'Permanently Temping?' – Education, Labour Markets and Precarious Transitions to Adulthood

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The candidate confirms that the work submitted is her own, and that appropriate credit has been given where reference has been made to the work of others.

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CONTENTS

ABSTRACT

Since the late 1970s the UK has undergone a period of substantial economic, political and social change. Fundamental to this has been the rise of 'neoliberalism' a political and economic philosophy premised upon the expansion of free markets, deregulation, and a reduced role for the state. The subsequent reformulation of economy and society around such principles has transformed the structures, institutions and processes through which people navigate their lives. Young people must now make decisions and face risks that were largely unheard of only one or two generations ago with significant changes in both education and the labour market having radically altered the transition from school to work. The move towards market-driven 'mass' higher education in the UK, alongside a deregulated, flexible and non-unionised labour force driven by an expansion of insecure, temporary and 'precarious' forms of work, has impacted upon youth transitions on a number of levels. With an absence of economic security and biographical clarity, the ability to achieve the traditional benchmarks of adulthood (marriage, mortgage and children) is becoming extremely difficult.

This study investigates the experiences of a group of young people in order to find out how processes associated with neoliberalism are affecting their lives. By conducting interviews with twenty temporary workers aged between 18 and 30, this study builds up a picture of their transition from compulsory education to further study or employment. The aim here is to understand how they have negotiated the choices available to them, how they feel about the work they do, their experiences of and views on higher education, 'temping' and youth labour markets more generally. Ultimately, it uncovers how the precarious and insecure nature of their temporary role impacts on their personal identity, their ambitions, relationships and plans for the future.

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Introduction

The life experiences of young people and the process by which they are able to transition from the comparatively vulnerable and dependent state of 'childhood' to the autonomy and stability typically associated with 'adulthood' has undergone a significant transformation since the late 1970s. Young people are often deemed to be at the forefront of emerging trends and periods of social change (Winlow and Hall, 2006) not least because youth sits 'at the crossroads of social reproduction' (Furlong and Cartmel, 1997:110) with broader processes of change and continuity observable in the views, experiences and aspirations of the young. The closing decades of the twentieth century provided a number of substantial social, political and economic changes which fundamentally altered this transitional period between childhood and adulthood. Today's young people are confronted with a world so different to their parents that Furlong and Cartmel (1997:6) argue that it merits both 'a re-conceptualisation of youth transitions and processes of social reproduction'.

Negotiating the pathway from learning to earning and the clarity and accessibility of routes from education into the labour market have in the past, and still today, continue to structure and shape the ease of youth transitions. Young people's engagement with paid employment 'remains pivotal to much else' (MacDonald, 2011:428) and the fairly sudden discontinuity of prescribed routes into the labour market alongside a decline in traditional patterns of socialisation has impacted upon the experience of being young on a number of levels. What was once a reasonably straightforward process of connecting oneself to local labour market opportunities upon completing formal education, a progression rendered largely unproblematic by both the relative availability of work and the clear demarcation (and limitation) of possible pathways, is now a more complex and protracted process. The reconfiguration of the labour market around new economic and political agendas, alongside an associated shift towards mass university participation, have both been crucial in altering this transitional process for young people, instigating new values, choices and risks.

It is easy to overstate both the stability and security of paid work and the simplicity of youth transitions in the years prior to 1979. Despite the famous declaration that 'most of our people have never had it so good', (MacMillan, 1957, cited in Evans, 2010:unpaginated) the decades leading up to the neoliberal turn were still predicated on a restrictive and exploitative social structure that provided clearly demarcated occupational expectations and life prospects based on the traditional categories of class, race and gender. Transcendence or rejection of this established social order was highly unlikely if not extremely difficult. In addition, the outward political

commitment to 'full employment' and redistributive welfare masked regional and local labour market differences with higher rates of unemployment in areas such as Wales, Scotland and Northern England (Cairncross, 1992) and the persistence of concentrations of poverty (Abel-Smith and Townsend, 1965). Although studies demonstrate that initial labour market entry was accompanied by some anxiety and risk whilst young people settled into the world of work (Goodwin and O'Connor, 2007) the relative availability of secure employment and the ability of young people to sell their skills to employers with 'a reasonable degree of continuity' (Winlow and Hall, 2006:22) ensured a clear pathway from school into the labour market. Moreover, the establishment of a comprehensive social security system helped to safeguard people from the rapid fluctuations and volatility of markets, providing a buffer in periods of unemployment and keeping the hazards of the labour market 'at arms length' (Bauman, 2007:60).

MacDonald (2011) argues that there is a general tendency within sociology to overemphasise and highlight patterns of change over processes of continuity with more attention focused on searching for what is new and different rather than what is 'consistent and unchanging' (2011:428). This may be true, but the scale of social, political and economic reconfiguration which occurred from 1979 onwards marked a transformation of such 'scope and depth' (Harvey, 2005:1) that any analysis of contemporary youth transitions is incomplete without an examination of the ideological currents that became the purveyors of such change. The unravelling of the post-war commitment to comprehensive welfare, strong trade unions, full employment and Keynesian economics that began in the late 1970s, was consolidated with the election of Margaret Thatcher in 1979 whose party sought the restoration of political authority and a fierce commitment to the idea of a free economy (Gamble, 1994). The advancement of 'neoliberalism', a political and economic doctrine that sees market exchange as the best possible guide for all human action (Harvey, 2005) has been pivotal in re-framing the experiences of young people around new individualised narratives of freedom, competition and choice.

It is the purpose of this study to examine and understand the changing nature of contemporary youth transitions and the effects of broader processes of social, political and economic change triggered by the implementation of neoliberalism within the UK. Those born after 1979 have lived the entirety of their lives under this new economic and social rationale, and its effect on the traditions, institutions and structures that shape and determine life courses and pathways to adulthood has been profound (Howker and Malik, 2010). Crucially, the reformulation of everyday life around

neoliberal agendas has fundamentally transformed the spheres of education and labour, both of which are pivotal to smoothing the process of youth transitions. Prolonged educational participation and delayed entry into the labour market may not as such, constitute actions of particular 'risk' in their own right, but the reconfiguration of both domains around the ethic of the market, has simultaneously increased instances of, and exposure to risk at almost every stage of the transitional process.

The expansion of higher education has contributed significantly to more protracted and complex youth transitions, continuing in education means to a greater degree, extending the period in which young people are reliant on their parents and delaying the economic independence and autonomy that a paid job ordinarily confers. However, the rewards for such short-term sacrifice were said to exist in the burgeoning 'knowledge economy'. It was argued that the requirement for highly-skilled and highly educated talent in professional occupations such as advertising, software and financial services (Leadbetter, 1999) would bestow hard-working graduates with the kinds of rewarding employment that would enable a secure and comfortable life. Liberated from the traditional confines of social class, the bureaucracies and rigid hierarchies of Taylorist labour management and the monotony of manual work, it was contended that the arrival of the knowledge economy would enable the realisation of neoliberal ideals of entrepreneurism, social mobility and meritocracy.

It is pertinent to note that the gradual shift to mass university participation and the introduction of market practices into the sector on the basis that competition naturally increases choice and efficiency (Bathmaker, 2003) was emblematic of a broader ideological shift towards individualism. The growing representation of public services as a financial burden to the taxpayer helped to undermine the notion of universities as serving a greater 'public good' helping to foster the kinds of inquisitive, critical and innovative citizens which are vital to the preservation of democracy itself. The wider societal benefits of producing highly educated and skilled workers and the notion of the university as a necessary investment in our collective future, has all but been eroded in favour of a highly individualised view of learning. The withering away of government funding for higher education to all but a narrowly defined range of 'priority' subjects (Browne, 2010) and the substantial rise in tuition fees has led to the repositioning of students as 'consumers' undermining both the purpose and experience of learning. Students must now make judgements about university based on crude economic principles rather than their aptitude or personal interest, adopting utilitarian attitudes on the basis of what will provide the best 'value for money'.

The ambition for mass university participation has been largely realised and recent figures show around 43% of young people are annually recruited into higher education (DBIS, 2014:1). However, the substantial increase in tuition fees is now leaving graduates laden with debts of up to £44,000 (Crawford and Jin, 2014:1). This, alongside a measured decline in the so-called 'graduate premium' and mounting evidence that graduates are finding themselves compelled to undertake the low-pay, low-skill, precarious jobs that they went to university to escape (Purcell et al, 2012:60; ONS, 2013; GMT, 2014) suggests diminishing returns to university education, a fact which, as will be demonstrated, only becomes apparent after it is too late. Despite the promised abundance of creative and professional careers awaiting talented and hard-working graduates in the so-called 'knowledge economy', the annual supply of qualified labour appears to greatly outstrip demand. The increasingly polarised 'hourglass' shape of the labour market into a profusion of 'good' jobs and 'bad' jobs with few positions in the middle (Clayton et al, 2014; Goos and Manning, 2003) makes job mobility increasingly difficult for those who find themselves in the entry level 'McJobs' at the bottom.

As a result of neoliberal restructuring initial labour market entry for young people today both looks and feels very different than it did only one or two generations ago. Conventional routes into employment for young people, the rather romanticised notion of 'son following father' into particular trades or occupations (Willis, 1978) seems a far cry from the fiercely competitive nature of contemporary labour markets. Obtaining employment can be a lengthy exercise, employers are now at liberty to be extremely selective in their recruitment process, a survey by Randstad (2013) found that the interview process has lengthened by a quarter since 2008, with an increasing use of technical, aptitude and psychometric testing. In addition, the use of assessment centres, group exercises and presentations alongside the standard face-to-face interview makes securing a position an onerous task. The collapse of traditional industries that fostered strong occupational cultures and high levels of trade union membership has transformed the social organisation of work and the bargaining power of employees. 'Jobs for life' and all that went with them, investment in training and development, rewards for long-term service and mutual commitment between employer and worker have long since disappeared (Beck, 2000). Increasing movement between roles and organisations is now the norm, requiring individual workers to take responsibility for the need to perpetually re-skill and retrain in order to stay ahead of rapidly changing markets.

Perhaps the most defining feature of contemporary labour markets is job insecurity. Increased anxiety about the stability of one's job can stem from many sources, certainly the personal costs associated with job loss have risen in light of the declining rate of unemployment benefits since the 1970s (DWP, 2013). Neoliberal drives for increased efficiency and the need for businesses to operate with a minimum of expenditure in order to maximise shareholder profit, have led to a transference of many of the costs and risks associated with operating in a global market economy onto the shoulders of workers themselves. By virtue of the globalisation of labour helping to drive down wage costs, alongside the residualisation of collective organisation and continued attempts to dilute employment protection, organisations' are able to extract the maximum value from each employee, leaving workers with little recourse to reject or counter the conditions they find themselves in. This has facilitated the increasing casualisation of labour with 'zero-hours' contracts, part-time and temporary work, driving employment growth particularly in the wake of the 2008 recession (Brinkley, 2012; TUC, 2013).

Standing (2011) argues that the proliferation of precarious and insecure forms of work is leading to the growth of a new class of worker, which he terms the 'precariat'. Embodying the realisation of neoliberal aspirations for employees to be easily recruited and disposed of 'on demand', precarious workers are characterised by a complete absence of employment security. Poor quality work, low pay, minimal opportunities for skill development or career progression, weak employment protection and uncertain hours all characterise the precariat. Engagement with work is fragmented and transitory, and they are subjected to pressures and experiences that leave them vulnerable and unable to develop a sense of forward biographical motion, compelling them to live relentlessly in the present (Standing, 2011). Even prior to the recession, young people made up a significant proportion of involuntary precarious workers (EFILWC, 2007; IPPR, 2010) and studies now show large numbers of young people transitioning from education straight into insecure and poor quality work (TUC 2014; UKCES 2014). The harmful effects of early engagement with precarious work not only on job and career prospects but also individual life biographies, has been confirmed by longitudinal empirical studies in the North of England. The research showed that 'churning' between low-paid work and unemployment continued into middle age and such jobs 'were rarely stepping stones to better employment in the future' (Shildrick et al, 2012:3).

The profound transformation of education and labour has thus impacted significantly on processes of transition from childhood to adulthood and altered the life

experiences of young people on a number of levels. It was contended that the inauguration of neoliberalism would give rise to greater freedom, choice and opportunity for young people and facilitate the emancipation of life biographies from long-established prescriptions of class, race and gender. However, increasing disparities in income, growing social polarisation (OECD, 2011), and the persistence of discrimination along both race and gender lines (see Schmitz, 2011; UN Report, 2007) suggest that such aspirations have been unrealised. Moreover, the endurance of social inequalities serve as an 'epistemological fallacy' as such inequities are now represented as stemming from individual behaviours and attitudes in an attempt to obscure continued systemic oppression and institutionalised exploitation. In a social world dominated by market-led forces, uncertainty and risk become 'unavoidable elements of the economic process' (Gamble, 1986:42) and young people without the security of financial savings and accumulated experience, nor the stability and clarity of long-established biographical identity, are therefore greatly exposed and highly vulnerable to the threats, insecurities and anxieties that are increasingly coming to dominate a contemporary world where 'all that is solid melts into air' (Marx, 1844:6).

Today's young people are compelled to negotiate and forge their life biographies on a highly individualised basis despite 'being the targets of (often) traditional societal prescriptions of what 'responsible adulthood' entails' (McDonald et al, 2011:71). Such prescriptions ignore the reality of 'coming of age' in a climate where the established conventions, structures, institutions and processes that previously provided frames of reference for young people and guided social behaviours, have collapsed under global market forces which prescribe an incessantly changing landscape. Bauman (2007) argues that this passage from the 'solid' to the 'liquid' phase of modernity embodies a new era of risk in which individuals who are 'free to choose' must bear the full effect of forces which transcend their 'comprehension and capacity to act' (2007:4). This new conception of 'progress' as a 'relentless and inescapable change' (2007:10) is fundamentally unconducive to the kinds of long-term thinking, planning and acting that facilitates maturation, development and the feeling of personal progression that reaching adulthood typically embodies. Conversely, living life in short-term, fragmented and transitory 'episodes' can lead to feelings of powerlessness, vulnerability and more worryingly, a fading of 'belief in the future' (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2007:421). It is therefore of great concern to see the deeper entrenchment of young people's engagement with precarious work. Such practices raise important questions about how young people are 'adjusting' to a life lived with minimal certainty and security and how such experiences can affect their individual plans and aspirations as well as their self-esteem and identity.

This study aims to understand the experiences of young people who are making the transition to adulthood within this new, risk-saturated, market-driven landscape. As economy and society have been reconfigured around neoliberal agendas, this study takes a critical look at how the consequent repositioning of higher education and the restructuring of the labour market have directly impacted upon young people's expectations and experience of both spheres, transforming the range of options and pathways that they must negotiate upon completing formal education. Situating the growth of precarious work within the context of imperatives for flexible labour, it examines how such work is experienced by young people and how the uncertainty and instability it fosters is impacting directly upon individual lives and their ability to reach the traditional biographical milestones of 'adulthood'.

By speaking directly to a group of young people, it illustrates experiences of 'precarity' as understood by this particular group and uncovers the attitudes, feelings and experiences of those who have been at the forefront of a period of significant social, economic and political change. Tracing individual biographies from education through to labour market entry, it will endeavour to give a voice to a group of people that can sometimes be overlooked in youth transitions research. Calls for more research on the 'missing middle' away from preoccupations with disadvantage and exclusion and towards a greater understanding of the meanings, dynamics and experience of growing underemployment as a new normality for youth in the 21st century (MacDonald, 2011; Roberts, 2009) suggests a need for a renewed critical focus on those young people who are economically and socially included, but are precariously 'clinging on by their fingertips'. In addition, this study will contribute to the continued critique of both neoliberal policy and ideology, and its role within the complex power structures which continue to dominate and shape our contemporary social world.

The study is organised logically, the initial chapters elucidate some of the concepts and theories that will frame the empirical research that will come to be the focus of much of the discussion. Providing a context for the rest of the study, Chapter One examines neoliberalism at the theoretical, political and experiential level. It will define and conceptualise neoliberalism as it was conceived by early advocates such as Friedrich Hayek and Milton Friedman, whose deep suspicion of state intervention and desire for market liberalism and the preservation of individual freedoms, began to gain the interest of those on the political right. It describes how such ideas were embraced and subsequently implemented by the Thatcher-led government from 1979 onwards, attempting to reconcile both 'laissez-faire' market-liberalism and traditional

authoritarian Conservativism under the new narrative of 'Thatcherism' (Levitas, 1986). This chapter will also demonstrate how successive governments from across the political spectrum have (to varying degrees of severity) continued the commitment to and deeper entrenchment of neoliberalism at both the ideological and policy level. 'New' Labour's historic rebrand in 1997 and its abandonment of the social democratic principles of 'Clause Four' appeared to signal the biggest victory yet for neoliberalism, adding an ontological dimension to Thatcher's proclamation that 'there is no alternative' (Fisher, 2011). Finally, the chapter examines how processes of neoliberalism are shaping and influencing the lives and experiences of young people in particular, as rising house prices, debt, mass higher education and the shift to flexible labour markets introduces new risks and anxieties into the transitional period between childhood and adulthood.

Chapter Two outlines the methodology and design of the research project. It is vital before undertaking empirical research to devise an appropriate and well-conceived research methodology that considers both the ontological and epistemological assumptions underpinning the project, the scope of the study and subsequently the most suitable methods of obtaining and analysing the data. This chapter describes and justifies the research design and the methods employed to conduct this particular research, namely, an interpretivist research strategy concerned with 'stepping inside' a social world in order to gain the views, meanings and experiences of young people from their perspective (Bryman, 2008). Although a small amount of quantitative research is employed throughout the study to contextualise and support the accounts generated, the primary aim of this study is to uncover experiences, views and feelings and, as such, qualitative research is necessary to generate this. The decision was made to conduct informal interviews with young people aged between 18 and 30 who were currently 'temping' for a recruitment agency. This chapter discusses some of the difficulties experienced in gaining access to this particular sample.

The rise in 'temping' and other forms of precarious work takes place within a context of neoliberal drives for flexibility and the requirement for labour to respond efficiently to market demand. Chapter Three addresses the growth of what has been termed the 'precariat', as labour becomes increasingly casualised. It is argued that we are witnessing the emergence of a new class of worker, defined by an absence of labour-related security and compelled to live fragmented lives around a succession of unstable, exploitative and short-term jobs (Standing, 2011). Such roles embody the realisation of neoliberal ambitions for labour that is easily recruited and disposed of according to fluctuations in market demand and it is argued that this represents a

fundamental shift away from preceding forms of labour organisation. Here, discussion is centred on the differential experience of work (and labour market transitions) under the 'full employment' years of Keynesian economic planning in comparison to contemporary neoliberal approaches. The decline of collective representation via trade unions, the opening up of labour markets to global competition, flexible labour management practices and comparatively higher levels of unemployment have resulted in a transfer of bargaining power into the hand of employers, fostering a fertile climate for the growth of 'precarity'. Although the composition of the precariat is heterogeneous, research demonstrates that young people make up a significant proportion of involuntary precarious workers (EFILWC, 2007; TUC, 2013; UKCES, 2014). The effect of early transition into insecure work as damaging long term career prospects is well documented (MacDonald, 2009; Shildrick et al, 2012) but discussion here also focuses on how such work may have an impact on the personal lives of individuals beyond the end of the working day. Finally, this chapter explore some current debates on the growth and deeper entrenchment of precarious work, particularly in light of the 2008 recession.

Chapter Four shifts attention towards education and seeks to outline and examine the effects of the increasing marketisation of the sector. Providing a context for the subsequent discussion, the first part of this chapter is concerned with both how and why market practices were introduced into education, and more specifically, how the expansion of higher education and shift to mass university participation sought to commodify what was once considered a public 'good'. It is argued that market-led approaches exemplified by the introduction of tuition fees, withdrawal of funding for courses which do not immediately benefit the economy (Couldry, 2011) and increasing focus on measurable 'research ratings' and 'satisfaction scores' is distorting and undermining both the process and experience of learning in favour of narrow economic agendas (Furedi, 2011). Thus, the concept of the university as a site of knowledge production and intellectual critique that can drive forward progressive social change becomes subsumed under individualised metaphors of ambition, entrepreneurialism and vocationalism.

The second part of the chapter introduces qualitative data generated during interviews with young temporary workers and primarily, relates their views and experiences of higher education to the proliferation of market practices. It outlines the choices and options they faced upon completing compulsory education and the decision-making involved, the availability of possible pathways and the need to carefully consider future job prospects and potential 'careers' presents a further step into the transitional

process. With many of the participants continuing into higher education, much of the chapter is devoted to presenting their expectations and experiences of university as well as a retrospective assessment of the relative 'worth' of gaining a degree. Finally, it is argued that the interview data poses serious questions about the role and function of universities as they continue to be caught between competing ideologies of traditional learning and business 'training' (Walton, 2011) and the effect that this is having on graduates themselves.

Following on from discussions on the 'value' of obtaining a degree and the currency it carries with employers, Chapter Five focuses on initial entry to, and experiences of the labour market. Whilst not all of the participant sample are graduates, early labour market transitions amongst the group shared many commonalities, with fierce competition for jobs, complex and arduous recruitment practices and the seemingly endless requirement to gain 'more experience' all playing a contributory factor in driving most of the participants towards temporary agency work. The experience of being a 'temp' was largely negative, low-paid, low-skilled, isolating and insecure. It became increasingly clear from discussions with the participants that such jobs had not enabled the cultivation or development of marketable skills or experience, nor facilitated upwards progression into more secure and fulfilling work (MacDonald, 2009). A frequent distinction was drawn here between the relative availability of 'jobs' and the scarcity of 'careers', a situation largely confirmed by existing labour market research which demonstrates an increasing polarisation of the labour market into 'good' and 'bad' jobs (Goos and Manning, 2003; Centre for Cities, 2014). For the participants, 'jobs' embodied labour as subjected to the full magnitude of neoliberal management practices, work intensification, exploitation, job insecurity and low pay. In contrast, obtaining a 'career' represented the holy grail of the participant's aspirations, providing job (and thus financial) security, opportunities for career development and conveying status and success.

As the chapter demonstrates, the monotony and uncertainty of becoming 'stuck' in a succession of temporary roles was for a number of the temps, leading to feelings of failure and dejection yet they maintained a resolute commitment to and gratitude at being in 'some form of work'. Against a backdrop of high youth unemployment (ONS, 2012) and a politically driven ideological agenda to demonise anyone not in paid work (Patrick, 2013) the resignation to simply 'take what you can get' was frequently voiced by the participants and the centrality and significance of paid employment to notions of identity and self esteem become evident throughout this chapter.

Chapter Six looks more closely at the affects of precarious employment on the participant's personal lives and their hopes, plans and feelings about the future. It is argued here that the experience of precarity extends much further than the end of the working day, debt, inadequate savings, and with (currently) little prospect of obtaining the kinds of well-paid employment that would lead to financial security, the participants found themselves 'trapped' in a position of vulnerability that had no foreseeable end. As demonstrated, despite their enduring position of 'precarity' the participants struggled to relate their situation and the individual problems they were facing (debt, unaffordable housing, inadequate pension provision, competitive labour markets and job insecurity) to wider social, political and economic processes. Their understanding of such issues was as highly individualised and fragmented as their experiences of them. However, despite growing concerns over young people becoming disengaged from politics (ONS, 2014) the participants in this study showed a keen interest in political issues (if exhibiting a distrust of politicians themselves) and made strong a strong case for declining social mobility asserting that in many respects they were facing a comparatively lower standard of living than their parents.

The close of the chapter examines the participant's future aspirations and anxieties. It is evident throughout their statements that hope for reaching the traditional milestones of adulthood, getting married, buying a house and having children, were being delayed further and further into an uncertain future as a direct result of their unstable position. Consideration of what the future may bring appeared to evoke much apprehension and anxiety, the compulsion to live in a perpetual 'present' was eroding any optimism and hope the participants had. The cumulative effects of such pervasive insecurity and uncertainty on individual self-esteem were profound, with some participants showing worrying signs of anxiety and depression.

Finally, Chapter Seven offers some concluding points to the study. It is argued here that neoliberalism, and attendant processes of marketisation and individualisation are having a profoundly damaging impact on the life experiences of this group of young people. Despite claims of facilitating meritocracy and opportunity, the accounts of those who are attempting to carve out their life trajectories within this landscape suggest that neoliberalism is acting as a barrier, preventing the achievement of those traditional socio-economic benchmarks which typically constitute 'adulthood'. Risk, anxiety and insecurity dominated the lives of the participants with the rhetorical opportunities and choices offered by neoliberalism not borne out by the experiences of the group. It is suggested that we may in fact be witnessing some downward generational mobility or perhaps a redefinition of what adulthood entails within this

new social order. Ultimately, it is argued that such precarious lives are unendurable, and the declining fortunes of young people, (particularly in comparison to their parents) may sow the seeds of any possible resistance to the dominance of the market over everyday life.

Chapter One: The Road to Freedom? The ascendance of Neoliberalism in the UK

The aim of this chapter is to contextualise the study against a backdrop of significant social, political and economic change and illuminate the concept which underpinned this transformation. The overall objective is to produce a penetrative and critical study of the effects of neoliberalism on young people's lives and experiences of employment. As such, it is the aim here to outline and define the concept of neoliberalism as an economic and political configuration, its key advocates, and the principles and values which underpin its ideology. Secondly, this chapter addresses the practical implementation of neoliberalism in Britain, its instigation into policy during the 1980s and the ideological inconsistencies it often presented to the government that was overseeing its execution. Finally, the chapter will examine the current context of neoliberalism, how the reconfiguration of social life around the ethic of the free market and the implementation of policies associated with this ideology, have significantly impacted upon young people's lives, particularly in relation to their experiences of the labour market, higher education and consumer culture. This review establishes the context for the study and outlines some of the key issues facing young people within contemporary society. From this, it is possible to formulate the key research questions to be addressed through the empirical study and subsequently, design a methodology that is appropriate for this research.

Neoliberalism in Theory

It is universally acknowledged that the world has undergone a period of intense social, cultural and economic change in the past thirty years; the changing role of women, increasing globalization and the development of communication technologies are all a part of a number of transformations which have profoundly altered the structure of society. Indeed David Harvey argues that 'future historians may well look upon the years 1978-80 as a revolutionary turning-point in the world's social and economic history' (2005:1). Fundamental to this historic period of change was the rise of 'neoliberalism', a political-economic doctrine and pervasive ideology that was to fundamentally reconfigure the basic principles of economy and society created by thirty years of Keynesian post-war policy, to a new ethic of market exchange.

> For any way of thought to become dominant, a conceptual apparatus has to be advanced that appeals to our intuitions and instincts, to our values and our desires, as well as to the possibilities inherent in the social world we inhabit (Harvey, 2005:5)

The currents of neoliberalism which began to emerge in Britain during the late 1970s and early 1980s, and continue to dominate the political economic landscape today, were conceived long before their eventual implementation into policy (this will be discussed further in section two). On the margins of academia, a small group of philosophers and economists, influenced by the nineteenth century principles of neo-classical economics which focused on the subjective choices of the 'self-interested, utility-maximising' individual (Gamble, 1986) and the relationship between market and state, formed an organisation which sought to facilitate an 'exchange of ideas' and the study of market-oriented forms of economic organisation. The group established the Mont Pelerin Society, advocating in its 1947 'Statement of Aims' a commitment to the 'essential conditions of human dignity and freedom' against the 'extensions of arbitrary power' which they believed to be infiltrating society, fearing that interventionist state policies would result in a gradual drift towards totalitarianism.

Early advocates of neoliberalism, including notable members of the Mont Pelerin Society such as Friedrich Von Hayek and Milton Friedman, wrote at length on the dangers of concentrations of power and the omnipresent threat of state intrusion and coercion into individual lives. They were fundamentally suspicious of assigning to government any 'functions that can be performed by the market' (Friedman, 1962:39) and instead, favoured the creation of 'effective competition' which was deemed a 'better way of guiding individual efforts than any other' (Hayek, 1944:37). The role of the state in this instance is reduced to a supervisory role, its intrusion permitted only to 'protect the lives and property of its citizens' (Gamble, 1986:30), to create a favourable environment for competition and to foster the conditions necessary for such markets to exist.

Neoliberal theory posits that the creation of free markets, privatisation, private property rights, deregulation and the liberation of individual and entrepreneurial freedoms is necessary not only to preserve the liberty and autonomy of individuals from government oppression and control, but also to achieve maximum economic efficiency. Markets are seen as 'the solution to economic difficulties' (Hutton, 1995:15), with central planning and state control regarded by neoliberals as wasteful, destabilizing, hampering growth and stifling innovation as the dispersion of knowledge which permeates through society in the form of individual skill will allow the best course of action to spontaneously emerge (Gamble, 1986).

In this deregulated setting, contractual obligations between individuals are freely negotiated in a market place that strives for optimal innovation, private enterprise and

initiative with all tariffs, planning controls and barriers to trade relaxed or eliminated. The creation of markets in areas where they do not currently exist is paramount and can be achieved by state action if necessary (see section three for further discussion of this). Competition is regarded as a 'primary virtue' (Harvey, 2005:65) and becomes the guiding framework for all human action within neoliberal ideology, making strong appeals to biological imperatives, human nature and the alleged 'natural' tendencies of individuals to the competitive drives of social Darwinism. Rampant individuality is the primary driving force behind neoliberalism, revering the responsible, competitive, flexible and self-sufficient individual as the ideal citizen.

Alongside the ideological imperative to be autonomous and self-sufficient is the necessity to assume personal responsibility and accountability for one's own actions. The extension of the market principle into all areas of social life, guiding ethics, attitudes and values and reconfiguring all forms of human action to market exchange, marks a decisive break with the past and entails the 'creative destruction' of prior institutional frameworks and organisations, divisions of labour and social relations (Harvey, 2005). The 'esteemed virtues' of the neoliberal capitalist include, 'independence, self-reliance… the willingness to bear risks, the readiness to back one's own conviction' (Hayek, 1944: 218). In the absence of government intervention and control and with entrepreneurial freedoms supposedly liberated from any conceivable constraints, the risks, opportunities and outcomes of each venture are redistributed away from the state and onto the individual (Beck, 2000). Success or failure is considered 'a matter partly of skill and partly of luck' (Belsey, 1986:187). According to the tenets of neoliberal theory, the impersonal and unpredictable nature of the market renders it exempt from blame or accountability as it 'does not raise moral questions' (Belsey, 1986:187).

As a result of this veneration of the atomised individual, forms of collectivism are viewed with deep suspicion. For Hayek, collectivism is nothing but a 'demand for obedience and the compulsion of the individual' (Hayek, 1944:218) representing a submission of the creative enterprising individual to the dogmatic constraints of the state. Organized collective groups such as trade unions and those who aim to protect workers from exploitation and advance their employment rights are seen to pose a real threat to the neoliberal project and are considered to be potentially dangerous and coercive, neoliberal advocates being 'necessarily hostile to all forms of social solidarity that put restraints on capital accumulation' (Harvey, 2005:75). In contrast, the coercive influence of large multinational firms and corporations are accepted

because they arise out of the 'spontaneity' of the market order (Belsey, 1986). For Friedman (1962:133),

> There is only one social responsibility of business - to use its resources and engage in activities designed to increase its profits,' the pursuit of any additional form of collective moral or social obligation would only serve to 'undermine the very foundations of our free society

Redistributive policies, such as those associated with the provision of welfare are seen to interfere and ultimately, undermine the effective functioning of the market. Such intervention causes inefficiency, hinders growth, lessens personal responsibility and violates the rights of wealthier individuals who have income taken from them to be disseminated amongst society. Alternatively, the neoliberal solution is the instigation of tax reforms and cutting the highest rates of income tax to induce further investment and the creation of more jobs. The concept suggests that increasing wealth at the top will eventually 'trickle down' to the rest of society, bringing a rise in national prosperity under the mantra that a 'rising tide lifts all boats' (Harvey, 2005:64).

The prevailing theme that dominates the ideology of neoliberalism is that of preserving individual freedoms, whatever the consequences. Appeals to 'liberty' 'freedom' and 'choice' are powerful and symbolic gestures which appear to show a commitment to individualism and 'rolling back' the state. Yet the neoliberal concept of freedom is defined primarily as an absence of coercion with the role of human agency being central to this concept. Only 'individuals, organizations and governments' are defined as agencies which can coerce and restrict freedom, (Belsey, 1986) the abstract and spontaneous order of the market itself is impersonal, unpredictable and therefore the disadvantages it confers cannot be considered to be 'just' or 'unjust'. The concept of justice, in these terms, is related not to the outcomes of market and the fair distribution of resources, but to the non-coercive nature of the exchange itself (Plant, 2010). Its definition of negative freedom is concerned with the absolution of state responsibility for market outcomes, the freedom it grants is 'freedom from bureaucracy, rather than freedom from want' (Leitner et al: 2007:4). As Harvey (2005:69) argues:

> While individuals are supposedly free to choose, they are not supposed to choose to construct strong collective institutions (such as trade unions)… they most certainly should not choose to associate to create political parties with the aim of forcing the state to intervene in or eliminate the market.

Despite such proclamations of liberty, there is little recognition by advocates of neoliberalism that submission to the market becomes unavoidable and compulsory,

the extent to which marketisation permeates all aspects of life virtually demands its engagement, 'there is only freedom to obey the market' (Belsey, 1986:185).

Whilst individual freedoms are regarded as sacrosanct to the neoliberal, equality is traded off for liberty, encapsulated by Friedman's explicit assertion that 'equality comes sharply into conflict with freedom; one must choose. One cannot be both an egalitarian, in this sense, and a liberal' (1962:195). In the absence of redistributive policies and social responsibility, each individual is compelled to become self sufficient, using the market to maximise their own position. This utopian prospect assumes something of a level playing field, and lacks any recognition of existing structural or institutional inequalities and the disproportionate advantages conferred to those in positions of power. For many disadvantaged groups, 'a decent life means a constant struggle against the 'impersonal' decisions of the market' with any collective attempts at minimising its negative effects or organising resistance deemed to be an infringement of their liberty (Belsey, 1986:193). Ironically, the racial prejudice demonstrated in its strong appeals to biological determinism and acceptance of a supposed 'natural' tendency to 'desire for company of one's own kind' (Levitas, 1986:96) is seldom recognised as having any inevitable influence on market forces. Dominant interests and unequal allocations of power are to be arbitrated in the spontaneous, impersonal market, where all outcomes from the process of 'non-coercion' are deemed morally legitimate. Plant (2010) argues, that this position is untenable given that the direction of market forces and the resultant likely outcomes are 'reasonably foreseeable' and although not intended, there is a 'basis for collective responsibility' to mitigate the effects of such negative outcomes on vulnerable groups (2010:219).

The implementation of neoliberal economics has provoked a number of broader theoretical and philosophical discussions regarding the market and its relationship with the state. The idea that markets are self-adjusting and can exist free from state intervention and imposition was deemed a 'stark utopia' by Karl Polanyi back in 1944. The neo-classical influence on the ideology is apparent, the normative assertion that economy can be extracted from the state, divorced from politics and disembedded from culture and society is highly problematic; to reconfigure the economy along neoliberal principles requires that markets are created and occasionally upheld by the state and, according to such justifications of human nature and self interest, such markets will ultimately embody the interests of their creators. The patent indifference shown by advocates of neoliberalism towards the deeply embedded power relations and unequal allocation of resources that persists in society has led critics such as

Harvey (2005) to argue that the inequality it creates is essential to a project which appears only to be 'associated with the restoration or reconstruction of the power of economic elites' (Harvey, 2005:19).

The Implementation of Neoliberalism in Britain

The move to neoliberalism in Britain in the late 1970s was the result of a myriad of social, economic and political circumstances that saw the unravelling of the post-war allegiance to Keynesian economics, state planning, welfarism and the commitment to full employment. The 1970s saw Britain gradually engulfed in a deep economic crisis. In 1973 the rapid escalation of oil prices set inflation soaring, peaking at an unprecedented 25% in 1975 and with economic growth falling and unemployment rising, 'stagflation' mired the economy (Stone-Lee, 2005). Yet while growth plummeted, public spending continued to increase, the situation representing a potential 'deep constitutional crisis' causing leading economist Lord Balogh to remark in 1974 that 'the magnitude of this threat is quite incalculable' (Balogh, 1974 cited in Stone-Lee, 2005:unpaginated).

In 1976 the incumbent Labour government appealed to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) for assistance and received a £2.3 billion loan in order protect the integrity of sterling and prevent the declaration of national bankruptcy (Stone-Lee, 2005:unpaginated). A number of austere conditions and monetary targets were imposed by the IMF in return for the loan, including increased privatisation, financial liberalization and severe cutbacks in public expenditure. Such radical cuts resulted in widespread strike action across the sector and culminated in the 'Winter of Discontent' in 1978/9. With such measures in place, the preliminary implementation of neoliberal policy had already begun. With support for the trade unions waning in the light of crippling strikes, and amidst fears of Britain's relative decline, there appeared to be a 'political opportunity for a sharp break with both the rhetoric and the practice of post-war economics' (Gamble, 1986:46).

Throughout this time the currents of free market liberal ideology had gradually been gaining ground and increasing political momentum. Since the establishment of the Mont Pelerin Society its discourse had gradually moved from the margins of academia and began to gain increased prominence with the establishment of many 'think tanks' and policy groups such as the Institute of Economic Affairs in 1955, the Centre for Policy Studies in 1974 (established by Margaret Thatcher and Keith Joseph), the Freedom Association in 1975 and the Adam Smith Institute in 1976. During the 1960s and early 1970s, Conservative Politician Enoch Powell, a committed believer in free-

market economics, reduced public expenditure, low levels of taxation, and a strong nationalistic state, had found himself isolated in his views as the ideological currents of Keynesianism were sweeping fervently in the opposite direction. As the 1970s progressed, and the crisis of political authority which both the Labour and Conservative government's had experienced resulted in deepening social and political discontent, the articulation of such views became increasingly common. Keith Joseph, another ardent supporter of free markets who established the Centre for Policy Studies in order to promote its ideology, began to vocalise more eagerly his support for the 'free market, strong-state' doctrine which came to embody the changing attitudes towards government and state-craft in the face of an 'un-governable Britain'.

In 1977 John Hoskyns, a Computer Systems Analyst, constructed a diagram on the British economy and the inter-related nature of the problems it was facing, concluding that a 'sea-change' was required to re-invigorate the economy. Working with the assistance of Norman Strauss and the Centre for Policy Studies (CPS), the subsequent report entitled 'Stepping Stones' became a strategic plan for implementing the free market ideology. It was distributed by Thatcher to her shadow cabinet but opinions were deeply divided as to its plausibility. Groups and organisations such as the CPS, and the individual proponents that established them, helped to provide a discursive forum for free market ideology, but such ideas were still considered radical and were often unpopular with large factions of the more traditional Conservative party (*Tory Tory Tory*, BBC, 2006).

Nevertheless, the breadth of discontent with the current condition accelerated and pockets of support continued to increase. Calls for a national-moralistic revival, embodied in social and cultural campaigns such as the National Viewers and Listeners Association became involved in widespread lobbying and campaigning for a reassertion of traditional family values and respect for authority. Business organisations such as the Independent Business Association and the National Federation of the Self-Employed began to take a more active and direct approach, becoming involved in litigation and direct confrontation with trade unions and collective associations. Such groups provided an established base of 'economic, political and ideological ferment' that could be exploited once 'Thatcherism' emerged to unify and lead the project in its implementation (Jessop et al, 1988:61).

> My Government will give priority in economic policy making to controlling inflation through the pursuit of firm monetary and fiscal policies. By reducing the burden of direct taxation and restricting the claims of the public sector on the nation's resources they will start to restore incentives, encourage efficiency and create a climate in which commerce and industry can flourish. In this way they will lay a secure basis for investment, productivity

and increased employment in all parts of the United Kingdom (Thatcher, 1979, cited in Fry, 2008:71).

In 1979 Margaret Thatcher won a significant majority to become Britain's Prime Minister. Her objectives were to restore the political power of the Conservatives, to reintroduce the principles of market liberalism and 'create the conditions for a free economy by limiting the role of the state whilst restoring its authority and competence to act' (Gamble, 1994:4). The party's manifesto had outlined their intention to 'restore the health of our economic and social life'. In practice, this involved an outwardly paradoxical combination of traditional Conservativism which sought the restoration of social and political authority, with a liberal tendency for a more deregulated and open economy (Gamble, 1994). Throughout the first few years in office, in order to consolidate power and provide an enduring base from which to formulate her political-economic project, the Thatcher administration followed a series of 'short-term tactical shifts' rather than a 'coherent long-term policy' (Jessop et al, 1988:91).

Initially, the most pressing demand was the securing of financial stability by reducing inflation to acceptable levels as, 'without financial stability, little could be achieved' (Walters 1986, cited in Fry, 2008:74). Extreme deflationary policies were adopted, taxes and interest rates were raised and the government sought to control and reduce public expenditure. While inflation gradually declined, unemployment figures doubled between 1979 and 1981 (Fry, 2008). The government's response to the mass unemployment caused by such measures varied, Norman Lamont described it as 'a price well worth paying' to enable a more globally competitive British economy (cited in Convery, 1997:170), and economic liberal Colin Welch said 'we must harden our hearts to the consequent misery and distress' and 'recognise how much of it is humanly inevitable' (cited in Fry, 2008:75). The Institute for Economic Affairs however, told Thatcher that if the low inflation policies she was instigating were causing a rise in unemployment then 'blame should be laid at the door of trade unions impeding the interplay of demand and supply' (Elliot & Atkinson, 2007:29). The gravity of the recession was unprecedented and despite their continuing commitment to 'cut and squeeze wherever it could' (Gamble, 1994:115) public expenditure continued to rise until 1984 (IFS Public Spending Report, 2005), the government being forced to bear the brunt of high unemployment with increased social security spending and subsidies to industry.

Despite the initial (and prolonged) growth in public expenditure to mitigate the effects of the recession, a substantial reduction of social security spending and the dismantling of a perceived 'welfarism' was high on the agenda. A central tenet of

neoliberal theory, the withdrawal of intervention and redistributive policies that were deemed inefficient, a drain on resources and hampering growth, were pursued with tenacity. Its gradual expansion under Keynesianism was considered to have created a culture of welfare dependency, contributing to an erosion of responsibility and family values with Thatcher arguing,

> Welfare benefits, distributed with little or no consideration of their effects on behaviour, encouraged illegitimacy, facilitated the breakdown of families, and replaced incentives favouring work and self reliance with perverse encouragement for idleness' (1993, cited in Fry, 2008:106).

During this time, there was resurgence in traditionally Conservative and Victorian attitudes to poverty. Theorists such as Charles Murray propagated the idea that poverty was now a 'lifestyle choice' for a section of society which he termed, 'the underclass'. This fragment of society was defined not by their lack of money or persistent exclusion from the labour market, but by their behaviour and values. Characterised by high rates of crime, illegitimacy, drunkenness and juvenile delinquency, the underclass lived in scruffy and unkempt housing, and lived off the state (Murray, 1996). They lacked pride, purpose and responsibility and were therefore deemed undeserving of governmental support or public sympathy.

Making such strong appeals to personal responsibility and morality aimed to garner public support and erode the political consensus that was in favour of the welfare state and recast the blame for dependency away from the state and back onto the individual. The measures that were implemented during the Thatcher administration marked the realisation of this ideology; the reduction and abolition of a number of benefits and forms of income support as well as the introduction of increased prescription and dental charges, tighter controls on the policing of claimants, reduced eligibility for benefits and the establishment of the Child Support Act all sought to alleviate governmental responsibility, reduce public spending and encourage personal accountability. The role of welfare was modified to become a minimal 'safety net' that supposedly enabled and assisted claimants to take responsibility for themselves.

Alongside the commitment to dismantling welfare and re-establishing control over the economy, a fundamental component of the instigation of free market capitalism was the privatisation of state-owned industries. The Conservative Government initiated a wave of privatizations, the sales of which would 'boost the public treasury and rid the government of burdensome future obligations towards losing enterprises' (Harvey, 2005:60). A number of publicly owned assets were gradually privatized including; British Telecom, British Gas, British Airways, the National Coal Board, British Steel and the regional water and electricity companies as well as a number of smaller

enterprises. It was contended that the end of the monopolistic and bureaucratic nature of such companies would increase efficiency; the creation of new markets would allow competition to arbitrate the demands of service users, eliminating waste, as well as increasing consumer choice. The efficacy of the UK's gradual privatization programme has produced varying results but the increased need to monitor such organisations to prevent abuse and allow new market entry has 'not led to the withering away of the state, but rather to a reformulated role for government as a market regulator rather than a direct service provider' (Parker, 2004:23).

Underpinning both the rolling back of welfare provision and the privatization of public assets was the coveted 'right to buy' scheme, aimed at selling off a large quantity of the public housing stock to council tenants. The programme was to become one of the defining pieces of Thatcherite policy, implemented with much neoliberal rhetoric on the virtues of a 'property-owning democracy' and traditionally Conservative appeals to economic self-sufficiency and diminishing the responsibility of the state. Homes were offered at a variety of discounted rates depending on the length of occupancy and the uptake of tenants was high with sales peaking in 1982 at 240,000 (Weaver, 2003:unpaginated). Yet despite the success of the scheme it proved controversial. The selling of houses at less than market value, and its forceful imposition on a number of Local Authorities who refused to process such applications, ran counter to the free market, non-interventionist principles advocated by the party.

