

Navigating the graduate labour market: The impact of social class on student understandings of graduate careers and the graduate labour market

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Abstract

Significant expansions in higher education over the last few decades have raised concerns about an over-supply of graduates in the labour market, such that a degree no longer seamlessly translates into a graduate career or occupation, with the increased life chances this could bring. In this paper, we report a study of undergraduates' perceptions of graduate careers and the graduate labour market. As the data showed perceptions were shaped strongly by social class we applied a Bourdieusian theoretical lens to examine the role of capitals and hysteresis of habitus on students' expectations. The study demonstrates how the classed nature of the graduate labour market manifests itself through differences in the level of understanding and preparedness for navigating the labour market. We highlight the structural barriers 'non-traditional' graduates face when entering and navigating a volatile graduate labour market.

Introduction

Over the past 20 years the expansion of higher education (HE) has been a strategic priority for governments around the world, driven by the skill demands of the 'knowledge economy' and the potential for education to enhance social mobility, in the UK context participation in higher education has risen from roughly 35% of young people in 2000 as reported by Harrison (2018) to just over 50% in 2017 (DfE 2019). This expansion was based upon assumptions derived from human capital theory (e.g. Becker 1964), and a meritocratic view of education and the labour market. However, researchers have raised concerns about whether expansion has produced benefits across the board. Purcell *et al.* (2012) compare findings from their research examining the graduate employment trajectories of

undergraduates in 1999 and 2009, they report that the level of graduate underemployment had doubled from 20% of graduates in non-graduate employment 30 months after graduation to 40% of graduates in non-graduate employment after the same length of time. This trend is echoed by the UK Office for National Statistics (ONS) reporting that 46.4% of recent graduates in the UK are in non-graduate employment compared to 37% in 2001 (Scurry and Blenkinsopp 2018). This issue is further complicated by substantial gaps in performance and outcomes ‘between underrepresented groups and other students at every stage of higher education – from entry right through to transition into work’ (Millward 2018). Although financial benefits are associated with possession of a university degree (Di Pietro 2017; OECD 2017), critics argue that assumptions of meritocracy are incompatible with the current context of the global graduate labour market, where demand for graduates has not kept pace with the number of graduates being ‘produced’ (Tholen and Brown 2018; Burke et al. 2017). The graduate labour market is characterised by long-standing and deep-running structural inequalities relating to social class (Furlong and Cartmel 2005; Hebson 2009; Burke 2016), gender (Tomlinson et al. 2013; Bradley and Waller 2018) and race & ethnicity (Sedghi 2014; Rafferty 2012).

Concerns about inequality have led to increasing attention on levels of participation by ‘under-represented’ groups and the equality of their experience and outcomes; in many countries, this discussion is taking place against a backdrop of debates about the value of HE. There is a need to examine the way in which the performance (and outcomes) for different groups are enabled or constrained by wider structural forces (Waller et al. 2018). This is obviously most important for graduates themselves and wider society, but also increasingly for HE institutions, as graduate labour market outcomes become a proxy measure of their performance and ability to deliver a ‘worthwhile product’ that offers a return on the investment in HE by individuals and society (Case 2014; Burke 2016).

These debates bring to the fore concerns over the readiness of undergraduates to engage in career planning and decision making, with Bridgstock (2009) arguing universities need to understand the acquisition and use of career building and self-management skills when considering employability. Growing diversity in the graduate population creates a need for better understanding of the diversity of graduate employment expectations. Drawing on qualitative data gathered from students at two UK universities (one Russell Group and one Post-92), the present study examines how undergraduate students in the UK understand graduate employment outcomes, in the context of the wider changes in HE and the labour market, and explores how this group are engaging in career management strategies.

Class proved to be the dominant factor shaping students' expectations about graduate careers, shaping their attitudes and strategy toward the graduate labour market. Moving toward a cultural class analysis reading (Skeggs 1997; Crompton and Scott 2005), we treat the social class as composite of various capitals, operating within many social contexts, and intersectional in nature. We draw on Bourdieu's (1977) theory of practice to examine the genesis of contrasts between students' expectations of and preparations for the graduate labour market. The study contributes important insights into how the classed nature of the graduate labour market manifests itself through differences in understanding of, preparation for, and successful navigation into, a graduate career.

