authority which enables her to reveal and validate new perspectives on practice and new truths that cannot easily be ignored. Suzie's discomfort is ontological in that she feels that being imbued with an alternative model means to her that she has become a 'straw in the wind'. Her identity is therefore less constructed by herself through reflection and choice, but more driven by the influence of the supervisor, not only as an individual but as a representative of the community of practice. Becoming part of the community may mean giving up some autonomy to that community. A similar process of socialization and acculturation can be seen in the placement interviews.

Allen, Quinn, Hollingworth and Rose (2013) also talk about power in arguing that work placements do not simply ease the transition into the labour market, but are where inequalities are reproduced. They show how students' progression in the arts is mediated through practices that privilege those able to bring financial resources, professional contacts and cultural capital to bear. Progress towards Clinical Psychology is no doubt similarly hindered or smoothed, but higher pay may now be found in management rather than the traditional professions. Those without the capital to compete for the psychology professions may find emerging graduate opportunities of the sort identified by Purcell, Elias, Atfield et al (2013).

## Identity

Dahlgren, Handal et al (2007) found that students develop discipline-based identities and this is evident in the graduate interviews. Nyström (2009a) argues that student identity is broad, covering occupational and social roles thus leaving a big gap when it is lost. The graduates all felt the loss of student identity supporting the contention that new graduates

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2  
3 seek occupational identities (Kram, 1988) and a broader social identity (Delanty, 2003).  
4  
5 Nyström (2009b) sees forms of professional identity emerging sequentially. Initially a non-  
6  
7 differentiated work identity as all-defining as the student identity but this changes as  
8  
9 professional life becomes assimilated and work/life distinctions emerge. Overall, identity is a  
10  
11 complex and multi-headed concept that interacts with most of the other themes.  
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13 Interviewees' sense of their own identities seems to change along the lines suggested by  
14  
15 Nyström.

## 16 **Promoting ontological development**

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18 Becoming a professional needs to be seen in conjunction with

- 19 • Ontology,
- 20
- 21 • The development from novice to expert
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- 23 • A search for self, power and role in a community of practice (Holden and Hamblett,
- 24 2007; Wenger 1998),
- 25
- 26 • The integration of knowing and acting into professional ways of being (Dall'Alba,
- 27 2009; Benner, 1984)
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- 29 • Judgment and wisdom grounded in acting and being in a professional world (Su and
- 30 Feng, 2008; Heidegger, 1962).
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36 However it is difficult to identify what can be done through teaching alone to promote  
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38 ontological development and facilitate the graduate transition to professional life, especially  
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40 during a non-vocational BSc. It is difficult to teach reflection or to involve students in  
41  
42 personal development work. Finlay (2002) notes how demanding honest reflection can be.  
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44 Johnsson and Hager (2008) note that musicians must learn to subjugate themselves to a  
45  
46 greater whole, rather than compete with each other in virtuosity, speed and volume, but  
47  
48 this experiential process is difficult for educators to provide. Griggs, Holden, Lawless and Rae  
49  
50 (2018) agree that students may resist reflective learning but, despite noting a general lack of  
51  
52 evidence that teaching about reflection enhances reflective practice in later professional  
53  
54 work, found in their study of Masters graduates in Human Resource  
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56 Management/Development '*...some evidence that students were able to translate their  
57  
58 learning into something meaningful for their practice*' (p1172). These were however Masters  
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60 graduates of a vocational programme.

In Burke's (2015) terms, all undergraduates may aspire to vocational greatness, but far too  
many simply expect greatness to be thrust upon them, as Louise initially expected to

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3 happen. It is a paradox that students are focused on their vocation but have difficulty seeing  
4 the route to it as one of self-discovery, a journey inwards, rather than largely as a matter of  
5 consumer choice. However work experience seems to have the power to bring ontological  
6 development about.  
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11 Heidegger offers some insights into how ontological development can be promoted.  
12 Heidegger (Thomson, 2005) distinguishes genuine education (or *bildung*) from received  
13 education in which students see everything as resources to be ordered and optimised  
14 (Thomson, 2005, pp.160-3) to the exclusion of becoming. To get beyond this is to transcend  
15 enframing - which to Heidegger represents the potential danger to forget our own essence  
16 as beings capable of revealing the world in different ways and finding new ways of being.  
17 Enframing causes humans to see themselves exclusively as beings that order things and see  
18 everything as commodities. Heidegger concluded that technology is fundamentally  
19 enframing (Scrivener, 2014). This contrast between becoming and enframing is challenging  
20 because it suggests that education aiming at ontological development may be incompatible  
21 with the employability agenda. However broader employability is not simply utilitarian, it is  
22 more than seeing the self as a resource to be ordered and optimized because developing as  
23 a professional inevitably requires us to go beyond this. Johnsson and Hager's work on  
24 becoming a professional musician illustrates this well (2008). Vocational education with  
25 integrated work experience may add ontological growth to employability.  
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38 To learn to become, students need to be strategic and to order things and use them in self-  
39 construction. This facilitates a sort of 'becoming' but true ontological education means going  
40 to a deeper level of truth. To do this requires reflection, self-awareness and openness to  
41 seeing things not only as objects of use. Getting students to be strategic is hard enough says  
42 Burke (2015), getting them to be open to ontological development is harder still, but  
43 professional level vocational work experience, immersion in a community of practice, has  
44 the potential to break the chains.  
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### 51 **Limitations and further research**