Pressing ahead with the full implementation of neoliberalism and the consolidation of the free market economy, the government sought to rid themselves of the need to subsidise any ailing national industry that was deemed uneconomical and equally, confront the increasingly powerful trade unions. The inevitability of a confrontation increased when in 1981 Arthur Scargill was elected as president of the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM), a man who Thatcher herself had described as a 'Marxist revolutionary' and who had led the strikes which brought down the Conservative administration led by Edward Heath in 1974. Since her appointment, Thatcher had made vocal her intention to restore managerial authority and 'management's right to manage' (cited in Dorey, 2003:75). In anticipation of a lengthy confrontation, and with a vocal intention to defeat 'the enemy within' (cited in Monaghan and Prideaux, forthcoming, 2016) the party had ensured substantial coal reserves were accumulated. In addition, they had recruited hauliers to transport the coal if necessary, as well as passing a range of anti-union legislation which limited the rights of those on strike. In 1984, 20 pit closures were announced provoking a bitter confrontation with the NUM and a strike that was to last 12 months and witness unprecedented violent clashes between miners and police. Over the course of the

strike, public support dwindled and the miners were eventually defeated signalling the end of the collective bargaining power and influence of the trade unions. Figures from 2013 demonstrate that trade union membership continues to steadily decline from a peak of 13 million in 1979 to 6.5 million in 2013 (DBIS, 2014b:5). Workers in the ever expanding service sector have the lowest levels of union membership, the significance of this will be discussed further in chapter three.

Throughout Thatcher's tenure, the drive to neoliberalism was pursued relentlessly and without compromise, with the policies she implemented being driven by an adherence to the key tenets of its ideology. Yet a number of tensions and contradictions between traditional conservativism and neoliberalism had to be reconciled. The application of libertarian market principles was restricted to the economy only, with traditional institutions such as the family and national defence, remaining 'protected domains from which the corrosive power of markets is to be excluded' (Gamble, 1986:51). The legacy of the social libertarianism of the 1960s, its rejection of traditional morality, family values, hostility to the establishment and permissive attitudes to sex had, in the eyes of traditional Conservatives, led to the creation of a generation of people who believed that they 'have a right to instant satisfaction of appetites, regardless of effort' (Edgar, 1986:68). To combat this, there was a distinct reassertion of national interest and the notion of the good and hardworking 'virtuous' society with the family unit becoming the source of social order and the organization in which those virtues of ambition, autonomy and self-sufficiency were 'transmitted and nurtured' (Letwin, 1992:39). Ironically, neoliberalism served only to validate the highly individualised, avaricious and hedonistic behaviour that traditional Conservatives so vehemently opposed. The economic deregulation and consequent generation of mass-wealth alongside widespread poverty served only to exacerbate social fragmentation, dissolving 'customary mores' in a way that could not solely be blamed on 'fuzzy 1960s permissiveness' (Allport, 2003:31).

As well as reaffirming the sovereignty of the family unit, there remained a small number of other domains which were protected from extensive marketisation and brought under further state control. Spending on national defence and domestic security increased during the early years of the Thatcher administration, attributable in part to the Falklands War (IFS Report, 2010). The Conservatives long-standing commitment to national defence and preserving British interests, sustained by characteristic and authoritarian assertions of identity, sovereignty and empire, stood in many ways at odds with the free market orthodoxy the party was promoting. Equally, The Education Reform Act of 1988, which devolved power from local authorities, granted more autonomy to schools and implemented performance measurement in

the form of national league tables, also introduced a national curriculum (Education Reform Act; 1988). This brought responsibility for curriculum content back under the control of national government, resulting in a uniform standardisation of learning that sits at odds with the neoliberal agenda of devolving central power and enabling individual expression and autonomy.

In spite of attempts to appeal to notions of nation and citizenship, of responsibility and accountability, and the alleged cultivation of creativity and liberation of entrepreneurial freedoms, the implementation and indeed maintenance of neoliberalism has required a far more authoritarian approach than initially conceived and outlined by its early advocates. The mass unemployment, strike action and economic turbulence that characterised Britain in the early 1980s demanded a robust and strong approach to government, and a paternalistic rule which reasserted authority over 'pampered and infantilised subjects' (Edgar, 1986:75) and ultimately endeavoured to chastise the 'idle and feckless' and compel individual subordination to the demands of the market. As such, the free market becomes less a source of liberation and more a source of discipline, with theorists such as Bauman (2007) arguing that contemporary consumer markets have come to replace more traditional, overt forms of repressive state control masked by a wealth of ideological rhetoric on choice and freedom. As Roger Scruton, founder of Conservative Journal 'The Salisbury Review' argues:

> For the Conservative, the value of individual liberty is not absolute, but stands subject to another and higher value, the authority of established government… freedom is comprehensible as a social goal only when subordinate to something else, to an organisation or arrangement that defines the individual aim (1980:19).

Rather than seeking to 'roll back' the commandist state, the neoliberal project ostensibly requires a re-establishment of control and re-affirmation of governmental authority. In order to maintain the virtues of the market mechanism and its continued function, the state is compelled to intervene when necessary to police, impose and nurture the values and practices conducive to its survival. As a result, critics argue that the drive to neoliberalism has produced a time of 'creeping authoritarianism' (Allport, 2003:30) with the substitution of a 'previously close form of intervention for a new intervention at a distance' (Thompson, 1990:139).

The establishment of neoliberalism as the dominant political and economic philosophy has substituted traditional modes of social reproduction and organisation with a 'market fundamentalism' that confers all aspects of human action into a commodity with an exchange value attached. The depth at which such an ethic now runs within society has been demonstrated by the continuation of such free market principles by

subsequent formations of government. The consolidation of the neoliberal project has been achieved through a succession of extensive policy measures accompanied by a pervasive ideological rhetoric, rendering the concept of the free-market, strong-state, irrevocable. As Jessop et al (1988) argue:

> In particular the state has been Thatcherized through civil service reorganization…through the enhancement of Treasury control over all areas of government; through a much reinforced policing apparatus and redefinition of 'subversion'; through the radical centralization of government power and the assault on local government; through a programme of denationalisation and competition which would be difficult to reverse; through privatization in the welfare state...through the radical restructuring of education...each constitutes at least a short term obstacle to an alternative economic and political strategy (1988:87)

After Thatcher's resignation in 1990, John Major continued and maintained the neoliberal agenda. His approach to government was much more consensual than the autocratic and confrontational style of his predecessor, yet he was evidently committed to the principle of 'free-market, strong-state'. He devised a 'Citizens Charter', an initiative which outlined plans to introduce further privatisation, competition and accountability in the public sector with notable emphasis on citizens rights as consumer's and the need for greater choice (Wilson, 1996). The passing of the 'draconian' (Fogg, 2009) Criminal Justice Act in 1994, sought to further suppress individuals rights to demonstrate and protest, increased penalties for 'anti-social' behaviour and enhanced the power of police officers to use 'stop and search' as a tool of crime prevention.

In 1997 the Conservatives lost the General Election and Labour returned to power as 'New Labour' abandoning the social democratic principles of 'Clause Four' which outlined the party's original commitment to collective ownership of the means of production, state intervention and redistributive policies. The new incarnation of the party distanced itself from its earlier repudiation of the 'selfish, acquisitive doctrines of capitalism' and its 'ruthless, self-regarding rivalry' (Labour Party, 1959, cited in Shaw, 2007:199). New Labour's approach to government, involved a seemingly irreconcilable combination of social democratic collectivity and solidarity, with the neoliberal free market principles of choice, accountability and responsibility. Tony Blair envisaged an important role for the state in guiding the British public through the turbulence of increasing globalisation and the rapid expansion of global technologies. He spoke at length on 'modernisation' and the need for Britain to embrace and adapt to the 'new revolution' which would scatter in its wake, 'previous forms of security, clarity and ways of living' (Blair, 2001, cited in Finlayson, 2010:13). In such a climate, limited state intervention is necessary to foster the aspirations and abilities in each

individual that will enable them to develop into fully self-sufficient and economically viable citizens in the future. As a consequence, social policy measures under New Labour were highly individualised. Welfare delivery, public services and manifest social problems such as anti-social behaviour, obesity and binge-drinking were all attributed to individual decision-making and behaviour rather than emanating from a wider socio-economic problem.

In 2001, Blair outlined his objectives for Britain, defined by 'not each person for themselves, but working together as a community to ensure that everyone, not just the privileged few, get the chance to succeed' (Blair, 2001, cited in Finlayson, 2010:11) The introduction of a minimum wage, tax credits and substantial spending in healthcare and education, illustrated New Labour's acknowledgement of a reformulated role for the state as an 'enabler' and its policies endeavoured to challenge inequality of *opportunity*, although not outcome. Yet despite this Tony Blair also embraced many of the market solutions administered by his predecessors; relentless target setting and performance measurement continued, low levels of taxation for high earners was maintained, Private Finance Initiatives (PFIs) were extended and the introduction of top-up fees in 2003 set the precedent for the creation of a market in higher education.

New Labour sought to reformulate its traditional relationship with both businesses and the trade unions as part of a process of 'modernisation'. Key aspects of Conservative trade union legislation regarding ballots, picketing and industrial action were maintained and although dialogue between the unions and Government was significantly reopened, and representatives were invited to participate in debates as a matter of routine, their influence remained marginal and limited (Shaw, 2007). Conversely, Blair expressed his profound commitment to establishing a stronger relationship with businesses stating in 1998, 'we want to go out and have a proper dialogue with business and be the natural party of business' (cited in Grant, 2000:24). As a result, Blair routinely emphasised the need for labour market flexibility, and avoided the imposition of any 'unnecessary' regulations or restrictions on employers, insisting that in order to drive a globally competitive and efficient economy, market conditions should dictate the needs of the labour force. During the New Labour years, a number of concessions were offered to businesses including 'allowing' individual employees of an organisation to opt out of the Working Time Directive which would limit the number of hours an employee worked to a maximum of 48 hours per week. The Government also resisted attempts to improve labour protection for the expanding number of part-time and temporary employees by opposing the EU Temporary Agency Workers Directive. Employment growth (outside the public sector)

during this time was largely in the low pay areas of retail, hotels, catering and cleaning, where 'poor working conditions are endemic, managerial control tight and trade union membership extremely low' (Shaw, 2007:134) with the mantra of 'flexibility' existing only to install endemic job insecurity in employees and transfer bargaining power back to management (this will be discussed in more detail in chapter three).

Some argue that New Labour's abandonment of many of its key social democratic principles was part of a 'logic of accommodation' and necessary in the light of sweeping globalisation and the need to remain competitive in a world economy (Shaw, 2007:10) with the 'colour of the government' becoming 'largely irrelevant in the light of economic globalisation' (Classen, 2002:71). But critics maintain that New Labour under Blair, drove Britain 'harder and farther to the right than the administration he defeated in 1997-all under the inscription of "progress"' (Seymour, 2010:5). It is interesting, that with New Labour unable to secure a majority in the 2010 general election, the subsequent Coalition between the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats borrowed heavily from their rhetoric, initially presenting themselves as harbingers of a 'progressive' and centrist Toryism, keen to disassociate with the still ever-present memories of the hardships endured under Thatcher. Yet despite their initial attempts to reposition the Conservatives in the public imagination, their policy prescriptions, particularly in response to Britain's recession hit economy, have been typically neoliberal.

In 'Built to Last' a document which outlined the Conservatives aims and values, they clearly demonstrate a continued commitment to neoliberal principles and a continuation of the 'free market, strong state' mantra. It states:

> Our Party seeks to cherish freedom, advance opportunity and nurture responsibility…Our Party stands for a free society and a strong nation state; an opportunity society, not an overpowering state; a responsible society' (The Conservative Party: 2006:1)

Upon forming the Coalition government, Prime Minister David Cameron spoke at length on the pressing need to reduce the 'structural deficit' as a way to secure the future stability of the economy and outlined his intentions to achieve this via rapid and severe cuts to public spending, rather than increasing levels of taxation. As a result, the UK has witnessed a systematic programme of spending cuts and reforms which have been repeatedly shown to disproportionately affect the most vulnerable groups in society (Rogers, 2012; Watt and Inman, 2010, IFS Report, 2010). The Welfare Reform Act, which was passed in March 2012 and heralded as 'the most radical shake up for 60 years' (Ramesh, 2011:unpaginated) introduced a number of

measures to significantly reduce the 'burden' of state spending and allegedly create a simpler and fairer system. In reality, the Act introduced a number of sanctions, restrictions and caps to welfare payments such as the new 'Employment and Support Allowance' Housing Benefit, and an overall cap to benefits at £26,000 (with proposals outlined by the new Conservative government in 2015 for this to be reduced to £23,000). In addition, the replacement of Disability Living Allowance with Personal Independent Payments significantly reduces eligibility for a range of benefits designed to assist with the costs of care and mobility that are often incurred due to disability.

The passing of the Welfare Reform Act was accompanied by an ideological campaign that located the problems of poverty as a result of individual behaviour and irresponsibility. With a return to the Charles Murray inspired discourses on the 'deserving' and 'undeserving' poor, last witnessed with such vitriol during the Thatcherite 1980s, the rhetoric that attended such scathing cuts to some of the poorest in society was again justified on the basis of preventing passive welfare dependency and promoting individual responsibility. It was implied that poverty was a result of individual choice; a refusal, rather than an inability, to find paid work; despite figures released from the Office for National Statistics in January 2012 illustrating that there were only 464,000 job vacancies available in the UK to meet the 2.68 million who were unemployed (ONS, 2012b:15). Recipients of welfare were routinely stigmatised in the press and by politicians themselves with David Cameron describing those on welfare, 'sitting on their sofas, waiting for their benefits to arrive' (Cameron, 2010:unpaginated).

In association, Cameron and the Conservatives spoke at length on their plans to mend 'Broken Britain'. The term, often invoked by 'The Sun' Newspaper, was used to describe a perceived collapse of moral values, respect and a rise in irresponsible and anti-social behaviour. Frequently linked to the activities and behaviour of the young, the mass hysteria and panic created over the perceived escalation of issues such as gun crime, teenage pregnancy, binge drinking and gang culture was routinely overstated and sensationalised, prompting calls for harsher punishments and tougher sentences to deal with the 'irresponsibility and selfishness, behaving as if your choices have no consequences…crime without punishment, rights without responsibilities' (Cameron, 2011:unpaginated). Nowhere was this 'hard line' approach demonstrated more than in the wake of the August 2011 riots, where magistrates were advised to give custodial sentences for those offences that would normally be punished less-severely, including for those who had simply received stolen goods, or incited a riot via social networking sites, but had not actually participated in it (Baggini, 2011).

There was little recognition in Cameron's reaction to the UK riots, of the social context in which they took place. The scrapping of the Education Maintenance Allowance, the rising cost of University tuition fees to £9000 a year, youth unemployment rising to its highest level since the mid 1980s (ONS, 2012b) as well as the impact of the Coalition's own cuts were seldom acknowledged as having any factor in contributing to the feelings of frustration and anger that led to the riots. As ever, the commitment to neoliberal principles of individual, personal responsibility and a refusal to acknowledge the impact of the free market on groups less able to mitigate its negative effects, remained in place. Perversely, whilst the young and the poor were being routinely denounced as 'feral', 'idle' and 'sponging', a blind eye was turned to the excesses of the rich; despite Cameron's frequently espoused claim that 'we're all in this together'.

Even in the wake of the Parliamentary expenses scandal, which showed blatant abuse of the system by MPs manipulating it for personal gain, investigations appear to show continued misuse (Watt and Newell, 2012). In addition, despite the prolonged economic slump, stagnating wages and living standards being squeezed by the 'austerity measures' being imposed by the Coalition, executive pay has soared and substantial bonus packages continue to be paid, particularly in the banking sector which was largely responsible for causing the financial crisis (Goodway, 2012). The justification for such profligate rewards; the need to incentivise staff and retain talent in order to remain economically 'competitive' is losing credibility particularly in the wake of the recession. Similarly, increasing coverage of the extent of tax avoidance being committed by large multi-national companies such as Google, Starbucks and Amazon, illustrated the growing disparities in a political economic system which ostensibly, continues to operate in order to increase the wealth of the rich, whilst simultaneously worsening the conditions of the poorest. Wacquant (2009) argues that neoliberalism translates economic injustices in such an individualised way, that while the rich are routinely rewarded, the poor are punished through the dual measures of 'prisonfare' (rising incarceration rates) and 'workfare' (attaching conditions and sanctions to social security and welfare). Such punitive measures allow governments to control marginalised populations more effectively, preventing dissent, and the individualised nature of contemporary capitalism enables poor outcomes to be blamed on individual behaviour rather than circumstance.

What is becoming increasingly clear is that the values espoused by Thatcher, and subsequently by Blair, and Cameron have now become deeply embedded into the fabric of contemporary life, entailing the 'creative destruction' of prior institutions, structures and ways of thought with neoliberal values becoming 'incorporated into the common-sense way many of us interpret, live in and understand the world' (Harvey,

2005: 3). In 2014, a British Social Attitudes report conducted by NatCen, found that society's views had gradually shifted to the political right, public support for increasing taxes to spend more on health, education and social benefits had declined from 63% in 2002 to 37% by 2014 (BSA, 2014: unpaginated). Equally, it shows a hardening of attitudes towards benefit claimants, in 1987 33% of respondents felt that if welfare was less generous people would 'stand on their own two feet' compared with 53% in 2014 (BSA, 2014: unpaginated) with some commentators suggesting that Britain is now 'more Thatcherite' than in the 1980s (Curtis, 2010). Moreover, with the Conservative Party managing to secure a (somewhat unexpected) majority in the 2015 general election, despite its pledges of further public spending cuts and continued austerity, it could be argued that the British public are now consenting to the deeper entrenchment of neoliberalism within the UK. In the next section, the validity of this claim will be addressed through an examination of neoliberalism within the current political and economic context.

Neoliberalism in the Current Context

The preceding sections have defined and outlined neoliberalism as a political-economic philosophy and documented its implementation within the UK. The following section will address how the changes directly associated with the shift to neoliberalism have significantly impacted upon young people's lives, by examining those areas which are important in enabling young people to make the transition from school to the world of work. Labour market restructuring and deregulation, the enrolment of growing numbers of young people into an expanded higher education system, and the increasingly prominent role of consumerism and leisure in young people's lives has ostensibly led to the repositioning of all human action around the ethic of the market. This section will utilise existing research to elucidate some of the new tensions and anxieties this has created in order to provide a contextual background for this study. It is the objective here to make an initial examination of the effects of neoliberalism on young people's lives, with the aim of elaborating this through empirical research.

It has been argued that today's young people must negotiate a set of risks that were largely unknown to their parent's generation (Furlong & Cartmel, 1997), experiencing an extended period in which they are dependent upon their parents, as well as being unable to implement progressive biographical plans such as buying a home and starting a family. The importance of stable employment as a mechanism for biographical planning, maturity, pride and purpose has long been a means of ensuring economic participation as well as social inclusion (Beck, 2000). The dual morality of

economic function and financial independence, as well as the establishment of social bonds and friendships, has historically compelled people to undertake paid employment and has provided an important and central guiding role around which young people are able to build a stable and coherent life trajectory. The transformation of the organisation of labour which came as a result of neoliberal restructuring has impacted on young people's first experience of paid employment on a number of levels and constituted a profound shift in terms of employees relationship to their employer, to colleagues and to the labour market in general (Pattison, 2008).

For a number of years, great economic gains were made in advanced capitalist economies with the adherence to Keynesian policies and the commitment to full employment despite the characteristic phases of boom and bust (Armstrong et al, 1991). During this period, a fully employed and mobilised workforce was a way of guaranteeing productivity and the relative stability of the economy. Conditions were often difficult and exploitative, and undeniably restrictive, but incremental pay increases, trade union membership and the solidarity forged between workers employed for many years by the same company, provided a secure and solid base upon which individuals could build a relatively comfortable future for themselves and their family, and facilitated the expansion of businesses into bigger and more profitable markets (Barber, 2007; Boltanski & Chiapello, 2007; Winlow and Hall, 2006).

The move to capital-oriented labour market flexibilization has shattered the need for a fully mobilised and employed workforce. As continually shifting market forces now arbitrate the changes in demand and supply it no longer made sense for organisations to strive for permanent full employment. As Beck (2000:91) argues, 'economic growth in today's world-market conditions is rendering obsolete the idea of classical full employment, lifetime jobs and everything that went with them'. Unfettered free market capitalism, divorced from the obligation to maintain social cohesion and the need to mitigate its more negative outcomes, has sought to recommodify labour with individuals becoming a mere 'factor of production' (Harvey, 2005:167) subjected to the mechanisms of the market. This is compounded by technological advances in mass production, the cost effectiveness of such solutions rendering masses of employees obsolete. The accompanying vast deregulation, lack of employment protection and decline of welfare provision accompanied by a collapse in the collective bargaining influence (traditionally associated with organised labour) has put downward pressure on wage levels and secured the transference of power to a capitalist class who are now able to legitimately hire and fire according to the demands of a market which

'mutates incessantly under the impact of technological innovation and deregulated market competition' (Gray, 1998:71).

Faced with intense global competition and a compulsion to achieve maximum efficiency, companies are now prone to frequent bouts of corporate restructuring and internal reorganisation. The proliferation of 'enigmatic management terms' such as 'subcontracting, outsourcing, offshoring, downsizing, customizing' appear amidst 'ever new waves of rationalization to which there is no end in sight' (Beck, 2000:91). Continuous cycles of recruitment and redundancy are increasingly common with employees easily discarded in the name of efficiency with 'flexible labour laws, allowing untrammelled hiring and firing with maximal speed and minimal cost' (Antonio, 2007:73). As the fluctuations of the market dictate the requirements of labour, the risks associated with such varying demand have been displaced to the labour force. Whilst the use of short term, temporary labour to meet the needs of employers is nothing new, in recent years it has become a central and permanent feature of contemporary labour organisation which is 'integral to business strategy' (Nollen, 1996:567). Figures show that the number of temporary agency workers in the UK rose from 682,000 in 1996 to almost 1.4 million in 2007 (CIETT Report, 2009:21) with the UK featuring in the top three largest agency work markets in the world (CIETT, 2009:18).

Irregular work, Weber argues, is 'something which the ordinary labourer is often forced to accept, is often unavoidable, but is always an unwelcome state of transition' (Weber, 2007:107). These positions, which are overwhelmingly clustered in the low skill sectors of sales and customer service, tend to be low paid and non-unionised (see Pollart and Charlwood, 2009) and provide few opportunities for career progression and personal development (Edwards, 2006). The distinct absence of employment protection and lack of security offered by such roles is acute. Attempts at reforming the laws which govern the estimated 2 million temporary and agency workers in the UK have been repeatedly blocked and delayed so as to not 'impose unnecessary costs and administrative burdens' on UK businesses, particularly in light of the recent economic downturn (Yeandle, cited in Berry, 2009:unpaginated). At present, temporary workers have minimal rights and entitlements; they have no right to a statement of terms and conditions of employment, are unable to receive maternity/paternity and redundancy pay and can only receive statutory sick pay when they have been employed for at least three months (Siddique, 2008). Within such conditions, it is perfectly legitimate for companies to fire and re-hire workers a succession of times. Employers are able to shift workers from job to job and rotate

them on short-term assignments, keeping their labour costs to the bare minimum, and providing them with a casual pool of 'cheap labour' without basic employee rights.

Figures show that the temporary employment market alone is worth £26 billion to the UK economy with the number of such placements continuing to grow as employers remain cautious about recruitment in the post-recession landscape (Recruitment and Employment Confederation Report, 2015:unpaginated). Research has demonstrated that many young people find their first job in this area of the economy with those under 25 making up the largest category of temporary workers across the EU (EFILWC, 2007). As a consequence, many young people remain trapped in a sequence of poorly paid, repetitive and dull jobs that fail to utilise their skills for a considerable number of years. This often results in young people remaining financially reliant on their parents until much later in life (Allatt and Yeandle, 1992), a situation which has also been exacerbated by the expansion of the higher education sector.

Despite the tangible lack of permanent positions available in the labour market, the higher education sector significantly expanded in the 1990s. Deindustrialisation brought with it a decisive break from the past, the demise of the coalmines, steelworks and dockyards, it was contended, would be replaced by a new 'knowledge economy' requiring highly proficient, confident and creative workers who would produce wealth in intangible industries such as communications, software, advertising and advice (Leadbetter, 1999:18). The coercion of masses of young people into the higher education system would therefore, increase the value of human capital, meeting the needs for such flexible knowledge workers. It would also signal the end of the traditional limitations of class structure and division along socio-economic lines, as an increasing number of young people could now benefit from the advantages a coveted university education could bring (Brown and Hesketh, 2004). Moreover, it would ensure enterprising and ambitious individuals took responsibility for their own 'employability', with 'upskilling' in order to meet the changing demands of the economy becoming fundamental in gaining access to employment opportunities.

Studies have demonstrated that the expansion of higher education, despite claims of meritocracy and opportunity, has served in many cases to only reinforce traditional inequalities. In 2009, a survey by market analyst firm CACI reported that young people from the wealthiest 1.9% of the population account for 8.4% of students at more elite, research intensive universities whilst those in the poorest 21.8% of the population account for just 6.3% (CACI report cited in Shepherd, 2009:unpaginated). Studies have also shown that graduates from more elite institutions can go on to earn

twice as much as those from newer universities (Paton, 2008). With increasing marketisation of the sector, not least the Coalition governments raising of top-up fees to a maximum of £9000 per year, universities are being repositioned as simply providing employees for business at the expense of traditional learning. Critics such as Hutton (1995:216) argue that universities are becoming 'factories for the production of degree holders'. The unrelenting focus on 'outputs' means that students are effectively adopting the position of a consumer who 'purchases' the requisite certification to present to future employers but fails to thoroughly engage with the subject at an advanced level, or to analyse critically, the fundamental structures and processes at work within the society in which they live. Higher education is thus becoming commodified with 'academic ideals routinely compromised for the sake of money' (Bok, 2003:16).

Yet as the annual influx of students into higher education continues apace, critics such as Evans (2004), argue that the possession of a degree is increasingly worthless, the number of graduate jobs available diminishes year on year and the small number of 'fast track' schemes which do exist are fiercely fought over. Studies increasingly show that significant numbers of university graduates are overqualified for the cluster of roles available to them upon graduation and, laden with debts of around £44,000 (Crawford and Gin, 2014:8) they are required to work in the low pay, low skill jobs that they went to university to avoid. Recent surveys have shown that 1 in 3 call centre staff is a university graduate struggling to find suitable graduate level employment related to their degree (Hays & Top 50 Call Centre Survey, 2010). Research has shown that such positions can have a demoralising effect on young people, robbing them of ambition and motivation and ultimately leading to feelings of failure, isolation and depression (Bennett, 2008).

The annual supply of graduates chasing their dream job now greatly outstrips demand and recruiters are able to take their pick of the thousands of eager faces, all desperate to succeed. Overwhelmed with applications, companies are using increasingly strict criteria to distinguish the most able candidates often involving presentations, personality and aptitude tests, interviews, and lengthy assessment centres, even for the most basic and menial of positions. Jobseekers are required to exhibit characteristically neoliberal traits by mastering the impression of confidence, adopting an entrepreneurial persona in order to 'sell' themselves successfully at interviews (Lasch, 1979; Brown and Scase, 1994). The ability to market yourself as a package to potential employers is now of paramount importance, the possession of the tangible

skills that the job actually demands (Brown and Hesketh, 2004) is only one of the many benchmarks upon which candidates are judged.

Competition, and the tendency towards a social Darwinist 'survival of the fittest' mentality, is now a predominant feature of contemporary labour markets, particularly amongst graduates. Education now plays a pivotal role in maintaining neoliberal ideologies primarily because it has 'become the default institution for nurturing the psychological conditions necessary for competitiveness' (Esland & Ahier, 1999:2). Figures illustrate that there are 85 candidates chasing each graduate job, a figure that has risen since the beginning of the 2008 recession (Association of Graduate Recruiters Survey 2013: unpaginated). In such an aggressive and competitive environment, young people are expected to be mobile and adaptable in their approach to work and are required to pursue ever more qualifications and forms of certification in order to present to potential employers. In order to succeed, workers must 'thrive on the consequent challenges and opportunities', 'make themselves ever more multiple as the situation demands' and 'constantly upgrade their capacities' (Antonio, 2007:73). Changing labour market requirements mean that the sudden need for new skills outstrips existing labour force capacities resulting in a perpetual need for 'retraining' which 'puts stresses on public resources as well as private energies' (Harvey, 2010: 93).

The uncertainty and instability of life under the unremitting pace of neoliberal capitalism compels people to be instrumental and almost narcissistic, living relentlessly in the present by adopting a 'short-term mentality' (Bauman, 2001:23). In a world now fully exposed to the fluctuations of the global economy, and where traditional institutions and structures no longer provide prescribed and clear routes into adulthood, young people in particular are vulnerable to this incessant unpredictability; Bauman, (2001b: 129) argues that planning for the future is futile if not impossible against such a climate of 'endemic insecurity'. The postponement of traditional aspects of adulthood has become increasingly common as it becomes ever more difficult to secure the financial stability needed for such commitments. The house price bubble seen throughout the 2000s, stoked by speculative buy-to-let investors trading homes as commodities, has contributed to severely inflating the housing market and pushed the cost of a home well beyond the affordability of the average first time buyer. As a result, the average age of a first time buyer has now risen to 37 (Knight, 2010) with research conducted by the National Housing Federation finding that many young couples are delaying getting married and starting a family until they can afford a home of their own (NHF Report, 2010). The social

consequences of allowing the free market to rip through housing are clear. The value and significance of homes as providing young people not only with security and shelter but giving them 'a focal point for the narrative of their lives' (Howker and Malik, 2010:65) is disregarded. A generation of young people are now priced out of the market, homes now increasingly represent a commodity whose value can be traded as part of an ever expanding project of capital accumulation. The 2008 worldwide economic downturn triggered by the US sub-prime mortgage crisis also demonstrates the consequences of trading homes in the pursuit of profit (see page 164 for full discussion on young people and home ownership).

The repercussions of allowing the unregulated free market to dictate and shape the very fabric of social organisation has a substantial human cost that is often borne by the groups that it is contended will benefit most from its instigation. De-industrialisation and the relocation of large factions of British manufacturing to cheaper locations overseas has caused widespread redundancy. Traditionally working class towns such as Sunderland and Hull, which were once organised around a particular industry, have seen the collapse of their local economy and primary source of employment as a result of economic restructuring. Studies show that such cities suffer from re-occurring if not continuous periods of high unemployment, educational underachievement and poor economic performance and are extremely vulnerable during the economic downturns that still characterise Britain's turbulent boom and bust economy (Centre for Cities Study, 2009: 3; IPPR North, Report, 2009:15). Hull for example suffers from persistently high rates of youth unemployment (10% of under 25s in 2009) and has one of the lowest skills profiles in the country (Local Futures Report, 2005:21).

The upshot of configuring social life along market principles and the absence of a moral obligation to make provision for its inevitable casualties has led to the development of what Bauman, defines as 'the new poor' (2005). In contrast to Murray's 'underclass' theory which attributes a degree of choice to those who are permanently unemployed and live off welfare provision, Bauman describes how the new poor are marginalised and excluded from mainstream society. In a competitive labour market with bargaining power now firmly in the hands of employers, and with even the most menial positions becoming increasingly occupied by university graduates, those with minimum qualifications or the inability to display the requisite 'social and cultural capital' demanded by employers are left in poverty amidst the resurgent discourses that denigrate the 'idle poor'. In a world of 'free choosers',

descent into the 'underclass' is seen as a choice, a conscious decision to 'opt out' of working and seldom recognised as an injustice of the market (Bauman, 2005).

Despite the propagation that free markets induce a tide of wealth that will 'trickle down' and be felt by all in society, evidence increasingly shows that individual economic freedoms have been sought at a cost to social equality. In 2005, a report conducted by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation illustrated that levels of inequality had risen significantly since the 1980s, the wealthy 'have tended to become disproportionately wealthier' (2005:xiv) and concentrations of extreme wealth and extreme poverty have become more segregated due to increasing 'socioeconomic and geographical polarisation' (2005: xiv). A report published in 2010 showed that the richest 10% of the population had a total household wealth that was 100 times higher than the poorest 10% (National Equality Panel Study, 2010:55), the salaries and benefits packages of Executives and CEOs continue to rise without restraint, whilst the alleged rise in prosperity that the move to neoliberalism was supposed to bring has failed to materialise for the vast majority.

With the gap between the richest and poorest in society continuing to widen, the availability of credit has been expanded to give financial freedom to those otherwise 'flawed consumers' (Bauman, 2005) and allow mass participation in a global consumer economy that has come to be the driving force of contemporary capitalism. With industrial production and manufacturing disappearing from British shores, a burgeoning service sector encompassing wholesale and retail trades, hotels and restaurants, transport and communication, financial services, real estate and business, has come to dominate the economy as the primary driver of growth, currently accounting for around two thirds of GDP (Rowley, 2011). The proliferation of a global and technologically advanced mass media has helped to 'lubricate the communication of styles and images in an economy that was coming to rely almost exclusively on rapid changes in fashion, lifestyle and identity' (Winlow and Hall, 2006:73) which 'interpellate' individuals with a range of new desires, wants and needs, to be 'satisfied' with an array of newly created consumer goods and services.

The compulsion to consume and discard continuously according to market demand is now a form of social obligation carefully interwoven through society by positive appeals to individual choice and liberation and more negatively with the threat of social and cultural marginalisation. Research increasingly demonstrates that such direct appeals to engage in the world of spectacular consumption start in infancy with television advertising and colourful packaging, and continue throughout childhood

through more disconcerting methods such as advertisers befriending young children on social networking sites and recruiting them to promote products to their friends (Mayo and Nairn, 2009). Thus children are now socialised into the ephemeral and semiological world of consumerism, immersed from birth in an environment which engineers competition and rivalry. The necessity to prove ones socio-economic standing and cultural nous by indulging in displays of 'conspicuous consumption' (Veblen, 1998) and exhibiting the latest products the market has to offer is the basis on which personal worth is increasingly judged.

Even before the development of 'consumer society' as it is understood today, a number of critics promptly argued against its manipulative and coercive nature. Critical theorists from the Frankfurt School such as Adorno and Horkheimer (1947) and Marcuse (1964) all wrote at length on consumerism as a form of social control and mechanism of repression, its cultivation of false needs for profit seeking to seduce and integrate social actors into the capitalist structure, removing any tangible threat of opposition or rebellion. In the years since the work of the Frankfurt School, the pace of consumption has accelerated beyond all previously conceivable limitations. As Harvey (2010) argues, 'the perpetual bringing forth of new needs is a crucial precondition for the continuity of endlessly expanding capital accumulation' (2010:107) with new technologies and a seductive mass media helping to sustain the process. Globalisation has intensified the speed at which commodities can be produced and disseminated and images circulated, allowing markets to 'escape the confines of democratic oversight' and leaving them free from having to justify their processes 'whether they breed prosperity or misery' (Barber, 2007:164). Rather than being a compensatory mechanism for the labours of work, contemporary consumerism operates at a nauseating pace, dictating the endless acquisition and disposal of commodities that have no lasting value and are designed to be obsolete almost immediately. The desire for novelty, transience and the avoidance of anything which is durable, committed and permanent, has created a 'society of consumers' in which infantilised and narcissistic adults consume and discard frantically, with little consideration for the environmental, financial, or social implications of their actions (Bauman, 2007b: Barber, 2007).

In order to create the conditions necessary for the proliferation of the consumer economy on such a mass scale, the ideological shift which compelled people to view consumer objects as fundamental to their sense of identity also sought to fundamentally alter their views on incurring large amounts of debt. Under the direction of Thatcher's government in the 1980s, financial markets were liberalized and the

regulation concerning the availability of credit was relaxed in order to fund the continued consumption necessary to maintain economic momentum. Subsequently, there has been a growing normalisation of debt as an acceptable way of funding the requisite consumer lifestyle. The long held puritan beliefs that 'required an individual to save first and enjoy later' (Galbraith, 1999:145) and the 'immorality of profit-seeking and usury' (Carruthers and Ariovich, 2010:15) were abandoned to avariciousness as coercive marketing sought not only to manufacture consumer 'needs' but also to promote the increasing availability of credit for the purposes of consumption. A report on personal debt in 2005 noted how attitudes to debt have changed dramatically, the stigma that was once attached to incurring large amounts of debt and 'buying on the never never' has given way to 'economic selfishness' (The Griffiths Report, 2005:19). Concomitantly, aggressive and misleading selling strategies, unsolicited increases in credit limits, incomprehensible terms and conditions and excessive penalty charges have served only to augment personal debt, whilst providing enormous profits for lenders.

As a result, we have seen private debt and personal bankruptcies soar to unprecedented levels, the number of personal insolvencies reaching 135,089 in 2010 (Insolvency Service Report, February 2011). The consequences of an indiscriminate credit system which actively promotes and encourages people to live far beyond the means afforded by current wages, has been illustrated with the most recent recession, which in 2008 led to a catastrophic worldwide financial crisis. The sub-prime mortgage crisis which began in the US, and gradually engulfed the broader world economy into a global recession, was driven by a relaxation of lending to those on low incomes and trading risky mortgages for a substantial profit. Such unregulated, laissez-faire economics, has served only to create a riptide of home repossessions and evictions, as well as triggering a worldwide economic slowdown. The collapse of financial markets and the end of the global property boom induced a wave of redundancies with UK unemployment soaring to 8% (Allen, 2010). Critics such as Elliot and Atkinson (2007:51) argue that the result of this 'surfeit of borrowing' will no doubt be 'a millstone round the economy's neck in the decade to come'.

Such reckless borrowing and narcissistic consumption perpetuates further processes of cultural pressure and anxiety, in an already risk saturated environment. The culture industry exploits existing fears and insecurities and fosters new anxieties and 'actively promotes disaffection, saps confidence and deepens the sentiment of insecurity, becoming itself the source of the ambient fear it promises to cure or disperse' (Bauman, 2007b:46). It is driven by feelings of inadequacy, pseudo-desire and

heightened expectation, promising self-fulfilment with the next purchase. Such satisfaction is designed to be only a 'momentary experience'; the cycle of desire needs to be continuous, keeping people in a state of perpetual dissatisfaction. Critics such as James (2008) attribute rising mental health issues, eating disorders, suicide and depression to the increased materialism of society, citing the distress caused by the obsessive and envious nature of consumerism. The pressure to both 'fit in' and 'be an individual' at the same time has resulted in a state of 'affluenza' in which materialist or 'selfish capitalist' societies demonstrate significantly higher levels of emotional and mental distress than those who consume at a more modest level.

The ubiquitous insecurity and instability fostered by deregulated labour markets set against a fast-paced culture characterised by rampant consumerism, social competition and indulgent hedonism (Zizek, 2002), means many young people in particular appear trapped in a state of what Zizek calls, 'fetishistic disavowal'. Within this state they realise the serious problems that beset their everyday experience, but choose not to acknowledge the reality of their predicament, deciding instead to lose themselves in the pleasures of consumerism and night-time leisure (Zizek, 2008). Such 'reflexive impotence' results in young people wholeheartedly pursuing the 'pleasure principle' and indulging in hedonistic consumerism in an attempt to find that *something* which is missing (Fisher, 2009). Keen to escape the mundanity of low skill, low pay employment, and the pressures of ontological 'insecurity' (Giddens, 1991), the night time economy seemingly provides the perfect social arena in which young people can thoroughly disengage from reality and indulge in 'hedonism in hard times' (Redhead, 1997). The shops, bars, pubs and clubs of the service and leisure industries now homogenise virtually every town centre in the UK and constitute a large generation of profit in today's consumer driven economy (Elliot and Atkinson, 2007). It could be argued that neoliberalism has successfully constructed an environment in which young workers, believing themselves to be upwardly mobile and liberated from the socio-economic structures which constrained their parents generation are now 'exploited in all spheres of work and manipulated in all spheres of leisure' (Winlow and Hall, 2006:78). Every waking moment is now structured and dictated by the demands of a free market economy which mutates at an unforgiving pace, forcing young people into a state of 'permanent temporality'.

Initial research demonstrates that in the current socio-economic context, young people's experience of employment, education and leisure, is highly determined by processes of neoliberalism and as a result, they are exposed to the perpetual change which characterises the free market economy. By formulating an appropriate

methodology to engage with young temporary workers in order to ascertain their views and experiences of working life within this particular context, the aim here is to understand how they make sense of their lives within this environment, how it has affected and shaped their perceptions of the world, their personal ambitions and their plans for the future. Through this empirical research, it will be possible to answer the key research questions, and elucidate how neoliberalism and its attendant structures and processes, are directly affecting and influencing the lives of young people and how this is negotiated and managed.

Chapter Two: Methodology and Research Design

Before any research project can commence, an appropriately conceived and well designed research methodology must be devised that will demonstrate the scope of the study and how it will be conducted and this acts as a guide and point of reference to the research (Blaikie, 2010). The methodology should outline the aims and objectives of the study, the key research questions to be answered and a justification for the decision making involved with regards to the approaches and strategies that have been adopted. It is important here to consider the ontological and epistemological assumptions that underpin the project, before assessing the range of methods and techniques available to generate the data and deciding on the most appropriate strategy for the study (Mason, 2010). Finally, it is necessary to explain the processes by which the raw data will be analysed and concepts/theories generated and developed.

This chapter will firstly, outline the key research questions posed. A thorough literature review has been conducted (please see chapter one) which has examined neoliberalism as a theoretical concept, as well as giving initial consideration to some of the areas of young people's lives which have been seemingly affected by the implementation of this form of political economy. This review assists in the formulation of the key research questions and has helped to define the main aim and objective of the study. Secondly, discussion centres on the various philosophical standpoints which underpin social research, with evaluations made as to the most appropriate perspective to adopt given the nature of inquiry and the research questions posed. Thirdly, a suitable strategy for the research is selected with consideration given to the ontological and epistemological standpoints identified, and the need to uncover the motivations, meanings and experiences of the young people being studied. Fourth, sampling strategies and access to potential participants are investigated with barriers to entry and initial recruitment problems examined within the context of the study. Finally, discussion will focus on the methods and strategies that were used to analyse the data that was produced, and how it was reformulated into tangible and useful theories and concepts.

Research Questions

Key research question:
What effect has the move to neoliberal capitalism had on young people's experience of education, the labour market, and their subsequent ability to reach the traditional benchmarks of adulthood?

Additional research questions

1)   How have British Labour Markets and the accompanying management strategy of western capitalism changed as a result of neoliberalism?

2)   In what ways have processes of neoliberalism impacted upon young people's expectations and experiences of education and the available pathways from compulsory education to further study or employment?

3)   What role does work play within the lives of young people and how is it viewed in relation to their self identity?

4)   How do young people feel about their unfolding biographies and work trajectories and their ability/desire to make and implement plans for the future?

5)   How do young people make sense of and understand the broader political and economic processes that are affecting their lives?

The key research question posed is both descriptive and exploratory in nature, seeking initially to provide an accurate description of the phenomenon under investigation (neoliberalism) and its defining characteristics. Secondly, it seeks to explore and ultimately understand the effects of this phenomenon by obtaining an 'inside' view with research that is derived from social actor's (young people) accounts and experiences (Blaikie, 2007). The additional research questions endeavour to break down the key research question into smaller components, beginning systematically by examining the structural changes that have taken place, the effects this has had on contemporary employment and then moving on to address how these changes are experienced and understood by young people in relation to their sense of identity and their everyday decision-making. Whilst each additional research question will be considered individually using different sources, they will all contribute to answering the key research question. All of the questions have been devised so as to

gain a thorough understanding of the phenomenon under investigation, as well as enabling those social actors being studied to articulate their experiences and perspectives through their own words.

Objectives

The overall objective is to produce a penetrative and critical study which seeks to contextualise the working lives of young people within the neoliberal capitalist structure, in order to examine how it affects their everyday lives. The study will ascertain how processes of neoliberalism influence young people's decision-making, their experiences of work and how this impacts more directly on their relationships, sense of identity and personal ambitions. While existing studies have examined the increasingly protracted and problematic nature of youth transitions and identities (Furlong and Cartmel, 1997; Miles, 2000), this study seeks to situate such discussions amidst the rise of precarious employment within the UK, its relationship with changing youth labour markets and its significance as part of a wider global shift towards neoliberalism. Moreover, it examines how this form of precarious employment, when combined with other cultural pressures and anxieties fostered by the climate of neoliberalism, are experienced and understood by young people trying to navigate their way into adulthood at a time of economic uncertainty.

By speaking directly to young people in order to ascertain their views and experiences, the study gives a voice to those that *are* considered to be socially and economically included, but occupy a position of precarity. The intention is to contribute to a renewed interest in critical youth sociology and illuminate the complex and dynamic relationship between capitalism, power and insecurity in contemporary society.

Theoretical Perspective

As the research questions are concerned with finding out in detail, the effects of neoliberal policy and ideology on individuals, and the many and complex ways in which young people make sense of different aspects of their lives in relation to the socio-economic environment, the decision was taken to employ a largely qualitative approach to generate this data. However, in order to answer the first question on changing British labour markets, a small amount of existing quantitative data and statistics were utilised in order to map out some key features of contemporary employment. For example, by ascertaining the number of involuntary temporary workers employed in Britain, the numbers of young people in such work, as well as changing trade union membership levels, such data adds further validity to the

subsequent empirical research. Such data helps to frame and contextualise the discussion on how neoliberalism has transformed contemporary labour markets, as well as corroborating the accounts generated through the subsequent qualitative research.

To answer the remaining questions a qualitative approach was employed. Qualitative research generally involves the researcher becoming engaged in the social world being studied in order to understand social actor's meanings, interpretations and constructions of the things they experience within this social world (Gerson & Horrowitz, 2002). By conducting qualitative research, the study will be able to 'give a voice' to this particular group and generate 'rich' and 'thick' descriptions of their experiences which does not lend itself well to a quantitative approach as these experiences 'cannot be meaningfully expressed by numbers' (Berg, 2009:3). 'Voice,' is of particular significance within a study on the effects of neoliberalism, the importance of being able to articulate 'voice', that is, to give an account of one's own self, is fundamental to the democratic process, something which Couldry (2010) argues is undermined by neoliberalism. Using a mixed methods approach in a complementary way provides more comprehensive evidence (Blaikie, 2010) and will build a more holistic picture of the phenomenon being studied. Creswell and Plano Clark (2007) refer to this process as 'explanatory' in which preliminary quantitative research can be initially employed and subsequently followed up, elaborated and 'explained' by a qualitative study.