Literature Review

Within an increasingly blurred and de-structured graduate labour market, the rules of the game (for career success) become increasingly tacit, increasing the significance of a classed ability to negotiate these unwritten rules and successfully navigate the labour market (Bradley and Waller 2018; Morrison 2018). A recurring theme within the literature is the importance of additional resources due to the decreased buying power of a degree and the

classed nature of access to and deployment of capitals (Burke 2016; Friedman and Laurison 2019). Financial resources to support oneself before securing employment, plus social networks and informal support from friends and family, combine to boost to a graduate's trajectory, while and lack of both types of resources may of course inhibit a graduate's career development. To explore how understandings of the graduate labour market vary between different groups of students, and the impact this has on their preparations for the transition to work, we apply Bourdieu's (1984) structural constructivist ontology.

We start by outlining how we understand and apply Bourdieu's thinking tools – in particular, habitus, capital and field. The habitus is the set of an individual's norms, values and dispositions (Bourdieu 1977). These norms and values provide a sense of belonging or un-belonging in certain social situations or environments and help to provide a roadmap to negotiate social space. Despite contemporary life being characterised by increasing sources of information and influence (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002), the major architects of habitus remain family and education (Bourdieu 1977). Family has a significant influence during an individual's formative years. Norms, values, expectations and a sense of practice are inculcated through a combination of everyday life and overt guidance. Similarly, the education system plays a significant role over a prolonged period of an individual's formative years. For Bourdieu and Passeron (1990), the education system is not a neutral arbitrator but a mechanism for social reproduction in articulating where a student 'belongs' in social space, with the effect of reproducing social positions over generations and subsequent social relations. The education system is able to do this through 'pedagogical authority', stemming from the level of trust individuals place in schools (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990).

Alongside habitus, Bourdieu's approach to the concept of capital provides a nuanced understanding of belonging and trajectory. Bourdieu (2004) outlines three forms of capital; economic, social and cultural. Within a Bourdieusian framework capitals are seen to

illustrate the transactional nature of a range of resources, plot an individual's position within social space and set out the parameters of an individual's expectations - what Bourdieu referred to as the 'field of the possibles' (1984, 110). The field is the final concept within Bourdieu's trio of foundational thinking tools, seen as the arena or context in which habitus and capital interact to direct practice – whether that practice be 'successful' or not. However, the field is a dynamic concept and as such has an active role in subsequent practice. Fields, operating via a set of assumed norms within a field (or doxa), have rules and expectations. For an individual to successfully navigate a certain field they are required to exhibit a combination of habitus and capital congruent to that field. If an individual is unable to navigate the often tacit rules of the field they will feel like a 'fish out of water' (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992) and their practice may not yield the intended results.

The impact of Bourdieusian sociology is evident in the cultural turn in class analysis (Savage 2000), which is based on the combination of forms of capital and the subtle processes of power relations, inequalities and suffering. The everyday experience of class and reproduction are illustrated by contemporary examples of cultural class analysis in a range of social spaces (Savage et al. 2015; Atkinson 2017). While cultural class analysis moves beyond economic capital, it maintains a focus on this critical resource; Bourdieu (2004) argues all capitals stems from economic capital, though its value is then determined by the field. It is this position of going beyond economic conditions, while maintaining an examination of them, that France and Threadgold (2016) advocate when unpacking the role of political economy in youth transitions. Through applying other capitals and valuing them against the expectation of a field we can examine inequalities within fields, while remembering the field's current context is curated by conditions best accounted for by political economy. We follow Bourdieu's approach of treating habitus, capital and field as

interlinked and informing each other, expressed as ‘[(habitus) (capital) + field] = practice’ (Bourdieu 1984, 101).

Successful navigation of the graduate labour market is mediated by having a clear appreciation for how it operates and which actions and attitudes are likely to be rewarded, or as Bourdieu (1977) would describe as ‘practical mastery’. It can be argued that the origins of classed employment trajectories stem from classed levels of understanding the market (Morrison 2014; Burke 2016; Bradley and Waller 2018) – in particular, middle class university students owning a clearer and more current picture of the graduate labour market. Burke (2016) reports on classed levels of labour market understanding, with meritocratic expectations and a reliance on the continued buying power of the degree a dominant feature of working-class graduates’ attitudes. Elsewhere, Figueiredo et al. (2017) suggest current Portuguese university students’ understanding of the market are based on previous cohorts’ experience, and as such are outdated.