52 This research is limited in scale and scope and confined to participants from a single  
53 university. It has the usual strengths and weaknesses of qualitative work (e.g. breadth  
54 sacrificed for depth), although reference to Tracy's eight 'big-tent' criteria for good  
55 qualitative research (2010) suggests that it meets these criteria. Further research to explore  
56 experience of the graduate transition, learning at work and the value that participants place  
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3 on their psychology degree would be of interest. It would also be interesting to know more  
4 about the role of work placements in social mobility and the about the extent to which  
5 recruitment to the psychology professions, especially clinical psychology, reproduces  
6 inequality.  
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## 10 **Conclusions and implications for practice**

11 This research suggests that BSc Psychology students and graduates value their work  
12 experience over other aspects of their degree. They are keen to become professionals,  
13 expect their psychology degree to help them to achieve this and are disappointed and  
14 confused if it does not clearly do so. Becoming a professional requires ontological  
15 development and the evidence here suggests that professional work experience enables  
16 such development through situational learning and may be the most effective means of  
17 bringing it about. This research suggests that ontological development, employability and  
18 scholarship in BSc Psychology may all be served by a stronger vocational emphasis and  
19 professional level work experience. Undergraduate vocational education in psychology is not  
20 straightforward however. There are far more undergraduates than professional psychology  
21 outcomes. Nonetheless Psychology is a STEM subject and a broad arena contributing to  
22 many areas of employment beyond those in the life and health sciences as the idea of  
23 psychological literacy explores (Halpern, 2009, Cranney and Dunn, 2011, McGovern, Corey,  
24 Cranney et al., 2009).  
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38 A number of questions and implications arise for BSc Psychology programme teams, for  
39 students, applicants and their advisors and for employers. For BSc Psychology programme  
40 teams, given that learning to become a professional involves adding ontological  
41 development to knowledge and skills, that students expect their degree to prepare them to  
42 become professionals and that work experience is important for ontological development,  
43 three questions arise. What will they do to: 1) Embed professional work experience into BSc  
44 Psychology and to promote ontological development? 2) Make BSc Psychology more  
45 vocational? 3) Meaningfully link learning at work to learning at university?  
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53 The implications for students, applicants and their advisors are that they should seek BSc  
54 Psychology programmes that: 1) Explicitly help students to become professionals. 2) Include  
55 activities that promote ontological development. 3) Embed professional work experience  
56 into the course. 4) Are more vocational. 5) Clearly link learning at work to learning at  
57 university.  
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5 The implications for employers are that they should: 1) Take undergraduates on long-term  
6 work placements to allow them to participate in and learn from communities of practice. 2)  
7 Offer them the inspiring personal apprenticeship relationships that are so important for  
8 promoting engagement and growth.  
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**Table 1: Placement student themes**

**Aim 1. Do interviews with those in the graduate transition offer evidence that ontology is central to the educational transformation that Barnett and others argue that HE should provide?**

1. Coherence, sophistication and fluency of interviewees
2. Personal development, competence
3. Connecting work and university

**Aim 2. Is a period of professional level work experience, such as an integrated sandwich placement year, important in the process of becoming?**

4. Situated learning (also aim three)
5. Broadened or crystalized career outlook
6. Supervision

**Aim 3. How do individuals experience the transition from being a student to becoming a graduate professional?**

7. Situated learning (also aim two)
8. Break from education
9. The challenge of placement

**Table 2: Key themes for individual graduates**

Nadia: Clinical ambitions, expectations and fate
Louise: BSc not worthwhile, initial disappointment
Amina: Learning at work, assimilating transition
Suzie: Inspired by vocation on placement
Toyah: Paradise lost, a narrative of becoming