Ontologically speaking, the primary aim of the study was to step inside the social world of young people and was concerned with how they understand, negotiate and interpret their everyday lives and the conditions of the social world in which they live. The quantitative data produced in the first stage of the project, whilst providing patterns and trends, will benefit from being contextualised by the social actors connected to it. As a result, a subtle realist approach was adopted. This approach suggests that a knowable reality can only be accessed by exploring the 'lifeworlds' of social actors (Hammersley, 1992). Such an external world encompasses social actors and the meanings and interpretations that they ascribe to phenomena in that world. The views of social actors do not exist independently of reality, they are contextually situated in and amongst the multiple structures and organisations that constitute contemporary neoliberal capitalism.

In terms of epistemology, an interpretivist approach appeared most suitable due to the study's primary focus on generating qualitative research. Although some quantitative

research was initially conducted to establish patterns and trends, the overall aim of this was to simply contextualise the qualitative data that will be generated and provide an empirical map for the study. A positivist approach which is focused on objective, measurable phenomena (Blaikie, 2010) while aiding the initial quantitative aspect of the study, was epistemologically incompatible with the subtle realist ontology outlined above, and would therefore be unable to provide access to the social world of the group being studied. Given that the study was primarily concerned with the meanings, views and experiences of those young people situated within a particular culture and context, it is impossible to divorce their conceptions of reality from the circumstance in which they were formed and as such are not value free, testable or observable by an 'outsider'. The interpretivist approach is much more suited to a study which seeks to gain an insight and understanding of a specific social world by accessing social actors common-sense thinking and seeking to interpret 'their actions and their social world from their point of view' (Bryman, 2008:16). However, the research also set out to uncover how neoliberalism is perpetuated and maintained at the ideological level and embedded as *the* rational form of social organisation (Couldry, 2010). In order to do this, it was necessary to understand not only how young people experience and understand neoliberalism and its effects on their lives, but also how they negotiate, rationalise and reproduce its existence.

As such, Giddens (1984) Structuration Theory provided a useful theoretical paradigm for this particular study as it attempted to straddle the difficult terrain between structure and agency and subject and object, given that human action takes place within a contextual setting that may be partially pre-determined, but is still subject to negotiation and modification. As social actors we make sense of the world around us based on historical, social and cultural perspectives and are in essence, a product of that surrounding culture (Crotty, 1998). Giddens argues through his notion of the 'duality of structure' that individual agents and structures 'are not two independently given sets of phenomena…but represent a duality' (Giddens, 1984:25). Structure (the rules and resources of organised social systems) is not external to individual agents and is in fact constituted of social actors own interpretation, modification and reproduction of the social system which, 'is one of the main dimensions of ideology in social life' (1984:25). The continued dominance of neoliberalism and its perception as the most appropriate form of social organisation (particularly in light of the continued global economic downturn) suggests the need for a critical look at its hegemonic operation. Brown (2003) argues:

> Neo-liberalism is a constructivist project: it does not presume the ontological givenness of a thoroughgoing economic rationality for all domains of society

but rather takes as its task the development, dissemination, and institutionalization of such a rationality (2003: Paragraph 9)

In this respect, the study uncovers how the discourses and values of neoliberalism are internalised and articulated by young 'temp' workers; how they attempt to make sense of their individual experiences in relation to a broad social structure and how its organising principles are reconstituted, reproduced and therefore normalised into 'common-sense' thinking.

Research Strategy

The initial stage of the study required the generation of some quantitative data and was focused on identifying and illustrating the structural changes that have occurred within the last 30 years, (throughout the implementation of neoliberalism). As such, the first part of the project was largely 'inductive', concerned with 'patterns of association amongst observed or measured characteristics of individuals and social phenomena' (Blaikie, 2010:83). By collating statistics on temporary employment and trade union membership, it was possible to illustrate the changes that have occurred but not how and why they occurred and more importantly, their effects on individual experiences. It is therefore necessary to adopt a second method, in order to answer the remaining questions.

The second stage of the research is framed by employing a largely abductive research strategy. Abduction is concerned with uncovering how social actors construct and perceive their reality (Patton, 2002) by examining their language, meanings and accounts. Although this research does not extend to the full completion of 'abductive logic', for example it does not seek to create 'categories or technical concepts' (Blaikie, 2007:89) it does prioritise social actors views, motives and experiences as the basis for understanding and explaining the problem at hand (Blaikie, 2007). The structures and processes that are influencing young people's lives are not directly observable, but we can examine their effects. Within the context of existing studies, it is expected that many of the processes of neoliberalism are now deeply embedded within the subconscious of young people and essentially 'common sense'. It is important that the strategy adopted uncovered the motivations, meanings and experiences of those being studied, their own accounts of the social world they inhabit and the 'theories' they generate themselves to account for their social environment (Blaikie, 2010:90). As much of social life is conducted in a habitual routine, often involving little critical reflection, it was necessary to undertake the hermeneutic process of 'piecing together the fragments of meanings that can be gleaned from these accounts' (Blaikie, 2007:107). It was then important to refine these

54

accounts so that those being studied were able to recognise themselves in the research and to ensure that the data 'has not been overly contaminated by the researchers constructions' (Blaikie, 2010), thus the research process became a reflexive form of mutual learning with the research participants.

Sampling

It is vital particularly when conducting interviews, that the sample selected provides an effective way to 'answer large questions with a relatively small group of people' (Gerson and Horrowitz, 2002:204). The research questions were focused on understanding the nuances of individual experience, not with encapsulating viewpoints which are ubiquitous and representative of the larger population. It is not necessary in this instance to generalise from sample to population, as this would be inconsistent with the theoretical and strategic considerations outlined earlier. The decision was made to conduct a case study approach, focused on the experiences of twenty, young temporary workers within one particular organisation. What age constitutes being 'young' is debatable (Barber, 2007), however the focus of this study is on people aged between 18 and 30 years old as existing research suggests that it is those born after 1979 that have grown up under the effects of neoliberal policy and have experienced its impact throughout the majority of their lives (Howker and Malik, 2010).

The case study approach allows the selection of a unit of analysis (in this case individuals) based on its ability to help understand a particular cultural or social phenomenon, facilitating 'an in-depth exploration from multiple perspectives' within a 'real life' context (Simmons, 2009:21). It seeks to 'engage with and report the complexity of social activity in order to represent the meanings that social actors bring to those settings' (Stark and Torrance, 2005:33). Commensurate with the original aims of the study to produce rich and thick descriptions of individual experience, the case study places individual cases, rather than variables, at the centre of the research project allowing the generation of unique and detailed data within a specific context. The nature of the research questions posed were both descriptive and explanatory which Thomas (2011) argues are successfully answered through a case study approach.

Proposed Method

In order to answer the first research question existing literature and secondary and tertiary data on changing British labour markets were examined. This included data

from labour force surveys and national statistics on changing patterns of employment, the number of workers in temporary employment, and the sectors they dominate. Such information is often easily accessible in a usable form with minimal resource implications, however official statistics in particular can be susceptible to some political manipulation, so it is important to remain sensitive to and aware of their potential advantages and pitfalls and the context in which such data was collected (May, 2001). This part of the research aimed to provide 'evidence' of the structural changes which have occurred in the labour market and helped to situate the new data that was generated within a particular background.

To answer the subsequent questions it was necessary to employ a qualitative approach that would accurately represent the views, feelings and experiences of the young people being studied and produce a rich and detailed description of their own individual experiences. Qualitative research generally involves some form of direct encounter with the social world (Gerson and Horrowitz, 2002) usually in the form of observation, focus groups or interviewing. For the purposes of this study, observation was unsuitable, it would have involved spending a prolonged period immersed in the social world being studied, but would not allow individuals to clearly articulate their views of that world. In this environment it would be difficult to facilitate lengthy and fruitful discussion around personal issues such as relationships and plans for the future and also the retrospective decision making regarding education. Because the study was concerned with giving a voice to this particular group and ascertaining how they make sense of the world, observing would prove time consuming and add very little to the data. Covert participation was also considered, it would have been feasible to gain employment within the setting being studied and present oneself as another young temp worker, in order to observe the dynamics and social interaction within this particular context (Mason, 2010). However, this would only assist with one element of the research, namely, young people's experiences of temporary employment. It would not enable a full understanding of the experience of precarity, how this is experienced and rationalised by each individual and its effect on personal life narratives. Similarly focus groups, whilst often less time consuming and more cost-effective, would not provide an adequate environment in which individuals could honestly and comfortably reflect on personal aspects of their lives. Given that the study was concerned with their experiences of work, participants may fear repercussions for expressing a negative opinion in front of colleagues for example or feel excluded if someone else dominates the discussion (Creswell, 2007).

Interviews are suitable where a 'thematic, topic-centred, biographical or narrative approach' is required allowing the interviewee to tell their own individual story (Mason, 2010:62). Semi-structured interviews allow the researcher to 'probe beyond the answers and thus enter into a dialogue with the interviewee (May, 2001:123). The aim here is that the data generated provides 'depth and roundness' of people's contextualised accounts rather than a large but shallow analysis (Mason, 2010:65). The decision was taken to conduct interviews with twenty participants. This was a sensible number given the time frame available for the study and would enable the depth of discussion required with each individual participant.

Access and Recruitment

In May 2011, Tiger Recruitment* in Leeds was approached and their Office Manager Faye* agreed to act as a gatekeeper to the sample. Tiger Recruitment has 17 offices throughout the UK and recruit for temporary (open-ended), fixed-term contract and permanent positions at all levels and across a variety of sectors. Having worked as a temp through Tiger Recruitment myself six years ago, a good relationship was easily established, thus enabling the selection of a convenience sample. The organisation was fully informed of the aims and objectives of the study, and how the data generated will be used. An e-mail was sent on my behalf to all of the agency's temporary employees aged between 18 and 30 with an information sheet which explained the study and requesting any potential participants to express an interest by contacting me directly. Unfortunately, after the two-week deadline for respondents to express an interest had passed, no-one had volunteered to participate. Following this, the offer of a £10 gift voucher as both an incentive and a thank-you was introduced in the hope that potential participants would come forward. In addition, a short online survey was compiled which asked some of the initial questions that were intended to be asked in the interview process. The aim of this was firstly, to enable potential respondents to see the nature of the questions that would be posed to them should they be interviewed and secondly, to obtain some initial data that would assist in the preliminary research and planning of fieldwork. A revised e-mail (including the online survey link) was sent to the temps, via a contact at Tiger Recruitment, and after a further two weeks, no participants had completed the survey, or come forward to volunteer for interview.

At this point, I thought it would be beneficial to meet in person with the contact at Tiger Recruitment to discuss potential strategies to move things forward given the persistent lack of responses. After a number of phone calls, messages and e-mails went unanswered, it became increasingly clear that the contact felt that she had already

done enough to assist, and given the demands on her time, no longer wanted to be involved. I called into Tiger Recruitment in person the following week and again, the week after that, only to be told by the Receptionist that my contact was on holiday and that when she returned she would be 'extremely busy'.

During this time, attempts were made to gain access to a number of other recruitment agencies across the West Yorkshire region. 21 recruitment agencies across Leeds and Bradford were contacted via telephone, in this conversation the study was briefly explained with a clear aim to conduct interviews with 20 temp workers but in the first instance, requesting to e-mail a short online survey that would take only 10 minutes for their candidates to complete. Out of these 21 agencies, 3 immediately said that this would not be possible due to time constraints or prohibition from senior management. Expecting some initial scepticism and hesitation on the part of the agencies, who quite reasonably, had little to gain from the perceived 'intrusion' into their company, it was suggested that this research would be a great opportunity for them to gain some free (albeit anonymous) feedback from their temps. It was suggested that a report could be compiled from the interview data, outlining the temps experiences of their placements, what they believe the agency was doing well, and what could have been improved. Similarly, it was reiterated that the project was subject to the ethical approval of the university and that participants and organisations would be given false names and be subsequently unidentifiable in the eventual thesis and that all data would be stored securely.

Over time, and despite a number of phone calls, e-mails, messages and visits in person, all of the agencies either said they were unable to assist with the study or failed to respond to any attempts at communication (please see Appendix A for information on initial recruitment and contact with agencies). It appeared that many were suspicious of the motives and agenda of the study, and what may potentially be uncovered (one or two agencies actually mentioned that they were not entirely happy with the requirement of participant confidentiality, and felt that they 'had a right' to know what their temps had said about them). Equally, many expressed a concern about 'having the time' to be involved, and although the input required from the agency themselves (simply sending an e-mail) was minimal, the period leading up to Christmas when contact was initially made with the agencies was clearly a demanding time, and many spoke of being understaffed and extremely busy.

A breakthrough with recruiting participants finally came towards the end of November 2011. A family member who works in Human Resources at a senior level, and liaises

frequently with a number of recruitment agencies in Humberside and East Yorkshire, offered to try and put me in touch with one of her contacts. Having seemingly exhausted all options in the West Yorkshire region, this was a welcome opportunity. An e-mail was sent on my behalf to Helen* at First Place Recruitment* in York which explained briefly the scope of the study, and the planned research to be undertaken with a group of temporary workers. In December 2011 I had a telephone conversation with Helen who said she would be more than happy to act as gatekeeper to the sample and would like to meet in the New Year to discuss potential recruitment strategies. In January 2012 we had a discussion around potential ways to recruit. Knowing many of the temps quite well she felt confident that there would be a high uptake of candidates willing to participate but there would be a stronger incentive if she was to e-mail the candidates rather than myself. We composed an e-mail together, introducing myself and attaching the participant information sheet (see Appendix B and C) and Helen forwarded this on to all of her candidates aged between 18 and 30. Within 48 hours, six candidates had come forward and volunteered to participate in the study. Over the next few weeks, the remaining interviews were scheduled, Helen helpfully reminded the candidates of the research when she saw and/or spoke to them and this encouraged more of the temps to volunteer to participate.

*False names have been used throughout to prevent identification

The Labour Market in York

The research was conducted in York, a historic city situated in the county of Yorkshire. York's economy is largely based around tourism and the service industry, which accounted for almost 85% of jobs in 2014 (ONS Nomis, 2014:unpaginated). Large employers within the city include the City of York Council as well as firms such as Aviva, Network Rail, NFU Mutual and Nestle. In 2012 a Centre for Cities Report found that York had a well performing economy and a highly skilled labour force, some 40% of York's working population holds a degree or better (Centre for Cities, 2012:3). In addition, the city has an unemployment level of just 4%, lower than both the regional and national average (ONS Nomis, 2014: unpaginated) and a relatively low youth unemployment rate of below 13% (Crowley and Cominetti, 2014:7). Yet despite this, a number of the cities larger employers made job cuts as a result of the economic downturn. Aviva shed over 570 positions in 2009 (Bell, 2009) with Network Rail and plant firm Jarvis axing 200 and 450 roles respectively in the same year (Bell and Aitchinson, 2009). However, York's strong skills profile and overall economic performance means it is well-placed to recover quickly from the affects of the global

recession and has not been hit as badly by the downturn as the neighbouring cities of Hull and Grimsby (Crowley and Cominetti, 2014).

'First Place' Recruitment and the participant sample

First Place Recruitment is an employment agency established in 1998 with offices in York, Leeds, Hull and Sheffield. First Place advertise that they specialise in temporary and permanent recruitment for roles in accountancy, business support, procurement, human resources and marketing across a wide range of industries, although they also place candidates in sales, customer service, administration and technical support positions. The roles advertised by first place span a spectrum of grades and salaries, from basic roles paying just above the minimum wage, to occasional placements at senior levels commanding salaries upwards of £50,000 per year. The participants that were recruited for interview were all working in what would have been considered 'entry level' sales, administrative, and support roles, and there was little difference in the salary and grade of the workers despite their variety of experience, level of education and age. Fourteen out of the twenty participants possessed an undergraduate degree, and a further seven had obtained, or were currently working towards postgraduate qualifications. In gaining access to interviews via an agency focused around business and largely 'desk-based' office work, the data produced can only give an indication of the experiences of these particular types of jobs, and the types of candidates that perform them. Interviewing workers who are temping in more manual or industrial positions for example, may have uncovered a different set of views and experiences. However, the research is concerned with understanding the nuances and details of individual experience within a particular context or 'case study', placing individual accounts rather than a number of variables, at the centre of the research.

The Interview Process

Interviews took place between January and April 2012 and were conducted on site at the offices of First Place recruitment. Ideally, it would have been preferable for the interviews to have taken place away from work to enable the participants to fully relax and feel at liberty to disclose information freely and without fear of repercussions. However, finding a setting that was convenient, safe and quiet enough for recorded interviews to take place was difficult. In light of this, the interviews were conducted in a room provided by the recruitment agency. This was more convenient for the participants and the gatekeeper ensured that the room provided was private and located in a quiet part of the building. Each interview was recorded using a digital

voice-recorder, and consent was obtained from each participant for this method of recording the interview.

The interviews were both relaxed and informal, and this encouraged the participants to be both critical and reflective and able talk at length about their own views and experiences, thus like a 'conversation with a purpose' (Burgess, 1984:202). Each interview lasted approximately one hour and the format of the interviews followed questions based around the key themes of the study and these were based on the research questions already outlined. It was felt that the concept of neoliberalism would be unrecognisable to young people and too complex to explain in the meeting. Therefore, the line of questioning was broken down into a number of thematic categories; education, work, consumerism and culture, politics, planning for the future, and personal reflection. In addition, opportunities were provided for the participants to discuss any other issues which they felt were important or relevant.

Minimal prompts were used to encourage deeper reflection and the sequence of questioning followed a broadly chronological form, for example beginning with education and ending with planning for the future, as it was felt that this would help produce a coherent narrative and place the participant in a 'perpetual context' (Gerson & Horrowitz, 2002). It was important that the questions followed a chronological narrative in order to encourage the participants to think about the multiple narrative settings within their lives (for example work, family, leisure) and how the different strands effect each other. The constant disruption and change under neoliberalism can often render the social world 'un-narratable' (Couldry, 2010) so in order to understand the complexity of each individual's social world, it is important to separate each narrative sphere in order to reframe their experiences in relation to one another.

The informal approach to the interviews worked well and all of the participants seemed comfortable and at ease throughout the interview process. The participants were made aware that they could decline to answer any questions they felt uncomfortable with, but this only happened on one occasion (one of the participants chose not disclose the reason behind being disqualified from driving). Generally, information was freely disclosed with minimal prompts, although longer pauses were sometimes needed to enable the participants to reflect and 'cast their mind back', particularly when considering their post-school decision making and the reasons behind the choices they had made. Many of the interviewees remarked at the end of the interview that they had enjoyed the process, and found the subject of the research particularly interesting.

The Participants

All of the participants were white and British born although Phoebe was raised in the US and Jess grew up in Indonesia. The temporary workers stemmed from a variety of social backgrounds with two of the participants having been privately educated whilst one or two others attended comprehensive schools in particularly deprived parts of the UK. All were educated to at least GCSE level, though most had been to university and over a quarter possessed, or were currently working towards postgraduate qualifications. Yet in spite of this their early labour market experiences and anxieties about the future shared many commonalities. The table below profiles each of the participants outlining their background and reasons for undertaking temporary work:

Name	Age	Mother's Occupation	Father's Occupation	Reason for Temping	Education	Background
Rose	18	Courier (retired)	Accounts Manager (Retired)	To gain experience that will help her to secure a permanent job	Went to college and completed a Diploma in Business but decided against university due to the high fees and money concerns.	After a brief stint as a sales assistant and three months unemployed, she decided to try temping to get some experience. She enjoys her temp job more than her previous retail role. Rose plans to temp for a year before moving on, and is considering a career in HR. She doesn't have any concrete plans for the future but is managing to save money as she is still living with her parents
Stuart	23	Nurse	Headmaster	Temping whilst applying for permanent jobs	Did a BSc in Psychology and recently completed an MA in Forensic Psychology	Stuart has applied for a number of 'graduate' jobs but has been told he needs more experience and is hoping to get this through temping. He has worked on a number of short-term, part-time and full-time contracts doing anything from data entry, administration to call centre work. He plays online poker to supplement his income and sees it as 'one of the only ways I can make money at the moment'. He currently rents a flat with his girlfriend
Lisa	23	Administrative Assistant	Sailor	Saving up to go travelling	Went to university to do BSc in Psychology but changed to Social Anthropology as she found Psychology too difficult	Says she felt 'channelled' into university with little discussion of other options. She plans to spend most of her twenties travelling and working around the world before committing to a career in her thirties. She says that there are jobs out there but people can't get the kinds of jobs that they want. . She feels strongly about stopping the 'benefits culture' and that unemployed people should 'not get a choice' about what jobs they get'. In ten years time she sees herself back in the UK earning around £40k a year and owning her own home

Name	Age	Mother's Occupation	Father's Occupation	Reason for Temping	Education	Background
Katie	23	Care Worker	Army Dog Handler	Temping whilst applying for permanent jobs	BA Journalism and Media Production; TEFL Course	After graduating Katie was keen to get any job so she was 'self-sufficient' and didn't have to move back home. She abandoned her original career aspiration to work in Journalism and has worked in a very demanding and poorly paid service sector role before coming to First Place. She feels that university has been a 'waste of money' as employers all demand experience. She has taken a TEFL course and has teaching as a 'back up plan'. Katie currently rents a house with friends
Beth	23	Cab Driver	Engineer	Beth is considering applying to do a PhD and is temping to try and save money for this.	BA History and Spanish and recently completed an MA in History of Political Thought and Intellectual History	Beth is considering pursuing a PhD but feels wary of taking on any further debt. She feels it is unfair that capable graduates have to work for free, particularly in organisations that can afford to pay them, and that jobs were easier to come by in her parents' generation. Wants to be 'financially stable' within the next five years. Beth took a sabbatical during university and received treatment for depression related to low self-esteem and anxiety
Gavin	24	HR Executive	Glassblower	Temping whilst applying for permanent jobs	Began a National Diploma in Graphic Design at College but dropped out	Gavin has worked in a number of roles, most were through temp agencies. He says he has 'never really worked out what I wanted to do, which is probably why I'm still temping'. He was made redundant from a permanent role at Aviva in 2009 and was unemployed for a year before he began temping. Gavin is currently living in a shared house and sometimes has to borrow money from his Mum in order to pay bills.

Name	Age	Mother's Occupation	Father's Occupation	Reason for Temping	Education	Background
Jennifer	25	Lawyer	Lawyer	Temping whilst applying for permanent jobs	Jennifer attended boarding school in York. She completed an MEng in Civil Engineering and recently retrained in Law	Jennifer has recently retrained in Law, undertaking a years unpaid work experience, during which time she was financially supported by her parents. She has done a succession of jobs and placements since she was 16, both paid and unpaid. She feels strongly about capping benefit payments and thinks 'it's ridiculous how much money people can get'. Jennifer currently lives with her parents.
Dave	25	Unemployed due to ill health (suffers from ME)	No contact with father	Temping whilst applying for permanent jobs	Did A Levels and worked for a few years before completing a Foundation Degree in Young Children's Learning and Development	Dave planned to go to university but found the process confusing and was 'misinformed' by the college about student loans. He has a very strong work ethic, having previously worked a full-time job as well as volunteering at a sports club and working as a Security Guard at weekends, to support his single Mum and younger brother. He eventually trained in Childcare/Playwork and has had a number of jobs around York. He says when unemployed he struggled to survive on the money he was paid and had to apply to the emergency fund to get some food.
Jess	25	Opera Singer (suffers from MS)	Tax Consultant	Currently studying for a Masters and temping part-time	BA Finance. Currently studying for MA in Health Economics	Studied at Durham because of its 'good reputation'. Moved in with her Grandparents after completing university (her parents had moved to Spain) and was unemployed for four months whilst she applied (unsuccessfully) for a number of graduate schemes. She started temping to gain some money/experience and in this time also began her MA. She currently rents a house with friends

Name	Age	Mother's Occupation	Father's Occupation	Reason for Temping	Education	Background
Jeremy	25	Housewife /Carer	Electrician	Temping whilst applying for permanent jobs	BA Geography; MA in Environmental Protection and Management	Jeremy came back to his parents after university and applied for a few jobs (unsuccessfully). He turned to temping to gain some experience and eventually gained a permanent role but left to pursue his MA. This was self-funded by saving money, his parents believe 'if you want something you get out there and you earn it'. He returned to his parents upon completion of his MA and found himself still struggling to obtain a job and is subsequently back doing temp work.
Eleanor	25	Lecturer (History of Art)	Facilities Manager	Temping to save money for Masters (due to commence Sept 2012)	BA Art. Commences an MA in Art in Sept 2012	Studied at Glasgow School of Art before moving back home and working to save money for travelling. Upon returning Eleanor did a five month internship as well as working freelance in London. She moved back home afterwards and began temping to save money for MA. Eleanor has applied for a grant to fund this but if unsuccessful will take out a Career Development Loan.
Ross	25	Part-time Nurse (retired)	IT and Pharmaceutical Technician	Temping whilst applying for permanent jobs	BA Business and ICT. Took a PGCE course but failed the final assessment	Went to university to do Business and ICT. Ross did not enjoy the course and took a year out before completing his final year. He began a PGCE (after a brief stint being unemployed) but failed an assessment twice and could not complete the course. Ross was forced to reconsider his career and says he applied for 'about 100 jobs' but was not successful. He has been temping whilst he continues to apply for jobs and is currently living with friends

Name	Age	Mother's Occupation	Father's Occupation	Reason for Temping	Education	Background
Danny	27	Nurse	Taxi-firm Owner	Saving up to go travelling	A Levels	Went to university to study computer science but dropped out midway through after he 'lost interest'. He began temping and moved into a house with friends to 'continue the student lifestyle'. After five months unemployed he landed a temp role at Aviva which became permanent but he was made redundant in the recession and used the money to go travelling. On returning he ended up back in York temping and has had a variety of short-term roles whilst he saves to go travelling again. He currently lives with his parents.
Ben	27	School Receptionist (deceased)	Sales Manager (retired)	Happy to temp for the foreseeable future (and is hoping to be made permanent)	BSc Maths and Accounting	Ben went to university 'because it was expected' of him. Having failed some modules he took some time out before returning to his degree. On completion he was unemployed for six months and had to move back in with his Dad. He then began temping through a different agency before coming to First Place. He thinks it's hard to get a job without going through an agency and there are 'far too many people going for far too few jobs'. He's currently renting with a friend

Name	Age	Mother's Occupation	Father's Occupation	Reason for Temping	Education	Background
Nick	28	Hairdresser (retired)	Senior Manager at Ford (retired)	Happy to temp whilst he makes some decisions about the future.	GCSE's. Began A Levels but dropped out as he found them too difficult	After leaving college Nick worked briefly but left and spent two years unemployed. He began another job and worked his way up to Assistant Manager but left after he was promised a new position that was subsequently given to someone else. He then got a job as a Telephone Debt Collector but left because he was uncomfortable with the increasingly hard-handed approach to dealing with customers. He has been temping ever since and would like to retrain in IT but 'can't afford the course'. Nick is married and would 'LOVE' to buy his own home.
Phoebe	28	Teacher	Electrician	Temping whilst applying for permanent jobs	BSc Biological Anthropology (completed in the US) MA Building Archaeology	Born in the UK but grew up and attended university in the US. Phoebe moved back to the UK after graduating to do a Masters degree. She was unemployed for six weeks before starting her MA but used her savings to live rather than claim benefits. After her MA she began temping while she applied for career-related jobs but has yet to find one. She has only been called to one interview despite applying for 150 jobs in the past year. She worries about her prospects given the impact of public spending cuts on her chosen career sector

Name	Age	Mother's Occupation	Father's Occupation	Reason for Temping	Education	Background
Craig	28	Retail Assistant	Sales Supervisor	To earn money while he pursues his real passion, writing and performing music	BA Music Performance	After university Craig got a temporary job at Aviva which became permanent but was made redundant when the recession hit in 2009. He has had a variety of permanent and temp jobs since and enjoys his current telesales temp job as he views it as a 'performance'. He would prefer a permanent job but is happy to temp so that you can change roles if you Don't like it. Craig expressed an interest in training to be a music teacher. He lives with his fiancée in a rented home that is part of the 'help to buy' scheme
Steve	29	Hospital Worker	Cabinet Maker	Temping whilst applying for permanent jobs	Began a BSc in Computing but left after a few months. Went back to university several years later and did a BA in Religious Studies	After quitting university Steve had a variety of jobs including working as a manager at a high-street mens clothing shop. He left and visited his father in Saudi Arabia for a few months before returning to the UK and starting temping. He then went back to university and completed a BA in Religious Studies and subsequently obtained a role working for a charity but was made redundant in the recession. He has been temping ever since whilst he tries to secure a permanent job, something he feels quite negatively about.

Name	Age	Mother's Occupation	Father's Occupation	Reason for Temping	Education	Background
Natalie	30	Freelance Journalist	Musician (runs music workshops for children)	Currently studying for a Masters and temping part-time	BA Linguistics. Currently studying for an MA in Social Policy	Studied Linguistics at Cambridge (having received some help on the admissions process from her comprehensive sixth form) and undertook a variety of temporary roles in London before developing an interest in support work roles and deciding to move back to York to pursue an MA. Natalie recently got married and the couple were expecting their first baby in September 2012. At the moment, she's not sure where she sees herself in five years time, and feels it depends on how she takes to being a new mother! Natalie rents a house with her husband.
Phil	30	Care Worker	Financial Adviser	Self-confessed 'drifter', has never known what he wanted to do	A Levels	Left college and began a Trainee Management role for a local convenience store but left after a dispute with a manager. He was unemployed for four weeks before gaining another job and moved through a succession of different jobs before coming to First Place - Helen is a family friend (Phil was sacked from one job and lost another due to losing driving licence). He says he has 'made a lot of mistakes'. He says he relies on his girlfriend financially who earns a substantially higher wage

Data Reduction and Analysis

Before analysis can begin the raw data that is produced needs to be reconfigured into a suitable form for analysis, known as 'data reduction' (Blaikie, 2010). This process resembled two stages; firstly, the quantitative data that was sourced in order to answer question one was examined to identify trends and patterns as typified by the initial inductive research strategy adopted. Each individual piece of secondary data obtained was processed and datasets and statistics were plotted into a consistent and appropriate format for analysis. Graphs were used for this purpose as they display information clearly, and are easy to interpret and understand (Bryman, 2008). Here, an examination was made for any correlations between the nature of employment on temporary contracts, the age of such workers, and changes in trade union membership as representative of wider patterns of change within the economy and labour market. As patterns were established it was important not just to measure variables and correlate them, but also to provide full descriptions that explained them (Blaikie, 2007). It was in the second part of data analysis that this was addressed. The second part of the data reduction process examined the qualitative information that was obtained by conducting interviews. All interviews were voice recorded and thoroughly transcribed. Transcribing the recordings, although very time-consuming, enables the data to become more familiar, assisting in the interpretation and analysis (May, 2001).

Once transcribed, the data was coded into a thematic framework. Initially, the data was divided into thematic groups based on the set of questions asked during the interview. Given that the line of questioning adopted has been thematically structured, the data that was generated was already indexed to a certain degree, although as expected, new themes and indexes emerged, creating the need for both post and ad-hoc coding and the amalgamation of existing codes. This was important as it enabled new themes to be created and ensured that the data was not forced into pre-existing categories. When the data was coded it was possible to compare and contrast between and among accounts. This enables the researcher to move from what Schutz (1963) termed 'first order constructs', that is, the social structures and objects of social actors 'common sense thinking' to a 'second order construct' which the social scientist derives from these accounts (cited in Blaikie, 2010:92).

Care was taken when interpreting data that the meanings and values attributed to it are not imposed from above, but rather grounded in the views of social actors. Giddens (1976) believed that social scientists should respect the 'mutual knowledge' and authenticity of social actors' everyday activity but are free to critique the

justifications of these beliefs as this is an 'escapable feature of the discourse of the social sciences' (Giddens, 1979:253). As such, the interview transcripts were read in an interpretive way, reading beyond the interview itself for both meaning and context (Mason, 2010), but mapping such interpretations onto the existing research uncovered during both the literature review and the earlier quantitative stage of the study. Given that neoliberalism operates at an ideological level, it is important that any interpretation is related back to existing theory, to ensure that the research questions posed are answered effectively.

Ethical Considerations

Considerations of the ethical implications of a project are an important part of any research design and are an ongoing process throughout the duration of the study to ensure the legitimacy of the project. There are a number of frameworks in place that informed these considerations in order to ensure that the study was conducted in an ethical manner, for example the British Sociological Association (BSA) Statement of Ethical Practice (2002); the six key principles of the ESRC Research Ethics Framework (2006) and the University's own ethical guidelines. Approval was obtained through the University of Leeds research ethics committee before any fieldwork commenced.

A code of conduct which encompasses the following points was followed and systematically reviewed throughout the project. Firstly, informed consent was obtained by all of the participants that were interviewed. The aims and objectives of the study were articulated as clearly and explicitly as possible to ensure participants were fully aware of their own role within the research, how the project will be conducted, how the information they provide will be utilised and the anticipated outcomes of the project (Bryman, 2008). For this purpose, an information sheet was produced and circulated to all potential participants. It is important here to ensure that the participants chose to participate of their own free will, for example they haven't been simply 'nominated' by their employer or are being unduly influenced or persuaded to take part (Mason, 2010). Participants were notified that they have the right to withdraw from the project at any point until publication, and any information they have supplied will be fully removed.

Secondly, the confidentiality and anonymity of participants and organisations were thoroughly protected. During transcription false names were applied to all participants and organisations and the data was stored securely in password protected files according to the Data Protection Act 1998. Given that participants were asked to voice

their honest opinions of work and also more sensitive personal information such as their ambitions for the future and any anxieties they have, it was extremely important that anonymity was upheld, if the identities of participants were revealed there could be serious implications on their employment and also on their personal relationships.

This leads on to point three; protecting participants from harm. Harm can entail not only physical harm but also damage to their self-esteem, and stress (Bryman, 2008). The disparities of power which arise in the relationship between researcher/subject may leave the participant feeling uncomfortable, anxious and unable to speak openly. Given that I am of a similar age and have personal experience of the issues being addressed in the study, it was felt that this helped to minimise any power balances, it was possible to make participants feel more at ease by revealing some of my own positive and negative experiences of temporary employment, in order to build a rapport with the participant (Creswell, 2007) as it is of key importance that interviewees are able to be open and honest. In addition, the location of the interviews was private enough to help the participants feel comfortable and at ease.

Finally, accurate representation of the data has been ensured. To ensure the integrity of the analysis it is important that the technical concepts produced have 'adequately grasped' the social world and have not been 'overly contaminated' by the researchers own perspective' (Blaikie, 2010:90).The key points outlined above are by no means a comprehensive list of the many ethical issues surrounding social research but they detail the main concerns applicable to this study. Ensuring adherence to the ethical points outlined was a reflexive process that continued throughout the duration of the project, seeking at all times to ensure the safety and respect of the participants involved.

Chapter Three: The 'Precariat'

The prescription of labour market flexibility as an essential precondition for a thriving and buoyant economy has become embedded into political orthodoxy and entrenched into policy since the late 1970s. As a result, there are growing numbers of people feeling insecure in their employment (OECD, 1997; Burchell, 2002), with existing anxieties further compounded by the economic downturn of 2008 and continued instability in the UK economy. Such volatile conditions have seen the growth of a nascent class of worker, their experiences of contemporary labour characterised by a succession of low-skilled and poorly paid roles, status frustration, diminished employment protection and the absence of opportunities for personal development and career progression. For the precarious worker, feelings of acute uncertainty, economic vulnerability, instrumentality and alienation are endemic, and stem directly from their often perilous position in the labour market.

In recent years, there has been mounting discussion concerning the rise of what has been termed, 'the precariat' (Standing, 2011; Southwood, 2011; Boltanski and Chiapello, 2007). There has long been recognition of the instability and insecurity fostered upon individual workers as a result of labour market restructuring aimed at flexibilisation. Many studies have sought to prove or disprove, the existence and escalation of widespread job insecurity, its perception amongst workers, its effect on motivation and morale, and the extent to which employees' fears of involuntary redundancy are justified (see Fevre, 2007; Doogan, 2001; Heery and Salmon, 2000). However, the continued omnipresence of precarity as an inherent feature of contemporary labour organisation and with the global financial recession exacerbating the tenuous position of those who have managed to cling on to their jobs, as well as compounding the economic descent of those who have not, discussion has been increasingly focused on the reification of a new 'class' of insecure workers.

This chapter examines the growth of the 'precariat', firstly, by summarising what is understood by the term and providing an initial outline of some of its key features. Secondly, a contrast is drawn between the insecure nature of contemporary labour (and precarious employment) and preceding forms of labour organisation. Following this, it is possible to offer a more detailed analysis of the precariat; examining more specifically who undertakes precarious work, how it effects their experiences of employment and their personal lives, before offering a more detailed look at young people and the particular long-term consequences that such insecure work can have on personal biographies when encountered early in an individual's working life.

Finally, the chapter concludes by looking at precarious labour in the current context; the increasing debates surrounding the exploitative nature of precarious work and how the Coalition government (and now Conservative government) plans to extend further labour market 'flexibility' may impact on social equality.

> This is not just a matter of having insecure employment, of being in jobs of limited duration and with minimal labour protection, although all this is widespread. It is being in a status that offers no sense of career, no sense of secure occupational identity and few, if any, entitlements to the state and enterprise benefits that several generations of those who saw themselves as belonging to the industrial proletariat or the salariat had come to expect as their due (Standing, 2011:24).

The term 'precariat' is a neologism, combining the word 'precarious' with the Marxist term 'proletariat'. Since the worldwide economic recession took hold in 2008, the term has gained increased prominence as decreased job security and diminished employment rights alongside a growth in temporary and contingent workers has enhanced employment instability. However, in current usage it is not just temporary, seasonal and contract workers that may be considered as belonging to the precariat. For Standing (2011) the precariat are defined by the distinct absence of a number of forms of labour-related security that although not universally realised, provided the ideological impetus during the post-war commitment to full employment and were largely embedded into socio-economic organisation until the late 1970s when the shift to neoliberalism gained momentum. These forms of security pertain to a number of levels: macro-level labour organisation and the opportunity to 'earn a living'; security of employment and protection from subjective dismissal; the opportunity to progress in both status and income; work security, and protection from work-related accidents and illness; skill reproduction and the prospect of enhancing and developing new skills; income security and confidence in maintaining an adequate living wage; and representation in the form of a collective voice or trade union (Standing, 2011:10).

It is tempting to describe the post-war years as a 'golden age' of economic stability, and consumer prosperity, accompanied by full, stable employment, and comprehensive welfare. In reality, the period is best described as 'slightly scratched silver' (Winlow and Hall, 2006:23) with the traditional rigidities of class, race and gender still reproducing the social *habitus*, structuring biographical narratives and restricting occupational expectations. For many throughout this time, labour was tedious and repetitive, embodied in the Taylorist model of 'paternalism, authoritarianism, compulsory work schedules, prescribed tasks' (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2007:70) and offering only minimal opportunities for the acquisition of new skills and incremental increases in both status and income. Work trajectories were

socio-economically defined, clearly demarcated and to a larger extent, greeted with a resigned acceptance (More, 1997; Willis, 1977). However, work was, for the most part, readily available and reasonably stable, it provided a continuity throughout life that, particularly in the 'boom' years of economic growth, allowed people to indulge more comfortably in the emerging consumer markets, all the while envisaging a more prosperous and successful future for their children (Winlow and Hall, 2006). In addition, the Keynesian model of economic planning served not only to engender mass employment, but to insulate the labour force against the harsher effects of market adjustment by providing adequate assistance in the form of state-administered welfare (Crouch, 2011).

Throughout this time, it was believed that there was a positive role for government, with state ownership of national industries, progressive taxation and the establishment of the welfare state aiming to provide security and stability to a country still recovering from the devastation of the Second World War. In the immediate post-war years, the incumbent Labour government pledged its commitment to Keynesian economic planning and demand management in order to prevent a return to the mass unemployment of the 1930s, and this 'consensus' was largely adhered to by successive administrations of both parties until the 1970s. In addition, there was a recognition and acceptance of the role of trade unions; the 1927 Trade Union Act (which restricted the Unions ability to picket and strike) was repealed and they were frequently represented and consulted on aspects of economic policy (Kavanagh, 2011). As Crouch (2011:13) argues:

> Keynesian demand management in which government action, far from trying to destroy markets, sought to sustain them at levels avoiding the self-destructive booms and slumps alike; strong welfare states that enabled people to receive some services in kind rather than through the market and some forms of income not dependent on market performance or property-ownership, bringing diversity to what would otherwise be purely market-determined life chances; in some cases, neo-corporatist industrial relations, trying to balance workers freedom to organise with the need for labour markets to function effectively.

Throughout the post-war years, unemployment was relatively stable, remaining below 3% until the mid 1970s (Lindsay, 2003:136). The availability of work, and the restrictive social structure in which peoples life trajectories were mapped out, provided a biographical clarity and often engendered feelings of collectivity amongst workers. It was not uncommon for people to work alongside those they had grown up with (Willis, 1977) and many would labour for the same employer for most of their working life (Winlow and Hall, 2006). The communities formed around industries, though often

viewed from a hazy and overly nostalgic perspective, did for the most part possess a sense of reciprocal values and class consciousness (Bourke, 1994; More, 1997). This spirit lent itself well to the mass trade unionism which developed to assert and defend the rights of workers and campaign for better conditions.

For young people in particular, the transition from school to work (and consequently, childhood to adulthood) at this time was fairly comprehensible, aided by a combination of economic imperatives, cultural pressure, and access to (largely) stable, paid employment. The influence of work on shaping life narratives was, as it still is, a strong determinant of personal outcomes. That said, historically the transition from compulsory education to employment did present some elements of uncertainty, insecurity and risk. Goodwin and O'Connor (2007) upon re-analysing data from a study of young workers in Leicester in the early 1960s, found youth transitions at that time to be far more complex and non-linear than anticipated with many of the sample changing jobs and continuing to rely on their parents for housing and/or money up to four years after finishing school. Their analysis refutes the suggestion of a 'golden age' of straightforward school to work transitions in the past juxtaposed against the fragmented and individualised experience of contemporary youth (Goodwin and O'Connor, 2005). Nonetheless, historical youth transitions appeared to provide a greater degree of clarity and predictability of outcomes. In addition, whilst many of those in the 1960's study were still in a state of 'semi-dependence' in their late teens, the same can be said of young people in their mid-twenties and beyond today.

Life, and to a greater extent employment, was most certainly characterised by 'homogeneity, monotony and clarity' (Bauman, 1992:188) but the security it offered enabled young people to map out their life trajectories with little thought and consideration and establish their position within the social structure with minimal difficulty. Sennett (2006) argues that a rationalised, incremental and predictable time lay at the centre of this type of industrial capitalism and delayed gratification and a contemplation of the future enabled workers to think about their lives as narratives and 'to define what the stages of a career ought to be like, to correlate long-term service in a firm to specific steps of increased wealth' (2006:23).

The growth of the precariat therefore, represents a discontinuity with the traditional industrial proletariat as the bedrock of labour organisation, its reification stemming directly from the shift in policy-making towards a flexible, deregulated, non-unionised and market responsive labour force, compounded by the systematic withdrawal of social welfare. It is reasonable to suggest that all contemporary employment is

relatively precarious, with the costs and risks associated with maintaining a workforce that will react quickly to market demand, having been overwhelmingly transferred onto the individual worker, and away from corporate management. Standing argues that the precariat, is a 'class in the making' (2011:7) part of a new social group borne out of the fragmentation of traditional class structures. The shared characteristics of the precariat – the absence of the forms of labour-related security outlined on page 75, mean that whilst they have yet to find their collective voice, they share a 'distinctive bundle of insecurities and will have an equally distinctive set of demands' (2011:vii).

However, this mass of insecure workers is a heterogeneous assembly of labour that emanates from a variety of backgrounds. They can be highly educated, ambitious graduates, compelled to undertake intermittent temporary roles or unpaid internships in a desperate bid to obtain the mandatory 'work experience', that will enable them to traverse the social stratum and reap the rewards of several years' assiduity in academia (Harris, 2011). Others will be economic migrants and refugees fleeing poverty and war who have journeyed for thousands of miles to work as cleaners or fruit pickers in the hope of securing a better future for their children. Some may have left school with few or no formal qualifications and be struggling to obtain gainful employment as apprenticeships and non-academic routes into employment decline (Gospel, 2007). It is also pertinent to note here that for a small minority; such work is actively sought as it adequately fulfils a specific function, for example, the student who supplements their loan by working in the summer holidays, or the pensioner who chooses to work a few hours a week in order to keep active and supplement their retirement fund. Standing (2011) makes a distinction here between the 'grinners' and the 'groaners' of the precariat; the former being those who happily choose such roles, primarily as a supplementary mechanism to achieve a particular end, and the latter being those workers who are 'obliged to take them in the absence of alternatives' (2011:59).