Such anachronistic conceptions of the graduate market are exacerbated for working class students due to limited social capital and the consequences of not having access to additional sources of information from family and friends (Bradley and Waller 2018). A key consequence arising from a restricted understanding of the market is a lack of preparation and a limited appreciation of the importance of non-academic experiences gained through extracurricular activities (Redmond 2010; Kim and Bastedo 2016; Rivera 2011; Tomlinson, 2007). There are visible classed levels of participation in extracurricular activities (Stevenson and Clegg 2010), with Bathmaker et al. (2016) finding students reported financial as well as cultural barriers to joining university clubs or societies, whilst Reay, Crozier and Clayton (2009) note the tendency for working class students to focus exclusively on academic achievement over extracurricular experiences, in part the authors argue to develop

scholastic capital to reinforce a sense of belonging in higher education which may very well be incongruent to their habitus.

Methodology

To capture the heterogeneity of the undergraduate student population, we draw on focus group data from two universities in the UK which represent different parts of the sector – a Russell Group and a post-1992 university¹. Focus groups were chosen as a method for data collection to provide an opportunity for students to voice their experience of and attitudes toward HE and subsequent employment. Employing focus groups allowed the research team to observe similarities and contrasts between students by the institution and also provided an opportunity to record student reactions when contrasting narratives were presented by their counterparts.

We conducted 15 focus groups at each institution, comprising students from a range of disciplines at different stages of their programme. Students were contacted through emails, posters and flyers. In total 65 students joined the focus groups, 32 from the Post-92 university and 33 from the Russell Group university. The characteristics of the participants are detailed in Table 1. All participants were briefed about the aims of the study and signed a consent form. To ensure anonymity participants have been assigned a pseudonym and any information which can be used to identify them has been removed. All participants completed a data collection form which asked them to indicate their gender, age, programme of study, year of study and whether they were the first in their family to attend university. Each focus group was facilitated by a moderator and an additional member of the research team made

¹ It is difficult to equate HE systems from one country to the next, but, in simple terms, Russell Group universities are elite institutions within the UK system while post-92 institutions are similar to what are sometimes called applied universities (e.g. in Germany) or universities of technology (e.g. in Australia).

notes and observations as the discussions unfolded. A structured approach was taken to the focus groups, using a common schedule of questions (Robson 2011).

Table One: Demographic details of the focus group participants.

	Post-92 Institution (n = 32)	Russell Group Institution (n = 33)
Gender	78% Female 22% Male	70% Female 30% Male
Year of study	51% Year 1 27% Year 2 22% Year 3/4	48% Year 1 36% Year 2 16% Year 3/4
Age	44% 18-20 28% 21-23 9% 24-25 19% 26+	42% 18-20 52% 21-23 3% 24-25 3% 26+
First person in family to attend university	47% Yes 53% No	30% Yes 70% No

The data were analysed using Angrosino’s (2007) two models of analysis, a combination of descriptive and subsequent theoretical analysis. Initially transcripts were analysed breaking down data into themes to illustrate emerging patterns. The themes were influenced both by previous literature but also through open coding stemming from respondents’ transcripts. Subsequently, theoretical analysis was employed to reflexively account for themes and regularities within student transcripts. A heuristic conceptual typology was developed through the analysis to illustrate attitudes and strategies of students in each university, leading us to identify two distinct groups of students, *Naïve* versus *Knowing*. We are not using the term naïve pejoratively, the term is being used as a label for

the group not an adjective to describe the individuals. These are students who have taken at face value the prevailing messages about the value of a university education. Though the differences between the two groups are nuanced and will be explored in detail below, for now we can simply say that Knowing students think possession of a degree is necessary but not sufficient for career success, whereas the Naïve students tend to assume it is necessary *and* sufficient.

Research findings

There was a distinct difference in responses between students attending the post-1992 university (*Town University*) and the Russell Group university (*City University*), which mapped onto differences in social class. Our initial proxy measure for social class was whether respondents were first generation university students, which we checked against their access to and application of resources. The main differences between the two student cohorts, the *Naïve Students* and the *Knowing Students*, were in the following areas:

- Attitudes toward the buying power of a degree
- Strategic planning for the future
- Resource building
- Influence of family

Naïve students

This group of students, the majority of whom read for their degree at *Town University*, expressed a particularly linear understanding of the relationship between HE and the labour market. Students often rationalised their entry into higher education as a gateway to increased employment opportunities and life chances. Jolene, when asked the underpinning reason for going to university, responded:

I think, well, you expect that, when you get a degree, you will get a better paid job – better job in general.