This heterogeneity makes it difficult to conceive of the global precariat as an emerging new social group or 'class' when the composition of such a group is far from homogenous and the experience of being in the precariat differs so markedly. Those who Standing identifies as being in the precariat could hardly be considered to possess any sense of collective consciousness or solidarity, when the very nature of precarious work actively inhibits such formations. Undertaking precarious work does not necessarily mean that one is in 'precarity', indeed, such a definition does not take into account the social, cultural and financial resources that may or may not be available to those individuals deemed to be within the 'precariat' simply by virtue of

their employment status. As Breman (2013:137) argues, 'there are a variety of regimes of informal/precarious labour, not all vicious to the same extent'. Perhaps those that can be said to be truly in 'precarity', are those who, in addition to the seven forms of labour-related security Standing outlines, also lack biographical security as a result of their insecure employment. Such insecurity is a manifestation of a lack of control over labour which translates into a lack of control over other aspects of their personal life, with little 'reasonable prospect of escape' (Standing, 2011:13).

For those who are really in precarity, it is the sheer unpredictability of employment patterns, the transience of work placements, and an ambiguity surrounding future life prospects which goes much further than vague feelings of 'job insecurity'. In an environment where workers must exist in a state of constant availability, isolated from forms of collective support and disengaged from the kinds of civic institutions that might facilitate social change, establishing the foundations for a secure and fulfilling future is virtually impossible. 'Work' engulfs the precarious worker in a surfeit of ontological anxiety, its prohibition of a sense of biographical advancement consigns the individual to a constant, daily feeling of 'existential vulnerability' (Southwood, 2011:16).

Since the global economic downturn of 2008, the number of workers who have been involuntarily expunged from permanent positions and forced to scramble for fragments of precarious work has significantly increased. UK unemployment climbed to a fifteen year high of 8.3% in November 2011, with youth unemployment also reaching a record 21.9% (ONS, 2011:10). The previous Coalition government's welfare reforms (which are likely to continue under the new Conservative government), pursue a number of significant cuts to housing, child and disability benefit, as well as further extending mechanisms of conditionality. In addition the imposition of severe 'sanctions' for non-compliance, has induced a desperate climate of 'take what you can get' as the spectre of economic descent looms ever larger.

Graph One: Involuntary part-time and temporary workers as a proportion of total part-time and temporary workers
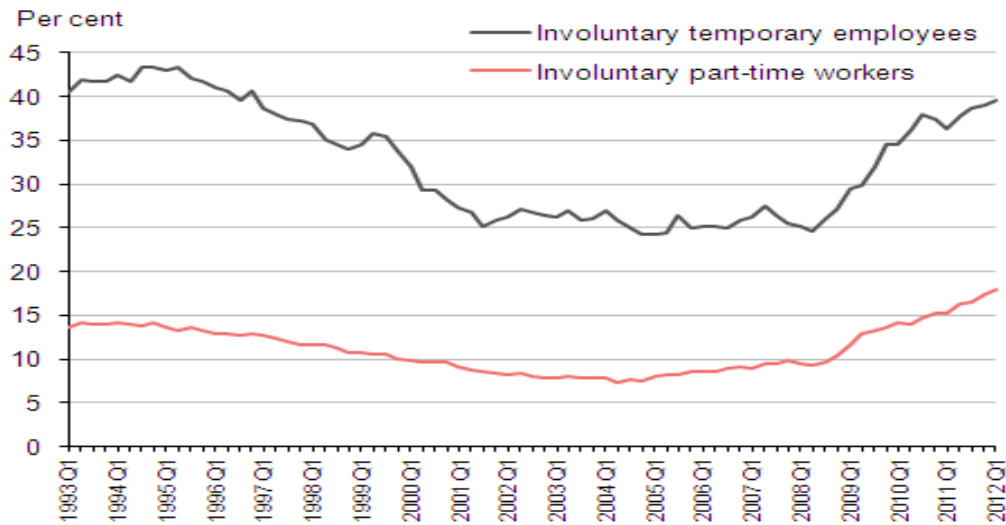
Source: IPPR (2010:1) 'Trends in Part-time and Temporary Work'

Analysis of Labour Force Survey data by both IPPR and the TUC has confirmed that the number of workers involuntarily undertaking temporary work because they cannot find a permanent position, has increased by 40% since the beginning of the recession in 2008 (IPPR, 2010:1; TUC, 2013:unpaginated), Similarly, the number of workers who are 'underemployed'; that is, working in part-time positions because they cannot find a full-time role, rose to a record-breaking 1,041,000 in 2009. More notably, the analysis also found that young people in particular (aged between 16 and 24) were twice as likely to be in involuntary part-time or temporary employment than other age groups (IPPR, 2010:4; TUC, 2014).

Graph Two: Temporary, Agency and Zero-hours contract workers by age 2014
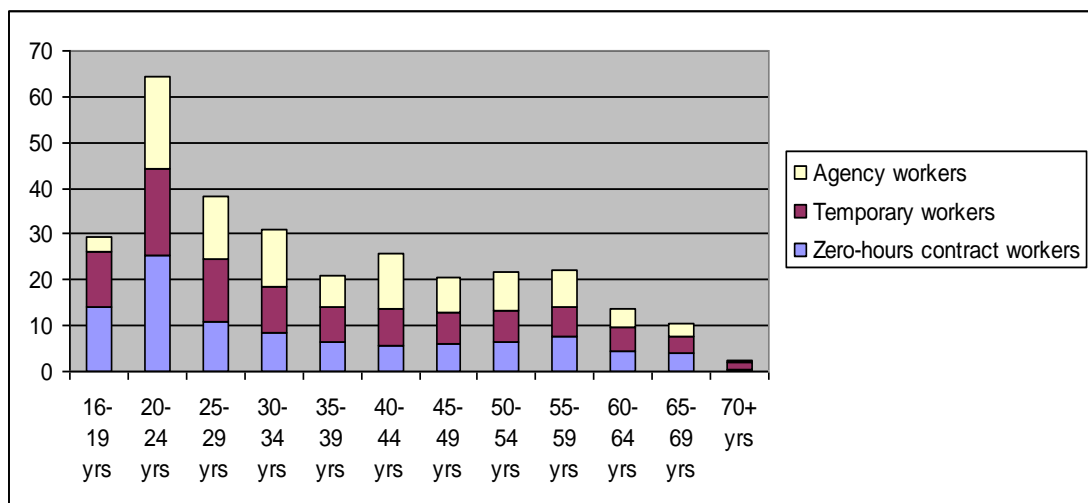
Source: ONS (2014) Quarterly Labour Force Survey, April-June 2014

80

Despite the recession, figures illustrate that a rise in involuntary part-time and temporary employment has been gradually increasing since 2005 (IPPR, 2010). Whilst it appears that the growth of precarity has certainly accelerated during the economic downturn, it is by no means wholly attributable to it. The precariat has grown somewhat imperceptibly, as a result of more than three decades of neoliberal labour management, which has gradually eroded employment rights, scaled back protective regulation, weakened trade unions and exposed workers to the vagaries of global markets as well as 'naked employer power' (Hutton, 1995:105). Ubiquitous job insecurity has been ostensibly programmed into the labour market and is perhaps the defining tool of strategic workforce management in the early twenty-first century.

For members of the precariat, 'job insecurity' can take many forms. Although such a notion is hard to quantify, it is often thought to relate directly to the fear of being made redundant or becoming unemployed, and can also express anxieties regarding the stability of the role itself, the fear of being downgraded, replaced, transferred to other sites, or shifted into new departments. It can also refer to the unpredictability of wages or lack of a regular income which is characteristic of those undertaking temporary or fixed-term employment. More generally, it can stem from feelings of having no control over what happens in the work place, with employees frequently excluded from decision-making and having little bargaining power in shaping the conditions in which they work (Robinson, 2000). Such feelings are amplified with the costs associated with job loss having significantly increased since the 1980s. Lekhi and Blaug (2010) argue that the documented rise in job insecurity felt by many workers can be accounted for by the 'demonstrable and rising costs of personal unemployment' (2010:7) The impact of job loss proves far more detrimental than forty years ago, when wage replacement rates in the form of welfare payments, were more than double what they are today, and currently stand comparably lower than most other OECD countries (OECD, 2007). Persistent feelings of job insecurity are 'created in a climate emphasising constant risk' (Sennett, 1998:97) and constitute a daily apprehension about what 'might' happen, given that previous experience, knowledge and practice no longer provides any guide to the present circumstance, nor direction into the future.

Unpredictability and irregularity are now permanent features of the employment experience, with workers routinely told to embrace the continuous change and risk-taking required to keep afloat in the labour market. The growth of short-term contracts and temporary assignments is symbiotic of the desire for versatile workers who can

adapt rapidly and respond to market demand. For Standing (2011:15) 'having a temporary job is a strong indicator of a kind of precariousness' the unpredictability of income, irregularity of work, changeability of roles and movement between and amongst organisations hinders the long-term investment and refinement of skills that would assist in career progression. Studies demonstrate that rather than providing useful work experience and facilitating labour market mobility, such positions, particularly for young workers and those undertaking low skilled roles, can in fact impede career progression and entrap workers into successive bouts of precarious employment, (Autor and Houseman, 2010; Macdonald, 2009). Temporary workers can also be used to facilitate the compliance of permanent employees by drafting them into organisations to work side by side. Such a move can result in work intensification as well as engendering further job insecurity; the temps serve as a visual reminder of their own vulnerability and reinforce the message that they can be easily replaced should they not satisfactorily perform their duties.

The requirement to be adaptable, versatile and portable across a range of organisations is not just characteristic of the temporary worker. The assimilation of the 'mobility imperative' (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2007:370) ensures that a premium is now placed on constant activity. Within this context, precarious workers may live around a series of short-term projects, moving disjointedly between roles without the clarity and focus afforded by long-term career planning and sustained progression. As Southwood (2011) argues, 'work, of whatever sort, might begin or end anywhere at a moment's notice, and the burden is always on the worker to create the next opportunity and to surf between roles' (2011:15). Neoliberal commentators positively promote such flexibility as liberating workers from the rigidities, bureaucracy and predictability of industrial labour organisation, and romanticise the contemporary labourer as an autonomous, free-spirited, entrepreneurial self. Workers may now develop 'portfolio careers', undertaking a number of unrelated roles simultaneously or in succession in order to diversify their skill-set and 'hedge their bets' (and thus spread the risk of ever looming redundancy). Often typified as independent, ambitious and versatile professionals who are keen to take control over their career, the realities of constant job juggling and multi-tasking seek only to blur the demarcation between the spheres of home and work and induce a constant feeling of being tied to the job (Cohen and Mallon, 1999). With significant developments in communication technologies enabling continuous remote access to work, some argue that the workplace as it is traditionally understood is becoming something of an archaic and outdated institution with the parameters of the working day no longer confined to a particular time or place (Fisher, 2011).

The restless movement between different roles, departments, organisations and the fragmentation of work identities into a series of unconnected and divergent tasks is also rendering obsolete the notion of a career in itself. The etymology of the word 'career' as a track or road for carriages, when applied to labour, denoted a pathway or a 'lifelong channel for one's economic pursuits' (Sennett, 1998:9). Contemporary labour markets have blocked this pathway, diverting workers away from the gradual step by step progression of a traditional career that required the proficient application and development of a specific set of skills, into a succession of disjointed and transitory engagements entailing the deployment of generic or 'transferable skills' across a range of different settings or organisations. Investment into the acquisition and refinement of specific skills, crafts or trades, is problematic for workers who change roles on a regular basis. Flexible labour markets find little value in the long-term accumulation of knowledge or experience, the pressure to 'hit the ground running' and produce results quickly and efficiently leads to a 'hollowing out of ability' (Sennett, 2006:127) with past experience discounted in favour of mining potential performance. Southwood (2011) argues that precarious workers, unable to establish a fixed work identity around the 'old skills of craftsmanship and technical proficiency' must now engage in a survival process akin to natural selection, and be 'able to adapt to whatever environment and identity one is thrown into and improvise a role around its unwritten rules' (2011:60).

That is not to suggest that skills, educational accreditation and practical expertise are no longer required in the flexible labour market, for indeed most roles require a modest level of certification and the appropriate presentation of social and cultural capital. In recent years, and particularly since the economic downturn, qualified professionals and university graduates have started to 'encroach' into more lower skilled roles, in a desperate bid to obtain some form of employment, thus pushing down further those workers with no certification and minimal skills (Green and Zhu, 2010). However, value judgements as to perceived individual potential look to elicit future performance and in particular, the capability and willingness of the employee to respond quickly to change and take responsibility for their own 'employability'. Consequently, the costs and responsibilities of maintaining and reproducing labour, particularly investment in skills and training, has been transferred away from management and onto the shoulders of the employee. In addition to the duties of their role, workers are now compelled to become their own personal auditors and spend significant amounts of time engaging in processes of so-called 'Continuing Professional Development' (Fisher, 2011).

Inexorable movement also inhibits the establishment of durable friendships with colleagues and their potential to provide not only support, encouragement and comfort during difficult times but also the ability to exert pressure and influence the decision-making of senior management. The curtailment of trade union power which began in the 1980s, has severely weakened their influence in collective bargaining; the increased casualisation of labour and fear of unemployment has, 'had the effect of weakening workers' fighting spirit and their propensity to join a union' (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2007:281). This is demonstrated below, with levels of trade union membership within the UK continuing to fall since the 1970s.

Graph Three: UK Trade Union Membership levels from 1892 to 2013 (in millions)
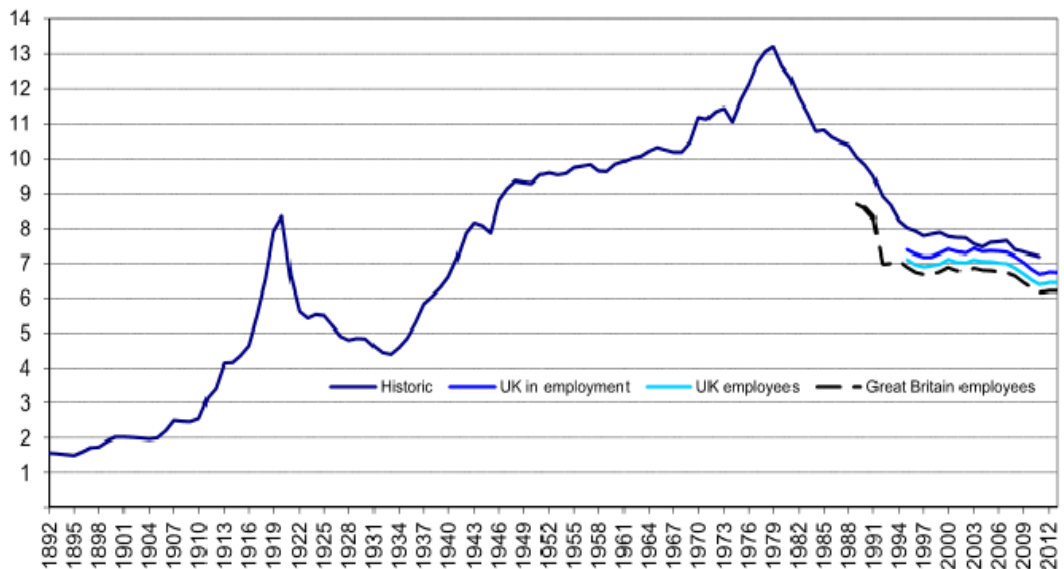
Source: DBIS (2014b:6) Trade Union Membership 2013 - Statistical Bulletin

In the sectors of the labour market where precarious, low-paid work is predominant, union membership is considerably low (see graph four below). Research demonstrates that in such vulnerable forms of employment and with the absence of union representation, employees are often unaware of their rights and lacking the protection and resources to challenge employers, their voices are silenced with the resolution to work-place disputes overwhelmingly favouring the employer (Pollart and Charlwood, 2009). Evidence also indicates that non-unionisation is accompanied by 'the imposition of a managerial regime characterised by tighter discipline, work intensification and closer scrutiny of individual employee performance' (Heery and Abbott, 2000:155). On the whole, with a myriad of pressures bearing down on the

precarious worker, it appears that there is often a resigned acceptance of the perils of such work, as Southwood (2011) argues, 'with labour infinitely replaceable, gestures of rebellion are anyway seemingly useless…the aberrant individual would only damage himself' (2011:19).

Graph Four: Trade Union Membership by Gender and Occupation, 2013
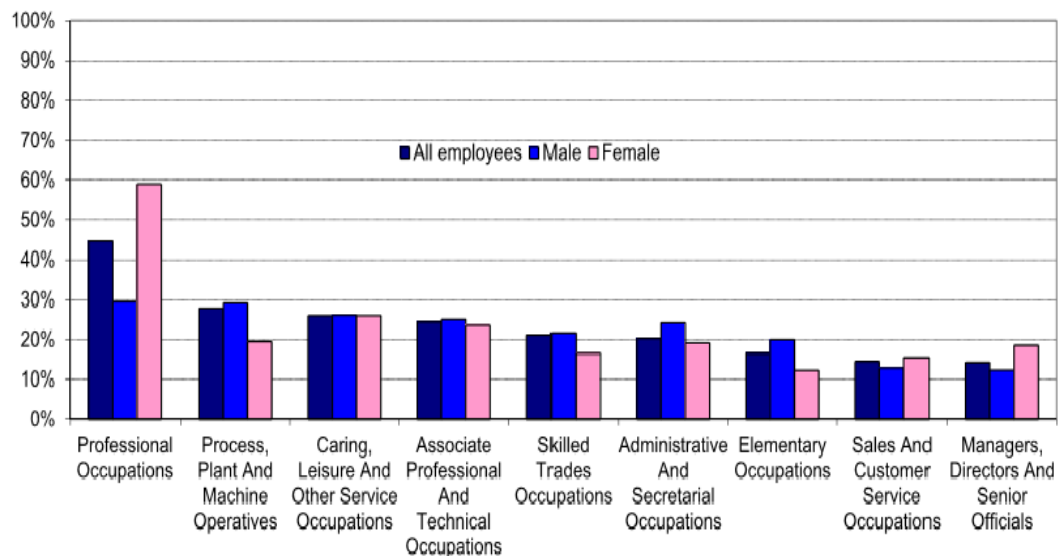
Source: DBIS (2014b:15) Trade Union Membership 2013 - Statistical Bulletin

In the absence of traditional solidarities, and with the 'revolving door' nature of much precarious work preventing the long-term development of bonds and affiliations with fellow colleagues, workers are frequently isolated in their experience of employment. Loyalty to the organisation and devotion to its aims, investment into relationships with co-workers, commitment to managers and the gradual development of enduring trust, are implausible in such a short-term environment. With the capitalist elite mobilising any slight distinction or difference in an attempt to divide and rule (Harvey, 2010) workers are seldom united in solidarity against a common cause and instead become insular and defensive. Brutal, possessive individualism prevails, as 'detachment and superficial cooperativeness are better armour for dealing with current realities' (Sennett, 1998:25). For workers employed on short-term or temporary contracts, such feelings are even more acute with the 'outsider' status forming 'a vague underlying sense of not-belonging which even the friendliest colleagues cannot shift' and 'a weight which is carried from one workplace to the next' (Southwood, 2011:66). The upshot of reconfiguring the employment relationship has seen an adaptation of the traditional 'psychological contract' between employer and employee into a tacit agreement of individual self-interest and every man for himself. In the workplace,

actions and approaches become instrumental, opportunistic and self-regarding, as each individual attempts their own particular form of self-preservation (Standing, 2011).

A worker who summarily adapts to living with chronic insecurity, relentless change and short-termism that characterises life as a precarious worker is, as Sennett argues, 'an unusual sort of human being' (2006:5). Most people need a 'sustaining life narrative' (2006:5) on which past experience is valued, and future hopes, expectations and ambitions can be built and achieved. The absence of stability, prescribed social norms and values and the incapacity of people to exercise any reasonable degree of control over their lives gives rise to feelings of frustration, defeat and listlessness. The conditions in which Durkheim (1893) described the rise of *anomie* have been steadily increasing; a relentlessly shifting environment provides no fixed points from which social actors are able to orientate themselves, and despair and alienation become accustomed features of everyday life. The sensation of constantly living life on the precipice, has serious consequences for the mental and physical health of the precariat, they exhibit higher levels of work-related stress and exhaustion (Bohle et al, 2004) and are more at risk of developing depression, anxiety and substance use disorders (CSDH, 2008).

> How could such a difficult, harrowing existence not affect their physical and psychological health, and erode their productive capacity? How could it give them the opportunity to develop their skills, when they have less ready access than other wage-earners to training courses, are less frequently trusted with new technologies, and the jobs they perform do not lead to the acquisition of skills? How could it permit them to create a family that will be a source of support, when their prospects are utterly uncertain and, even when they have a stable job, their firms do not allow them to be with their family, or do not care about their future? More generally, how could it enable them to have long-term projects in a society where they can make only short-term plans? (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2007:231)

The move to flexible capitalism brought about a reconfiguration of economy and industry and as a result, a re-composition of the labour force. Firstly, the exponential growth of the service sector and concomitant decline in male-dominated industries such as manufacturing (Elliott and Atkinson, 2007) has resulted in an increase in women's workforce participation based on their supposed biologically determined aptitude for the 'emotional' and performative labour required (Guy and Newman, 2004). Low paid and unskilled jobs in retail, hotels, customer service, cleaning and care have proliferated (Fagan et al, 2005). Secondly, the practice of outsourcing parts of production to make use of cheap labour in developing countries has transferred

large segments of production to locations in India, Cambodia, Vietnam and Thailand, thus further weakening the bargaining power of workers in the UK. Finally, technological developments have resulted in the disappearance of entire occupations as organisations are now routinely able to shed jobs due to innovations in automation (Sennett, 2006). As a result, there has been an increasing polarisation of jobs, with the 'middling' jobs of the labour market becoming the 'casualties of technological progress' (Goos and Manning, 2003:84). Goos and Manning (2003) argue that the bulk of new roles that have been created are clustered either at the high end of the jobs market; roles they term 'Mac Jobs' in industries such as computing, professions and information technology, or at the lower end, the 'Mc Jobs' in fast food, shops and personal services (2003:73). Despite the continued emphasis on upskilling to meet the demands of the 'knowledge economy' and the promotion of Britain as a creative, global hub, such work remains 'very much atypical of the vast majority of employees in the modern workplace' (Lekhi and Blaug, 2010:8).

The plethora of unskilled and low-paid roles which exist at the bottom of the labour market are those commonly associated with the growth of the precariat and research shows that such work is becoming more deeply entrenched (Lloyd et al, 2008). Despite the continued emphasis of successive UK governments on paid employment as a way out of poverty and 'welfare dependency', evidence frequently demonstrates that these roles can in fact compound downward socio-economic mobility, with many workers becoming trapped in the 'low-pay, no-pay' cycle, oscillating between welfare benefits and subsistence level employment (Lawton, 2009, Shildrick et al, 2012). The annual 'Monitoring Poverty' report, published in 2012, suggests that the number of 'in-work' households living in poverty, now outstrips the number of workless households, and whilst there are more households in work than in previous recessions, the jobs that workers are taking up are more likely to be poorly paid, insecure and/or part-time, which increases the likelihood of them remaining in poverty (Aldridge et al, 2012). The rise of 'in-work poverty' has seen the supplementation of low wages with a range of benefits, tax credits and forms of income support, but the persistence of such roles has seldom been addressed at the level of policy, and such subsidies serve only to maintain the creation of precariat jobs by allowing employers to continue paying low wages (Standing, 2011).

The effects of the 'low-pay, no-pay' cycle on individual biographies has been well documented. Qualitative longitudinal studies carried out in the North East of England between 1998 and 2003 have illustrated the extent to which precarious, low quality jobs can have a long-term detrimental effect on social mobility and contribute to

increased economic marginality, particularly for young people (Johnston et al, 2000; Webster et al, 2004; Shildrick et al, 2012). Rather than providing a 'stepping stone' out of poverty, the insecure nature of such jobs can in fact become a trap, obtaining such employment 'may only represent a turn in the cycle of poverty' (McKnight, 2002:98). The results of the study (which interviewed the same group of young people aged 15-30 several years apart) found that:

> Despite continued commitment to finding and getting better work, most were still experiencing poor, low-waged, intermittent work at the bottom of the labour market… This lack of progression had ramifications in other aspects of their lives, resulting in social exclusion (Webster et al, 2004:5)

In addition, the minimum wage permits that they are paid less than their older colleagues, the minimum wage for 18-21 year olds currently stands at £5.13 per hour far short of the £7.85 per hour 'living wage' that is calculated to cover the basic costs of living. Although it is reasonable to argue that traditionally, young people have always commenced their working lives in such entry level jobs, historically, this may have facilitated an eventual progression up the career ladder to more stable and better paid employment but such mobility is becoming increasingly rare (Evans and Gibb, 2009). Such problematic transitions into the world of work in early adulthood are linked to a reduction in chances and prospects that persists throughout adult life, an effect also known as 'scarring' (Lodovici and Semanaza, 2012). This long-term detrimental impact is all the more acute on those from traditionally 'working class' background, and those with minimal qualifications, where downward social mobility (compared with their parents and grandparents) is increasingly evident (MacDonald, 2009).

The growing problem of young people and precarious work, and its demonstrably negative impact on personal biographies, extends much further than low-pay, low-skill employment. As economic stagnation persists in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, and those leaving university graduate into an extremely turbulent labour market, unpaid work placements and internships have proliferated amongst graduates who are desperate to obtain the relevant skills and experience to gain a competitive advantage over fellow job-seekers. It is not uncommon for graduates to undertake a succession of unpaid placements that last a number of months, often working lengthy and unsociable hours, whilst receiving little or no remuneration, and these rarely lead to permanent employment (Malik and Syal, 2011). Alarmingly, it also appears that some graduates are now resorting to paying companies (up to £100 a day) to work for free, in order to get the necessary skills and prove their dedication to a potential

employer; the number of British students doing so is estimated to be in the high hundreds (Kenber, 2009). Agencies such as 'Etsio', match graduates with companies (as long as they are willing to pay for their placement) and justify their approach as encouraging small businesses who would not normally willing be to recruit in the current economic climate. CEO of Etsio Kit Sadgrove argues; 'anyone who's determined to get work experience will see this as a unique opportunity…a few hundred quid to get experience is a good investment' (2011:unpaginated).

However, critics argue that the expansion of unpaid work placements serves only to compound youth unemployment rates, dragging down wages and exacerbating precarity amongst young people. Tanya de Grunwald, founder of careers website Graduate Fog, a site dedicated to providing a collective voice on the issues surrounding graduate unemployment, argues:

> We believe that unpaid internships exploit those who do them, and exclude those who can't afford to do them. Too many large companies are taking advantage of graduates' desperation to gain experience by hiring them as interns and not paying them properly for their work... Interns are being used to cut costs and boost profits (Grunwald, cited in Boffey and Stewart, 2011:unpaginated)

This is not to suggest that all internships and placements are exploitative; many companies in the banking sector offer paid, well-structured, and comprehensive work experience programmes and organisations such as Barclays, Grant Thornton and PWC are all rated highly by former interns on websites such as 'ratemyplacement.co.uk'. Nonetheless, in such a turbulent and competitive labour market, young graduates are desperate to find *any* way in to the kinds of well-paid, fulfilling, professional careers they were promised would await them upon graduation and this undoubtedly leaves them vulnerable to exploitation and exposed to the (often unreasonable) demands of a potential future employer (for further discussion on higher education and graduate employability, please see chapter four).

Resistance to such exploitation is gradually mounting, with groups such as Interns Anonymous, Precarious Workers Brigade, Carrot-workers Collective and Graduate Fog all voicing their concerns on the difficulties of navigating youth labour markets and rejecting the increasingly insecure and unstable nature of contemporary employment. Such groups are mobilised around issues of precarity and insecurity, campaigning for improved pay and working conditions and providing resources and support for those young people who feel they are being exploited or find themselves trapped in precarious employment. In 2012, the annual 'May Day' demonstrations

(which celebrate workers rights and the International Labour Movement) saw a renewed anger at the austerity measures now being imposed in the wake of the financial crisis and a resurgence in global protest against the unjust nature of contemporary capitalism. With movements such as 'Occupy' drawing media attention towards issues of exploitation, social justice and the deepening inequalities between rich and poor, some argue that the potential for transformation and harnessing a new revolutionary politics is just beginning (Graeber, 2012).

Yet despite the revitalisation of critique instilling a somewhat cautious optimism about the future, government rhetoric and neoliberal policy prescriptions continue to harness employee flexibility as fundamental in aiding Britain's economic recovery. Worryingly, the persistence of economic stagnation has seen appeals for the extension of further labour market deregulation. Under proposals outlined in the Beecroft Report, the consultation period for redundancies would be reduced from 90 to 30 days and the concept of 'unfair dismissal' would be abandoned (Grice, 2011), whilst elsewhere, Mark Littlewood from the Institute for Economic Affairs has called for the scrapping of the minimum wage for under 25 year-olds in order to boost employment rates (Littlewood, 2011). The expansion of 'zero-hours contracts' in which employees have no guaranteed hours and work only when they are required by their employer, has been a key driver of post-recession jobs growth. Latest estimates suggest such contracts now account for 2.3% of people in employment, up from 1.9% in the previous year (ONS, 2015:1) with those aged under 24 accounting for 34% of such workers (ONS, 2015:9). In addition, caps and cuts to welfare payments alongside plans to abolish housing benefit for under 25s (Cameron, 2012) accompanied by a range of punitive measures to force people into work, suggests there is little interest in addressing the growth of precarity amongst young people and the effects of such employment insecurity on their lives.

Chapter Four: 'Great Expectations' – The changing nature of Higher Education in England

The extension of neoliberalism into all domains and spheres that were previously spared the full intrusion of its market logic has been rapidly advanced throughout the 2000s, most notably within the sectors of health and education. Throughout their time in office the Conservative-led coalition government's austerity programme, retaining its commitment to a minimal (but paternalistic) role for the state, reduced public spending and ideologically driven need to reduce the UK budget deficit (whatever the social implications) has nowhere been more clearly demonstrated than within the higher education sector. Whilst advancing marketisation has been steadily and decisively infiltrating the university system over the past two decades (and indeed education as a whole), the publication of the Browne report in 2010 demonstrated the Coalition government's commitment to further extend the ethic of the market into the sector, with some suggesting that the proposed changes signify a 'complete reclassification of what a university should be' (Fenton, 2011:104).

This chapter is divided into two sections. The first part examines the changes which have occurred within education and more specifically, within the higher education sector as a direct consequence of neoliberal policy implementation. Education has been increasingly reconfigured around market-led approaches, ideologically justified on the basis of 'up-skilling' to meet the demands of the global knowledge economy. It addresses the consequent changes to the sector such as the introduction of tuition fees and the repositioning of students as 'consumers', and how such changes have distorted the function and purpose of universities as well as devaluing both the experience of being at university, and the attainment of a degree in itself.

The second part of the chapter introduces empirical data generated through the participant interviews, exploring individual decision-making regarding the range of choices and options available upon completion of formal education, and subsequent pathways into further education or employment. For those that continued on to university, it contrasts prior expectations with the actual experiences of attending university during a time of mass higher education, and the value and 'worth' they consequently attribute to the education they received. The interview data reveals a functional view of university as providing access to a 'career' and the prevalence of utilitarian attitudes to learning which undoubtedly stem from the increasingly neoliberalisation of the sector. Finally, with initial entry into the fiercely competitive 'graduate labour market' exposing the participants to a reality far removed from the

aspiration of professionalisation they were 'sold', it will be argued that the costs of the current identity crisis in higher education, caught between traditional learning and contemporary corporate 'training' is currently being borne by the graduates themselves.

'Education for Sale' – The Marketisation of Education

The introduction of market principles into education more broadly can be traced back to the Conservative administration of the 1980s. Most significantly, the 1988 Education Reform Act introduced a number of measures that sought to adjust the operation of schools in order to better align with business principles. Firstly, the establishment of a 'National Curriculum' would outline key targets that pupils were expected to reach at each stage of development, thus standardising programmes of study and removing the autonomy schools had to determine academic content. Teachers and schools were therefore no longer able to develop their own curriculums and had no input into its design or development. In addition, the management of schools was transformed with schools now having responsibility for their own budgets, and head teachers expected to oversee all aspects of general management such as health and safety, staff recruitment and buildings maintenance. As funding was allocated largely on the number of pupils, schools had to compete to attract students, the requirement to publish exam results in national league tables ensured schools were forced to compete with each other for both pupils and resources (Gillard, 2011). Changes to admissions and the decline of 'catchment areas' (which had largely determined school entries prior to the 1988 Act) gave increasing choice to parents over which school their child should attend, thus reinforcing the imperative for schools to be seen as efficient and competitive in relation to other schools in their area.

The consequences of the 1988 Education Reform Act are significant in that it enabled the establishment of a quasi-market within the sector, something the Thatcher-led government had been keen to establish since coming into power (Gillard, 2011). It allowed government to impose central control on education, dictating and shaping curriculum content and weakening the influence the teaching profession had on creating and innovating their academic practice. Such a move was fully representative of the Thatcherite 'free-market, strong state' mantra designed to reassert state control over public institutions whilst simultaneously exposing them to the effects of market competition (Gamble, 1994). As a result, teachers simply assumed responsibility for the mechanical delivery and facilitation of learning via prescribed materials designed to produce quantifiable and comparable results (Gillard, 2011). The imperative to focus on measurable outputs and appear favourably in league tables has resulted in

'teaching to the test', with the process of learning and knowledge acquisition reduced to a formulaic exercise in simply memorising and regurgitating standardised information. Critics argue that this has led to a 'dumbing down' in schools, with pupils unable to grasp and articulate more complex and in-depth understandings of a subject or topic, as the requirement to demonstrate annually increasing pass-rates takes precedent over academic rigour (Bassey, 2013). The introduction of the principles of 'supply and demand', accountability for outcomes, standardisation, parental (consumer) choice and competition has succeeded in implanting the seeds of the market within education. However, the pursuit of a market-driven agenda has been realised more extensively within the higher education sector.

Higher education policy has from the 1980s onwards, similarly focused on increasing marketisation. With a succession of measures introduced to extend further competition, increase participation rates, and reduce public funding for the sector, universities must now emulate the managerial models of private sector organisations, operating 'efficiently' in order to attract students and secure funding. However, Furedi (2011) argues that the commitment to marketisation is as much ideological/political as it is economic, and whilst competition between universities (for academic talent, funding, or intellectual superiority), is not a new phenomenon, recent opposition to the increasing marketisation of higher education stems from two particular concerns. Firstly, there is unease about the reconfiguration of the relationship between academics and students to one of 'service-providers' and 'consumers' and second, its attempts to commodify academic education and transform 'what is an abstract, in-tangible, non-material and relational experience into a visible, quantifiable, and instrumentally driven process' (Furedi, 2011:2). The effect of such a fundamental shift in ontology on the experience of those studying for a degree, and the value they attribute to its eventual attainment, cannot be underestimated (see page 110 for full discussion). From its conceived notion as a state-funded public good, to a simple 'service provider' forced to 'adapt or die' in the ever-expanding neoliberal economy, the institution of academia is seemingly under threat as a result of its permeation with commercial imperatives, calling into serious question, the role and purpose of higher education in the twenty-first century.

Historically, universities have been considered sites of critical thinking and rigorous intellectual enquiry that served the greater public good. Drawing on Enlightenment concepts, the university embodied a place of human reason, the search for 'truth, respect for others, tolerance of rival views, a willingness to be self-critical, and a commitment to putting forward new ideas' (Bathmaker, 2003:170). Public funding for

universities was justified on the basis that such institutions provided a diverse range of benefits to society as a whole, developing the intellectual capacity of individuals and engendering the kinds of critical and well-educated citizens, 'upon which genuine democracy would depend' (Winlow and Hall, 2006:60). The notion of higher education as a 'public good'; producing and harnessing knowledge, researching and developing new technologies, facilitating social mobility, creating culture, engaging citizens in the public sphere as well as preparing them for work; is increasingly being rejected and dismissed in favour of a privatised and individualistic view of the benefits of learning (Calhoun, 2008). Structural changes within the university sector have been informed by this increasingly utilitarian perspective to the acquisition of knowledge, with market agendas coming to dominate the landscape of higher education as we move into the twenty-first century.

> A battle is being waged under the rubric of neoliberal austerity measures on the autonomy of academic labour, the classroom as a site of critical pedagogy, the rights of students to high quality education, the democratic vitality of the university as a public sphere and the role played by the liberal arts and humanities in fostering an educational culture that is about the practice of freedom and human empowerment. (Giroux, 2011:146)

The Higher Education system underwent two periods of significant expansion throughout the twentieth century. The first took place after the Robbins Report in 1963 which criticised the elitist and discriminatory practices of the institutions, particularly at a time when the post-war commitment to social democratic principles offered a vision of increasing social mobility and equality (Bathmaker, 2003). Following the Robbins report, student numbers increased considerably, rising from 5% in 1960/61 to 14% by 1972/73 (Mayhew et al, 2004:66). The second period of expansion occurred in the early 1990s with the Further and Higher Education Act 1992. This removed the pre-existing divide between traditional universities and the newer vocational focused 'polytechnics' allowing the newer institutions to brand themselves as universities and giving them the power to confer their own degrees. It was the intention of the Conservative government in office at the time to base expansion on typically neoliberal, market-led practices, reducing public spending on education, and making the sector more economically efficient and responsive to the perceived needs of economy and industry (Bathmaker, 2003). As such, it was anticipated that removing the binary divide between the two institutions would facilitate the creation of a competitive market (with the perceived efficiency gains a market would bring) with no additional costs to the government. In addition, the introduction of student loans in 1989 and the gradual reduction of maintenance grants was representative of a

broader ideological shift towards individualisation, in which a university education is viewed in purely instrumental terms, with students expected to bear increasing responsibility for the costs associated with learning because of the perceived benefits they will reap individually in their career.

Throughout the 1990s as the system expanded and participation rates increased, government funding failed to keep pace with such rapid growth to the extent that between 1989 and 2004, public funding per student fell 37% (Universities UK Report, 2013:3). The higher education system remained severely underfunded with teaching budgets halved and the amount of money available for research and investment in infrastructure gravely reduced (Crace and Shepherd, 2007). In 1997, the publication of the Dearing Report further compounded the move towards marketisation, recommending the abolition of student grants, (to be replaced fully by means-tested loans) and suggesting that students should pay tuition fees of £1000 per academic year. The New Labour government which came into office in the same year appeared committed to continuing the neoliberal agenda set in motion by the Conservatives, (see chapter one for more detailed discussion). Despite famously pledging 'education, education, education' as its priority for government, their subsequent policies sought increased marketisation of the sector, and a shift in emphasis from higher education as a place of knowledge transmission to a training centre administered by the demands of economy and industry (Mayhew et al, 2004).

The continued objective of higher education to 'inspire and enable individuals to develop their capabilities to the highest levels' (NCIHE, 1997:unpaginated) shifted towards a more notable emphasis on universities ensuring that individuals were 'well-equipped for work' and serving the requirements of the 'knowledge-based economy' (NCIHE, 1997:unpaginated). From the commencement of their time in office, New Labour spoke at length on meeting the needs and demands of globalisation, engineering a culture of self-development, aspiration and employability (Finlayson, 2010). Prime Minister Tony Blair frequently articulated the need for 'knowledge and skills, creativity and innovation, adaptability and entrepreneurship' (2000:unpaginated) as essential to Britain's success in the 'knowledge economy'. The expansion of higher education was justified on the grounds of 'up-skilling' to meet economic demand and in 1999, New Labour outlined its intention to get 50% of young people going into Higher Education by 2010, thus marking the final stage in the transition to a mass university system.

The 50% participation target was only narrowly missed, the Higher Education Initial Participation Rate (HEIPR) stood at 47% when New Labour left office in 2010, (DBIS,

2012:2). However, the desire to channel increasing numbers of young people into an already severely stretched and underfunded system, created a tension between the alleged need for a skilled and proficient workforce and the significant financial costs involved in its realisation. Whilst maintaining its economic allegiance to neoliberal measures to increase efficiency within the public sector, and adherence to its ideologically articulated 'responsibility' agenda, the publication in 2003 of the white paper 'The Future of Higher Education', outlined New Labour's long-term strategy for investment and reform within the sector. The report signalled an intensification of market practices within Higher Education, including allowing universities to charge students up to £3000 per academic year in tuition fees, and the establishment of an annual National Student Survey (NSS) to 'help student choice drive up quality' (Department for Education and Skills, 2003:7). In addition, many references were made to ensuring the UK university system became globally competitive with other higher education institutions across the world, establishing stronger and more direct links with business and local economies, enabling the harnessing of knowledge for 'wealth creation' and the introduction of new national standards for teaching quality (DfES, 2003).

The subsequent introduction of 'top-up fees' in 2006, was met with widespread controversy and debate and concerns about its potential effect on attempts to widen participation and encourage those from lower socio-economic backgrounds to attend university. A report conducted by London Economics raised question's about the clarity of the funding system for students, beleaguered as it was with a complex calculation of means-tested loans, fees and bursaries and the extent to which such confusion may deter students from applying, particularly those whose families have no prior experience of higher education (London Economics Report, 2007). Despite the introduction of 'top-up fees', a shortfall in funding persisted, with Universities Minister David Willetts proclaiming that the costs of students' education was 'a burden on the taxpayer that had to be tackled' (Willetts, 2010, cited in Shepherd, 2010:unpaginated). Such concerns formed part of the Independent Review of Higher Education Funding and Student Finance (known as the 'Browne Review') which published its results in 2010, under the gaze of the new Coalition government. Conducted by Lord Browne (former Chief Executive of BP), the report's overall message embodied a resolute faith in competition as conducive to delivering the best end result. Published amidst much controversy and debate, the report arguably marked the final and largest step yet towards the creation of a full, open market in university education.

The report included a number of recommendations; firstly, removing the existing cap on tuition fees and allowing institutions to set their own fee levels, to allow for 'diversity' in courses. There would be no 'up-front' costs with fees not being repaid until graduates were earning £21,000 per year or more. Second, the cap on student numbers would be removed so that institutions were allowed to expand (and in some cases fold) mimicking market practices. Third, increased emphasis on 'choice' and 'empowering' students to make their own cost/benefit decisions on where/what to study, would see institutions forced to compete on issues of quality and affordability. The instigation of competition, it was contended, 'generally raises quality' (Browne, 2010:2) with universities compelled to publish data on employment statistics, course ratings and information on satisfaction levels to assist prospective students in their decision-making. Fourth, the need for course provision to be market driven would see public funding for 'non-essential' courses substantially cut, or completely withdrawn altogether. Priority courses were those deemed as having the most direct and immediate economic impact such as 'STEM' subjects (science, technology engineering medicine).The proposals sat favourably with the Coalition government's austerity agenda and plans to squeeze public spending. Whilst the tuition fee cap was not fully removed but raised to a maximum of £9000 per year, and despite a nationwide demonstration by students and lecturers against the plans, the proposals were largely implemented by government, with the tuition fee increase coming into effect for the 2012/13 academic year.

We have observed throughout the past thirty years, a gradual infiltration of the doctrines of neoliberalism and market management into essential public services of which higher education is only one example. With citizens in all areas of the public sphere increasingly viewed as 'consumers', the consequences of reconfiguring key institutions around the ethic of the market and its potentially negative effect on 'service provision' has been seldom acknowledged by policy makers whose sole focus appears to be economic efficiency. The requirement for education to be responsive to the demands of global industry has resulted in universities being run more and more along the lines of private sector organisations with the attendant focus on results, outputs and measuring 'value'. Critics such as Walton (2011) argue that the importation of 'monocultural management values' represents a systematic attack on core academic ideals of autonomy, critique and intellectual engagement, 'under the destructive rubric of 'New Public Management' (Walton, 2011:18).

As league tables, student surveys and employment statistics come to dominate the agenda in any discussion on the perceived benefits a university education can bring,

the obligation for universities to modify their operation and justify courses, research centres and teaching on the basis of projected 'impact' has been met with increasing criticism from both inside academia and beyond. In November 2012, the Council for the Defence of British Universities (CDBU) formed a coalition of academics, broadcasters and intellectuals, to articulate their deep dissatisfaction with the marketisation of higher education and campaign for a return to academic autonomy. They argue that under market-led conditions, the very foundation of the university is being 'grossly distorted', and that the 'central values of the university are being sidelined or forgotten' (Thomas, 2012, cited in Malik, 2012:unpaginated).

The pressure to perform well and hit government defined targets and objectives is placing increasing demands on academics that shift their focus away from the more traditional erudite activities of independent research and enquiry and on to narrower areas of study that have demonstrable 'impact' with 'impact being primarily defined by the needs of the economy' (Couldry, 2011:42). The demands of the Research Excellence Framework (REF), the system for assessing the quality of research output in universities across the UK, means that academia is now subject to increasing levels of bureaucracy, micro-management and performance-indicators whose 'logic are more corporate than they are academic' (Bailey, 2011:96). The imperative to 'publish or perish', and have papers accepted to the 'top' journals means academics are often forced to restrict their research to increasingly limited fields of study, thus leading to 'intellectual inertia' (Bailey, 2011:96). This, alongside excessive administrative tasks, an increased emphasis on issues of 'proving' teaching quality and 'enhancing the student experience' gives rise to a pressurised and individualised environment within university departments which sits completely at odds with the considered, deliberative and collective surroundings required for truly original and pioneering research.

Commentators such as Fenton (2011) and Molyneaux (2013) have raised concerns about the demise of funding for subjects that do not fit with government priorities or meet with narrowly defined criteria, thus reducing the disciplinary (and institutional) diversity that allows a truly egalitarian education system to flourish. Couldry (2011) argues that the strategic purpose of the REF is to justify the removal of funding for certain research centres, thereby 'allowing' them to fail. Such measures represent a typically neoliberal approach, in which immediate and short-term, measurable results are favoured over longer-term investment into subjects which will develop skills and knowledge more broadly which could potentially be harnessed in the future. It marks a decisive move away from university as a general 'public good' in which governments support access to learning at the highest level to 'the full range of human knowledge,

understanding and creativity' (Couldry, 2011:40) thus providing *all* young people, in *all* subject disciplines, the opportunity to develop their full intellectual and creative potential. Instead, the much cruder principle of judging academic worth on economic grounds filters down from policy level and into the minds of the thousands of young people who are compelled to undertake a cost/benefit analysis on projected future earnings before embarking on a degree.