The belief in the transactional power of a degree was a recurrent attitude amongst the *Naïve students*. However, more than this, students understood higher education as life-changing and offering a significant shift in how they anticipated their life unfolding if they had not read for a degree. The economic and social value these students associate with a degree can be seen through Lauren's response when asked how she thinks her life is different by attending university:

I would have been stuck in a dead-end job [...] If I hadn't done a degree. I would have stayed in the part time job I'm in now. Just totally different. I have a career ahead of me, not just somewhere I have to go because I need the money.

Lauren expects a degree not only to create employment opportunities but also offer a very different life course with increased life chances and a sense of status.

Naïve students perceived almost guaranteed linkage between a degree and graduate employment but, as a result, also expressed a sense of opportunities being limited to particular parts of the labour market. In particular, students studying a vocational subject for their degree felt they were limited in the types of jobs they could secure after graduation.

Alex, when asked about her future plans, responded:

Hopefully, get a job in youth work because I have left all my eggs in a basket, really, and I haven't got any qualifications so ... So, hopefully, get a job.

Among the *Naïve students*, there was also an attitude that HE provided self-validation and offered a sense of legitimacy to enter the graduate labour market. When discussing the benefits of a degree, Steph and Alex comment that, beyond the technical credentials they gain, there is also an increased legitimacy of their attempt to navigate the labour market.

I think it [a degree] just gives you more opportunities in the jobs because now they ask more for people with degrees and stuff as well (Steph)

I think they take you a bit more seriously, especially from my area where no one has a degree. Especially with youth work and stuff because it is not the most serious job in the world. Well it is but not the sort of thing high up. People are sometimes like youth worker? Is that actually a job? (Alex)

Directed by the confidence in a degree's market value, the strategies students intended to deploy to navigate the graduate labour market were very one-dimensional and based almost exclusively on the exchange of scholastic capital for position. Students' reliance on scholastic capital to enter the labour market can be seen through Beth's comment when asked about the steps they were taking to prepare for life after graduation:

Really, I don't know. I've got to be honest, I don't. All I see is that you've got your degree and they [employers] ask for a degree...

The emphasis which students placed on the final degree directed their practices and attitudes during their time at university. Students did not value additional resources such as extracurricular activities or CV development; the rationale for this attitude was that the degree was of central importance:

I don't – I haven't been to anything about a CV or anything because I am more or less ... well, I know there is a time, and you can still come back after you've done your degree to do all of that, so I am not worried about that actually. I just think just get the degree. (Beth)

Naïve students spoke of receiving encouragement from family but a lack of practical advice, perhaps because the majority of these students were first-generation undergraduates. The main message coming from extended family members was that a university degree will secure a graduate job and offer increased life chances.

Well, my mum keeps saying to me 'so what are you going to be at the end of this? [...] She doesn't understand that kind of system. (Sharon)

Parents stressed the importance of studying and supported short-term planning:

I don't have any strategy for it (laughing). I am not planning anything yet, so just studying and then, because my parents say – just studying. No need to worry because studying is the most important thing for right now. (David)

Knowing students

In contrast, *Knowing Students*, all studying at *City University*, demonstrated quite different attitudes toward the significance and buying power of a degree. While respondents within this group still stressed the importance of having a degree, they also emphasised the need to develop additional resources and credentials due to the reduced buying power of a degree. These respondents, unlike their *Naïve student* counterparts, were careful not to become too reliant on their degree. A number of respondents felt those students who would achieve the highest classification in their degree, while demonstrating strong intellectual skills, could be missing a practical edge required by the labour market. These sentiments were clear in Tom's comments concerning his approach to his university studies:

I see people doing my degree and they're – on paper, they're better than me, I think, and they will probably come out with a first, and I'll have only got a 2.1, 2.2, whatever... but I think I have got to make my business being self-employed now and people are, I think – that have a very good degree – can be very naïve in that respect that, although they get the degree, their real world experience is very minimal, whereas that's where I think I'll have an advantage.

Having a strong appreciation of structures within the graduate labour market and, in particular, their porous nature, *Knowing students* demonstrated an understanding of how to apply a non-vocational degree. In this exchange, Philip explains how he can mould the skills from his Business and History degree to better navigate the market:

I think History leaves you with a better skill set than Business or having done both. Cos Business is a faddy, it's ... the way the degree's structured, it's not Business; it's the theoretical side of why you're to place something on a shelf, and it's ... I'd say you learn more from History because of the communication you develop, the research you develop, the self-restraint you develop, the organisation you develop – it's something which Business doesn't offer you.

A common attitude amongst the *Knowing students* was the necessary balance between extracurricular activities and their degree classification. Louise described her attitude to this balance:

My CV is getting quite full now, but it looks better if you have actually done something with your time, especially roles of leadership and stuff, rather than just got your degree. I would rather have lots of extracurricular and get a 2.1 than just a first and have none.

Informed by their beliefs about the limitations to the buying power of a degree, respondents had contrasting strategies/approaches to developing their employability for post-graduation. Consistent with the expectation of the value of extracurricular activities, the majority of the *Knowing students* had established a strong balance between their academic studies and extracurricular activities.

While *Naïve students'* strategies during university and plans for graduate life rested on scholastic capital, *Knowing students* understood the importance of other forms of capital and, crucially, had access to them, notably financial resources and extended social contacts.

Respondents spoke of how they could rely on financial resources to wait out a difficult labour market and build up additional experience. Juxtaposed to the urgency expressed by the *Naïve students* to enter the labour market as quickly as possible, many *Knowing students* appeared relaxed and planned to travel and wait for better market conditions:

I am not ready to go into a career as of yet, so I want to get some work experience. That's my plan [...] I sort of want to chill and go away for a bit, and then I'll feel more settled in myself. (Mariella)

In contrast to the *Naïve student* group, the *Knowing students* had family members who were able to offer practical advice and encouragement. Characteristic of this group, Zoe points to her family's previous experience with higher education and the graduate labour market for her understanding of its fluid nature:

I think it is my expectations, like a lot of people I know, and I've got a couple of older brothers who are quite a lot older than I am, so like speaking to them and speaking to their friends, etc.

In addition, contrary to the expectations of the *Naïve students'* family members, Zoe's family is active in planning her first moves post-graduation to ease her eventual transition into a graduate position:

I think my mum is expecting me to struggle a lot just because she is very politically-attuned – and we all are – and we know that things are a bit grim at the moment, and I think that's why she has been pushing the idea of a Masters to me and then like perhaps the idea of going abroad to try and do something there in France or something – just something to make me a bit different. She has been talking very strategically for a while about how to get into something.

Below we provide a theoretical discussion of the sources of such a contrast between the student groups, applying Bourdieu's structural constructivist lens.

Discussion

Our findings illustrate the significant class disparity between how students understand and prepare for the graduate labour market, one characterised by increasing competition, rewards for a tacit sense of fit and graduate underemployment (Scurry and Blenkinsopp 2018; Friedman and Laurison 2019). Based on the cumulative effect of influence from family members and access to additional resources, a clearer understanding of graduate employment and a market-recognised preparation strategy means the *Knowing students* are much more likely to enjoy a smooth transition into the labour market than their *Naïve* colleagues. In addition, the *Knowing students* appear to be in a stronger position to navigate successfully whatever hurdles and barriers they will face within their future employment pathways. Our position is supported by reflecting on previous research discussing the difficulties graduates face when entering employment (Furlong and Cartmel 2005; Burke 2016; Bradley and Waller 2018), comments from graduate employers on what they need from their workforce (CBI, 2009) and advice from the UK careers community (Artess, Hooley and Mellors-Bourne 2017; Bridge Group 2017).

In Bourdieusian terms, we suggest that the *Knowing student* group had a much stronger 'feel for the game', respondents such as Philip discussing how to apply a non-vocational degree in the labour market signalled an innate or pre-reflexive understanding of the market and a sense of belonging within elite institutions such as higher education. Applying Bourdieu's concepts of habitus and capitals provide us with a powerful and dynamic operationalisation of the often-subtle processes driving the sharp contrasts between the two student cohorts' attitudes, confidence, sense of belonging and practical mastery.

Locating the foundations of the habitus as the family and the education system, a system which due to basic self-preservation reinforces meritocratic narratives, we can see the significant difference in how respondents' families accounted for the market and prepared their children. Devine offers a succinct account of the transmission or inheritance of practical mastery:

The middle class may have high cultural tastes that they can mobilise to their children's advantage. More important, however, is the way in which parents who have enjoyed educational success know how the system works and how to work the system on their children's behalf [...] those who have not successfully navigated the education system cannot approach and deal with it in the same way.