The introduction of market practices into higher education and in particular the significant costs of tuition fees has led some to suggest that students are now simply 'consumers', with the value of a degree determined largely by its market value. As Bathmaker (2003) argues, students now 'require assurances that they are getting a suitable product…a qualification which is recognised and valued by the outside world and in the labour market' (2003:183). With ongoing economic instability resulting in continued labour market volatility, and with many graduates now at risk of unemployment or underemployment (ONS, 2012c) the need to acquire certification that is instantly presentable and highly valued by a prospective employer, means that students need to consider very carefully their degree programme of choice and its subsequent impact on employment prospects and earning potential, something which is virtually impossible to assess (Hutton, 1995). Such a 'narrow, utilitarianism vocationalism' gives rise to 'the notion that the only conceivable purpose of going to university is to get the right sort of corporate job, so that universities become the training wings of international corporations' (Walton, 2011: 20).

Given the instrumental nature in which students make decisions about higher education, the oft used argument that in a market-led system students will be able to exercise more choice, seems somewhat implausible. Under such a system, the availability of future courses will ultimately be shaped by the decision-making of current graduates, many of whom feel compelled to choose 'safe' courses that provide a clear route into a profession, or offer immediate high financial returns, but are not perhaps best suited to their skills, interests, or long-term goals. Such utilitarianism will;

> Lead to a greater concentration in subject areas that are more profitable and least expensive as provision responds to market demand…subjects without self-evident 'market value' face extinction. The range of degrees on offer will narrow, the types of subjects available within degree programmes will diminish and real choice will be increasingly limited (Fenton, 2011:107).

However, perhaps the most fundamental problem surrounding the perceived 'worth' of a degree is that the 'product' in question is not tangible, and not designed to be simply purchased and acquired in such a mechanistic way. The substantial increase in tuition

fees, emphasis on 'student-centred' learning and 'value for money' and the need for universities to aggressively market and advertise their course provision, has led to an overall repositioning of students as consumers which has a significant and detrimental impact on the process of learning, as well as students expectations of what is involved in studying for a degree. The practise of learning in higher education requires commitment and engagement from the student, a willingness to prepare for lectures and seminars, to contribute to class discussions, and work pro-actively and independently outside of scheduled classes. The metaphor of consumerism is unhelpful as it implies that students, by virtue of paying large sums of money, are effectively able to purchase their degree in a mindless form of transaction, in which 'knowledge is somehow dished up by experts like a buffet from which you take what you like' (Fullick, cited in Anyangwe, 2011:unpaginated) without having to critically engage with the subject at an advanced level.

Winlow and Hall (2006) argue that the imperative for universities to advertise themselves and present their institution in a favourable light, means that marketable statistics (student intake, drop-out rates, student satisfaction scores) must be manipulated and maintained at acceptable levels. As a consequence, students who are less capable or less diligent, rather than failing their course, may simply be assessed as consumers who have not received an adequate service for their money, with consumer power potentially distorting the process of learning. Within this climate of being compelled to give students what they want, teaching which challenges student's commonsense assumptions and promotes independent critical analysis and introspection is undermined as 'market-driven rewards cancel out the 'ethical imagination' and 'social responsibility' in favour of pandering to individuals (Giroux, 2011:148). Winlow and Hall (2006) argue that in the future, it may become common for intellectual content and assessment methods to be reconfigured around the expectations and demands of the student 'consumer'.

With knowledge now viewed as simply another commodity to be purchased and traded in the capitalist market-place, Faulkner (2011:28) argues that contemporary universities are 'drained of culture, intellect and politics' with the virtual eradication of all counter-cultural and oppositional values giving rise to conformity and a 'clinical functionalism' (2011:28). Creeping instrumentalism and individualism throughout the student population as well as amongst under-resourced and pressurised staff may support such a scathing analysis. However, the widespread tuition fee protests that took place in 2010, as well as student involvement in resistance groups such as Occupy and UK Uncut suggests that pockets of student political participation are still

to be found on campus, but are often forced to take second place to the more pressing demands of part-time work and cultivating a marketable CV (Hawker, 2013).

Upon being instated as University Rector at St Andrews in 1867, John Stuart Mill declared:

> Universities are not intended to teach the knowledge required to fit men for some special mode of gaining their livelihood. Their object is not to make skilful lawyers, or physicians or engineers, but capable and cultivated human beings (cited in Standing, 2011:160)

As the inevitable 'winner-takes-all' market begins to proliferate throughout higher education, the fundamental experience of being a student is seemingly hollowed out, and the value attached to obtaining a degree corroded. The reality of studying under a marketised system is in marked contrast to the promised ideal, in which glossy prospectuses depict an empowering and transforming student experience, bolstered by carefully massaged statistics which demonstrate high graduate employment rates and assurances of enhanced career prospects. Critics such as Goos and Manning (2003) argue that the need to expand higher education to meet the demands of the much vaunted 'knowledge economy' has been over-emphasised, where the 'actual increase in the number of educated workers has been far in excess of that necessary' (2003:83). Despite much hyperbole on investing in human capital and 'up-skilling' the country's workforce to meet the demands of the global knowledge economy, the expansion of higher education has resulted in an annual supply of debt-ridden, over-qualified graduates which greatly outstrips demand, whilst 'the economic machine may be able to run profitably and efficiently by drawing on an ever smaller elite' (Sennett, 2006:86).

Parents and prospective students continue to be routinely seduced by the vision of higher education as a meritocratic portal to success and gateway to a secure and stable future. For many, particularly in the former industrial towns that still suffer from economic stagnation and persistently high levels of unemployment, attending university and obtaining a degree promises an adulthood liberated from the economic subservience of low grade service work or the humiliation of surviving on subsistence level welfare (Winlow and Hall, 2006). However, possession of a university degree may not be enough to prevent young people's descent into the kinds of precarious, low-pay, unskilled work that they went to university to avoid (see chapter four for more detailed discussion). Graduate 'underemployment' has risen markedly since the start of the recession with 47% of recent graduates now working in a non-graduate

occupation although figures show there has been a steady upwards trend since 2001 (ONS, 2013).

In the absence of sufficient opportunities for graduates to exercise their ambitions, it would appear that the economic justification for an expanded, market-led higher education system has proven unfounded. Steeped in typically neoliberal discourses on individualism, opportunity, entrepreneurialism and personal responsibility, the emergent reality reveals the deeply ideological agenda behind the past thirty years of education policy. Neoliberal culture has raised the hopes, aspirations and expectations of young people, only for them to find a narrow and ever diminishing range of opportunities for their fulfilment (Winlow and Hall, 2006).

Post-school Transitions and Higher Education

The previous section examined the ways in which education, and in particular higher education, has been substantially marketised and reformulated around neoliberal principles and the significant impact this has had on the experience of attending university and the value attached to obtaining a degree. Structural changes in the economy and the emergence of a global labour market has dramatically altered young people's route out of compulsory education and into work. The transition from secondary school to employment or further education has historically been relatively unproblematic, and took place within the confines of a highly pre-determined but comprehensible socio-economic structure (see page 75 for more detailed discussion). As more traditional routes from compulsory education have declined, largely as a result of restructured labour markets and the expansion of higher education, individual decision-making regarding job prospects and future 'careers' now introduces a range of pressures and anxieties into young people's lives. The culturally narrated imperative to 'live a life of one's own' to make the 'right' decisions and take responsibility for shaping and navigating your personal biography into adulthood, is something that begins upon finishing high-school, when young people are still somewhat immature, and exhibit a naivety and lack of understanding about the wider socio-economic structures and systems that influence and shape their lives.

The individual decision-making on paths of future study/employment that is required at the age of 16 was met with a mixture of apathy and ambivalence by the participants. Overwhelmingly, they expressed that at the time, they had 'no idea' about what kind of job they might want to do in the future, and for those that embarked on further study,

courses were chosen to indulge a student's interest, or to keep potential options 'open' rather than strategically as part of a long-term career plan.

> No idea at all…I tried to make my subjects as broad as possible. I thought if I do quite a wide area, cos I had no idea what I wanted to do, maybe I could go along any route.
> **(Stuart, 23)**

> No you feel like you're kinda just led into it…, I didn't at that time have any kind of a bigger plan…I think about two of the people I went to school with went to college, it was quite a low achieving school…people just either went into work or, they had children, kind of thing so yeah, I was one of the few that went on to college
> **(Katie, 23)**

> I really didn't have any clue when I left school, what my next step would be, …I kinda tossed a coin to be honest with you, it was a complete guess…looked at five subjects I thought I'd enjoy most and because if its something I'm gonna do in a future career I want it to be something that I enjoy rather than something that would get me money and so I went to college and picked four A Levels… I still had no idea what I wanted to get out of it…just hopefully discover something at the end of college
> **(Craig, 28)**

Many of the participants felt further education was routinely portrayed as the next 'logical' step and never really questioned their reasons for wanting to do it or considered other alternatives. They were simply 'guided' towards further study, either by parental expectations or the actions of their peer group.

> I'd done quite well at school so I guess there was a general expectation within my school and I guess within my family that I was capable of doing A Levels… I think I already knew that I wanted to go to university so I knew that I wanted to do A Levels… I didn't really consider full-time work at that stage.
> **(Natalie, 30)**

> I went to sixth form college and did A Levels… I've always, y'know, there was never any other option, I was always going to do it, A Levels, I've always had that very traditional, sort of academic focus so… I was always gonna do A Levels.
> **(Jess, 25)**

> It felt like a natural progression to not stop learning after sixteen….yeah, all my friends did it, it was the done thing. Not many people left school in 1998 and went straight onto a job. I don't know anyone who didn't go to college… at sixteen you listen to what other people tell you.
> **(Steve, 29)**

It appears that the transition from compulsory to post-compulsory education was made with the same ease and minimal consideration that used to characterise the transition from school to first employment. For the majority of those interviewed,

deciding to go to college was a proverbial 'no-brainer' delaying further career-based decision-making for another couple of years whilst providing the opportunity to gain further qualifications without disrupting friendship groups.

The somewhat larger step involved in deciding to go to university, appeared to follow along similar lines. Only six of the twenty participants that were interviewed had decided against university and had entered the labour market after completing A Levels or similar qualifications. For two of the participants, financing degree level study was cited as a contributory factor in their decision-making:

> I went straight to work. Well, I finished GCSEs and A Levels and then applied to a couple of uni's but my secondary school at the time, sixth form, sort of misinformed a lot of us cos most of us went to our banks and that to ask for student loans for uni and then the uni got a bit confused as to why we were coming at them with certain questions, so it went on for months and so I just didn't bother going to uni in the end… cos I needed to stay in London…my Mum weren't well at the time so I was just like, I need money to support her so I'll go to work.
> **(Dave, 25)**

Dave grew up in a low-income household in a deprived borough of London. His mother and father were separated, and as his Mum was unable to work as a result of her long-term illness, Dave had adopted something of a 'provider' role, working a number of jobs simultaneously in order to support his Mum and younger brother. It is interesting to note that Dave received little guidance and encouragement from his sixth form to apply to university, their inability to help him with his application was discouraging, and he was left unaware of any financial assistance and support that may have been available to him. Dave simply felt unable to begin studying for a degree at significant financial cost, when the family were already struggling on a low income. Such an example demonstrates how existing inequalities are still reinforced by the higher education system and despite claims that the introduction of tuition fees will not discourage poorer students (Shepherd and Stratton, 2010) this was the case with two of the participants.

> I wanted to be a secondary school teacher originally…I decided not to go to uni. I did originally want to go, but with the fees rising and stuff it was a bit… I was gonna take a year and then go but then I just thought oh I'll wait because getting experience is more important then getting qualifications now… I wanted to get a bit more money behind me before uni…it just seems a lot for what it is.
> **(Rose, 18)**

Rose was the youngest in the sample and would have faced paying the higher tuition fee rate (introduced in 2012) of up to £9000 per year. She was fairly stoical in her decision and felt that gaining some work experience would be a better way of making herself more employable. Although many of her friends had gone to university, she did comment that 'I think some of them have dropped out actually'.

The remaining four participants who had decided against going to university, had done so because they had simply 'had enough' of education and would rather be in full-time employment. Sharing similar feelings with those who had gone to university, they too expressed that they had 'no idea' what they wanted to do but felt that they had reached the end of their educational trajectory and would rather take their chances in the labour market.

> I did two years of sixth form at the same school and then after that I went on to do a National Diploma in Graphic Design at the college up the road but I dropped out…Friends went to university and went their separate ways and I was left in York… Yeah I kind of thought that I would be the same and do the whole education thing but like I say, I dropped out of college and I just got to a point where I was sick of education and I just said well, I don't actually have to be in education anymore so I can do what I want and go get a job so I did.
> **(Gavin, 24)**

> I was working part-time for a company which was a local convenience store, I didn't apply to go to university, I was put forward for a management programme with the company and spent many years working for them, about six years working for them. It was a trainee management role…I've always been a bit directionless, I've never really known what I wanted to do, I'd had enough of studying so I decided to keep in the employment market.
> **(Phil, 30)**

The influence of peers, parents and teachers in shaping aspirations towards (or against) university, was evident throughout the interviews. For those 'first generation' students such as Jeremy, the decision to go to university understandably raised some concerns and anxieties from parents who possessed both little knowledge and no experience of higher education. Such worries could have potentially discouraged Jeremy from going to university had he not been so resolute about his decision;

> I think initially perhaps my parents were undecided as to university and they were concerned over all the money and all the debt at the end of the day and also the prospects once you finished… I didn't share those qualms at all! I had considered for a very brief period, getting a job straight from school but all my friends went to university and I didn't want to be left out… Plus, I love learning really.
> **(Jeremy, 25)**

Conversely, those who had access to the 'cultural capital' of family members and/or teachers appeared to benefit significantly from their experience, knowledge and resources. Such participants demonstrated an awareness of the importance of an institution's reputation, and the need to be strategic in their selection of A Levels as well as discerning in where they applied to study;

> I always wanted to do History, that was my big focus and then it kind of got to, start of the second year and I realised I was never gonna get the grades I wanted to get to a good university…y'know you needed to get three A's and all that so I switched to doing Business and ended up doing Finance at Durham… I never thought I'd get into Durham, my original first choice was Keele which obviously is a good university but it's not got the name and recognition that like Durham has.
> **(Jess, 25)**

Natalie, who studied at Cambridge, describes the additional support and tuition she received from her college which helped her to navigate the arduous admissions process that accompanies an application to one of the UK's most elite universities. In addition, the fact that her mother had also attended Cambridge, meant she had a wealth of resources and 'accumulated cultural knowledge' at her disposal;

> I think there were about six people who were applying for Oxbridge that year and they put on lunchtime classes for us and stuff, sort of extra support… it would've been a more difficult process if I didn't have that extra support and again my family were very supportive and my mum had also already been to Cambridge so she had had that experience.
> **(Natalie, 30)**

Bourdieu (1977) argues that this 'relationship of familiarity' and the ability to understand and articulate the signs and symbols of the dominant culture confers 'cultural capital' to privileged groups and thus reinforces (and legitimizes) existing inequalities within the education system. The differentiated experiences of the participants goes some way to supporting this claim with many of the temps being influenced and informed by the networks of people around them.

Yet despite the distinctions, there was a general consensus from the participants that going to university seemed like the 'natural progression' from A Levels, and that there was subtle encouragement from family, teachers and peers that studying for a degree was the next perceived 'step' in their learning trajectory. The internalisation of neoliberal inspired discourses on higher education were apparent, the cultural expectation that attendance at university was now 'the norm', and likely to lead to

increased prospects, was frequently articulated and ostensibly reinforced by parents and teachers in order to gently 'nudge' them towards university.

> I never actually questioned it, I always knew that my parents expected me to have a higher level of education… but I have always thought I would go to university…it was a natural progression…I think all of my friends went to university.
> **(Stuart, 23)**

> There wasn't really any other option given to us at my school it was university or….everyone went to uni that did A levels….I don't know about the people that left at sixteen but everyone that did A levels it was just…it wasn't 'are you going to uni?' it was 'which uni are you applying to?' it was very much….we were channelled into university.
> **(Lisa, 23)**

> Most people went on to do A levels and like yeah…all my friends went to university. It was just the kind of thing to do, sort of thing after school and that… I never thought like erm, yeah maybe I'd be better off going straight to the job market, get a job or whatever, I just assumed that that's what people did, going to university. I wanted to go.
> **(Ben, 27)**

Although none of the temps had designed strategic and precise long-term career plans when applying for university, many felt that they would benefit from enhanced employment prospects and would be more likely to obtain lucrative and fulfilling employment upon graduation. Based around the principle of 'rational choice', participants made their decision on university participation by weighing up the perceived risks and benefits, and ultimately viewed the acquisition of a degree as being both the best way to maximise ones labour market potential, and on the other hand 'insuring' themselves against the threat of labour market exclusion (Tomlinson, 2008).

Foskett and Hemsley-Brown (1999) suggest that young people's perceptions of success, and the impressions they have of embarking on a professional corporate career, are largely informed by personal experiences (as well as those of siblings and peers) parental expectations and aspirational images conveyed via the mass media. Such images and narratives can be powerfully seductive for both students and parents alike, particularly when faced with the prospect of immediate entry into a stagnant youth labour market. In addition, and despite having only vague ideas about what kind of a career they did want, individual motivations to attend university often stemmed from very precise ideas about the kinds of employment that they did not want to do and were keen to avoid.

You know, that you read in the papers that a graduate is likely to earn y'know, an extra £100,000 over their working life, and I…I didn't want to get stuck in some menial job at the end of the day and I thought university offered me the best prospects for the future.
(Jeremy, 25)

After a year of just working I realised that I did actually have the qualifications and decided to go for it and see what happened…In my year out I was just working in a hotel at the time chamber-maiding…I'd been a waitress before, I'd worked since I was about fifteen but I realised from that point that I did not want to spend my life in a job like that and realised, well, thought, that with a degree that wouldn't happen, that's why I went.
(Katie, 23)

I went (to university) to be challenged and to be able to get a job when I left. The reason I chose to go to the university I went to, was because of the employment statistics that they presented on the open day so I wanted to go to uni to make myself more employable and able to earn a higher wage.
(Ross, 25)

There is an unfortunate irony, that despite their attempts to escape menial, low-pay, precarious work by going to university, research continues to demonstrate that significant numbers of graduates are being compelled to undertake the very same roles that they were hoping to escape (Clifton et al, 2014; ONS, 2013). The imperative for young people to 'up-skill' either through apprenticeships or academia, has been a flagstone of neoliberal policy for decades, yet its failure to provide access to the kinds of meaningful and rewarding employment promised has only accelerated as a result of the 2008 economic downturn (see page 79 for more detailed discussion). Despite this, the temp workers clearly believed that by choosing to attend university (notwithstanding the significant financial implications attached to this decision) they were making a worthwhile investment into their future, and would reap the rewards later on in their career.

It was not surprising given the public discourse surrounding university education and the alleged life enhancing benefits it could bring, that the participants expectations of what university would be like were overwhelmingly positive and optimistic, revolving around 'stereotypical assumptions of moderate academic demands and an exciting social life' (Lowe and Cook, 2003:55). Most of those interviewed felt like university would be their first real taste of adulthood and looked forward to the prospect of becoming more independent, learning to 'stand on their own two feet' and meeting new friends.

Well I think everyone has an idea that it's going to be the best time of your life and parties all the time, things like that.
(Jennifer, 25)

I thought it would be my first real taste of independence, I was quite excited about things like budgeting and stupid stuff like that really but it was the first time I would really be away from my parents…it would be enjoyable to make new friends and what I considered to be 'mini-adulthood'…I knew it wasn't going to be all about focusing on education, it was gonna be more a transition into the adult world
(Stuart, 23)

I'd gone to uni to see my brother a lot and obviously seen what uni life was about so I suppose I had similar expectations to that so a good fun time but work on top of that so…kind of a time to go outside of living at home and be yourself a bit more I suppose
(Danny, 27)

I guess I had big expectations about the social side of it cos everybody I knew who had been to university said they met some of their best friends for life while they were there and had an opportunity to do lots of new things so I guess that was a big part of what I was expecting
(Natalie, 30)

Expectations of workload were mixed. For a number of those interviewed, the courses they embarked upon were deemed not sufficiently demanding or intellectually challenging in comparison to what they had anticipated.

From an academic perspective I imagined it would be very difficult, very challenging and I thought it would push me, certainly in terms of the undergraduate degree and I think that wasn't the case… I have a really strong work ethic… I worked really really hard and I found the degree easy and I shouldn't do cos I don't class myself as clever.
(Jeremy, 25)

I thought it would be more work, I thought it would be harder, cos I got a 2.1 without really trying and I'm not that clever, like at A level I got B's, I'm not like an A* student and I got B's and I thought university was gonna be really hard and you'd do loads of work and you don't at all, not for the course I did anyway.
(Lisa, 23)

Honestly, it wasn't as much work as I thought it would be, it was more of a social experience for undergrad, and then a couple of weeks cramming at the end of each term.
(Stuart, 23)

It could be argued that the answers above provide evidence of a subtle 'dumbing down' in universities as a result of the implementation of market practices. Pressure on academics to retain student numbers and improve satisfaction rates can lead to a 'hollowing out' of more rigorous academic content in favour of more 'student-centred' and formulaic learning. However, the mismatch between perceptions and experiences of workload felt by almost all of those interviewed suggests a broader, more general disparity between students' expectations of what university life is like, and the reality

that greets them upon entry. Some studies have shown that whilst many young people make the transition to university with relative ease, a significant number are un-prepared for the experience, and struggle to comprehend the independent and autonomous style of learning required at degree level (Lowe and Cook, 2003). Fewer contact hours, for many students simply translates as more 'time off' and rather than reading, organising lecture notes and preparing for forthcoming classes, many students fail to fully engage in the self-directed learning expected at university, and instead feel that their time should be more highly structured:

> The reality is that you get set assignments and you're on your own to do it there's not a lot of, structure or guidelines, kind of thing and that's why students have the reputation for being lazy and not doing anything, it's because they have a lot of time on their hands.
> **(Katie, 23)**

> I think there's far too much time wasted when you're doing a degree I think between terms, like, the way its done, I don't know if its different abroad but they way its done in England its pretty much a joke, being in university in my experience is a doddle cos you have so much free time, like, my first year I had Monday and Friday no contact time, so I had a longer weekend, as I saw it, so I had four days for the weekend and three days of work and I didn't struggle to keep up with the work.
> **(Ross, 25)**

Interestingly, one of the participants who had studied a degree which did require a high level of contact time said she had felt overwhelmed with the workload and found the course extremely difficult:

> I couldn't keep up with all the work to be honest…it was literally nine till five, nine till six then, lots of work outside as well to do in our own time and lots of coursework and things like that, it was very full on. They even said on the first day, my personal tutor said to me that if I've come to university to have a good time then I would fail, that's what she said to me straight away… I really relied on help because some things were really really hard and I just never really got my head around them.
> **(Jennifer, 25)**

Lehmann (2009) suggests that the background of the student can play a contributing factor in how quickly they adapt and adjust to the requirements of university, with those from non-traditional or first generation backgrounds more likely to struggle and experience anxiety and feelings of dislocation. However, this was not found to be the case within this study; indeed an overwhelming majority of the participants despite their various backgrounds, all expressed dissatisfaction and disappointment with some aspect of their university experience. It is interesting to note, that out of all the participants that continued on to higher education, three of those interviewed dropped

out part-way through their course, two changed their course of study and two deferred after an initial year of study and went back to complete their degrees after a period on sabbatical. The individual accounts given below suggest a number of reasons why the participants' expectations of university did not match the reality;

> I did the first year… I was just getting less and less interested in actually what I was doing and realised that …it seemed like the natural progression but was maybe not my kind of thing. I dropped out due to the fact that I didn't enjoy the course.
> **(Danny, 27)**

> No I hated it (university) and nearly quit twice…I actually took a year, like, away from university where I decided whether or not to do my final year cos basically it didn't challenge me, I found it ridiculously easy and I just stopped trying and I sort of, I dunno…I didn't take the first year very seriously after about six months, the second year was worse, I decided, I don't wanna do my final year now cos I'm not focused at all so I worked for a year while I got my head together.
> **(Ross, 25)**

> That initial experience of university was quite negative really I suppose… It was the course content. I feel that either I didn't research sufficiently what was to be expected of me or that information wasn't really provided until the course got going and I found it very difficult. I found the subject itself was…not what I expected.
> **(Steve, 29)**

The statements above strongly suggest that there is a significant and problematic disparity between young people's perceptions of university and their actual experiences upon beginning a degree. It could be suggested that this widespread discrepancy between expectations and experience is down to what has been termed the 'freshman myth' (Stern, 1966) whereby students perceptions of higher education are characterised by an over-enthusiastic and optimistic idealism, which in reality, could never be fully realised. Such overly positive and unrealistic expectations may stem from the media depictions of university life that abound in popular culture, but more specifically, from the attractive images that are represented in glossy university prospectuses and promotional literature. Following years of expansion and increasing competition, universities are being driven towards aggressive marketing techniques in order to distinguish themselves from competitors, and establish a unique brand identity. The result has seen a surge in complaints to the Office of the Independent Adjudicator, with many students challenging course descriptions and information provided on marketing material which later transpired to be fabricated, misleading or incorrect (Swain, 2011).

Despite conveying an overall feeling of general disappointment with the university experience stemming largely from dissatisfaction with the course itself, the participants did speak positively about the social side of being at university. The formation of deep friendships and the support they provide during a period in which many young people first experience independence from their families, is recognised as helping some students to persevere with, and in many cases finally complete their degree (Brooks, 2007). It appeared that this shared experience of going out and making new friends enabled the participants to reflect a little more favourably overall on their time at university:

> On the social side it was pretty much what I was expecting so that anxious first bit and then you're trying to…y'know everyone else is doing it as well you're trying to find the people who you think you'll actually gel with rather than just the first people that are in your corridor or whatever.
> **(Natalie, 30)**

> I would say that I ended up by the end of the fourth year with a sort of, small group of say, six of us who I considered my friends… doing the coursework and things I really relied on help because some things were really really hard and I just never really got my head around them. I did rely on them a lot.
> **(Jennifer, 25)**

> The only disappointment for me was that it was only three years! I wish it was for longer, I loved it…. It's a good uni and the students I was studying with, I got on really well with them and enjoyed their company... I grew as a person quite a lot while I was there.
> **(Jeremy, 25)**

However, regardless of the friendships forged and memories made with peers, and the independence that is fostered by studying for a degree, one or two of the interviewees articulated strongly that they felt that going to university had not been a worthwhile experience and attributed little value to the degree itself:

> I definitely think for me, what I'm planning on doing you don't need a degree, I'll never use my degree. I had a great time and I loved it but it's…in terms of me it's probably not what I should have done… but no other option was given. If you can get enough grades to do it, which obviously I could, then it was well, 'you're gonna go to uni'.
> **(Lisa, 23)**

> I just don't think they care, I think a lot of universities see you as a way of getting money and once you're in, that's it. I don't think they have any incentive to make you more skilled for the workplace.
> **(Ross, 25)**

> I feel like I've wasted my money…and towards the end of the degree, like, the atmosphere kind of changes and the teachers it's like…the lecturers are

like, you'll see what happens, y'know, there's not jobs out there for everyone and its kind of like an admittance, not of guilt but of the reality that's kind of been hidden, I think for the three years and in our graduation they were like, some people will do this and some people will do this and it was like, oh yeah, like, we've bought your product now.
(Katie, 23)

After finishing university a number of the participants returned home to live with their parents, providing them with some time to think through future plans and crucially, enabling them to save some money.

I finished, I dunno, end of June or something and I went home and I was thinking as I say that I would try and get temping work or some kind of casual job and then think about what I wanted to do…and I started to look for temping work but not, it must be said, very hard because my Mum was still ok with the fact that, for a little period of time I had a grace period y'know
(Natalie, 30)

I moved back to York cos I just couldn't afford, I couldn't afford rent for one month so I just came home.
(Eleanor, 25)

My parents moved abroad just before my final exams so I finished my uni and moved in with my grandparents and just sort of went on the dole a bit but I didn't know what I wanted to do.
(Jess, 25)

The provision of this 'time out' from the full responsibilities of adulthood was not extended to all of the participants however. Some of those from lower-income families were unable to move back home and thus they were compelled to immediately seek work and take whatever job they could get, in order to survive;

The main thing I was worrying about was just getting a house and a job cos everyone else was just going home and they weren't gonna do anything they were just gonna get supported by their parents but I wasn't, I didn't have any of that kind of thing so my priority was more realistic than other peoples, it was to get a house, get an income and then try and work out the career thing afterwards.
(Katie, 23)

Post-university transitions were characterised by a large degree of uncertainty and anxiety, particularly for those who finished university post 2008 and in the midst of the global recession.

I started to look for temping work. I didn't find anything quickly and I tried things like the jobcentre…I think they were probably thinking y'know, why

113

are you here? You're a graduate you don't need to come in for this and I was saying… I'm not looking for graduate level employment, I'm just looking for employment for the moment but they were a bit like, 'no'.
(Natalie, 30)

I applied for a couple of jobs, I got down to like the last five on one graduate scheme but the year I was there, they just cut all the graduate schemes, there were very few and I didn't want to be an accountant which a lot of the ones were like, have a job with us but you basically have to work full-time and study full-time for three years to become an accountant and it just doesn't appeal, which is what a lot of my friends ended up almost having to do cos they were the only schemes that were left.
(Jess, 25)

I graduated in 2009 and there was no work it was totally dead, there was no work anywhere so my plan was to take a bit of time out, try and do some travelling, do work that wasn't really career related but just a way of getting some money and then apply for a Masters course when I could.
(Eleanor, 25)

Very few participants had graduated with specific and concrete career plans for the future, and many simply articulated vague ambitions for travel, some time-out from academic study by either being unemployed or working in a 'mindless' job, or alternatively, a consideration of continuing their studies to masters level. Seven out of the twenty participants that were interviewed had undertaken postgraduate level study at various stages of their career and reasons for doing so were varied, including; passion for the subject, professional development/career progression, or simply to ride out the turbulence of the economic recession.

I knew that everyone's got a degree or thereabouts so I knew if I stood any chance I needed to go a level up at least and it was also by the time I come to begin it, one of the factors was I thought I'd wait out the economic crisis and erm, I just think, y'know, a Masters degree would serve me for the rest of my life and be a worthwhile investment.
(Stuart, 23)

I decided just before I finished my degree that I wanted to teach so I didn't apply for jobs because I applied to do the PGCE, and I found out, I think, shortly after I'd finished my degree that I would get on the course. I was unemployed for a little while in-between finishing and starting the course, but I knew that entire time that I was unemployed that I would be doing the teaching course.
(Ross, 25)

I started a Masters last year… the kinds of jobs I've been doing, I do like the field but I know that in the long run I'd want to have a more strategic role…I thought about it for a while…this time, unlike when I did my first degree, I did actually have a plan and was trying to further my career by doing the Masters
(Natalie, 30)

114

It was clear from those that had pursued further/postgraduate study that the decision to do so was more carefully considered than had been the case at undergraduate level. A key factor in this was the significant cost and limited financial support that is available for study at this level. After receiving student loans to fund their undergraduate degrees, and in many cases having already accumulated a considerable amount of debt, many of the participants had to adopt a 'beg, steal or borrow' approach in order to finance their postgraduate studies. Most of those interviewed had found this a real struggle, taking out additional loans, extending overdrafts, working part-time, borrowing from family members and in one case, even using online gambling sites in an attempt to win money to fund their studies. In 2013, an NUS study found that almost half of all postgraduate students regularly worry about not having enough money to meet basic living expenses such as rent and utility bills (NUS Survey, 2013).

> It was difficult financially… I saved about £7000 and it actually quite quickly went with…at the beginning I needed a new computer and deposit for rent and stuff like that.
> **(Stuart, 23)**

> I've got a CDL Loan which is great, thank you government…
> **(Jess, 25)**

> I took a career development loan to pay for my MA so I knew, even if I wanted to go and do a PhD, I knew I couldn't do it straight away, cos I knew I had to pay a lot of it off.
> **(Beth, 23)**

> I saved about £2000, my grandparents gave me £1000, my uncle gave me a loan of £2000 and a got a career development loan to cover the rest of it. While I was a document controller I saved enough money that I could've paid my tuition and it was just the career development loan would have paid for my living expenses but then being out of work for six weeks I spent, not all of it but enough of it that by the time I came to do it a year later I only had £1000 left…cos when I applied I had to prove that I had the money to do it which I did when I applied, but by the time it came around I'd been unemployed and used it.
> **(Phoebe, 28)**

As already demonstrated earlier (see page 112) the extent of financial support from parents and family members was crucial in assisting many of the participants in navigating the next steps of their career. Whilst some were compelled to take out further loans or sought to borrow money from parents and family members to fund postgraduate/professional study, others were given more substantial assistance, for example by being allowed to live at home rent free and/or receiving an allowance.

I paid very little rent at home and was able to save up quite a lot of money and that saw me through the year and I still had a couple of thousand left over once I'd finished, so there was no pressure at all there…. I don't agree with working while doing degrees, I think that if you're gonna spend all that money you may as well give it your sole focus and…listening to other students who were there and doing 20 hours a week and trying to do all their studying, I don't think that works.
(Jeremy, 25)

I had a gap year where I did work experience… One Chambers in Hull and the rest were in London… I did temping for three months full-time… in my gap year that's what I did first, I worked and then after that I did the work experience and I was basically supported by my parents…I think basically from January to when I started my next course in September…because I was doing work experience I didn't do anymore paid work.
(Jennifer, 25)

The limited availability of funding for postgraduate study poses a real barrier to students who do not have access to the money to support themselves. In the absence of a student loans system like that offered for undergraduate study, 'Professional' or 'Career Development' loans, are offered at a commercial rate of interest (currently around 9.9%) and are a risky form of finance for young people who despite the costs they have incurred, have no guarantee of a job upon graduation, nor any idea on future projected earnings and the affordability of repayments. The individualised need to 'upskill' and chase ever more credentials in the vain hope of obtaining meaningful employment compels people to layer debt upon debt so that it '*might* be enough to secure a job that would make the total investment worthwhile' (Standing, 2011:70). It therefore comes as no surprise to see that many of the participants felt that higher education generally should be geared more towards employability, with universities needing to do more to help graduates be immediately employable and ready for the labour market:

Why should companies pay even more to train graduates when really that should be a part of their education, why should companies have to fork out the money? I don't see why the employer should have to do it.
(Jennifer, 25)

I came out of university and didn't even know how to write a CV…I think it would help if just a course in how to write an application, how to actually sell yourself in an application, saying here's the course, here's the skills that you get from the course, but how do you translate those…how does this relate to the job that you're applying for?
(Phoebe, 28)

I think it should be skills, and vocations and levels and proof…like I don't think a degree is proof enough of what someone can do. I think there should be more structured guidelines like I know you have your modules

and things like that but if you're not getting enough feedback like I didn't, it's not really that helpful.
(Katie, 23)

I don't think the proliferation of degrees, i.e the previous governments intention of getting 50% of children to go to university is a particularly good idea, erm… I feel a bit disingenuous again to say that quite a lot of these degrees are what I class as 'mickey mouse' degrees and I don't think they give any benefit to either the wider economy or to the student themselves in terms of employability. I know there's a lot said for more vocational courses and people learning a trade…but I certainly didn't learn anything in terms of employability
(Jeremy, 25)

It was felt by some participants that the subject studied could play a significant role in either enhancing or decreasing a graduate's employability. Studying certain 'specialist' subjects such as Medicine or Law for example, carried an immediate 'currency' into the labour market as they related directly to a particular profession. This is indeed confirmed by labour market data; a 2013 ONS report demonstrated that graduates from Medicine and Dentistry were more likely to be employed and had the highest average gross annual pay (ONS, 2013). Looking back, many of the graduates felt they had faced a trade-off in their decision-making which they only became too aware of once they began looking for jobs. Undertaking a specialist subject that would lead directly to graduate employment, but risk 'pigeon-holing' themselves and face difficulties in trying to change their career path at a later date, or, study a broader subject such as English or Business Studies, in order to 'keep their options open' but struggle to find employment when competing with many other graduates with the same generic skills.

I think there are certain HE courses that are obviously geared to a job, medicine would be an obvious example, if you've got a medicine degree, you're gonna be a doctor, there are a lot of other degrees like psychology where you probably aren't gonna specialise. I think, if you've got a good degree from a good university or any sort of qualification really that shows that you can study and have different skills which are useful in business then it should be considered almost…life experience, you've obviously got a good head on your shoulders that sort of thing.
(Stuart, 23)

I deliberately thought, I'll do a broad ranging degree and it'll like help me into here but when you're looking at graduate schemes a lot of them say, a business degree would be preferable or a marketing degree would be preferable which is funny cos when I was at school I was like, I wouldn't go do a marketing degree I want to go do English, Maths or Science, something like that cos that's what had been drummed into me, y'know the proper old fashioned subjects were the best ones to do
(Lisa, 23)

If you're young and you commit to a vocation, you have to do a lot of retraining if you have to get out of that pigeon hole…its six of one and half a dozen of the other, you either train into something and have to really know that you want to do this, or you do something and you hedge your bets but then you've really got no skills…
(Jess, 25)

It is clear from the statements above that the participants who had attended university had made the decision to do so largely on the basis of a perceived increase in employment prospects. Throughout the interviews frequent references were made to practical and 'transferable' skills, employability, work placements and experience, strongly suggesting that they saw higher education as a process that should have equipped them with the necessary skills and knowledge to present to a future employer (and was largely found to have failed). This demonstrated a typically neoliberal and utilitarian approach to learning in which the primary objective was to maximise one's potential in the labour market. Only two of the participants questioned the changing nature of higher education under market-led expansion and articulated a more traditional attitude to learning:

I think people should just wanna go to university to…just cos they enjoy the academic side and just to study. Depends what you go to university for cos like, some people go cos they want such and such a career, especially like Doctors and that they have to go study Medicine and that…if its what you want to do then be young and enjoy studying yeah…I think people should just study for studyings' sake to be honest.
(Ben, 27)

Higher education, I think, to me always has been about understanding the world around you…the bigger picture...an awareness that you gain about things that you wouldn't necessarily come into contact with…Any subject that you do at a higher level will always involve those aspects of a more holistic attitude towards how you can change things and how you can change your own life. I think if you don't get anything like that from university then there's no point in going. You shouldn't have gone.
(Steve, 29)

The notion that the purpose of a university education is to produce critical, well-rounded and inquisitive individuals that will serve the benefit of wider society was seldom recognised or discussed by the overwhelming majority of the graduates that were interviewed. The process of learning at a higher level and its transformative potential was largely ignored in favour of looking towards a tangible, quantifiable endpoint that had intrinsic market value.

Although a significant number of the graduates felt that it was the role of the university to furnish them with the skills and experience needed for the labour market (and in

addition, enable them to articulate and 'sell' those skills to a future employer) it was also felt that businesses could do more to help graduates 'hit the ground running' in the workplace by investing more time and resources in training them to the needs of the company. Many of the graduates felt that businesses needed to lower their immediate expectations and that after three years immersed in academic study, allow some time for those newly recruited into the company to fully demonstrate their capabilities and harness their full potential:

> I think that businesses are very unwilling at the moment...there's no room for training in anything really, but if they did invest, that little bit of time, it would benefit them in the future, but because we're not being trained, in years we're just gonna have not fully trained people, it'll just carry on so I think businesses should try a bit more.
> **(Katie, 23)**

> I don't see how you can be ready to hit the ground running. I think you can come in and be gregarious and have a bit of common sense and willing to work but I don't see how you can do much more than that really I mean like, how can you?... Yeah y'know, if you want an employee to be good at their job and you want to hire somebody that's new then it seems to me that you're gonna have to invest to a certain extent in training someone up
> **(Beth, 23)**

> Business shouldn't expect that they (graduates) can just walk in and do the job perfectly straight away they should expect that it'll take six months for them to get good at their job and be able to have a return, cos otherwise they should be paying graduates a lot more cos if they're really good at their job straight away then they're getting a lot more for their money in a sense...
> **(Ross, 25)**

It was questioned why so many companies sought to recruit graduates over non-graduates, if they were so frequently found to be lacking in the competencies required:

> Well, why do they want a graduate? What is a graduate to a company? That's what needs to be addressed I think. If a company wants graduates then they want graduates for a reason, what is that reason? I don't think large corporations have the vaguest idea why they want graduates, I really don't. I think they say graduates cos they have to somehow politically justify the reason for fees, and the existence of universities at all, perhaps....So when a company has a graduate scheme, I don't personally understand why they have to be graduates, because it's not obvious to me.
> **(Steve, 29)**

Whilst the annual supply of graduates has risen steadily over the past decade, climbing from 25% in 2000 to 38% in 2012 (ONS, 2013:4) debates continue as to whether market-led expansion has contributed to a fall in standards with employers

frequently criticising graduates for a lack of basic skills. A study in 2012 by the Confederation of British Industry (CBI) found that there were 'worrying weaknesses' in graduates' IT, numeracy and literacy skills and graduates themselves now argue that university has left them ill-equipped for the world of work (Snowdon, 2011). Giroux (2011) argues that the infiltration of market-values into the classroom, with academics under increasing pressure to manipulate pass-rates in order to retain favourable statistics and high student satisfaction scores, will only increase with recent changes to funding and the rise in tuition fees. Whether there has been a real decline in standards relative to increased participation in higher education is debatable, yet one of the interviewees suggested that the problem stems from the fact that as a response to increased participation, graduate employers are now requiring additional criteria and demanding evidence of additional skills and experience as a means of differentiating between the mass of competing applicants:

> I don't think there's been a difference in graduates from say ten years ago, I think the courses are pretty much the same, but I think it's what they're expecting from people, they're expecting from people who have work experience already… maybe changing the structure of university so it's more like a job…I think just generally, if they've been to university they'd be…in time they'll pick up everything but there's just so much competition.
> **(Jess, 25)**

As the number of graduates competing for 'entry level' jobs has increased, it appears that employers are looking beyond the obtainment of an undergraduate degree as evidence of a candidate's ability and indication of future potential. According to the CBI study, 37% of graduate recruiters' cite 'inadequate work experience' as having a negative effect on their levels of satisfaction with employing graduates (CBI, 2012:34) and this sentiment is shared by graduates themselves who cite a perceived lack of practical skills and experience as a significant barrier to employment.

> I think it's really easy to come out of university with your head full of stuff but very little practical experience unless you're really careful and get it. I think that university's should help you get work experience during your degree if you want it, and have a really good careers officer who can help you…I don't know….it's your responsibility to get experience but it's the employer's responsibility to take the risk in training you in the first place. Everyone needs a first job.
> **(Eleanor, 25)**

> I think every degree should involve some sort of work placement, I think the academic side of it where you attend lectures and stuff is very important and I don't think there should be any less of that, if anything it should be better but I do think there should be some practical side to it as well…maybe degrees should be still three years, two and a half academic and six months on a placement or something like that or you should have to do a placement over the summer or something.

(Ross, 25)

I think there is so much emphasis on experience that graduates are never gonna get the chance to perform, or other young people for that matter.
(Stuart, 23)

In a saturated labour market graduates are becoming increasingly aware of the need to distinguish themselves from their competitors and 'add value' to their academic credentials by gaining work experience. As a result, many of the participants spoke of the need for universities and businesses to work in partnership for mutual benefit, expanding work placement schemes and collaboratively devising courses that met a specific business need, thus providing students with applicable skills and relevant experience, and enabling them to be immediately employable:

I do think that businesses could help universities get students or graduates ready by providing placement schemes more and maybe universities could link in with employers who have real tasks that need doing and give them to students to do …I think employers can do stuff like that and maybe headhunt graduates that they want from developing that relationship. I think that's something that employers can do better but universities should be responsible for generating those contacts.
(Ross, 25)

If you're gonna recruit someone, you need to make sure that they're trained up to do the job but whether that should necessarily happen post-employment or whether it should be…whether they'd be a way of doing it more in partnership with universities so people receive those skills prior to becoming a graduate employee of that firm, I don't know.
(Natalie, 30)

The mismatch between employers demand for skills that are grounded in practical work experience and the inability of a standard three-year degree programme to provide students with such 'hands-on' experience in a classroom setting, was reiterated amongst almost all of the graduates that were interviewed and continues to inform policy debates about the purposes of an undergraduate degree. Former Education Minister David Willets criticises the theoretical nature of many degrees stating 'some of our courses have been delivered too much on paper with insufficient real life experience' (cited in Paton, 2013:unpaginated) and yet discussion on the viability of university institutions' to provide such 'life experience' are largely absent from policy discourse.

The expansion of the higher education system and systematic implementation of market practices has been justified by successive governments under an alleged need to 'up-skill' the British workforce and meet the increasing demands of the global

knowledge economy. A narrow focus on labour supply issues and a perceived scarcity of competent and qualified workers has informed much education and employment policy whilst sidelining demand-side problems such as the quality and availability of 'good' work for young people to transition into (Furlong et al, 2012). The introduction (and subsequent raising) of university tuition fees continues to be defended on the basis of a university degree providing increased personal and financial returns in the form of higher salaries and increased promotion prospects; the so called 'graduate premium' (Walker and Zhu, 2013). Faced with an expanded and seemingly more accessible higher education system, the graduates that were interviewed had made an ostensibly rational decision to attend university, located within the context of a peer group that helped them make judgements about the options and pathways that were available to them (Brooks, 2005). As well as looking to friends, parents and teachers to ascertain their own position and 'make sense' of the range of choices that were presented after compulsory education, the decision to go to university was largely informed and reinforced by individualised discourses on self-optimisation and maximising ones potential. With routes into academe often appearing more comprehensible than navigating straight into the volatile youth labour market, attending university simply became 'common sense', illustrated by statements such as 'it wasn't "are you going to uni?" it was "which uni are you applying to?"'. Such sentiments were shared amongst friendship and peer groups, parents and teachers, thereby reaffirming their decision.

Throughout popular culture, and indeed within the glossy pages of university marketing material, higher education is often presented as a transformative experience of self- discovery, parties and making friends. Course descriptions depict stimulating and innovative modules, challenging assessments, and the cultivation of marketable skills, evidenced by carefully selected graduate employment statistics. Students anticipate that their time will be filled with 'interesting and novel activities' alongside 'opportunities for personal, social and intellectual growth' (Pancer et al, 2000:2). As a result, students begin university hoping that they will have 'the time of their life' and with extremely high expectations of not only the experience itself but also where it will lead. Whilst it is by no means fair to suggest that these expectations are seldom fulfilled amongst UK university students, the majority of participants in this particular study who had attended university expressed high levels of dissatisfaction and disappointment with some aspect of their undergraduate experience, mainly as a result of unhappiness with the degree itself. This is clearly demonstrated by the fact that seven of the participants who began an undergraduate degree either dropped out, changed course or took a sabbatical because the course had not matched their

expectations. This mismatch between expectations and experience is echoed in recent studies on student satisfaction (Kandiko and Mawer, 2013; HEA/HEPI, 2004) and demonstrated in the rising number of student complaints (Abrams, 2014).

It was evident from the interview discussions that those who attended university had expected that it would prepare them for the labour market and offer a form of 'training' for future employment. As a result, they were unprepared for the format of degree level study; low contact hours, large class sizes and lots of time preparing notes and studying independently were felt overall to be symptomatic of a lack of 'structure' to the course and incompatible with preparation for the world of work, with one participant suggesting; 'maybe changing the structure of university so it's more like a job?'. There was a demand for increased contact hours, detailed feedback, more rigorous and continuous assessment, work experience and additional emphasis on the cultivation and verification of practical skills that could be presented to a future employer. Reflecting on the perceived 'value' of their degree after having had some initial forays into the graduate labour market, it was clear that the participants felt it had failed to equip them with the practical skills, knowledge and work experience employers required. After three years of studying and accruing a sizeable debt as a result, they wanted (and expected) to be *immediately* employable and were dismayed to find that the degree in itself carried only limited currency with prospective employers.

It was apparent that the participants viewed higher education and its intrinsic value, from a largely market-driven and utilitarian perspective. Even before the lifting of the tuition fees cap in 2010, these students (who paid fees of between £1000-£3000 per academic year) articulated strong consumerist attitudes towards their education based around their evaluation of the experience (service) and degree (product) itself. In their assessment of the relative 'worth' of going to university and obtaining a degree, it was generally felt that it did not represent 'value for money', especially given the limited teaching hours and time spent studying independently, and was evident in statements such as 'I feel like I've wasted my money' and 'I'll never use my degree'. Such sentiments were echoed in a 2014 HEPI-HEA Student Academic Experience Survey, which also showed a marked increase in students who felt that their course provided 'poor value for money' up from 18% in 2011 to 33% in 2012, the academic year in which the increased tuition fee rate of £9000 per year came into affect (2014:3). The oft-used argument that university should be viewed as a 'long-term investment', usually cited by policy makers as a justification for increasing fees, is somewhat problematic given that there is no guarantee of future employment as a result of

having a degree, nor any way of estimating future earnings in order to calculate any likely financial 'return'. It is more worrying, that despite obtaining undergraduate and in some cases postgraduate level qualifications, the participants in this study were still relying on temporary employment and servicing large debts for degrees that had yet to pay any real return (see page 161 for full discussion on debt) with more recent data revealing a steady decline in the graduate earnings advantage over the last decade by as much as 2% per annum relative to average wages (Purcell et al, 2012:60).

With increasing tuition fees and diminishing returns, the graduates expressed frustration and anger that they had paid for an education that they felt had failed them. There was a general feeling that the university experience should have provided them with more and disappointment that the degree they had studied for three years was no longer considered 'enough' to secure them even a basic trainee role. Critics argue that market-led expansion and the concomitant growth in credentialism, has generated more pressure on young people to gain a university degree and associated qualifications, which has simply 'raised the stakes'. A university degree is now required as a means to *access* particular jobs, rather than reflecting a tangible need for the skills and knowledge to *do* jobs (Tomlinson, 2008:50). For employers too, academic credentials and the possession of a degree merely provides a 'tick in the box' for the purposes of recruitment, and instead they seek the demonstration of a range of vague personal competencies and practical skills (Brown and Hesketh, 2004). With significant numbers of graduates flooding into a labour market where the number of vacancies is declining and as many as 85 candidates are chasing each job (AGR Recruitment Survey, 2013) it is no surprise to find a rise in 'high-skilled immiseration' (Prideaux, 2004) with many graduates encroaching on the lower paid, low skill areas of the labour market that were once occupied by those without degree level qualifications. This was certainly true of a number of the participants who were undertaking temporary work as a 'stop-gap' whilst they continued to search for relevant graduate level employment, but were finding it an immense struggle given the fierce competition and suppressed recruitment post-recession.

For the majority of the graduates, the promised high returns, increased prospects, lucrative salaries and better career progression so often cited by policymakers, had yet to materialise and instead they were compelled to undertake temporary and unpredictable forms of work, servicing large debts, whilst spending additional time studying for further qualifications or continuing to search and apply for jobs that were relevant to their chosen career. They vociferously expressed their dissatisfaction with the relevance of what they had learned during their degree and as a consequence it's

utility in the labour market, thus demonstrating a typically neoliberal and individualised approach to learning. The value of an undergraduate degree was surmised in its perceived 'exchange-value' and its function as a bargaining tool with future employers and it was felt that the acquisition of a degree has been markedly de-valued as a result of mass participation.

The interview data raised a number of important questions about the role and function of universities in contemporary society as a result of their assimilation into the neoliberal market and the feasibility of such institutions to furnish young people with 'work-based' and 'employability' skills. Arguably, higher education is fundamentally unsuited to teaching practical skills and unable to provide students with the work experience demanded by employers. However, with market-led policy driving universities away from more traditional forms of learning they are currently caught in a form of existential crisis, trapped between competing ideals about the fundamental purpose of a university education (Readings, 1996).

> I think the main problem with university education in the UK is that it doesn't match well to people's expectations cos I think a lot of people probably do go to university thinking, this will set me up better for a job, but then either the course they do doesn't do that or they don't get enough careers guidance… I think piling everybody through and telling them that it's gonna improve their career prospects is a mistake. So if we are gonna tell people that, then we do need to make it more career focused to meet that need if that's why people have gone.
> **(Natalie, 30)**

With the intended benefits of marketisation failing to materialise for either graduate or employer, the process of university expansion in the UK appears to be driven by a deep ideological commitment to neoliberal market practices, its predictable failure to provide the gains promised are consequently attributed to the personal faults, weaknesses and incapability of individual students. Echoing the sentiments of 'underclass' theorist Charles Murray, the failure of graduates to succeed is always a result of individual action, and as large numbers of young people are continually funnelled into the university system under an ideological chimera, the true costs are ultimately borne by the graduates themselves. The following chapter will examine how the participants began to navigate their way into the labour market upon completing their education and how the challenges and problems they faced were negotiated and understood within this highly individualised context and the affect this has had on their own personal biographies.

Youth Labour Markets

The previous chapter examined how the gradual marketisation and expansion of higher education in the UK has had a significant effect on the environment in which young people make their post-school transitions, and their initial steps into the decision-making and autonomy that typically characterises 'adulthood'. Here, attention is turned to their experiences of the labour market. The overall aim of this chapter is to examine in detail, the participants experiences of, and their views on, the initial transition they have made into employment. The complex and impeding nature of contemporary recruitment practices, reasons for engagement with and experiences of temporary work, and the overall importance of work within their lives and broader sense of self, are all addressed in order to build up a picture of what it has been like for this particular group of young people, to make that important integration into the labour market.

'Selling Yourself' – The Application Process

As already discussed in chapter three, the routes and pathways into the labour market for young people, and their initial experiences of the so-called 'world of work' have become replete with a number of decisions and difficulties due to economic change; the shift to global, flexible labour markets and a supply-side 'up-skilling' of workers to meet the demands of the alleged 'knowledge economy'. Barriers and obstacles to gaining (and indeed maintaining) stable employment are numerous, not least the constant supply of ready, (and often highly qualified) labour in the UK, alongside competition from cheaper overseas labour. This is exacerbated by a cautious, post-recession economy that is operating with sluggish levels of recruitment, with concerns of a 'jobless recovery' continuing to be raised as employment rates struggle to expand rapidly enough to cope with demand (ILO, 2014). In addition, much job creation has centred on insecure and short term contracts (Brinkley, 2012; TUC, 2013; TUC 2014) and labour management policies that emphasise even greater flexibility for employers (demonstrated in the rise of the 'zero-hours' contract). Control over the labour process is, (and indeed has been for some time) in the hands of employers who are now able to 'take their pick' of the workforce and implement an increasingly rigorous recruitment process in order to carefully select from the abundance of enthusiastic applicants available.

The participants in this study had all began their engagement with the labour market at different stages in their lives. Some had sought full-time, permanent employment at age 16 upon finishing school, others had undertaken part-time/casual work whilst

continuing their studies to degree level and beyond. Despite their different work trajectories, their educational background, the level of qualifications they possessed and their previous work experience, it was striking that initial attempts at job-seeking were negative for all of the participants, with many receiving a series of rejections which eventually forced them to reconsider the level of positions they were applying for and to 'aim lower' in order to even be shortlisted or considered for interview. This was particularly disappointing for those who had been to university, as the graduates felt they had worked hard to gain a qualification that would help them avoid the basic, entry-level positions that economic necessity now demanded they applied for, but which subsequently seemed to have little value in the labour market;

> I applied to publishers initially…I applied to banks and very financial sector type things…then I kind of got way laid and applied to anything that said 'graduate' on it really and it sort of got a bit more panicky and to be honest I wouldn't have minded whatever I got cos I just wanted to get in somewhere and learn… (It's) probably partly my own fault because I've been aiming too high I think, I need to start applying for more realistic jobs.
> **(Stuart, 23)**

> I, pretty much got straight into looking for jobs and setting up links to websites to vacancies in the civil service, councils, and applied for a fair few....I didn't get any interviews! Maybe having a masters degree…y'know, these jobs aren't…there's not brilliant remuneration, they're only sort of…well they were quite good they were about the 22-23 mark (£22-23,000) and that's a lot of money… Because there's so many people at university nowadays that have degrees y'know, you've got to differentiate yourself from somebody else and I thought…not just having the degree but also with the grades I was able to attain, might just put me a little bit above somebody else, but I was wrong!
> **(Jeremy, 25)**

> I just looked for jobs. I applied for like, I dunno, probably around 100 jobs in the time that I was unemployed which was from September until fairly recently…until maybe February… Just like anything…so I applied for stuff I was massively overqualified for, like basic admin stuff and reception work and stuff and I applied for IT support stuff, just anything I thought I could do, without having to be trained from scratch if that makes sense… I applied for sales and front of house…all sorts of stuff but most of the places didn't even respond which is crap…I didn't even get a chance to sell myself.
> **(Ross, 25)**

Despite repositioning themselves, lowering their expectations and applying for jobs they were often extremely overqualified for, there was still no guarantee of securing employment. The sheer volume of applicants for many positions and fierce competition meant that even when furnished with the desired skills and attributes, they were rejected in favour of other candidates who may have possessed marginally more experience and knowledge or who were simply more effective at being able to 'sell themselves';

> One person said I didn't get the job because in their opinion someone else gave a better example of why they gave good customer service, in an example say….my example was good, and the relevance of my experience to the job I was applying for was good and…I just think that y'know, if it comes down to something as possibly arbitrary as that it shows there's so many people… ultimately that's down to me being able to communicate effectively why I was good for that role. Just because you can do that (sell yourself) doesn't mean that you're the best person for the job.
> **(Steve, 29)**

Brown and Hesketh (2004) argue that understanding the notion of 'employability' is a duality that focuses on both the *absolute* and *relative.* Labour market policy overwhelmingly emphasises the *absolute* dimension of employability, that individual workers possess the relevant skills, knowledge and commitment to be employable, thus individualising any failure to secure employment as a personal deficit with those who are not made job offers simply 'not up to the grade' (2004:24). This ignores the *relative* aspect of employability, that the laws of supply and demand shape the market for jobs, and that even in times of economic growth, there are more qualified and skilled applicants than there are vacancies. As a consequence, employability 'not only depends on whether one is able to fulfil the requirements of specific jobs, but also on how one stands relative to others within the hierarchy of jobseekers' (Brown and Hesketh, 2004:35). The ability to 'sell yourself', to package your skills, experience and personality into a marketable economic resource, therefore becomes vital in distinguishing oneself from the competition.

After a number of rejections, some of the participants sought alternative ways to make themselves more employable. Without a clear route into stable, paid employment some of the participants had looked into volunteering/internships as a way to gain experience but similarly found that intense competition made securing such a role impossible;

> I was looking for, even if it was volunteering I applied for like the BBC, they do like work experience even if its just for three days, like I'd love to start out as a runner, I'd like to get into being a researcher I think that would be amazing…but when you apply for these things all you get is alerts to a website that is mainly about volunteering and the positions have usually gone, cos in the way of journalism and media, I think I've learned that unless you make your own and prove that you've done it already, there's very little…you're probably not gonna get a chance.
> **(Katie, 23)**

Rose, the youngest in the sample at 18, had finished college and managed to secure a full-time job with a well-known high street retailer. The location of this job meant she

had to take two buses to and from work everyday (taking a fair amount of her £5 per hour wage) and after being verbally abused by her manager on a daily basis for three months decided to resign ('she shouted at me a lot… but she didn't seem to shout at anyone else, just me!'). With a resignation now in her work history, marking her as a potential risk to a future employer, Rose describes the difficulties she faced in trying to find another job;

> Well, I thought, it can't be too hard now that I've got a bit of experience in something, I thought it'd be easier to get a job…it was three months before I got the temping job… I did nothing I just looked for work, I was at the job centre every week. (I applied for) office, admin, trainee, accounts assistants, them kind of things cos I wanted to get away from retail but…anything like that, receptionists, quite a lot of that but, they kept saying you haven't got any experience in it so I didn't have any luck with them.
> **(Rose, 18)**

Rose's case demonstrates that for those leaving school with few or no qualifications, (Rose did attain a Diploma in Business at her local college) the available options are extremely limited. With the fierce competition for jobs leading to a growth of 'high-skilled immiseration'; professionals, graduates and those with higher skills and qualifications frustrated in their attempts to gain suitable employment gradually begin to 'bump down' the labour market into lower-quality, low paid jobs (Prideaux, 2004). As a result, the opportunities for those without any work experience or who do not possess any professional or academic credentials continues to diminish (Shildrick et al, 2012). In addition, the low skill/low-pay jobs that were advertised were often part-time or temporary, representative of the precarious forms of employment that have expanded as a result of neoliberal flexibilisation and labour market deregulation;

> If you do get, like, alerts and stuff it will nearly always be in London, and its only for about two days and no-one wants anyone with less than a year and a half's experience which is just…a little bit ridiculous, because we're all paying these amounts for our degrees…(everyone says) 'you need a degree, you need a degree' and its not, you just need to know someone and have the right phone number. At the moment when you look, it's pretty much always a dead end.
> **(Katie, 23)**

> Permanent jobs would be great but there just wasn't any…or there would be adverts for it saying temporary, possibly ongoing to permanent but that never goes through, but that's me being cynical, I'm sure some of them go through eventually but I think they put that on all the adverts just to get you to apply. I think there is a lot of that cos sometimes you see the same advert with a different company and you think, does that job actually exist?
> **(Gavin, 24)**

The practical process of searching and applying for jobs was described as being exceptionally arduous. The necessity for prospective candidates to market themselves, identifying how they meet the essential and desired competencies outlined in the person specification, explaining any identifiable gaps in work history and augmenting the most trivial and mundane of work experiences into 'a moment of personal epiphany' (Southwood, 2011:60) was described as being 'a job in itself'. Having to continuously search through a variety of websites, re-tailoring CVs, drafting covering letters and completing extensive application forms, simply added more tasks onto the end of their working day. Critics such as Standing (2014) and Streeck (2014) argue that prospective employees are currently saddled with an unfair share of the recruitment burden, the time and costs associated with the process are currently met by the candidates themselves. In order to 'equalize the costs to both sides' (Standing, 2014:158) Standing argues that applicants should be offered some form of financial recompense for the significant amount of time spent completing forms and attending job interviews under a recognition that such tasks constitute a form of 'work'.

> When I first started I was really looking and was in this recruitment and e-mails and everything but then it got hard to look for another job cos I was so tired. I'd get in from work at 3am and sleep till about 11am and if my shift started at 3pm again, you didn't have the energy or really the drive to look for another job and that is how I think people stay there for so long.They say 'I'm gonna do this and this' but they go home and sleep cos they're so tired!
> **(Katie, 23)**

> I've done about 150 applications in the last year and a half….approximately. I haven't kept track. Just since October, I've done 50. I decided I wanted to track how many applications I do and I started a spreadsheet and yeah…since I started tracking it in October I've done 50. I tend to do 2-3 a week.
> **(Phoebe, 28)**

> It's hard when you get home and you're knackered and you just wanna go home to bed…I know I should be doing it, I've been given an opportunity, I'm back in work so I should use that opportunity to springboard me back into a career.
> **(Phil, 30)**

Formal educational credentials, (alongside a standard 'face-to-face' interview) are no longer deemed sufficient to gauge and assess a candidate's potential performance. With so many young job-seekers now possessing certification to undergraduate degree level and in some cases beyond, employers are supplementing the standard application form/interview process with a variety of tests and assessments in order to better determine the suitability of candidates for a particular role. In addition to lengthy application forms, techniques such as time-constrained numeracy and problem-

solving tests, and general aptitude and reasoning exercises are used to mine a job-seekers ability to work quickly and under pressure. The participants' felt that as well as being excessively difficult, such exercises were deliberately complicated and did not enable them to fully demonstrate their capabilities;

> I applied for the civil service grad scheme but I didn't get through the first round. They make you do psychometric testing and verbal and non-verbal reasoning and I didn't pass that and I also didn't pass it when I took it last week. I think if I had the job I'd probably do it well but I just can't do that twenty minutes to answer seventeen questions on word play or maths problem solving I just can't…like if you gave me half an hour to do it I'd probably be able to do it but it's the speed.
> (**Jess, 25)**

> The application forms were long, really crap questions that didn't make any sense and just, y'know, just….corporate spiel and…one of the questions was, 'what does breakthrough client service mean to you' or something like that and its just like, it didn't make any sense to me at all and I just thought it was a load of rubbish… I think the online tests are probably one of the worst things…the maths ones for instance, they don't really demonstrate your ability to do maths, in my mind they demonstrate your ability to dissect what the question is after. They ask you a question in the most roundabout way and they have some small print to catch you out and it just seems ridiculous why they make it so complicated.
> **(Jennifer, 25)**

The increasing use of assessment centres, used to observe the behaviour and response of candidates within an artificial 'work' setting, is often celebrated as providing the best indicator of an applicants potential performance and how they will 'fit' within the organisation and their ability to adhere to its values and agenda. Role play and team-working exercises can demonstrate a candidate's leadership skills, their ability to interact and cooperate with others, but more importantly, their *soft* currencies; personal attributes such as charisma, deportment, accent and appearance (Brown and Hesketh, 2004), traits of particular importance in a largely service-centred economy. This focus on the presentation of self as an embodiment of corporate value can lead to unconscious bias in the recruitment process as employers discriminate along traditional class lines. In 2012 a survey by Law firm Pannone found that 79% of HR Managers and Directors felt that unconscious bias in recruitment was widespread (Woods, 2012). In addition, a study by the University of Manchester found that 'accentism' was rife with 40% of participants admitting to modifying their regional accent to sound more 'professional' or 'posh' (Baratta, 2014:22).

Displaying the requisite 'personal capital' is crucial to assessment centre success and as a result, potential recruits are under pressure to 'perform' and act out what they believe is expected of them. The experience of assessment centres therefore

becomes something of a grandiose self-marketing exercise. Many of the participants acknowledged their performance at them as 'unnatural' and 'fake' with the content of the exercises they had to undertake often deemed irrelevant to or excessive for the role they were applying for:

> The ones I found the hardest were group exercises because they always tell you to be yourself, but no-one's being themselves so its hard to be yourself around people who aren't being themselves either! It's a really unnatural experience when you're thrown into doing something when you have no experience of it and no real knowledge of it…its very hard for you to perform, in my mind, to your best level cos you're answering questions where you don't actually know the information, you don't have the experience so how could you show, what you could do? If that makes sense…It all seems very pointless to me…they've just made this process horrendously long and complicated.
> **(Jennifer, 25)**

> I've had a three hour assessment with British Gas *after* a telephone interview, assessment interview and an online assessment… It was for a Customer Service Assistant believe it or not! All that rigmarole for a customer service job! …I applied online, I was successful online so I had to do an online assessment, I was successful with that so I had to do a telephone interview which was the next stage so I was successful with that and then they invited me for a three hour assessment…
> **(Phil, 30)**

> I understand like an assessment centre if it's a technical job but for jobs that are basically just glorified admin jobs were you'll be working in an office with people on the phone, doing an assessment centre seems a bit overkill!
> **(Jess, 25)**

Having to perform for a panel of 'judges' likens the experience of an assessment centre to a talent show competition, candidates must inject their performance with their 'heart and soul' creating a veneer of authenticity and positivity whilst being careful to ensure they are not revealed as a 'fake' (Southwood, 2011). Jess describes a recent experience of an assessment centre where she feels her openness and honesty, cost her the role;

> I had a phone interview after my application form which I got through, and then I went down and it was basically a big group interview and you had to do a five minute presentation and then you had lunch where you were basically supervised, well, watched by everyone as they talk to you informally to get your…and I know that's where I made the mistake and why I didn't get the job because I was like, 'oh I wasn't 100% sure about this but now I'm here this is a really good job and I'd really like to work here' to someone and I know that like, not being 100% enthusiastic from the very first second was my mistake…
> **(Jess, 25)**

The necessity to maintain the performance, even during the lunch break when candidates were not being formally assessed, is illustrative of the 'emotional labour' that has risen with the shift to a service-based economy. Hochschild (1983) describes how service workers are required to display a specific set of emotions, presenting them as though they were authentic, when in fact they are likely to be fake. A candidate that displays *genuine* honesty and sincerity is deemed a potential risk to the organisation and is therefore unlikely to be appointed. Similarly, Beradi (2009:192) argues that contemporary capitalism operates specifically by overcoming the distinction between body and soul, mobilising emotion and sensitivity in order to generate capital. Previously, the labour of industrial production used the 'soulless body' requiring an unthinking physical toughness and typically masculine traits: strength, endurance and dexterity. In contrast, the contemporary economy requires us to disengage from the body and place the soul and all it encompasses, 'intelligence, sensibility, creativity and language' at its disposal.

Marketing oneself by creating and preserving an impression of confidence, enthusiasm and total dedication was necessary at all times in the recruitment process from the initial application form right through to interview/assessment. The length and complexity of the entire process, coupled with the need to give a polished but seemingly effortless performance throughout, was felt to be hugely emotionally and physically exhausting. This was exacerbated by the fact that such efforts were seldom rewarded or acknowledged. For many of the participants who had been stuck in a repeated cycle of job-hunting for months, such assiduity was often followed by rejection, occasionally (but rarely) accompanied with minimal feedback;

> I just got a phone call saying thank you for my application but I'd been unsuccessful and they'd keep me on file for six months but there was no, (reason) as to why.
> **(Nick, 28)**

> Well you probably get, you probably hear back from maybe 30% of people you apply to, maybe a bit higher sometimes but its certainly not more than half and some are quite regimented and are very good at letting you know what's happening and…some others just don't end up getting back to you
> **(Steve, 29)**

> I maybe got…ten, fifteen rejections out of at least 100 applications…a couple of times I asked for feedback but I gave up…
> **(Ross, 25)**

On occasions where feedback was obtained, the primary reason for rejection was largely cited as 'lack of experience'. It is interesting that despite often applying for roles that they were overqualified for, this was rarely cited as a reason for being

unsuccessful. The frequent use of 'lack of experience' for rejected applicants may suggest it is used as a seemingly adequate, standardised response by employers. Such a response individualises failure, it prevents recruiters from having to provide a more detailed and evidenced reason for their decision and implies that the candidate is in fact lacking in some way and needs to 'do more' in order to be employable. For young workers who were starting out in the labour market, and particularly for those who had just finished three or four years at university, the frustration at being unable to get a job in order to gain the requisite experience was strongly felt;

> The majority of the ones (jobs) I haven't gotten anything back. The ones I have got back, I got…have all been very positive going, 'we really liked your application, we really like your enthusiasm, we hope we're not discouraging you from a career in this field, however, there were people with more experience than you that we've shortlisted'. One of the most recent letters was, 'thank you for applying, we took on someone with three years experience, you only had one'.
> **(Phoebe, 28)**

> I thought… so naively thought I was gonna get some kind of job straight away, I applied for lots of graduate schemes and things and then more trainee sort of positions but the feedback that I got from almost all of them was that I didn't have any experience so…that was when I did get feedback! That's when I decided I should go to recruitment agencies and try and get some experience. I just think nowhere will give you a chance, they all want experience…
> **(Stuart, 23)**

> The massively frustrating thing is, everywhere says its wants experience…it's just a vicious circle whereas…they'll get my CV and go 'oh well this person doesn't have any experience whatsoever' and instantly put it to the side… but without taking a note of what that person could actually do if you trained them and y'know, I might be better at it…I might not be, but I might be better at it than the person that has got experience but you're not even given the chance
> **(Lisa, 23)**

The requirement to gain 'experience' in order to assist with the application for permanent/career-related roles was the main reason over half of the participants had made the decision to seek temporary work through a recruitment agency (and also reinforced negative feelings about the value/worth of higher education). However, some of those who had been temping for some time worried that they were becoming trapped in roles that made little use of their skills and experience and were largely irrelevant to their long-term career goals. The 2008 recession and subsequent economic slump have seen a reduction in the availability of permanent roles, with young people far more likely to be 'underemployed' in low-paid roles which offer few opportunities for progression and development (Ernst, 2012; Daly, 2014).

For those stuck on the merry-go-round of repeated job hunting, the frustration at putting so much time, effort and energy into applications that continually ended in rejection, was increasingly leading to pessimism and despondency. This was certainly the case for some of the older temps in the sample who had begun to abandon their long-term ambitions and aspirations for a particular career, and reluctantly reframed the function of work in purely instrumental terms with an attitude of 'take what you can get';

> I'd love to say I know but, basically anything that's going at the moment, anything that can get me a bit of money and to be honest, I've stopped caring, as long as its closer to home and it pays, I don't care what I do anymore…It's pretty much a means to an end.
> **(Phil, 30)**

> I decided that I want to move back to Manchester so I've started to look for admin roles, permanent admin roles in Manchester…as well as still doing the applications for career-based positions… if it (work) was a career-based job it would be important because that's something I am passionate about. Now, it's just something that pays the bill.
> **(Phoebe, 28)**

For this particular group of twenty young people, routes into paid employment were far from straight-forward. Applicants face an exhausting multitude of tasks; application forms, tests, interviews, presentations, group exercises and assessments, even for the most basic and low paid roles, each one presenting a separate challenge and barrier to successfully obtaining employment. With flexibility now deployed throughout the labour market via policy and management, down to the expectations and performance of the individual worker, the cultivation of traditional skills and presentation of qualifications appear to carry only limited currency in the global marketplace. Instead, employers want to see evidence of:

> The new skill of linguistic and semiotic virtuosity, a kind of *stagecraft*, being able to adapt to whatever environment and identity one is thrown into and improvise a role around its unwritten rules of costume, gesture and language (Southwood, 2011:60).

To obtain employment, the self must be elegantly and carefully packaged and sold as a commodity to meet the demands of employers and recruiters who have the legitimacy of neoliberal employment policy, and the power of the market to strengthen their position of dominance over labour. Confronted with such a complicated and laborious process, it is not surprising to see that many of the participants immediately turned to temporary employment agencies as a way to bypass some of the barriers they faced. Whilst some of the participants in the sample had chosen to 'temp' and

were relatively happy to do so 'for the time being', the vast majority had felt compelled to undertake temporary agency work as a result of being involuntarily expunged from and/or unable to successfully obtain permanent employment. In the following section, participants elucidate their reasons for becoming a 'temp', recounting their experiences of and their feelings about this kind of work.

Temping

The trend towards creating and sustaining a market-led labour force which responds quickly and effectively to peaks and troughs in demand has been entrenched in policy since the 1980s via deregulation and increased employment flexibility. The subsequent growth of 'non-standard' forms of work such as temporary, casual and more recently 'zero-hours' contracts, and the political and economic significance of such labour as providing evidence of a marked increase in job insecurity and 'precarity', has, and continues to be fiercely debated (see Fevre, 2007; Doogan, 2011, Standing 2011). Although data demonstrates that overall rates of temporary employment decreased between 1997 and 2008 (IPPR, 2010) the number of people undertaking temporary work specifically because they could not gain a permanent role had begun to increase before the recession even began, growing 149% from 263,289 in 2005 to 654, 820 in 2012 (TUC, 2013:unpaginated). As already discussed in chapter three, young people make up a significant proportion of temporary workers, are more likely to be in such work involuntarily and are more likely to become trapped in such roles over the long-term, which often has a detrimental impact on future employment prospects (MacDonald, 2009; IPPR 2010).

The participants interviewed for this study all expressed many different reasons for temping. As previously discussed, completion of full-time education and formal entry into the labour market occurred at different times for each of the participants, and so their work biographies were diverse, shaped by their long-term career objectives but also, dictated by the ebbs and flows of the global and local economies in which they worked. With most traversing the complexities of the labour market at a time of global economic uncertainty, what united all of the participants was their severely fragmented and disjointed employment history, with frequent movement in and out of jobs. Most had spent their working life thus far in and out of paid employment, frequently changing employer and/or recruitment agencies, alternating between temporary and permanent, part-time and full-time work, with some encountering redundancy and many experiencing spells of unemployment that led to them accepting handouts from generous parents or being 'on benefits' and in receipt of welfare. Whilst existing research demonstrates that young people 'churning' in and out

of employment can damage long-term work trajectories (Shildrick et al, 2012), there appears to be less research on the potential impact of persistent job changing. However, a survey conducted in conjunction with Robert Half Recruitment found that such frequent 'job-hopping' is likely to be perceived negatively by recruiters with some 88% of those managers questioned stating they would remove an applicant who appeared to be a 'job hopper' from consideration (Robert Half Recruitment, 2014).

Those participants who had been in the labour market for some time, and certainly those who were above the age of 25, had managed to acquire a somewhat incoherent and disjointed work history. It was striking that even amongst the older temps in the sample, there seemed to be little overall, longer term career 'progression' in the traditional sense of the word, with qualifications earned and specific skills learned, developed and perfected over time, enabling a steady, incremental 'climb' up the professional ladder (Sennett, 1998). Instead, work was a fragmented experience with many new roles (whether assigned as permanent or temporary) offering at best a 'side-step' but often a demotion, and with any professional progress difficult against the multitude of recruitment freezes, wage-cuts, demotions and redundancies that have come to characterise the UK labour market since 2008.

Being a temporary worker, perhaps unsurprisingly, was not a specific career choice for any of the participants that were interviewed, and all recognised and articulated the importance of secure, permanent, paid work as being fundamental in enabling them to build a stable future for themselves and allowing them to reach the traditional benchmarks of adulthood such as home-ownership, marriage and having children. Although obtaining a permanent job, with all the relative security it was seen to provide was espoused as an enduring career/life ambition for all of the temps in the study, some of the group were happy with their current decision to undertake temporary work. There was an evident distinction amongst the participants between those who were actively choosing to be in temporary employment because it assisted them with achieving a specific goal, and those who were involuntarily in temporary work because they were unable to secure permanent employment. In his discussion of the 'Precariat' Standing (2011) argues, that the precariat is composed of 'grinners'; those who are happy to take casual jobs whilst they achieve other ends, such as the completion of a degree or to fund a backpacking trip abroad, and the 'groaners' who are compelled to take such insecure roles in the absence of alternatives. The use of such categories as 'ideal types' provides a useful tool for examining the reasons for temping amongst the participants in the study, although there are limitations to such classifications. Principally, the typical movement of many 'precarious workers' in and

out of jobs, between temporary and permanent work, and employment and unemployment, makes them extremely difficult to categorise. Such typologies can only given an indication of where the participant fits at any one time, and does not account for the fact that many of the temps had moved between being defined as both a 'grinner' and a 'groaner' at various points in their working life.

However, it was certainly the case that the function that temporary work was playing in their lives ultimately shaped their views and experiences of it, with those who saw it as a 'stepping-stone' or a 'stop-gap' better able to cope with the negative aspects of temping and rationalise any exploitation they may have experienced.

> It's £6.50 an hour…Oh it's so boring! It's awful. Erm, like its just admin. It's real basic admin stuff…It tends to be quite last minute with the temp work, you don't hear anything and then you get a call saying 'can you work tomorrow'? But I don't mind… Well it suits me at the moment. The only reason I'm temping is cos I don't wanna get a permanent job cos I don't wanna be tied to the UK. I want to go off and do more travelling, erm…so it suits to be earning a little bit of money, I'm living at home so everything I earn I save so it suits me alright.
> **(Lisa, 23)**

> It's not a job that I would want to do if I, if it was my permanent job, but for a role that I know is temporary I think it's really good and the temping work that I had a few years ago was much worse, y'know this…I was really lucky to land this role I think cos it's relatively stimulating and a nice bunch of people.
> **(Natalie, 30)**

> I'm still planning to go travelling again... I think its employment, it gives you experience, you might learn something about what you'd like to do in the future. There is bad things about it…I don't enjoy every minute of it but generally its cos I'm working towards a goal, so as long as you're working towards a goal in your life then it's not so bad.
> **(Danny, 27)**

For Lisa, Danny and Natalie, temping was helping them to achieve a particular goal or ambition and so it was easier to manage the negative aspects of the experience such as the monotony of the work and employment insecurity. Similarly Craig, a committed musician and member of a band, saw temping as very much his 'day job' and felt that the money he earns from temping helps him to 'get by' whilst he follows his real passion in life: music;

> I'm currently in a temporary one (role) which is doing Telesales which is back on the phone again… It's a rolling week (contract) but…they had a set time for us which was the end of March and now its…they'll see what it's like at the end of the week, they'll tell us if they need us or not… it's horrible! You dunno when you finish! Yeah, but then I'm happy doing

temporary stuff because, if its temporary, if its not an ideal job, its easier to deal with it being temporary cos you know at some point its gonna finish and you can concentrate…you're getting a bit of money so you're still kinda living but you've got time to find something that you actually want to do.
(Craig, 28)

All of the participants shared similar views on what could make a temporary role more enjoyable. Even the 'grinners', who saw their temporary work as a functional stop-gap, and who might have therefore distanced themselves from the role they performed and put minimal effort into the tasks and duties they carried out, were happy to utilise their skills and knowledge wherever possible and were grateful to be given some additional responsibility;

> The first job…it was actually probably the best temp work I've done cos I actually got to make a couple of not that important decisions, I actually got to use my own thoughts and stuff like they'd say, do that and I'd get to choose a few properties that would get to go in this magazine and the front page of websites and things like that, so it was alright. It was better than some of the other stuff where you're just filing…
> **(Lisa, 23)**

> The work I found ok, it wasn't hugely challenging but at that time it was a new thing to me so it held some interest and what I liked about it was that I had some level of responsibility there, I had an actual role to do which was quite nice… if your temping and fortunate enough to have a role rather than just doing, sort of, basic data input or something then that's a better experience cos at least if you have a role, you're respected within the team as having a role rather than being someone who's thrown crap to do here and there.
> **(Jennifer, 25)**

> I think initially, I felt very frustrated, very bored erm… I think my work ethic to an extent shone through and they gave me more and more responsibility and y'know, little things to just make you feel wanted which perhaps in the grand scheme of things don't mean very much but at the time mean quite a lot.
> **(Jeremy, 25)**

From the view of the 'temp worker', being recruited to perform a specific role with explicit tasks and responsibilities was far more enjoyable and rewarding than being taken on to simply help out with 'odd jobs' such as filing or data entry.

> There is no job role for a temp as such it's a mish mash of jobs that other people would've done but because its busy they take off the most time-consuming bits of lets say, a dozen peoples jobs and they bring a temp in to do those jobs…Sometimes when an employer sees that you can do other things…that's when you feel that you're being used for the skills that you've got… …sometimes there are very specific job roles for temps but they can't be considered permanent because of budgetary regulations or HR issues.
> **(Steve, 29)**

Not having a designated role or responsibility within a placement was also linked to reinforcing feelings of being 'just a temp' and an outsider that doesn't have a specific place within the team;

> I literally just finished on Tuesday…but that role was just essentially data entry, creating invoices so copying and pasting pretty much. It's very boring! In this one I was very much just the person who was creating the invoices, I wasn't really part of the team, wasn't really involved so…it was a different feeling…so whilst they were all perfectly friendly, it was just that feeling of being 'the temp'. It was fine but I personally really hate it! I think when you're a temp, my experience is that you're never really part of a team; you're always a little bit left out so to speak so you never feel completely, completely there.
> **(Jennifer, 25)**

The difficulties in trying to 'fit in', and establish good working relationships with colleagues was clearly difficult for those temps who were continuously moved into a succession of different roles. This 'vague, underlying sense of not-belonging' (Southwood, 2011:66) was frequently articulated amongst the participants, even when co-workers had been especially welcoming and friendly.

> I was quite on my own in a little booth. I occasionally talked to people but there wasn't much opportunity really.
> **(Stuart, 23)**

> I get frustrated that I'm…I wanna say 'just a temp' there was a phrase at my old job cos my boss would take the piss out of me cos I was 'just a temp', just jovially, I mean, there was no malice it was just like a 'oh don't talk to Gavin, he's just a temp' completely fine with it, it wasn't a horrible thing but that's kind of stuck with me.
> **(Gavin, 24)**

> When you are a temp…it is a little bit jokey but there is some kind of like, not discrimination but banter that some people…I think some people genuinely don't like temps cos they get quite set in their ways and they've been in the same job with the same team for a number of years and someone else comes in…and certain people feel a bit like, 'who's this person coming in here in my tight knit group?'.
> (**Craig, 28**)

The notion of being 'just a temp', of being different to colleagues and co-workers, extended much further than feelings of informal exclusion. The contractual status of a temporary agency employee as a 'worker' dictates that they are ineligible for many of the rights conferred on a directly recruited 'employee'. Despite the Agency Workers Directive coming into force in 2011, temporary agency workers are still not entitled to claim redundancy pay or unfair dismissal, and only qualify for the same rights as employees after a 12 week period (GOV.UK) companies can therefore legitimately

hire temp workers on shorter contracts in order to avoid the effect of this new legislation. Even when placed on a longer-term temping assignment, the difficulty in establishing durable relationships of trust and mutuality with co-workers, and a disinclination to join labour organisations such as trade unions, means that temporary workers who find themselves being treated unfairly or exploited can find themselves dealing with such issues alone, unaware of their rights and risking a lawful termination of contract simply for 'speaking out'.

Jess, (25) had a particularly negative experience whilst in a long-term temporary placement for the NHS. She worked hard in the role because she 'really believed in it', often working long hours without complaint. However, her line manager's instant dislike of her and accompanying autocratic management style led to Jess being routinely threatened with the termination of her contract in order to keep her compliant. Jess' experience provides a particularly powerful account of both the insecurity and exploitation temporary workers can experience, and for this reason it is quoted at some length:

> I temped there for a very long time. The original thing is that it'd be a permanent job, I'd get it, it'd be a band five, it would be brilliant and I'd just be temping for a month while they got the paperwork through and eighteen months later, I was costing them a fortune probably in agency fees and other things and there was pressure from the trusts that you weren't allowed to have temps anymore, and I was getting very anxious because I was worried that at any moment…you always have that thing when you're temping that at any moment it could be said that we don't want you anymore, we don't need you anymore…I was working under a woman who didn't understand what I was doing…she very much micromanaged me and she just wasn't a very good manager, she used to do all kinds of things that if I had been a permanent member of staff I'd have raised a grievance against her but I was told not to cos I was a temp…

> …they'd opened a new clinic in Selby and had basically forgotten to hire a receptionist for it so I was told that I had to go and be reception in the evening clinic but I also had to work all through the day so I was working a twelve hour day and I said basically, I was happy to help out, y'know, I really believed in the place I was working and I liked working there so I said well I'll help out for a while and they said yeah its only gonna be for a few weeks and then three or four months…I think it was about two months into it I'd had a week off…I'd come back from holiday with the worst case of tonsillitis ever and I'd come into work anyway but I was so ill I shouldn't have been there…I was thinking, 'oh I don't wanna go to Selby today, I don't wanna go' and just having a moan. This was then, the moan to the wrong person…they complained to my boss that I had a terrible attitude and that I shouldn't have been doing this… about two weeks later I was in my weekly meeting and she was like, we need to talk about your attitude and I was like, what? And then in the middle of the cafeteria at the hospital which is also a public area where patients can go, she gave me a bollocking for having a terrible attitude, that because I'm a temp, if they say jump I have to say how high otherwise they'll just replace me with someone else and cut

my hours and just really were very threatening and I came so close to quitting but ended up…because it was 2009, early 2010, the job market was terrible… there was that temp thing where they threatened me with, 'if you don't do what we want we'll just go back to the agency and get someone better' which, after everything I'd done…
(Jess, 25)

In spite of the continued threats from management Jess persevered in the role, hoping that she would eventually obtain the permanent position she originally wanted. However after a lengthy and complex negotiation with senior managers, the role she was awarded was not what she had been promised;

It was always gonna be a band five which is a good, is about twenty-ish thousand so great… it kept coming back and not passing because I didn't supervise any staff, you had to tick a box…it was tick boxes and you had to make a certain number of points for it to be this band or this band… then it goes off for official review and at that point I'd been temping for over a year and I was just like, is there anything else we can do?… can somebody give me a hand or someone from HR help me fill this form in? Next thing I went into an interview with my boss and she was holding these generic job things of a lower band of a band four…and she was like, 'we're never gonna get it as a band five' and it was part-time…the band four starts at sixteen if its full-time if its part-time it's less obviously…I basically said I was promised this thing, this is like a huge pay cut and she basically did the same thing again, 'well if you don't want to work here then we'll get someone else'. It was her attitude any time…and it worked, it worked. She was like, 'well it will be band four but it will be full-time', so I agreed to that cos it would only be like a grand and a half pay cut and then she…right before the job went out to advert she cut it…she said it would be part-time band four so I ended up taking a four and a half grand pay cut in exactly the same job. It was awful. I talked to Helen (agency manager), we had like a crisis meeting after work so it was like 5, 5.30pm and she said she'd tried to do what she could but she said they were, y'know, very resolute…

… (It was) just a horrible experience and so stressful and it was like, I could lose my job at any moment if I complain about her…it ended up that because I'd pissed her off so much, the agreement was that it would go out for…the job would have to go up for one week, internal in the hospital, it would basically, have, not officially, but it would have my name on it and basically because I'd pissed her off…she changed it and put it out to external advert…I didn't get to apply for it the first time around.
(Jess, 25)

What Jess's case illustrates is just how easy it is for temporary agency workers to be exploited and mistreated by employers within the confines of the law. The ongoing temporary status of Jess's employment, her desperation to secure a permanent position against a backdrop of high unemployment, and an absence of union representation (a seemingly futile expense for workers who change placements frequently and can be summarily terminated with little notice) meant that Jess, and many like her, are exposed and vulnerable to the strength of employer power (Hutton,

1995). It is the combination of weak employment protection, deregulation, declining unionisation, the globalisation of labour, sustained high unemployment, and a profit-driven requirement for workforce flexibility that has resulted in employers commanding a greater amount of control over the labour force. Coupled with increasing global economic uncertainty post 2008, and the Coalition government's historic slashing of welfare, the haunting spectre of economic and social descent compels many seeking work to simply accept whatever work is available.