(Devine 2004, 181)

Following Devine's argument, and based on our findings, it seems reasonable to suggest that such 'inside information' extends beyond higher education and into the graduate labour market. In many ways, the parents' habitus, characterised by differing levels of familiarity with higher education and understanding the relationship between higher education and graduate employment, is inculcated into our respondents. Parents of *Naïve Students* who encouraged an instrumental approach to credential development rather than long-term planning display a pattern similar to that discussed by Burke (2016). He noted that, based on a limited understanding of the market, working class parents encourage their children to read for a degree without specific advice. Due to the expected value of educational capital, support and encouragement to successfully enter higher education was thought to be enough. The trust which the *Naïve Students* place in the mobilising effects of HE and its ability to secure employment is compounded by a lack of *a priori* capitals (Bourdieu and Passeron 1979). In other words, the *Naïve Students* do not have other capitals to rely on; education

alone provided these students with a feeling of validation and a sense of distinction. In contrast, for the *Knowing Students*, reading for a degree did not translate into a life-changing event but, rather, provided continuity to their trajectory, reinforcing the stocks of capitals they already possessed.

There are a number of factors which can account for the inaccurate and outdated understanding of the labour market held by the *Naïve Students* and their families. First, the pervasive influence of human capital theory and its unsurprising success in framing attitudes and understanding in HE policy. The second, closely related, is that for many individuals seeking to become socially mobile, educational capital is the only resource available. As such, an acceptance of human capital theory is required to legitimise and validate the time and limited resources an individual has invested in education. These factors have been exacerbated by significant shifts in the labour market leading to the devaluation of a degree when judged in isolation (Tomlinson 2008). The graduate labour market has been a complicated and difficult terrain to negotiate for decades, particularly with the advent of increasingly blurred social structures (Bourdieu and Passeron 1979). For the UK the swift expansion of higher education in the early 1990s is the point where conditions in the graduate labour market vis-à-vis supply and demand reached a tipping point (Tholen and Brown 2018).

Shifts in the labour market can be operationalised as changes in the field of graduate employment, underlining the extent to which the field is a dynamic arena with rules, regulations and expectations which rewards a particular type of habitus and combination of capitals. Shifts which devalue or make obsolete previous generations' experiences, attitudes or understanding, are particularly problematic. The significant potential damage created from relying on others' previous experience stems partly from the value individuals, regardless of social class, place on personal recommendations and informal advice over official advice

disseminated in the classroom or through literature, i.e. hot versus cold knowledge (Ball and Vincent 1998; Reay, David and Ball 2005). Reay, David and Ball (2005) argue that recommendations are often sought from those with a similar habitus to the individual seeking advice, therefore reproducing classed mastery and classed experience. *Knowing students* have access to better sources of hot knowledge, and these sources (typically family) are likely to offer the same advice as experts like careers advisors.

Bourdieu (1977) argues that when the field changes (as we have seen in the contemporary graduate labour market) the habitus must change to accommodate for the new rules of the game. However, due to the tacit and unwritten rules of the game, some occupants of the field can experience difficulties in appreciating a change in the field and then acting to reposition themselves within the field to retain/access a position of power. Such difficulties can lead to a time lag between the shift in the field and the habitus ‘catching up’; individuals caught in this lag will continue to try to press a square peg into a now round hole. This is what Bourdieu termed ‘hysteresis of habitus’ (1977, 83). Bourdieu applied hysteresis of habitus specifically to examine graduate unemployment and in particular the damaging effect of holding an outdated understanding of the market in relation to the buying power of a degree:

[T]he hysteresis effect means that the holders of the devalued diplomas become, in a sense, accomplices in their own mystification ... they bestow a value on their devalued diplomas which is not objectively acknowledged.