The stoical attitude of 'take what you can get', of being grateful for simply being in some form of employment, was regularly voiced by the participants who were 'groaners', those who were essentially forced to undertake temporary agency work in the absence of, (or whilst they attempt to obtain) permanent positions. Within this group, attitudes towards (and experiences of) temping were predictably more negative than those 'grinners' who were temping to support the attainment of a particular goal. It was also apparent that within the group of 'groaners' age gave a strong indication of each participant's views and experiences of temping, with those participants who were younger, and newer to 'temping' retaining a more positive and optimistic attitude on their future prospects, than their older counterparts. Katie was a prime example of a new, young temp who had recently graduated, and was temping whilst she sought relevant graduate employment;

> It is quite monotonous but, I'm ok with that, I accept that I'm in a temp position…I'm happy that its nine to five and the wage is more respectable than the other places so I'm quite comfortable and quite appreciative of the fact that I've got that really…
>
> …If someone said, move to London for three months to start out as a runner, I'd do it completely and live wherever. I think that's more important. And also, at the moment, I'm young, I don't have the responsibility of stuff like a mortgage, I don't have kids so I'd be willing to do anything for short periods of time…I'm giving myself a year, maximum… I've done a TEFL course so I can travel, like, the other avenue that I would want to go down is to become a teacher but its very hard to get onto a PGCE when you need so much experience so I think if I did a TEFL course I could go abroad and teach and that would give me the experience to come back and get on the course…cos that would be a steady career.
> **(Katie, 23)**

Katie's attitude towards temping was very much 'grin and bear it', she remained optimistic about her future career in spite of the difficulties she was facing in obtaining graduate-level employment. Even though she expressed dissatisfaction with being a temp, the fact that she was relatively financially secure, had no children to support or significant financial commitments such as a mortgage to meet, meant that she had

some time to establish her career. Her consideration of other options and devising a 'back-up plan' provided some reassurance that in time; things would eventually 'work out'. For Stuart (23) and Gavin (24), the poor quality of roles they had been assigned, insecurity of work and unpredictability of income had clearly left them feeling pessimistic and uncertain about the future;

> The first place I worked at was… on the phones and was just, five hours a day and it didn't sound like something that I'd want to do but erm, but y'know it was a foot in the door…Cos it was only part-time and it was out in Malton I was sort of paying £8 a day for my bus fare there and was getting £25 a day or whatever so it was not great…I was there for about six weeks… (Then) I went to (name withheld) I was there for 3 weeks… I had a bit of a break for like 2 or 3 weeks where nothing really came along and then erm, I went to another place but that was only for two days a week though and I wanted full-time…There's very little security and a lot of the time I've been working part-time when really I've needed full time work and erm, there's times when I don't work at all like at the moment and that's very disheartening.
> **(Stuart, 23)**

> I worked at a place…it was out in the middle of nowhere and it was just, again, a pretty horrible place to work…this company were pretty unorganised anyway…just telling us to lie to customers and I was thinking no, I don't really feel comfortable doing that y'know…but they didn't seem to care, and I don't really wanna work somewhere where nobody cares. It felt very dead-end…it destroyed me mentally to just be abused by these people on the other end of the phone cos you are the face of this disappointment that they've got in whatever company you are being at that point in time so…it gets to you…
>
> …(Temping) It gets you by…but its by no means anything to rely on… A permanent job would be great… I find that with temping I can't really look too far ahead. It gets a bit cloudy, three or four months ahead I don't really know what I'm gonna be doing so I can't really plan for anything. It does bother me sometimes. At the moment I'm employed and the cloud is moving with me and it's fine but sometimes you end up catching up to the cloud as it were, and that's when it starts to bother you cos, y'know, the number in the bank starts to get a lot lower.
> **(Gavin, 24)**

For Jeremy and Jennifer, both in their mid-twenties, educated to postgraduate level and extremely ambitious, working as a temp after spending years studying hard for qualifications that they hoped would lead them to a successful career, was causing feelings of embarrassment and frustration. Whilst they both articulated their gratitude at being in some form of paid employment, the indignity of spending their working days filing and photocopying for a low wage was beginning to take its toll;

> I think its great when you're 19 or 20 or something temping in the summer holidays or for the first bit of work experience you get, but when you are seriously thinking about getting a permanent career and things, the thought

of doing just temporary work where you're not important, you have no responsibilities, you're doing boring work and it is simply temporary for a low wage as well, it is a bit depressing... it does come to a point where you really just want to find something permanent and I hate the feeling now...I really want something where I have a role and a responsibility, I'm just sick of being the temp, basically.
(Jennifer, 25)

I don't want to sound ungrateful or...be disingenuous to the people that I'm working with....no it's awful, I absolutely hate it, I mean with a ...serious passion, I mean I dread going to there in the morning, absolutely dread it. It's a combination of all aspects really erm... I mean the work itself is very dull, just monotonous...

Temping, for me now...is demoralising at times and demeaning, you know... I haven't got a sense of entitlement that I should do things just cos I've got a degree but...'go and do the filing'...it does dent the old pride a bit at times...It is gonna have an issue on certain people, particularly if they're temping for a long period of time... But it's better to have a job than being one of the one million NEET's sat at home doing nothing and...you've got to be grateful for what you've been given...
(Jeremy, 25)

Perhaps unsurprisingly, it was the older members of the sample who expressed the most hardened and pessimistic attitudes towards the future as a result of their continued, reluctant engagement with temporary work. Nearing the age of thirty, an age which was often cited by the sample as marking the end of the period that is generally defined as 'young', made the precarious nature of their employment even more pressing. Low skill, poorly paid, temporary work was a little easier to endure in your 'transitional twenties', as attempts to establish a career and achieve financial autonomy were played out amongst socialising with peers in a similar position, thus providing a distraction (and escape) from the realities of work. During this time it was possible to retain an optimistic outlook, holding on to a vague hope that a future opportunity would lead them to the secure, fulfilling work they desperately sought. However, the increasing desire/compulsion to 'settle down', and thoughts of marriage, buying a house and having children meant that for those facing the prospect of beginning the next decade of their lives, *still* temping, the feelings of personal failure, insecurity and anxiety were acute, and were clearly having a significant and damaging affect on their mental health. The hope of achieving a well-paid, secure, fulfilling career appeared to have been abandoned, with a creeping cynicism obscuring any remaining optimism about what the future may hold;

It's just a rolling week from week at the moment... I pick up a telephone, I call someone from a list of data and I try and sell them stuff.... Soul destroying. I'm very thankful to, have a job and some money coming in but I travel three hours a day there and back and spend seventy quid a week on petrol and I earn £210 a week, I give £100 a week to my girlfriend and

that's it. I leave at 7.30 am and I come back at 6.30pm, eat something and go to bed and I do a job I really dislike…
(Phil, 30)

Steve, aged 29, spoke at length on the dangers of becoming 'trapped' in a temporary job. Having being made redundant from his previous role when the recession hit he, like many others, had sought temporary agency work as a 'stop-gap', expecting that it would provide a short-term solution whilst he sought another permanent job.

I'm not happy to continue temping no…The reason I temp is…is because I would like to get a full-time job…Sometimes I'm de-motivated... I think some people can get stuck temping when it should be a temporary solution more than a long-term thing…I don't have any dependents or family so it's not so much of a worry. I do think about the future implications in terms of how I'm gonna support myself when I'm older and that becomes more and more of an issue, y'know, temp work there's no chance of any pension or anything and you can't build that up.
(Steve, 29)

Apart from 5 months spent teaching English in Thailand, Steve had been temping with First Place for over two years. He suggested that his status as a 'long-term temp' may now be contributing to his inability to obtain permanent employment;

Employers don't seem to give significance to… they just see a stunted, perhaps slightly unorganised work history whereas I see it as….you could put them all together and say well I've done a job for two years that's involved me doing all these different things and they don't see that, they see it as, well why was he only there for three months? Some employers don't understand what temping is necessarily… it's down to the people that are interviewing you. If they've done that job since they left school then they don't understand the workplace the same way.
(Steve, 29)

A study by Blenkinsopp et al (forthcoming, cited in GMT, 2014) investigated the long-term negative effects of graduate underemployment and the rise of 'GRINGOs', (Graduates in Non-Graduate Occupations). Their research found that as long as graduates see their underemployment as short-term or a 'stepping stone', they are more insulated from its negative effects, do not hunt for jobs that utilise their skills and are less likely to engage in proactive job searching, applications, CV tailoring etc, instead passively blaming the economic climate and ensuing lack of jobs. This may have been partly true of the 'grinners' who were using temporary employment to help them achieve a particular goal, and were therefore more likely to rationalise or dismiss any negative feelings about this kind of work (see page 137). However, these findings were not supported when it came to the 'groaners'; all of the participants that wanted a permanent position were highly proactive in searching and applying for jobs,

preparing for interviews and tests and attending lengthy assessment centres, despite the exhausting and often complex nature of such tasks alongside their temporary job. They were also keen to utilise their skills and experience within their temporary role and readily accepted additional tasks, duties and responsibility where it was offered (despite no additional financial recompense).

Being a 'temp' was not considered a fulfilling vocation, nor a desirable career-goal. By definition, being a 'temp' and undertaking the insecure work that it embodies was something that was supposed to be short-term, providing some form of income in the interim whilst other goals, were achieved. For those that were saving money to fund periods of travel, or studying for further qualifications, engagement in temporary work was a sagacious and practical thing to do as it supported them in achieving their desired ends. However, for the larger majority of involuntary temps in the sample, it was the absence of quality jobs, and the difficulties in accessing the kinds of stable, well-paid and rewarding roles that are promised to exist in the 'knowledge economy', that drove these young workers into the insecurity and instability of temporary employment. The desperation to simply be 'in work' irrespective of the pay and conditions attached, alongside a substantial degree of anxiety about avoiding unemployment, is encapsulated by a statement that was often repeated by the temps; 'you've got to be grateful for what you've been given'.

The Importance of *not* being idle

Within popular discourse, the virtues of paid employment are regularly exalted as part of a continuing historic reverence of 'work' and the sense of purpose and pride it can engender. Media coverage of stories regarding work and its portrayals of those who do not/cannot/will not work, as well as policy prescriptions around labour markets and employment denote the transformative potential of being in paid employment, and its perceived positive affect on self esteem and wellbeing alongside its more obvious financial benefits (Waddell and Burton, 2006; Department for Work and Pensions, 2010).

The centrality of paid work to everyday life, its relevance to notions of identity and self-worth, importance to individual citizenship 'rights and responsibilities' and supposed emancipatory potential continues to be the ideological touchstone of neoliberal labour policy. The valorisation of paid work, (for it is only *paid* employment, excluding care, child-rearing and voluntary work that is deemed to have any value to society as it provides a direct economic benefit) and its importance to notions of responsibility and the duty of the 'good' citizen, extends far back in political discourse (Patrick, 2012).

This has continued in both policy and rhetoric through both the previous Conservative and New Labour administrations targeting the perceived idleness and passivity of those who are unemployed with a range of initiatives and sanctions that deepened the obligation to work, under the premise that 'work is the best form of welfare' (Department for Work and Pensions, 2008).

However, this was significantly intensified when the Coalition government came to power in 2010, promising an historic overhaul of the welfare system in order to 'make work pay' (Cameron, cited in Hope and Mason, 2013:unpaginated). Under its programme of reform, the Coalition implemented a number of changes to welfare: the introduction of the Work Programme has seen the extension of conditionality and the entrenchment of 'workfare' with claimants forced to undertake unpaid labour for their benefits or face sanctions for non-compliance. Similarly, the implementation of universal credit was designed to 'increase work incentives' (DWP, 2012:2) whilst the introduction of the welfare benefits cap, and benefit up-rating (meaning benefits will no longer rise in line with inflation) beget an overall cut in benefits. Such policy prescriptions imply not only a supply-side problem with the labour market and the need to adopt a disciplinarian and paternalistic approach to instil an absent 'work ethic', but a profligate welfare system that actively creates idleness and dependency (Bagguley and Mann, 1992). This sentiment appears to be echoed in public opinion; a 2013 survey showed 47% of respondents agreeing with the statement; 'government is not being tough enough towards people on benefit, and more should be done to force them into work' (YouGov, 2013:5).

The centrality of work to notions of personal identity, self-esteem and the importance attached to being in paid employment was routinely voiced by the temporary workers in this study. As Mooney, (2004:2) argues, 'Work is often central to our life story, to our personal biography. It is a mark of who we are, how we are defined and seen by others: a key element in our identity'. As demonstrated in the preceding sections, the participants possessed a strong commitment to work, and an immense gratitude to being in some form of employment, particularly at a time of such economic uncertainty, even when the quality of the work that was on offer was poor and low paid. It was felt that work provided them with a purpose, and they would rather undertake jobs of poor quality than 'be at home, sat on the sofa'.

> I'm not one of these people that could just sit about and not have any money and still be happy and just keep myself entertained in the day….if I don't have that I seem to collapse in other ways like I don't have the motivation to do other things so it's important to me to feel like I'm contributing and doing productive things.

148

(Beth, 23)

Yeah definitely, cos I was out of work for three months I really appreciate it, even though I have to get up at 6am to get the bus I don't even mind at all, people always say like, how do you do it but I just appreciate it too much not to, I'd rather be there than at home doing nowt.
(Rose, 18)

Very important, I mean…I guess I appreciate more than most cos I don't have it at the moment, it's certainly something that I really…really want to do. I think perhaps that's because I haven't really been in work for long but it's quite satisfying to go to work for the day.
(Stuart, 23)

It is clear from the statements above that being 'in-work' was considered productive whilst being out of work represented inactivity and passivity. This binary distinction is often found in both popular and political rhetoric surrounding discussions of unemployment and welfare (Department for Work and Pensions, 2008; 2010). However, despite their familiarity with the complexities and time-consuming nature of job-seeking, and as will be demonstrated later in this section, first hand experience of what being unemployed really entails, the implication that being out of work involves 'doing nowt' was still alluded to on a number of occasions (see page 156 for more on the participants general views of benefits and welfare).

The appreciation for simply being 'in employment', and 'being grateful for what you've got' was often voiced by the participants whether the role they were in was permanent or temporary. There was a general feeling that all work should be treated with gratitude and respect, perhaps mindful of the alternative, and this often translated into a real commitment to the role, always performing tasks to the best of their ability, and expressing an enthusiasm to learn and develop more. As discussed on page 139 the participants often went beyond the 'call of duty' within their temporary roles and were keen to utilise their knowledge, skills and expertise wherever possible. They articulated a strong work ethic and a sense of pride in committing fully to the tasks and duties they undertook;

I didn't enjoy my job at the football club so much it was like, a free ticket to a game! But because of the way my mind works now, I'd just work anyway and every job I take really seriously… whatever job I do I'm always quite nosey and I always try and figure out the job and learn as much as I can rather than just go in and do the bare minimum and walk off….I can't.
(Dave, 25)

Yeah I put a lot into it. I think I'm just…I have really high standards no matter what I'm doing so I try not to do jobs that I don't like, cos even if I don't like it I'll still put 100% in which is kind of not helpful, so yeah. I dunno, I think its pride.

(Eleanor, 25)

Even though I don't like the job I've currently got I still give it…I still treat it
with the respect it's due.
(Jeremy, 25)

However, the endurance of such a strong work ethic in spite of the conditions of the
job left many vulnerable to exploitation by their employers. It was often expected (and
in some cases demanded) that employees would work additional hours during busier
periods regardless of how many hours they were contracted for, and in direct
contravention of the European Working Time Directive (2003/88/EC). Both Dave and
Katie, recount their experiences;

My job was part-time hours but when the new catalogues and stuff came
out our hours were increased… So we ended up being asked to come back
at evenings when the new catalogues were coming out, we'd go in at 7.30
in the morning, finish at like 2.30, then I used to run over to the kids club, be
there till 6pm, get changed then run back again to Argos till 9.30 at night for
about a month or two months… It was horrible! My hours practically trebled.
(Dave, 25)

Yeah I just got a job at the 'Imperial Grand' Hotel…it was Bar Staff and
Restaurant… It was awful! You were mistreated, wrongly, it was illegal the
hours they made you do back to back, the respect was minimal and you
were paid so little for what you did…it was £6.15 an hour I think, minimum
wage…it was just how long we'd be made to work, if you did a close for
example you'd start at 3pm and finish at about 2am and they wouldn't make
the shift shorter kind of thing and then often I'd do a close and then I'd start
at 8am doing the breakfast shift. They were aware, it was on the rota and it
happened all the time…Christmas eve I was at work till 1am and then I
started at 7.30am Christmas morning, just things like that, there wasn't
consideration, or respect for the staff…Christmas, I was put in nine days
straight so I didn't have one seasonal day off as it were and I went to HR
and they said they were gonna talk to my manager… he said he hadn't
heard anything about it. It would just be completely ignored so you got to
the point where you just thought there is no point.
(Katie, 23)

Despite signing a contract that explicitly stated the number of hours they were
expected to work, both Dave and Katie were routinely required to work overtime and
despite the objections they raised, their feelings were simply ignored by management.
The growth of what has been termed 'work intensification', a reorganisation of work in
order to 'extract the maximum value from each worker' (Newman and Mooney,
2004:59) is typically associated with long hours, tight deadlines, high performance
management and strict adherence to organisational targets and objectives. The
practice came to prominence in the 1990s and was linked to companies adopting
typically neoliberal labour management policies such as reducing staffing levels in

order to be more economically competitive and market responsive (Burchell et al, 1999). Alongside the expectation to work long hours as and when required, the participants' spoke of a highly target-driven work culture, of being compelled to adopt pressurised selling techniques and coercing and deceiving customers in order to meet specific organisational objectives:

> They'd changed from just trying to get as much money as they could off debtors to also finding out information so that we could use it to build up a profile of em… having to ask people how much they earn and what benefits they're on, does it get paid into a bank and knowing that we were just using that information to basically hit them with some threat at the end of it saying 'well, we'll take you to court and you'll be forced to pay it back' and all that… when I first started you could use your initiative, like if it was an elderly person you could go a bit easier on them but at the end it was like, 'no, everyone's the same, tell them if they don't pay they're getting cut off' and I just wasn't comfortable with it.
> **(Nick, 28)**

> There was an emphasis on certain things like the selling of credit and store credit…something that just rubbed me up the wrong way cos I wasn't there to start….furtively sneaking money out of people other than what they knew they were buying….so immediately the ethos wasn't right and what was expected actually turned out to be something I just fundamentally couldn't…I couldn't fake the supposed benefits of these after sales things… I was great at selling clothes but that wasn't enough really… It was about 'these are the targets and it's up to you as Deputy Store Manager to reach them'….I just think there's something very fundamentally wrong with it.
> **(Steve, 29)**

Although reported rates of work intensification levelled off in the early 2000s, findings from the 2012 instalment of the Skills and Employment Survey series demonstrated that there has been a perceived rise in overall work intensification since the survey began in 2006. Those questioned felt increasingly under pressure to meet tight deadlines or targets, and felt that they were working faster and harder than they were in previous years (Felstead et al, 2013). Boltanski and Chiapello, (2007:250) argue that there has been a general shift towards the removal of any 'dead time' from paid work as companies seek to extract more capital from labour for the same wage. In the burgeoning call centre industry, described as the modern day equivalent of Blake's 'dark, satanic mills' workers report having to meet specific targets on the duration of each call, the number of calls per hour, and even having to request permission from a supervisor to use the toilet (Hudson, 2011). Alongside processes of intensification in the workplace rapid advancements in communications technology have led to a blurring of the boundaries between work and home, with employees existing in a state of constant readiness for work via their smartphone or laptop. The desire to be successful, alongside an 'ever-growing pressure to be productive and busy' (Davies,

2013:9) results in individuals seeing busyness and being overworked as somehow virtuous and a badge of honour (Gershuny, 2005).

With the economic recovery proving slow and continued high rates of unemployment exacerbating the competition for jobs, it is anticipated that processes of work intensification may increase further, as employers are able to use the fear of redundancy and unemployment to place higher expectations on their staff, demanding longer working hours, scrutinising performance, and raising targets (Felstead et al, 2013). And where employers do not demand such intense labour, rising living costs may compel workers to voluntarily work longer hours, in order to simply maintain their standard of living.

The experience of working long hours in demanding and pressurised roles that not only paid very little, but offered minimal recognition or reward for their efforts had only reinforced the desire and bolstered the search for more fulfilling and rewarding employment. Unsurprisingly, most of the participants aspired to a career that they would enjoy above one that would pay them a lucrative salary, although they hoped to achieve a level of income that would allow them to be 'comfortable' so they would not have to worry about money;

> I want to work to live, rather than live to work....I wouldn't be someone that was wanting to make as much as possible... I want to do something I enjoy, which I think I will and get a nice enough salary so that I can do the things I want to do but no, I'm not into 12 hours a day and commute and all that it's not me... I'd rather be paid less and enjoy what I'm doing.
> **(Lisa, 23)**

> One summer I had a temp job which involved updating the copyright section on the bottom of a website that nobody went to, it was for three months...I just used to leave work at the end of the day and be like, that was a complete waste of my time, their time, my money and their money, so what is the point. I never want to do a job like that again.
> **(Jess, 25)**

> Really important cos you're just miserable if you don't enjoy what you're doing. I've done jobs I don't like, but I've always known that I wouldn't have to do it forever. I wouldn't want to be in a position where I couldn't...where I wouldn't have that choice.
> **(Eleanor, 25)**

Evidently, the participants views on employment, and the value they attributed to being in 'paid work' extended much further than the simple financial returns it provided. There was a frequent juxtaposition of what they considered to be 'work'; that is, the kinds of low skill, low pay, insecure roles they were currently employed in, with

their 'career' on which they projected their aspirations for a fulfilling role, opportunities for professional development, and a reasonable salary. It became increasingly clear that what united the vast majority of the participants in their aspiration for a fulfilling and enjoyable career was pride. They frequently referred back to the duties and tasks they had undertaken in some of their short-term/ temporary roles as 'dull' and 'embarrassing' citing them as examples of the kind of work they hoped to avoid in their career. Instead of being intrinsically motivated by money, the participants spoke about the sense of pride they would gain from a role where they were stimulated and challenged and where they could develop their skills and progress their career;

> I don't want to be bored, I couldn't do a job where I was bored, it would drive me mad, so I'd want something that even if I didn't enjoy it, it challenged me so I found it interesting.
> **(Jennifer, 25)**

> Yeah, I would like to find something that….it would be nice to find something that I could progress with again… where you're constantly going up and making yourself better and to enjoy it at the same time.
> **(Nick, 28)**

Others expressed an enthusiasm for finding work which had a significant contribution to wider society, and seeking employment within an organisation whose purpose/function extended further than simple profit accumulation;

> I wasn't able to teach, and I felt like that was a really respected profession, and something that I really enjoyed where I could have a real impact on the lives of others and I get to my job now and I don't have that ability to be proud of what I do. Somebody's computer works, but it would've probably got fixed by somebody else anyway whereas when I was a teacher, I could give advice that could maybe be useful to somebody for the rest of their life...
> **(Ross, 25)**

> My ideal job would be a job were I was presented with new challenges everyday and it would be a job that was not motivated by profit, a job that begins with, y'know, it doesn't have to be based upon the philanthropy of someone else but there must be an ethic there that means its self-sustaining and providing a beneficial service rather than motivated by profit.
> **(Steve, 29)**

The participants had certainly given some consideration to the kind of career that they wanted and in many cases it appeared to be an outward embodiment of their values, ideals and character. But the relationship between identity and work wasn't always as direct and simplistic as 'people are what they do' (Gini, 1998:708) and for two of the temps, the centrality of work to their identity was beginning to be questioned. Whilst still pursuing a fulfilling career, they both recognised the limitations of imbuing such

personal significance to their job and its (perhaps) declining importance in relation to other aspects of their lives:

> It's very important…but my identity isn't based on career if that makes sense. I think the most valuable thing you can have is good friendships with people and the most valuable resource you can have is your time. The nicest thing you can do for somebody is to give them your time and I dunno…I find that far more important than being wealthy…I want to have a good job where I'm challenged and have an interest, I don't wanna be doing something where I just feel bored or unimportant, but at the same time I'm not gonna, not have a family for the sake of having a career…the Japanese call it like a salary man, where you work and that's your existence.
> **(Ross, 25)**

> I'd say it was actually less important to me now than it used to be which is partly as a result I think of, having met my partner and having moved here with my partner…I've got other focuses now and I'm also pregnant so because I'm not in a permanent role I'm not gonna get maternity leave so there's gonna be a period of time when I'm out of work completely whilst I have the baby…so I feel I've just got other things that seem as important or more important which is not to say that I wouldn't want a kind of career in the future, if I could make that work I'd definitely rather have a job that I feel stimulated in and that I also feel I'm making a contribution by doing, than a job that is just to pay the bills.
> **(Natalie, 30)**

The ambition of having a successful career was indeed considered against the attendant desire for a 'work-life balance', and the ability to have a family and cultivate a life outside of paid employment. The importance of obtaining a work-life balance was expressed by many of the participants, perhaps unsurprisingly given their previous experience of high pressure, work intensive roles. Though the extension of labour market flexibility has been routinely promoted as conferring greater choice on employees to prioritise the allocation of their time between home and work, (in many cases as a response to the long hours culture associated with work intensification) this has, in many cases proven to be something of an ideological chimera. At the heart of work-life balance policy remains an inevitably economic driven business agenda (Mooney, 2004) and requests to work flexibly can simply lead to blurring of the boundaries between home and work and further intrusion into an employees leisure time.

For Ross and Natalie, although they hadn't abandoned their hopes for a satisfying and rewarding career, there was a general feeling that they would not be willing to compromise their family, friendships and home life in order to achieve it. As a result, they were (currently) far less concerned with obtaining employment that they could strongly identify with, and it was less important to be deemed successful. However,

154

even though they didn't view work as inextricably linked to their identity and sense of self, it was acknowledged that the relative security and stability afforded by permanent employment was vital in enabling (or preventing) them from seeking this fulfilment elsewhere (this will be explored further in chapter six). Craig, who also didn't identify strongly with 'work' and instead, articulated himself through his passion for music and performance, recognised that paid employment was still fundamental in allowing him to pursue this interest;

> I'm still in different musical groups, you know we'll get a group together and go do a wedding but…the money's not coming in to that…I'd love it to be a full-time thing but I don't think it ever will be, but at the same time as long as I'm doing something, I can do that and I can do a job where I'm happy getting the money in and it doesn't drain the life out of me then fine by me…I can write music and enjoy that and so all I want is a job that's gonna earn me a fair bit of money to support a family in the future and that I don't hate.
> **(Craig, 28)**

Regardless of their aspirations for a particular profession or career, simply being in employment was important to the participants as it was seen to provide a certain degree of security and financial stability in order for them to simply 'live'. Despite the long-hour, high pressure working culture that some of the temps had experienced, having a job was still considered to be empowering, particularly when contrasted with the alternative; being unemployed. They had absorbed and internalised much of the prevailing ideological rhetoric on paid work and the perceived virtuosity and dignity of paid labour that is much-favoured by politicians and cultural commentators (Seymour, 2013). Most of the participants agreed that they would rather endure the indignity of low skill, low paid, insecure work than the greater indignity of 'signing on'. However, it is interesting to note that half of the twenty participants had experienced a period of time unemployed at some point in their work history (ranging from a minimum of four weeks to two years). In addition, all of those who were non-graduates (six in total) had experienced a spell of unemployment in comparison to four out of the fourteen who were graduates.

The vulnerability of young people to spells of unemployment during times of recession has been a persistent problem since the 1980s (Lee et al, 2012) with the collapse of traditional routes into the labour market and the adoption of neoliberal labour policies signalling the end of the post-war commitment to full employment (see chapter two for further discussion). The 2008 economic downturn and subsequent recession have seen youth unemployment climb to levels not seen since the 1980s, peaking at 22% in the last quarter of 2011 (ONS, 2011:10). Within this context, it is therefore not

surprising to see that half of the participants had experienced a spell of unemployment, primarily as a result of redundancy, or as a temporary 'stop-gap' whilst they searched for jobs after completing further/higher education.

The participants' spoke of feeling 'demoralised' and 'ashamed' that they were out of work and on benefits and described how this affected their confidence. It was obvious that the cultural stigma associated with being 'on benefits' was internalised by the participants and feelings of worthlessness and pessimism became a self-perpetuating cycle that many struggled to break out of;

> I was unemployed for about six months… It was horrible. Awful…I've never not had a job….I mean I was going in there (the Jobcentre) three times a week, looking for jobs, looking on the net, printing jobs off, walking around handing CV's out, I just needed something quick and yeah it was weird cos I would go in there (the Jobcentre) and they'd say, 'what you doing'? and I'd pull out a bag of CV's etc and they'd go, 'fair enough'…there wasn't anything… there was just nothing at the time, post-Christmas before Easter, there was no way you were getting a job.
> **(Dave, 25)**

> It's very demoralising. Cos obviously you're looking for further employment but its quite demoralising cos the longer you're unemployed, the more demoralised you get with it, and say you go and get an interview, your confidence isn't high to be able to put yourself across in the best kind of light and so you wouldn't theoretically get the job because you'd been unemployed I reckon. It's how it works I suppose.
> **(Danny, 27)**

> When I finished uni I was unemployed for quite a bit cos the job market at the time was not brilliant. So I was up in Newcastle for a year, for about six months doing bits and bats really… It wasn't fun to be honest. It made me feel like a bit of a deadbeat…
> **(Ben, 27)**

> I think I was unemployed for nearly two years so I was on benefits at that time… Horrible. I didn't like it.…I just wanted to get back into work.
> **(Nick, 28)**

Despite the propagation of the 'benefits as a lifestyle choice' myth, (a strategy used to garner public support for increasingly stringent cuts to benefits) and pejorative descriptions of the unemployed as 'skivers' and 'scroungers', by both politicians and the mass media (Walker, 2013), the participants actual experiences of unemployment sat completely at odds with the current government rhetoric. The reality of being 'on benefits' was characterised by shame, and feelings of failure but overall, a continued commitment to finding work. Research with unemployed claimants by the Dole Animators project, similarly found a sharp contrast between the rhetoric and lived experience of being on welfare, with claimants showing a gradual internalisation and

acceptance of the negative language used by the press and policy-makers, reinforcing feelings of failure, dependency and passivity (Patrick, 2013).

As would be expected, the experience of being unemployed differed significantly for those who were still living with parents, and thus had something of a financial 'safety net' to those who were living independently and had to meet regular payments such as rent and bills. Rose, (18) who was living at home with parents described it as being 'a bit easy' to earn £50 a week simply for job searching. Similarly, others who were also living at home acknowledged that they would have struggled on the modest income they received from Jobseekers Allowance, had it not been for the support of their parents;

> It was enough to get by on living with your parents but I think if I wasn't living with my parents it wouldn't have been enough.
> **(Nick, 28)**

For those who were living independently and therefore had other financial commitments, the experience of being on benefits was far less comfortable:

> I struggled a bit….cos I was up in a house in Newcastle and you got rent paid by the council and that so…and it was like £65 a week to live on which isn't a lot but it's liveable. You just make do with what you've got.
> **(Ben, 27)**

> The money is enough to live on as in you can *live*, but you can't enjoy yourself I'd say…I wouldn't say its enough money to have a proper life…you survive in just about having a life really.
> **(Danny, 27)**

> A week I got £60 … But, your gas and electric in a shared house is still quite expensive. Then you have your phone, internet and its like well what do I do, do I spend £25-£30 on the internet at home or go and spend £5 every day trying to get on the net in some internet café somewhere?
> **(Dave, 25)**

There was also some stratification in the duration of unemployment. The two longest spells of unemployment were found amongst non-graduates Nick (2 years) and Gavin (1 year). This suggests that longer-term unemployment was more common amongst those without degree level qualifications. Graduates are frequently said to experience better employment outcomes (ONS, 2013) though in this instance this refers not to the quality and security of the work obtained by having a degree but the protection it offered from long-term labour market exclusion.

Most of the participants spoke positively about their encounters with job centre staff, describing them as 'always very polite' and found the process of submitting a claim and receiving money fairly straightforward. However, Dave had experienced a number of problems with his claim for JSA in which Job Centre staff were less than helpful and the bureaucratic nature of the process led to him going several weeks without money, pushing him into severe financial difficulties:

> I went to sign on every fortnight, but the thing is, it took them so long, like I got a redundancy pay package when I left the last place, so I had like a couple of grand that I sat on and it just went on rent, bills….the pot started getting smaller and smaller. It took JSA about two months to pull their finger out and get me sorted out… even though I was signing on I wasn't getting the money, I got it through in the end but I had to go to a different JSA in York to go get an emergency £70 to go get some shopping cos I had no money, y'know I did my shopping and what not and the money had gone. I was paying off bills and what not and after a couple of months, it was about two months (redundancy) pay so after two months I was out. I needed something, so I had to go get this emergency money which I had to pay back…I was ringing them up every other day…it was so so irritating… I still had other bills to pay and stuff so it's why I ended up getting a bit behind on it all. It was just a difficult five or six months.
> **(Dave, 25)**

Delays to benefit payments are not uncommon, and recent research by the Trussel Trust showed that 30% of people who used foodbanks in 2013/14, did so as a result of benefit delays (trusseltrust.org). For young people on low incomes, without the financial buffer of accrued savings from significant time in employment, often servicing the repayment of student loans and overdrafts, and with housing and living costs continuing to rise, unemployment can very quickly lead to acute financial hardship and this situation is only exacerbated by delays to benefit payments. The Coalition government's decision to introduce a seven day 'waiting period' before an individual qualifies for benefit, alongside well-documented problems with the current migration of claimants across to the new system of universal credit, (Packman, 2014) appears only to increase the likelihood of the unemployed sinking further into financial hardship.

Conclusion

What was once a relatively straightforward and comprehensible task of connecting oneself to local employment opportunities, is now a significantly more arduous and difficult process. Since the 1980s, the shift to a highly flexible, deregulated, globalised labour market has altered young people's early experiences of paid employment at a number of levels, and as the nature and organisation of work has changed, integration into the labour market has become both more protracted and problematic (Lanning

and Rudiger, 2012). As we have seen throughout this chapter, the participants experienced numerous barriers to acquiring (and indeed retaining) stable employment. Fierce competition amongst applicants permits employers to conduct a highly selective and rigorous application process with young candidates, even those qualified to degree level and beyond, frequently disadvantaged through a perceived lack of 'work experience' (Lanning and Rudiger, 2012). In an attempt to obtain some of the practical skills demanded by employers, (whilst bypassing convoluted recruitment procedures) participants sought employment via temporary employment agencies. Whilst a minority of the temps were actively choosing to do so whilst pursuing other ends (saving for 'travelling' or studying for further qualifications for example) the larger majority of the sample were temping specifically because they could not find permanent employment. Given that many of the 'groaners' were also in possession of postgraduate qualifications, and had themselves previously taken trips abroad to 'travel' it would be interesting to re-interview participants in the future to see if those 'grinners' had found themselves back in temporary employment but this time on an involuntary basis.

The experience of temping, and of the types of employment young people typically engage with upon entering the labour market were largely negative, frequently characterised by low-skill work, poor pay, long hours, and in some cases an autocratic and high-pressured work culture. The longer-term trend towards declining wages and jobs of diminished quality, as well as the growth of insecure and precarious work, particularly in the cautious, post-recession climate (TUC, 2013b; Goos and Manning, 2003) is preventing the upward mobility and career progression that 'entry level' jobs typically used to provide. Such work for this particular group, had failed to provide a 'stepping stone' to more fulfilling and rewarding employment with most of the participants presenting an incoherent and disjointed work history.

Yet despite this, and alongside a creeping pessimism about what the future might bring, the participants maintained a strong work ethic; they valued being in employment and recognised the disabling/enabling nature of work in relation to their identity and sense of self. This substantial gratitude for simply having a job was used as a coping mechanism to help the temps manage the situation they found themselves in. Overall, it appeared that an absence of well-paid, good quality, and secure jobs for young people to transition into, coupled with an acute (ideologically driven) fear of unemployment, and desperation to avoid becoming one of *those* people, 'on benefits', was ultimately responsible for coercing the majority of this group

into temporary work, and ensuring that despite their continued efforts to escape, they remained trapped there.

Living Precariously

The preceding two chapters have examined how the spheres of education and labour, both of which are key domains in the facilitation of youth transitions, have been reconfigured around the 'ethic of the market' and how this has impacted upon young peoples experiences of both areas. This chapter takes a more focused look at the personal lives of the participants in order to understand the effects of such change on individual biographies. With traditional patterns of social reproduction giving way to highly individualised and uncertain pathways from learning to earning, the experience of transitioning to adulthood and the ability of young people to not only implement progressive biographical plans, but their ability to actually conceive of such landmarks as ever being possible, is becoming increasingly fraught. This chapter examines the experience of precarity on individual lives, how the participants make sense of the position they are in, and how this is affecting their hopes and plans for the future.

'Struggling' – The Precarity Trap

As discussed in chapter three, the precariat are characterised by feelings of alienation, frustration, vulnerability and endemic insecurity that largely emanate from the uncertainty of their employment position. However, being 'precarious' and existing in a state of constant 'risk', could not be wholly ascribed simply to the contractual status of ones employment. Arguably of equal importance was the durability of this unstable position, an inability (despite best efforts) to escape the 'precariat' by obtaining secure employment and an incapacity to foresee a time of relative security. For the participants in this study, fundamental to these feelings of vulnerability were anxieties about their financial situation, the irregularity of income and low wages alongside the accumulation of considerable debts, further exposed the participants to the risk of social and economic marginality. As such, being 'precarious' extended much further than vague or immeasurable 'feelings' of insecurity which are difficult to quantify (Greg et al, 2000) and was evident in the individual debt level and financial situation of each of the participants.

Changing attitudes towards debt and the acceptability of borrowing has increased over the past thirty years as restrictions on the accessibility of credit were relaxed and consumer borrowing became an integral part of the UK economy (The Griffiths Report, 2005). This cultural normalisation of debt as a 'way of life' was harnessed to great advantage with the introduction of student loans and tuition fees, with student

debt often considered to be 'socially acceptable' particularly given its promotion as an investment that will pay an anticipated return in the future (Sodhexo University Survey, 2014). Fifteen of the twenty participants had attended university and had predictably amassed a substantial amount of debt whilst they were studying, mostly in the form of their student loan. Whilst one or two of the participants were unhappy with owing so much money, most of the graduates didn't consider their student loan to be 'real debt' because there was no time limit attached to repayment, it would simply be paid off 'someday' in the future;

> Yeah I've got about £25,000 student loan. But again that bothers me even less cos…until you're earning enough they won't take it off you anyway so when I'm earning enough it just comes off like a tax its not like you've got to make the effort to pay it, it just comes off automatically so it doesn't phase me.
> **(Lisa, 23)**

> On my student loan I probably owe about £35,000… It doesn't really bother me cos I know its debt, but….it's not, there's a guy banging on your door…it is there, but its not gonna effect your life that much, when you earn over a certain amount
> **(Katie, 23)**

> Yeah I do have a student loan which I pretend isn't there. Because I've never actually earned enough to pay it back!
> **(Eleanor, 25)**

Earning little above the minimum wage, most of the temps admitted that they were not currently earning enough money to reach the repayment threshold that required them to begin paying back their loan. As a result, their debt was continuing to grow as it sat accruing further interest. Some of participants that had studied for postgraduate qualifications owed additional money in the form of Career Development Loans, or were repaying money borrowed from family members to fund their studies;

> I have a credit card, and I have a Career Development Loan and a loan to my Uncle. It (CDL) started at £7000, and I've paid it off for a year so my guess is it's down to £6000, but I'm not positive, I just know it goes out…its just a direct debit of £168 goes out every month to pay it back…I also borrowed £1000 from my uncle.
> **(Phoebe, 28)**

In addition to student loan debt, the use of overdrafts and credit cards to fund student living costs was common. Such forms of interest free credit are readily available whilst a student, but often require repayment soon after graduation to avoid incurring interest or charges. This debt was a more immediate worry for the participants, and many of them were struggling to pay off their overdrafts and credit cards

162

I have a huge overdraft which is my biggest thing which I have to sort out by June somehow…My bank let you go up to £3000… They'll reduce it and I think they'll be a monthly charge that will kick in that will be a pain…Some people are telling me to consolidate it and like, get a credit card to pay it off or something... I just need to borrow £3000!
(Katie, 23)

I have an overdraft, credit card…It's about £2000 combined…I supplemented my income with my credit card when I was a student which is the worst thing you can do with a credit card and that's what kind of got me into the debt.
(Steve, 29)

A survey by the Money Advice Service found that 72% of respondents in their twenties had made financial mistakes that they regretted (Money Advice Service, 2014) including seeing credit as 'free money' (2014:5). Such mistakes impacted on their standard of living for years to come, with many witnessing a 'domino effect' with one bad decision having a negative cumulative effect over time. But it was not only those that had been to university that had accrued considerable debts. Phil (30) had not attended university, but ran up credit card debts of £5000 during a period of unemployment and describes how his situation rapidly spiralled out of control;

It's probably about £5000 I owe… It fell apart after I stopped working for (local convenience store) cos I was unemployed for a bit and at that time I did have a few credit cards and stuff and was in quite a bit of debt…I was offered a consolidation loan through this tosser at the bank who paid off a lot of the debt but…they charged me a massive amount and I ended up owing them twice as much as they paid me out…and then being unemployed made everything worse… pinging from job to job I got myself into a bit more trouble…It's been very difficult financially
(Phil, 30)

Similarly, Craig (28) took out a £5000 loan upon finishing university during a period in which he was unemployed. After using it to pay off his student credit card and store cards, he faced interest charges that resulted in him having to seek help from a debt consolidation agency. The use of loans and credit cards as a form of wage replacement or to supplement benefit payments/low incomes was common amongst a number of the temps, and raises a number of serious questions about the accessibility of credit to those who are in a vulnerable position. The tendency of such debts to escalate rapidly left many of them in a worsened financial situation. Faced with a need to obtain more money than they were able to earn, one particular participant had resorted to an even riskier way of attempting to increase his income;

I also play online poker to support my income! On average I make about £20 a day so that keeps me going…In one day I've lost £200 but I've won £6000 in a day… that's what paid for my masters degree actually! I'm not in a very good financial state at the moment and it's one of the only ways I can make money… if I had a full-time job I wouldn't do it because I wouldn't need to.
(Stuart, 23)

A quarter of the participants were still living with parents or had moved back into the parental home in order to save money. Those that were not living at home were renting with a partner or friends, and none of the participants had managed to gain a first step on the property ladder, despite many articulating a strong desire to own their own home. Increasing house prices, low incomes and high levels of debt are preventing many young people from affording a home of their own without assistance from the 'bank of Mum and Dad' (Financial Inclusion Centre Report, 2011) Home ownership was frequently aspired to by the temps and represented more than a simple consumer purchase. Katie (23) stated that she would 'like the security of a house' and it was generally felt that owning a home would provide stability and a 'bedrock of certainty in an uncertain world' (Howker and Malik, 2010:65). The increased trading of homes as 'commodities' in a process of capital accumulation by buy-to-let investors has pushed the cost of a home well beyond the affordability of most first time buyers'. The average deposit required for a first time buyer now stands at £30,000 (NHF, 2014) and as prices begin to increase post-recession, and with the introduction of new measures to tighten mortgage lending, most of the participants felt that home ownership would be beyond their reach for some time.

I don't know how I'll be able to buy a house…The thought is dwindling a little bit because I don't know if it will ever be possible. You certainly hear that it might not ever be possible, this is what the newspapers are telling you everyday. I was trying to work it out the other night how many years I would actually have to save before I could afford it.
(Jennifer, 25)

I would LOVE to buy a house but dunno whether we'll ever get a deposit… We went to try and get a mortgage…must've been about two years ago and they were like yeah, we can give you a mortgage but…we'd need to come up with £25,000 for a deposit…I felt like saying, yeah I'll just get that out my back pocket, I mean, where are you supposed to get £25,000 from? I'll never….unless there's some inheritance or something to come from my parents…until that day I'll never be able to get a house… Houses should be more affordable and people need to own homes cos its basically your assets isn't it and in the future you've got that to fall back on if you get into trouble and I think you need that. It's security and stability.
(Nick, 28)

Saving the hefty sums required for a house deposit whilst being a temporary worker seemed so unfeasible that many of the participants had resigned themselves to being forever a part of 'generation rent', a group with no realistic prospect of owning a home (Blackwell and Jessop, 2014). Alongside an exponential increase in property prices, the 'buy-to-let' property boom has seen a growth in private renting up from 10% of households in 1999 to 17% in 2011 (Communities and Local Government Committee, 2013). However, the sector remains largely unregulated and this has led to concerns over high rents, poor property standards and unscrupulous management practices (Hughes, 2009). It is therefore not surprising that the participants argued that having a home of their own would give them a greater degree of control and stability and would be preferable to simply 'paying off someone else's mortgage'.

It was interesting that the participants desire for home ownership showed little recognition of the fact that this in itself was also a 'debt', the prevalence of a narrative which sought to rationalise debts into those which are 'good' i.e. home ownership and student loans, and those which are 'bad', i.e. credit cards and consumer debt, was apparent throughout the discussions. There was a strong belief, or perhaps more accurately a 'hope' that their future would be debt-free and that their current financial precarity was a temporary situation that would eventually be resolved.

Similarly, paying into a pension was something that the temps hoped would happen 'in the future' once they obtained permanent employment, but given that most of them were still repaying debts of a considerable size, they currently had little, if no spare income that could be put aside for the retirement;

> At the moment cos I couldn't afford to pay into a pension. It's something I will consider when I'm back in permanent employ and I'm sorted with my debts and stuff
> **(Phil, 30)**

> That would be the best thing about not working for a temp agency… it sucks that I don't have a pension scheme to pay into…I had intended to start paying in from the age of 22 when I got my first proper job, set up a pension and start paying into it early and now it looks like I might end up being 30 before I can actually make a contribution so it will be worth considerably less.
> **(Ross, 25)**

With irregular, low paid work providing only a modest income, the participants had to prioritise their spending, most of the money they earned went on either living costs or repaying debts and any surplus cash that could be saved was usually earmarked for buying a house in the future. Consequently, paying into a pension was at the bottom

of the list of financial priorities for most of the participants. Inadequate pension saving amongst young people is being increasingly recognised as a pressing social and economic problem, with reports suggesting that today's young people are not beginning to save for retirement until well into their thirties and are therefore not saving enough to enable an adequate standard of living in retirement. This is largely attributed to more prolonged transitions to adulthood, with broader financial strains such as unaffordable housing, student debts, stagnant earnings and employment uncertainty reducing the time (and money) available for retirement planning (Berry, 2011).

Most of the temps appeared to show some degree of anxiety about their financial situation. For those 'voluntary' temps, particularly those who were saving to go travelling, the reality of their economic precarity was something to be faced in a distant future, and they remained optimistic that when they did decide to embark on a career, they will easily be able to secure the kinds of lucrative employment that would allow all their debts to be repaid.