(Bourdieu 1984, 142)

The strength and duration of the hysteresis of habitus is mediated by position within social space; those occupying dominant and elite positions, who carry a strong understanding and awareness of a particular field, are much better placed to recognise changes in the field requirements and make adjustments, and can offer these insights to their social networks and

families (Burke 2016). Such a trend is evident in the differing levels of understanding expressed by the *Naïve* and *Knowing student* groups. Hysteresis of habitus has traditionally been understood to be a process where expectations, directed by experience, are out of sync with current field conditions. However, in this case hysteresis does not come from outdated experiences of higher education but rather from outdated expectations of the socially mobilising effects of higher education and the standalone value of a degree. It is clear from our data that such expectations were held by the parents of *Naïve Students*. Arguments concerning the devaluation of a degree and the subsequent hysteresis effects were developed by Bourdieu in the late 1970s, as such this is not a new phenomenon but rather an issue that those with direct experience of the field are aware. The key point here is that parents of the *Knowing students* attended university within this context and their direct knowledge and experience provided them with accurate appreciation of field conditions and the need to supplement scholastic capital with additional resources. This is in stark contrast to the public narrative of how higher education leads to increased life chances which reflected the expectations that *Naïve students* reported their parents held.

Our findings presented a sharp classed contrast between students' planning for life after graduation. Respondents from both cohorts are partaking in what Tomlinson (2007) describes as 'graduateness', the development of the resources and profile a graduate needs to navigate the labour market successfully. However, due to the hysteresis of habitus, the contrast in student strategies to prepare for the labour market are quite significant. The antecedent for preparation and likely trajectories is understanding, in particular, how families and education systems understand and explain the subtle workings of the market to their children and students. As a consequence of the hysteresis of habitus the *Naïve students* prepared to rely solely on their educational capital, often eschewing opportunities to develop resources through extracurricular activities, in order to prioritise their studies.

In direct contrast, the *Knowing students'* preparation strategies involve a combination of academic, social and cultural resources. While the students from this group still value educational capital and see it as crucial to enter the labour market, they are very aware of how this form of capital has been increasingly devalued. This is clearly articulated by participants such as Louise and Tom, who opt to invest time increasing their social networks at the risk of obtaining a lower degree classification, and are comfortable with this strategy. Returning to Bourdieu's (1984, 101) equation of practice – [(habitus) (capital)] + field = practice – we can see the lasting and damaging effects hysteresis of habitus can have on practice.

Conclusion and implications

This paper contributes to the critical debates about graduate transitions to the labour market. Hysteresis of habitus arises from a friction between long-standing norms and values and changing field conditions and demands. In the UK context, the step change in the scale of higher education over the last 20 years has meant each new year brings in an increasing proportion of students who are first in their families to go to university, growing to nearly half of the 2017/2018 intake of (UK domiciled) students in full-time HE undergraduate courses in the UK (HESA 2019). The expectations of these students provide a sharp illustration of hysteresis of habitus; the devaluation of a degree and the need to bolster it with other capital enhancing activities has been discussed within higher education for over 40 years, and yet this is news to many of these students and their parents. In terms of the generational inheritance of norms we are in the fledgling stages (of the mass availability of university education) and social class casts a long shadow. Through exploring the narratives of a diverse group of students from two contrasting institutions, the findings demonstrate how the understanding of the graduate labour market varies greatly between different groups of students and the impact this has on their preparations for the transition to work. While

economic influences clearly have an impact on the choices that students and graduates make, Bourdieu's theory of practice helps us to highlight how a wide range of other non-material dispositions and attributes affect the decision making and behaviours, with very material consequences.

We have highlighted a class disparity in students' understandings of and preparations for the graduate labour market. In doing so we provide insight into the constraints faced by those who do not possess the innate understanding of the rules of the game. This is particularly important in the context of increased and widening participation in HE, as it demonstrates how the purported value of investing in education as a means to improve individual and societal outcomes is mediated by individuals' positions within social space; those occupying dominant and elite positions who carry a strong understanding and awareness of a particular field, are much better placed to recognise changes in the field requirements and make adjustments, offering these insights to their social networks and families. The key barrier to alleviating hysteresis is the durable nature of the habitus, but habitus can be reformed through inculcation of a different environment - as Bourdieu argued, 'habitus is durable but not eternal' (1992, 133). Whilst family and education account for the early origins of the habitus and orientate individuals and groups to future experiences/activities, when the habitus is immersed in an environment contrary to its norms, values and dispositions, an alternative or reformed habitus can take shape (Bourdieu, 1992). Understanding this provides an opportunity and rationale for renewed and extended careers advice at all levels of education. This is consistent with the shift from careers practitioners as neutral arbiters, encouraging the development of a career path suited to an individual's current situation and level of qualifications, to career practitioners as advocates of social justice promoting self-actualisation through recognition (Hooley, Sultana and Thomsen 2017).

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