> I feel that one day I will be perfectly capable of earning a decent salary when I put my mind to it, at the moment…I'm deliberately temping, I'm not putting any effort into doing that but once I do I think I should be ok.
> **(Lisa, 23)**

In contrast, the reality for those that were 'trapped' temping, was a daily struggle of 'making ends meet'. Many felt that they had to 'constantly watch what I am spending' and that their lack of income prevented them from seeing friends, going out and being able to take part in activities they enjoyed. Jess, felt that there was a 'natural culture of spending' amongst young people that was hard to escape from, and added that on occasions where she had spent money on socialising, she would be left with little money for food and forced into eating unhealthy, cheaper meals as a consequence;

> You go out and go for a couple of drinks and end up spending £20 and be like, 'that was food' (money)…and then you run out and end up eating terrible like canned food. I feel like I've…I've stopped being healthy…I cannot go on eating tins of spaghetti or baked beans just cos they're like 10p a can.
> **(Jess, 25)**

'Making ends meet' often meant having to seek assistance and financial help from parents, something that led to feelings of embarrassment and shame;

This month, I may have to borrow a little bit off my Mum to cover rent…I don't take it for granted by any stretch of the imagination. I hate asking for money off my parents, it's just a horrible feeling.
(Gavin, 24)

Money limits what I can do. I probably would go and do more stuff if I had the money but at the moment its prioritising…It's not so much the living costs it's just the lack of income, I mean…. I have learned to live on very little, do your shopping at Aldi and spend only £20 a week on food…I don't want to have to go back to my parents for money, I want to be self-sufficient.
(Stuart, 23)

The absence of financial security was a significant contributory factor to the experience of precarity for this group of young people. High levels of debt, low pay and an inability to save for the future left them 'at risk', of social exclusion, although their current situation was perhaps best described as 'clinging on by their fingertips' (Winlow and Hall, 2006). However, what compounded their vulnerability even further was that they currently had little prospect of being able to escape their position of precarity. The lack of secure and well-paid employment to transition into, and the difficulties in obtaining the few roles that did exist, meant that the probability of career progression was minimal. As a consequence, it was not possible to foresee a time when they would be in a secure enough position to repay their debts and save money for the future (Standing, 2014).

The participants were very clear that one of the main difficulties they faced in the labour market was the dearth of 'decent' jobs, jobs that are full-time, relatively secure, well paid, and offering opportunities for career progression. With government policy focusing on supply-side barriers to employment it has largely ignored the availability and quality of jobs to be filled by young people 'focusing on up-skilling without due regard for opportunities' (Furlong et al, 2012:14). Research has shown that despite claims of increasing professionalization and the growth of the 'knowledge economy' job creation in the UK has become increasingly polarised, (Clayton et al, 2014) with a growth of 'lovely' jobs at the top and 'lousy' jobs at the bottom end of the labour market (Goos and Manning, 2007). There was a frequent distinction drawn between being able to get 'a job' and being able to get 'a career', something which was seen as far more difficult to achieve;

I think a lot of people say, 'I can't get a job, I can't get a job' when what they really mean is they can't get a job that they want cos I think if you really want to get any form of job then you can get a job like even if its just labour or some sort of factory work… I think it's easy for young people to get a job behind a bar or a job doing that kind of thing but no I don't think it's easy to get a career.

(Lisa, 23)

I think there is a lot of jobs around but I don't think there's a lot of careers…
when I was looking, there was nothing that I really thought, 'oh, this is what
I wanna do for the rest of my life'…'what do I wanna be?', or 'what would I
aspire to do?'
(Ross, 25)

As demonstrated in the previous chapter (see page 152 for discussion), the
participants aspired to gaining a 'career' that they could be proud of, such a role would
enable them to develop and refine their skills, offering a degree of responsibility and
providing a wage that would enable them to repay their debts whilst enjoying a decent
standard of living. A 'job' on the other hand was an unthinking role that simply paid the
bills, such roles appeared to be in abundance but offered very little in terms of career
development.

It's not easy for anyone to get a job…people I know with degrees are at my
work, working in the logistics unit, y'know? It's so difficult now.
(Dave, 25)

A large company may make, say a thousand people redundant, and these
are skilled people, but that's in the news…negated by the fact that Asda are
creating two thousand jobs…but they're not the same types of jobs.
(Steve, 29)

There's a lot of cleaning jobs out there!
(Katie, 23)

No-one wants to work in Tesco's forever…you don't wanna waste like this
period between 22 and 30 wasting your time in jobs that don't matter to you.
(**Eleanor, 25**)

Whilst it is fair to argue that historically, young people have always entered the labour
market in precarious positions, 'expecting to have to prove themselves and learn'
(Standing, 2011:65) the prospect of career advancement through 'entry level' jobs
appears to be declining. A number of studies (Sissons, 2011; Devins et al, 2014) have
raised concerns that low-wage/low-skill work, no longer acts as a 'stepping stone' to
better employment with increased wages and prospects and can in fact become a
'dead end'. Devins et al (2014) found that employees in low-skill/low-paying
occupations and those on non-standard contracts, were less likely to benefit from in-
work training. Fluctuations in market-demand act as a disincentive for employers to
invest in up-skilling workers who may only be in their employ for a finite period, and
may be seen as a burdensome task in a high-speed, target driven environment where
cost-minimisation is a priority. Responsibility for acquiring the skills and experience
that might facilitate upward job mobility is thus transferred from the employer to the

employee. It is within this context that some young people are now offering to work for free in unpaid internships.

There is currently a paucity of accurate data on the extent of internships within the UK, although calculations by the Sutton Trust estimate that there are 22,000 interns who are unpaid (The Sutton Trust, 2014: unpaginated). For access to professional careers in banking, law and journalism, completing an internship has almost become standard practice; the ferocity of competition enables organisations to offer such placements without pay. Without the means to support themselves and meet living costs whilst working for free, critics such as Jones (2014) argue that the practice of unpaid internships is exclusive and reinforces traditional class privilege. He argues that not only are unpaid internships exploitative, they 'effectively allow the children of the well-to-do to buy up positions in the upper echelons of British society' (2014; unpaginated). Whilst Jennifer had successfully completed some unpaid work experience whilst being financially supported by her parents, the remaining participants in the sample agreed that unpaid interning was only an option for those with families who would support them financially;

> I know a lot of people who are living in London and just working for free and just…y'know, doing great things but the only reason they have the capability to do them is because their parents are paying for them
> **(Beth, 23)**

> You're expected to work for free, I have to do an internship as part of my course, its built into the course but it drives me mad that I have to work full-time for no money for three months to get some work experience, it just seems wrong and it's this culture of 'well if you wanna get anywhere you have to work for free'. It's fine if you're rich but I've got no money, I'm temping and I'm selling my belongings on e-bay and I've got a £10,000 loan.
> **(Jess, 25)**

Alongside an absence of 'good jobs', or indeed jobs that would facilitate career progression, increased competition was also recognised by the temps as being a significant barrier in preventing them from securing a career. Many felt that the annual arrival of more graduates into the labour market simply intensified the competition for jobs and consequently, older graduates were simply 'forgotten about'. It was also felt that much targeted employment help either excluded or ignored older graduates, perhaps on the assumption that they had already successfully began their career.

> Its terrifying because you know that, especially when you're a bit older, you've got five years of graduates who are newly qualified than you applying at the same time as you and each year you're getting another year

of graduates all perfectly good candidates for the job and it is very terrifying… its really competitive and scary out there.
(Jennifer, 25)

Its really hard that there's not much out there, and what is out there… y'know the schemes for the 16 to 20 year olds or the 16 to 25 and being over 25…I think the people between 25 and 30 are getting left out…the ones who are getting out of uni when they're 25, 26, they're the ones that aren't getting captured in these statistics…I think it is just as hard for the 25 to 30 year olds as it is for the 16 to 18 year olds, if not harder…because they aren't the ones getting the targeted focus and targeted help.
(Phoebe, 28)

As well as increasing competition from new graduates and younger job-seekers, some of the temps also felt that the postponement of the retirement age would have a detrimental impact on young people's ability to obtain employment. They felt that organisations would be keen to retain the wisdom and experience of older workers at the expense of recruiting new, younger workers who would require more training;

There are people that keep getting made redundant and they've all got relevant experience and I think its quite unfair that they're considered ahead of someone just because they're older, it's almost like discrimination…why are they getting employed over me, y'know I feel really enthusiastic about working.
(Stuart, 23)

Plans with pushing up the age of retirement and also the plans to do away with compulsory retirement, y'know if you're just gonna get people sat in jobs so the people at the lower end like young people, won't be able to come through and fill them.
(Jeremy, 25)

The increasing polarisation of the labour market into 'good' and 'bad' jobs, has only intensified the competition for entry into well-paid, good 'quality' professions. Technological change, globalisation, and the offshoring of some semi-skilled production jobs are cited as reasons for the increasing 'hourglass' shape of the UK labour market (Sissons, 2011) resulting in a 'missing middle'. The absence of the kinds of intermediate occupations that those beginning in entry level jobs could progress into, is making it increasingly difficult for those starting at the bottom of the occupational ladder to advance into better jobs (Clayton et al, 2014). For young people, the imperative to secure immediate entry into a 'decent' professional job becomes even more pressing, as they face potentially diminishing prospects should they fail to succeed.

For this particular group of young people, the experience of 'precarity' stemmed from a dispiriting combination of factors that conspired to keep them 'trapped' in such a

tenuous position. They faced ferocious competition for jobs and access to the high-skill, high pay careers they sought was diminishing due to the changing shape of the labour market. In addition, they were financially insecure by virtue of the debts they had accumulated, saving for the future was difficult if not impossible when meeting simple day-to-day costs was a strain. Life was described by many of the sample as 'a struggle', a ceaseless daily battle to stay afloat which appeared to show little prospect of ever ending. Chomsky 2011 (cited in Hartlep and Eckrich, 2013:82) argues that 'when you trap people in a system of debt, they can't afford the time to think'. Debt thus becomes a tool of discipline, the need to work (and to survive) takes precedent over long-held ambitions and plans. Moreover, it prevents the cultivation of a sense of awareness of the structures and processes contributing to ones own situation (Standing, 2014).

A new normality? – Making sense of Precarity

Since the 1980s we have seen a normalisation of the ethic of the market and 'the embedding of neoliberalism as rationality in everyday social organization and imagination' (Couldry, 2010:5). Harvey (2005:3) also argues that we have reached a point where 'it has become incorporated into the common-sense way many of us interpret, live in and understand the world'. For young people, particularly those born after 1979 who have lived their entire lives within the neoliberal social order, the values and principles it upholds may not be overtly recognised as a disjuncture with, or different to the social and economic organisation that preceded it. The valorisation of the ethic of the market across all spheres of social and economic life is pre-given and is simply 'taken-for-granted'. Experiencing precarity within this context can make it difficult for young people to conceive of the wider structural forces and institutions which are shaping and influencing their lives. Southwood (2011) argues that constant precariousness and the 'continual anxious self-surveillance' induced by precarity provides a distraction from 'wider abstract social or political concerns' (2011:11) diverting attention and energies towards simple survival.

Young people generally are frequently said to be disengaged from contemporary politics, polls routinely demonstrate that young people and particularly those under the age of 25 have 'no interest at all' in politics (ONS, 2014). Low voter turnout from young people is also cited as further evidence of this, indeed only 44% of those aged 16-24 voted in the 2010 General Election, the lowest turnout of all age groups (Ipsos MORI, 2010). However, some studies point to a keen interest in and engagement with political issues but a 'cynicism towards political institutions and decline in trust of

those taking decisions within such bodies' (Tonge and Mycock, 2014:4). Indeed, a series of recent political exposures such as the parliamentary expenses scandal and cash for influence, have undoubtedly further eroded public trust in the political system and the figures that represent it. Such sentiments were evident amongst the participants in this study, with many stating that they had little faith in politicians who were largely 'in it for themselves';

> They (politicians) haven't got enough spine. They'll say, 'well we'll do this' and then they don't and then, 'we'll do this' and then it falls through and you just think well, why are you in the position you're in if you're just gonna, not bother?
> **(Gavin, 24)**
>
> It's all lies anyway…they manipulate the system, everyone does so… it's rare that you'd meet a straight up guy that's in politics.
> **(Phil, 30)**

However, despite distrust in political figures the majority of the participants had exercised their right to vote with fifteen out of a possible nineteen having used their vote in the 2010 General Election.

Table 1: Participants vote in 2010 General Election

Party	Votes Cast
Liberal Democrat	8
Did not vote	4
Labour	3
Conservative	2
Green	1
Ineligible to vote*	1
Undisclosed	1

*Rose was below the legal voting age in 2010.

As is evident in the table above, the majority of the sample had voted for the Liberal Democrats in the last election with many citing their stance on free education and abolishing tuition fees as a key factor in influencing their decision making. Predictably, in light of the Liberal Democrats entering into a Coalition Government with the Conservatives', and their subsequent reneging of the promise to abolish tuition fees (in fact overseeing a lifting of the tuition fee cap to £9000 per year) those participants that had voted for them expressed much disappointment and frustration with the party's performance in government;

They've kind of gone back on a lot of what they've promised and I've lost a lot of respect for them.
(**Ben, 27)**

I voted for the Liberal Democrats last time, that back-fired slightly, thank you Mr Clegg! I'm unconvinced that I'll be voting for him again.
(Jeremy 25)

I voted for the Lib Dems last time although I think I'll be changing my vote! I think it was wrong of the Lib Dems to go back on their free education stuff.
(Stuart, 23)

I voted Liberal Democrat last time…next time I'm voting Labour, cos I'm never voting Lib Dem… I voted on the student debt issue.
(Jess, 25)

The 'broken promises' of the Liberal Democrats had done little to restore faith in politicians' or the political system amongst young people and for many, simply reinforced feelings of apathy and a sense of futility at exercising their vote. Moreover, with parties across the political spectrum ostensibly embracing neoliberalism, it was difficult to conceive of a 'choice' within the democratic system. Fisher (2011) argues that 'TINA', the notion that 'there is no alternative', a slogan favoured by Thatcher in the 1980s, now carries an 'ontological weight' in that neoliberal capitalism is seen not just as the *best* possible system, but is actually the *only* possible system. The continued omnipresence and deeper entrenchment of what is now (in the wake of the 2008 financial crash) a discredited and defective system, begets serious questions about the ideological intentions of those in power (Crouch, 2011). With the Labour Party having long since abandoned its commitment to the social democratic principles upon which it was based, and at best offering only a mitigated or slightly diluted version of neoliberalism, many of the participants felt that there was so little distinction between the main political parties that it simply 'did not matter' which party was in Government;

I'm not interested in the political policies of a government as such but the fact that there's a supposed choice as to how the country is run, I think that's interesting, when really there isn't.
(Steve, 29)

One party is the same as the other, y'know… they're all out to run the country, they're all in it for themselves at the end of the day… It doesn't make an ounce of difference to me who's in power…My vote will never make a difference so (voting) it's just a couple of hours wasted time out of my day.
(Phil, 30)

They are going to do these things anyway, like no matter who I support the EMA has gone the tuition fees have gone up and I don't know….I don't feel like it makes a difference.

(Katie, 23)

Given the widespread dissatisfaction with the Liberal Democrats in light of their performance within the Coalition Government, it was not surprising to see that the voting intentions of the sample had changed significantly since 2010. The participants were asked which party they would vote for if a General Election was called tomorrow and their voting intentions are outlined in the table below:

Table 2: Participants current voting intention*

Party	Voting Intention
Labour	6
Green Party	5
Conservative	3
Don't Know	3
Liberal Democrat	1
Would not Vote	1
Undisclosed	1

(*as recorded in early 2012)

Interestingly when questioned, the majority of the participants held views that would be considered traditionally left of centre, articulating strong feelings against the Iraq War, in favour of preserving and protecting the environment and in support of social democratic institutions such as the NHS and the welfare state;

> I had very strong opinions about the Iraq War when it started in 2003 and went to quite a few war protests against it.
> **(Phoebe, 28)**

> I don't understand how they can say, we're gonna cut loads of jobs and we're gonna cut benefits and then somehow we're gonna demonise people for not going to work. I don't understand how they can meld them into one coherent argument…it doesn't work…it encourages this idea of, 'well I've got a job and I got here by working bloody hard and these people don't work' and it just encourages the idea of the deserving and the undeserving poor.
> **(Beth, 23)**

> I feel quite strongly about benefits and support for people who are not in employment or are below an acceptable level of income, also care provision generally. It tends to be sort of social issues and how they manifest themselves in politics that would be of most interest to me… I feel like the system isn't working now and that it's not acceptable just to cut benefits because we need to save money and to leave people without the financial support that they need.
> **(Natalie, 30)**

174

> I feel strongly about the NHS as I mentioned, because I've worked for the NHS I've seen what they're doing… I did lots of campaigning and things like that and wrote lots of letters to my MP and got very bitterly, angrily into politics… I'm a big believer in government and I think that people that don't believe in it shouldn't be in government. There's a role for the state. I was a baby socialist at university and almost got arrested!
> (**Jess, 25**)

Despite there being strong support for redistributive policies and preserving the welfare state there was perhaps predictably, some criticism particularly from younger members of the sample, and those from more affluent social backgrounds, of a perceived 'benefits culture' that had been engineered by government 'handouts'. The interviews took place in early 2012 when media coverage of the Coalition Governments plans to introduce a household benefits cap of £26,000 was at its peak, and discussions on the need to 'incentivise people to work' were dominating the political agenda;

> I do like the Conservative approach which is more what I've been brought up to, you work hard and you get what you work for, cutting taxes, cutting benefits and things like that to push people off their backsides basically… I think its ridiculous how much money people can get on benefits. It's sickening.
> **(Jennifer, 25)**

> A lot of lazy people that don't want to get a job and can't really be bothered… My best friend, his Dad works for the job centre… and apparently the main thing they say is they don't want to do that job…its just kind of frustrating and its like, no, its not a choice, if you're unemployed you take whatever job you can get…I don't think you have much of a choice.
> **(Lisa, 23)**

> I think the way the benefits system is absolutely appalling, the people on jobseekers are not being checked upon, my friend is on jobseekers and the guy who's meant to get him a job was saying, don't distribute leaflets, it won't benefit you enough, just stay on the dole… a lot of them are absolutely capable of working and they're not cutting down on it enough at all, I think they're just handing out way too much.
> **(Katie, 23)**

Even Rose (18) who had been unemployed and in receipt of jobseekers allowance herself demonstrated a hardened attitude to those 'other' people on benefits stating, 'so many people are on it…it just seems too easy to get away on benefits'. The existence of a perceived 'other' group of 'undeserving' benefit claimants appears to persist even amongst those who are in receipt of benefits themselves and demonstrates an internalisation of the prevailing 'strivers' versus 'shirkers' discourse (Patrick, 2014; Shildrick et al, 2012).

It was interesting that those participants who exhibited more traditionally right-wing views on issues like benefits and the role of the state, were more likely to profess to being 'ignorant' and 'not knowing enough' about politics. Lisa (23) admitted 'I watch the news and stuff…but I don't really bother with it'. In addition, they occasionally made contradictory statements which suggested that they didn't possess a holistic understanding of the relationship between politics, economy and society or the implications of specific policies on particular social issues. For example;

> If there was an election tomorrow I'd vote Conservative…The country went down hill a little bit with the Labour government… just in general, just like the recession…Moneywise I find that my bills are going up but my wages aren't and this stemmed from when Labour got in…
>
> …I don't like all these bankers getting these massive bonuses and that, I think that should be stopped.
> **(Nick, 28)**

> The work ethic isn't there anymore…probably because of the benefits system…Everyone thinks they should be able to go into the job that they can, without actually starting from the bottom…
>
> …(In the past) It just seemed easier for people to get jobs…people were willing to teach people…they started fresh out of school…you can't leave school and start there now cos they're not gonna train people, there's no apprenticeships.
> **(Katie, 23)**

Couldry (2010) argues that neoliberalism operates by installing 'distance' between subjects, rendering social life 'un-narratable' and inhibiting the formation of critique and opposition. Such a process distorts the connections between different aspects of a person's life, thus denying an ability to reflect on, or narrate our sense of self. It could also be suggested that neoliberalism is thus able to render the complexities of social, political and economic life unfathomable. The fragmentary, fast-paced and transient nature of contemporary social life, bolstered by a technologically driven 'digitised world' of instant information which leaves little space for contemplation or reflection (Standing, 2011) makes it extremely difficult to piece together the individual fragments of the wider structural forces that shape and influence our lives. This situation of 'non-stop inertia' (Southwood, 2011) and an inability to conceive of the relationship between manifest social problems such as precarious employment and welfare 'dependency', is why Standing (2011) argues that the 'precariat' are at present, 'a class in the making' and have yet to assemble as a force for political change.

Perhaps it is encouraging then to see that the larger majority of this group of young people demonstrated their support for the preservation of social democratic institutions such as the NHS and welfare and showing some (if very modest) involvement in politics by utilising their vote, taking part in demonstrations or lobbying their local MP. Groups or institutions which question and critique the prevailing hegemonic model have gained momentum since the recession, exemplified in the growth of the 'Occupy' movement, groups such as 'UK Uncut' and exemplified in the 2010 student tuition fee protests. However, the highly individualised and competitive nature of neoliberalism seeks to undermine any form of solidarity that interferes with the efficacy of markets. In addition, the transient and short-term nature of precarious employment hinders any form of collective organisation that could bring about fundamental change. But more importantly, the increasing demonization of particular social groups, such as migrants, or those on welfare, creates tensions within the precariat that prevents them 'from recognising that the social and economic structure is producing their common set of vulnerabilities' (Standing, 2011:25).

Southwood argues that the growth of precarious work needs to be 'exposed in order to be dismantled' (2011:19). Despite some increasing media coverage (Dispatches, 2013, Wintour, 2015) he argues that there is a notable absence of discussions on precarity within mainstream politics and a 'wilful denial' of the reality of its existence and its effects on individual lives (2011:19). The participants in this study, whilst unable to demonstrate the links between their situation of precarity to wider socio-economic processes, were in fact able to conceive of a great deal of inter-generational change when questioned about their parents transitions from learning to earning in comparison to their own. The picture they painted was generally one of increased anxiety and decreased security, although there was recognition that certain aspects of being young today were perhaps easier. For example, some of the temps felt that young people today have more resources to their hands, and listed the internet, mobile phones and other consumer items which undoubtedly 'make life easier';

> We've got like more resources to our hands, we've got the internet and like things like that, like the worlds a smaller place so it's easier to get yourself out there.
> **(Ben, 27)**

> We've got the opportunity to go, 'well, I want to work in London' so lets go on the internet and look for a job. In that way it's easier.
> **(Phoebe, 28)**

Some of the temps argued that the increasing affordability and availability of consumer items such as mobile phones provided a distraction from having to work. They felt that young people have higher expectations and demands but due to a culture of instant gratification, are less willing to work hard in order to obtain things in comparison to previous generations, which was ironic given the assiduity they demonstrated in their own situation of job-searching.

> People expect more now such as like, fifty years ago no-one expected to be able to go abroad or whatever really but where people have got a certain expectation about what they should earn, what they should be able to buy like a giant TV for their room that kind of stuff so I suppose the expectations are a lot higher than they ever used to be…you want to get a certain job and you want to get it now, I think people are really a bit more, quick to want…to get money really.
> **(Danny, 27)**

> We expect money, we expect housing, we expect blackberry's…like, there's this feeling of we deserve something when we don't, people aren't willing to work.
> **(Katie, 23)**

It was generally felt that young people today have significantly more choice in determining which career and life path to follow than what their parents had. It was felt that the to a greater extent, the traditional restrictions associated with class and the decline of communities organised around a particular industry, were creating more opportunities for young people to navigate away from the cities and towns they grew up in, and were more able to pursue their own interests;

> I think probably a lot of young people do feel free to make their choices these days and I think that's probably, permeated across the classes a bit more…I think there are probably still a section of working class people who don't feel like that at all and still have similar family expectations that at sixteen you'll go out and get a job and then you'll…y'know, you'll contribute to family income and you'll stay local and y'know, I'm not saying its necessarily bad but it's…it's restricting if that's not what you want or feel comfortable with.
> **(Natalie, 30)**

> I think we have more choice…I don't think it's easier. I think it's harder to get a job for life but you have more choice of what you could do and there's a lot more scope for setting yourself up and doing something you've had an idea for whereas three generations ago…if you lived in a mining town you worked in a mine…if you lived in a town with a mill, you went and worked in a mill. Nowadays, you can be like, 'I wanna design a website or an application' or something that can go worldwide and isn't restricted to your geographic location.
> **(Ross, 25)**

However, the predictability of pathways from school into employment was felt to offer a clarity and simplicity to life that provided a degree of security, with individual biographies 'clearly defined' and 'rendered perceptually unproblematic' within the prevailing system of social organisation (Winlow and Hall, 2006:18). The decline of such structures, institutions and processes which limited choice and guided prescribed behaviours, has now given rise to greater opportunities, but as a result, greater risks and a heightened sense of anxiety (Bauman, 2007). Such anxiety grows in 'ill-defined conditions' (Sennett, 2006:53) with many of the participants feeling that ultimately, the more prescriptive nature of routes into employment that their parents experienced would be preferable to the insecurity and uncertainty that they are currently experiencing;

> I think having a lot of choice brings with it potentially more anxiety so I think…the bit where you're actually a young person and you're making those decisions might be more stressful than it was previously cos if you were definitely just gonna go work in your Dad's business or whatever then you knew what you were gonna do and that part didn't provoke any anxiety…but the path itself was maybe more straightforward, one or two generations back than it is now.
> **(Natalie, 30)**
>
> Our parents, for them it was quite simple as in…there was a lot more people going into apprenticeships, that kind of stuff, erm, and there was less to think about in a way, less routes of employment you just kind of, you knew what you were gonna do.
> **(Danny, 27)**
>
> Ultimately it's…I don't think it's very good…At least if your future's laid out in front of you, be it through social class or something else, at least you know what you're gonna be doing and y'know. The idea of son following father is no longer an option for as many people as it was a generation ago, so no it's not easy.
> **(Steve, 29)**

Despite developments in communications technology assisting young job seekers in their search for employment, many felt that access to work was much easier to come by in previous generations. The rigorous nature of the contemporary job application process, requiring the completion of lengthy forms, online tests, formal interviews and assessment centres (see page 130 for full discussion) meant that job-seeking was a lengthy and laborious process, often taking several weeks. This was juxtaposed with examples of parents who simply 'had a word' in the right ear and found themselves starting a shift later on the same day;

> The getting a job is harder in that...my Dad left school, he was ten days off his 14th birthday and he went straight into an apprenticeship which was already set up, y'know…I think my Dad's apprenticeship was probably set

up because someone knew someone who knew someone who knew someone…
(Phoebe, 28)

My Mum left school, she's a really smart woman but she just left school and didn't really care really and she just said that when she was sixteen you could walk out of one job in the morning and get another one by the end of the day and a lot of the people I know who are sort of my Aunts and Uncles, they say similar stuff like there was more opportunity, people were more willing to give you a chance.
(Beth, 23)

In addition, the participants felt that declining job mobility was also making things more difficult for young people today. Historically, young people have always entered the labour market into basic and lower status roles with employers expecting them to demonstrate hard work and commitment in order to advance up the professional ladder. However increasing job polarisation within the labour market is preventing the kinds of career progress and upward social mobility that their parents experienced (Bukodi et al, 2014). Many of the participants told of parents with few qualifications being able to traverse the career ladder simply by working hard, proving themselves and learning 'on the job'

I think that…in a way young people have it harder in many ways… I think that there are a lot more pressures to go on to university which aren't necessarily appropriate to every student…my father was able to be partner in a solicitors firm without a degree, he just worked his way up from the very bottom and now is at the top whereas nowadays I feel you're less able to do that, you have to have the qualifications, you have to have all the work experience, you can't just go in and learn on the job so I think opportunities are less, there's so much more competition because everyone has the same qualifications.
(Jennifer, 25)

I think it's a lot harder…during one of my bouts of unemployment, where I get extremely cynical, I sort of sit there going, I'm sure back in the day you could sort of go somewhere and go, 'can I have a job?' and they go 'yeah', or you put yourself forward for a job and say, 'well I might not have the qualifications you're after but I will graft, or I am willing to learn', all this sort of stuff and I don't feel like that's as apparent anymore. I think you've got to have the facts there, the qualifications and if you haven't you're a bit out of luck. It's how it seems to me.
(Gavin, 24)

I think at the higher end there's more choice but at the lower end, I don't know if this is politically correct or whatever but for the working class, I think it's harder, considerably. I think it very much favours, you get ahead academically being able to prove yourself. I think its harder now to rise up the ranks.
(Ross, 25)

The notion that the 'precariat' are currently a 'class in the making' (Standing, 2011), and are yet to fully mobilise as a force for political, economic and social change was certainly confirmed throughout the participant interviews. There appeared to be no signs of a collective 'common consciousness' nor desire to engage with the political system in any fundamental way in order that they might endeavour to change the circumstances they found themselves in. For the most part, their experience and understanding of precarity was fragmented and incoherent, they recognised the individual problems they were facing: debt, inadequate pension provision, unaffordable housing, competitive labour markets and job insecurity, but could not conceive of the wider political economic structure that united all aspects of their precarity. There was however, some recognition of the tension that exists between the prevailing rhetoric of increased freedom, high expectations and choice and young people's actual ability to navigate their transition to adulthood amidst the reality of structural uncertainties, excessive demands and external constraints (McDonald et al, 2011). In addition, their acknowledgement of the 'generation gap' that exists between their parents experiences and their own, belies much of the popular discourse that neoliberalism is the best (and the *only)* course of action to better advance human well-being (Harvey, 2005). Finally, with the overwhelming majority of the participants professing their support for social democratic institutions and recognising a positive role for government, it may be hoped that in time, those within the precariat will come to a better understanding of their current state, and may seek to reject neoliberal capitalism in its entirety.

Thinking about the Future

> How to manage short-term relationships, and oneself, while migrating from
> task to task, job to job, place to place? If institutions no longer provide a
> long-term frame, the individual may have to improvise his or her life-
> narrative, or even do without any sustained sense of self. (Sennett, 2006:4)

The decline of traditional, prescribed routes from school to employment and their stabilising influence on life narratives at a time of great transition has considerably transformed the experience of being young. As has been demonstrated, the clarity and predictability of social reproduction that maintained capitalism for much of the twentieth century has changed substantially within the course of a generation (Winlow and Hall, 2006). The position of precarity that the participants occupy extends much further than the temporary nature of their employment status and impacts considerably on their ability to build a coherent life narrative. Chronic insecurity and uncertainty are not conducive to 'long-term thinking, planning, or acting' (Bauman,

2007:3) and concepts such as maturation, development and progress, suggesting a preordained succession of events, are no longer applicable to biographies lived around such short-term and unstable projects. Standing (2011:18) refers to this 'precariatised mind' as a 'mass incapacity to think long-term, induced by the low probability of personal progress or building a career'.

The participant's thoughts and plans for the future were considerably short-term, immediate concerns were largely centred around finding permanent employment and paying off existing debts. It was felt that only when they had achieved both employment and financial security, could they conceivably plan for the future and make provisions for the longer-term such as buying a house and paying into a pension;

> In five years time…I want to be in a better financial situation so I don't want to have this bloody career development loan hanging over me and I don't want any like…the only thing that's an imperative at that point is that I'm financially stable, because I think I'll just be sick of it by then I don't wanna be pushing 30 and be working full-time and still be struggling.
> **(Beth, 23)**

> It would be wonderful if I could own my own home…it would be nice but until I feel established again it's not something that I'll think about really. At this point I want to get the career development loan paid off, the overdraft paid off and then yeah, that's probably the first thing I'll start saving for but it's not a priority at the moment.
> **(Phoebe, 28)**

> All my debts will be clear and by the time I'm 30, 35 all my debts will be clear and I'll just sit with a beer in the corner and go, phew! One day I'd like to get married and start a family…One day yeah. That's the thing, when all my debts are cleared…
> **(Dave, 25)**

> Hopefully in a better paid job…a secure, permanent job, paying off a mortgage rather than somebody's rent.
> **(Nick, 28)**

The aim of being debt free and in secure employment could not be fairly dismissed as being overly ambitious or unrealistic, and would doubtfully have been considered unachievable by previous measures of what 'adulthood' entails. Yet despite their hopes they were currently unable to foresee such a time when either of these aspirations would be realised. As a result, the significant commitment and responsibility required in acts such as getting married and starting a family were seen by some of the temps as an additional burden or expense that would be most unwelcome in their current situation of uncertainty;

I do believe in marriage to a point…Starting a family? Well, give it maybe ten years and I'd be more interested in kids… I think I'm still too young to have kids, I've still got too many things that I want to achieve myself
(Danny, 27)

I don't mind kids…I don't think I would want any… Not at the minute. It's a lot to take on…I truly can't afford it…it just doesn't…I don't need it. I struggle enough bringing myself up, sorry, I struggle looking after myself but having something that needs all of your attention just so it doesn't starve or hurt itself it's a huge responsibility and I don't think I could deal with that
(Gavin, 24)

I do want kids but the thought of that now is terrifying…In ten years I'll probably have children…
(Katie, 23)

Hum…marriage and babies. I'm not sure. I don't know how to answer that one cos I'm not sure. I've never really given it much thought. Maybe in the future when I'm a little bit older, sensible, wiser then perhaps yes…certainly…I'd be very surprised if it happens in the next five years, very surprised…probably ten years actually…
(Jeremy, 25)

Only two of the participants were married, Nick, (28) and Natalie (30) and none of the participants had children although Natalie was pregnant with her first baby. Most of the sample articulated that they did expect to get married and have children 'one day' but that day was clearly envisaged to be far into the future. As Boltanski and Chiapello (2007) argue, it is implausible to conceive of getting married and having a family when the prospects of the insecure worker remain so uncertain, especially as such undertakings require commitment and present an impediment to potential career opportunities. Statistics demonstrate that the average age for (first-time) marriage for men and women in the UK has been increasing over the past forty years, with the average man now getting married at 32 (up from 24 in 1970) and women at age 30 (up from 22 in 1970) (ONS, 2012d:7). Similarly, the age of first time mothers has risen from around 26 in 1975, to 30 in 2013 (ONS, 2014c:5). Such trends are said to be largely indicative of women's increased participation in both higher education and the labour market since the 1970s. This may be true, but for the participants in this study, it was the absence of job (and consequently financial security) that was cited as the main reason for 'putting off' such traditional commitments;

I guess getting married, late twenties I guess and then starting a family, sort of, thirty cos I'd wanna make sure I was in a job and secure and making sure I can provide all I can provide cos otherwise if I hadn't done all that I wouldn't feel like I could… If I was still temping in my late twenties I guess I probably would put it off actually.
(Rose, 18)

I think I want what most people want really, marriage, kids, mortgage, that kind of thing…Probably much earlier than is realistic. I always thought I'd get married at like 25, kids at 28, mortgage by 30 or whatever but it seems like it's getting later and later because I'm not on the employment path that I thought I would be on.
(Stuart, 23)

Attempting to plan for the future was felt to be a futile and pointless exercise given the continued insecurity of their position and uncertainty of what would happen. There was a general feeling that the future represented an 'unknown', it was impossible to know in five or ten years what job they would be doing, and where they would be living and working and this was rarely seen as a positive situation. Despite the alleged greater freedoms bestowed on young people today and their liberation from the restrictive social expectations and hierarchical organisation of the past, many of the participants expressed a desire for some clarity in order that they could feel more secure. Although Standing (2011) argues that anxiety is the price we pay for freedom, unless it is 'moderated, anchored in security, stability and control' it risks veering into irrational fears and an inability to function rationally' (2011:155)

I've not let myself think about it (the future) mainly because …I always had set goals in that it was, move to England, live here for three years, do a masters degree, finish the masters degree then think about a career after and I've kind of stalled…I thought, 'oh it will be fine, I'll find a job'…My focus at the moment, my goal is to get a job in heritage and that's all consuming. And once that falls into place then…I feel I can think about other things but until I've got that job that I want, the career I've wanted, planned for, then I'm not really letting myself plan more ahead…I'm just worried that it's not all… I can't plan for the future because I don't know where I'm gonna be in six to eight months or what's gonna happen.
(Phoebe, 28)

I feel like I can't (plan) cos there's no stability really. I'm living with friends, my jobs temporary, I don't think I can really plan anything… it stresses me out. I don't like it at all… The unknown. You don't know where you're gonna be you don't know…so my contract runs out at the end of April, is that it? And then I could be just working in a café somewhere, back where I was so you just don't know. I don't like it.
(Katie 23)

Mmm…I'm never very good at looking too far in life… Because I don't see myself as having much in my future at the moment, so I try not to think about it too much.
(Phil, 30)

Bauman (2007:26) argues that it is the 'insecurity of the present and uncertainty of the future' that can give rise to feelings of anxiety and passivity. Individuals, exposed to the vagaries of the market in almost all aspects of their lives, no longer feel in control of shaping and directing their lifecourse, leading to a sense of 'collective impotence'.

Given the sustained efforts of the participants in their attempts to obtain a secure and rewarding career, but the repeated defeats they endured, they clearly felt that despite their best efforts, they currently had little command over the direction of their lives. Two of the participants even went as far as to state that 'no matter what you do, it's all about luck' (Jess, 25) and simply 'being in the right place at the right time' (Danny, 27).

Faced with an unpredictable and uncertain future, some of the temps admitted that they were anxious and fearful about their prospects and where life would take them. Such apprehension and anxiety about what 'might happen' is endemic in the environment of 'constant risk (Sennett, 1998) that precarious workers inhabit;

> I'm worried that I won't be able to break even, I've still got a student overdraft which seems bottomless, it's getting near the bottom now and it's definitely really worrying. It's just not being in full-time work really, I'm just worried that nothings gonna come up and I'm gonna have to go back and live with my parents…it's like falling back on old ground.
> **(Stuart, 23)**

> It's a bit of a question mark cos there's an ideal, and there's a reality. In the ideal world, I'll be having a bit of a pocket of cash in the corner, I've been trying to do that for the last few years but the reality of it is things change, y'know, I could lose my job tomorrow, the landlord could turn around and say, 'right I want the house back, you've got two months then move out'…when I think ahead I think 'well I'm not gonna place me bets on the horses just yet…that's something I've learnt to do over the years…you've got to have that mind frame.
> (**Dave, 25**)

> Yeah I do worry about it. I think…like I say, am I ever gonna be able to buy a house, am I gonna be stuck at the bottom end of a career, y'know….you do, you do worry about it definitely.
> **(Nick, 28)**

> (I worry about) Just money and whether I'll be able to afford a life that's…a good life. I just think that's quite scary… I do think about the future often yeah. Sometimes I feel positive but it depends on what's happening…this job might lead on to something else and y'know, I'll be in full-time work and in a stable job and able to save up and get a car and stuff but there's a chance that I might not and I'll just be back where I was…
> **(Rose, 18)**

Past experience is no longer seen as providing a useful guide or frame of reference for future experiences and increased risk principally means that 'everything is possible and nothing can be foreseen or controlled' (Beck, 2000:77). For some of the participants, the cumulative effect of feeling both apprehensive about what the future may bring, and powerless to steer or direct ones lifecourse through the events that

may follow, led to feelings of pessimism and despondency. A YouGov-Cambridge survey in 2015 demonstrated a generally pessimistic and negative outlook on the future amongst the British public, with 53% of those surveyed feeling that the next generation in Britain will do worse than their parents (compared with only 12% saying standards will improve and 23% thinking they will remain about the same) (YouGov-Cambridge, 2015). In contrast to the stereotypical notion of 'idealistic youth', two of the participants articulated their bleak outlook on the future suggesting that economic stability and security within the UK was not foreseeable for some time;

> When I think of the future (of the country) I don't see stability…I certainly don't see a bright future.
> **(Steve, 29)**

> I think the next ten years are not gonna be great, economically for the whole country and probably including me in that…
> **(Ross, 25)**

Standing (2011) argues that the precariat experience the four A's – anger, anomie, anxiety and alienation and the cumulative effect of such feelings on the individual mind should not be underestimated (Bohle et al, 2004; Vives et al, 2013). The effects of precarity on the mental health of participants was perhaps the most troubling find of the study, as one particular temp surmised how he felt about his current situation;

> I wouldn't say that I was happy…I dunno. I feel like, if I stopped existing, it would have no detrimental effect on anything really, other than my parents being sad…I don't contribute anything significant to society at the moment…I don't think my life has as much value as it could do, I don't think I'm living my life to the full.
> **(Ross, 25)**

It was evident from the interviews that the experience of precarity was both damaging and disabling on individual lives, inhibiting the development of a coherent biographical narrative and inducing a permanent state of temporality compounded by feelings of failure. The ceaseless short-termism induced by the precarious work they found themselves in, their economic vulnerability, frustration with career prospects and anxiety about the future, was directly preventing the participants from making the transition to the autonomy and independence of adulthood. 'Adulthood' as a social category, has historically 'meant the opposite of flexibility' (Blatterer, 2007:783) and is traditionally defined in terms of stability, security, commitment and responsibility. As Howker and Malik (2010:12) argue:

> Adulthood encompasses…family, savings, community, realising ambitions and ideas, stability, even having children. And all these are connected by narratives - those vital stories humans construct for themselves.

The absence of a progressive life narrative, and the inability of the participants to reach these still greatly anticipated biographical milestones within the prevailing cultural and economic condition, (nor foresee a time in the future when they could) was robbing the participants of hope. Ultimately, they were compelled to live relentlessly in a perpetual present, with no possible conception of what the 'future' would look like.

Conclusion

The participants in this study were trapped in a position of precarity as a result of a combination of factors; significant levels of debt (even amongst those who had not attended university) and fierce competition for a diminishing number of 'good jobs' in an increasingly polarised labour market (Clayton et al, 2014) were fundamental in preventing the temps from achieving the employment and financial security they so desperately sought. They were financially vulnerable, in the absence of savings debt repayments and low wages conspired to keep them 'at risk' of economic marginality and it is therefore ironic that their temporary job may have been what prevented their economic (and perhaps social) descent, even if it only allowed them to sit uncomfortably on the precipice. Their position of insecurity was compounded by the fact that they were currently unable to perceive an end to their 'precarity' the durability of their position (in spite of their best efforts) seemed only to add to their vulnerability.

It was heartening to see that despite national trends for young voter apathy (ONS, 2014b; Ipsos MORI, 2010) the participants demonstrated some interest in and engagement with political issues. However, their understanding of the problems they faced was highly individualised and fragmented; debt, inadequate pension provision, unaffordable housing, competitive labour markets and job insecurity were seldom related to deeper political, social, or economic structures and processes. Despite this, they did recognise that in drawing comparisons with their parents' experience of transitioning from school to work (and childhood to adulthood) that things have changed significantly within the space of one or two generations and such change has not necessarily been for the better. Though they felt that young people today generally had more choice in making decisions about their lives, this wasn't borne out by their experiences, with many believing they had little control or command over their future, a fact which led to much apprehension and anxiety.

The relationship between precarity and the ability of the participants to reach the traditional benchmarks of 'adulthood' was evident. Such social markers as mortgage, marriage, parenthood and stable work, have provided a frame of reference for what traditionally constitutes being an 'adult' for a number of years (Blatterer, 2007), yet such biographical milestones were simply out of the participants reach. The insecurity and instability of their situation made it virtually impossible to commit to the emotional and financial responsibility of buying a house, getting married or having children, despite aspiring to reach such milestones 'one day'. More importantly, consideration of the future whilst existing in a state of enduring impermanence seemed to provoke an overwhelming anxiety in most of the participants, with one or two appearing particularly pessimistic about their prospects. Being 'precarious', means being compelled to adapt to a life lived relentlessly in the present, with no conception of anything beyond the immediate short-term, and no prospect of stability or certainty. The effects of this on the mental health and well-being of today's young people should not be underestimated; the expansion of precarious work and precarious lives, is a pressing concern that requires serious attention from policy makers in the years to come.

Conclusion

The implementation of neoliberalism as the driving economic and social rationale in the UK was premised upon powerful appeals to the preservation of individual freedoms, and aspirational narratives of choice, opportunity and social mobility. The idea that human well-being can best be advanced by subjecting all relations of experience and interaction through market competition, was said to be 'a better way of guiding individual efforts than any other' (Hayek, 1944 (2008):37). It was contended that emancipating individuals from the concentrations of 'coercive' collectivity and the intrusive power embodied in the state, would facilitate the arbitration of decisions in an impersonal and spontaneous market (Friedman, 1962 (2002) thus justifying the outcomes of such processes on the basis of autonomy. The reconfiguration of politics, economy and society around such mechanisms has sought to incentivise the kinds of individualised behaviour that is required for markets to thrive, revering the self-sufficient, entrepreneurial, ambitious and risk-taking individual whilst simultaneously denouncing forms of solidarity, mutuality and dependency. The rewards for those independent and hard-working 'strivers', who embody this meritocracy would be borne out not only by an increase in personal wealth and success, but universally felt in a 'trickle down' of economic prosperity that benefits all members of society (Stiglitz, 2002).

Throughout this study it has become increasingly clear that such promises and expectations have ostensibly failed to translate into a substantial material and experiential improvement in life prospects for the vast majority of people. The UK's continued commitment to neoliberalism for almost forty years has in fact, overseen a mass transference of wealth away from ordinary people and into the hands of a small number of shareholders and Company Executives. Since 1979, inequality and poverty have increased substantially within the UK, figures from the OECD demonstrate that the share of national income going to the top 1% of earners rose from 7.1% in 1970 to 14.3% in 2005 (OECD, 2011:351). As a growing proportion of national income has been driven away from wages in favour of profits, a declining wage share, down from 65% in 1970 to 53% in 2011 (Lansley and Reed, 2013:5) has hit lower paid workers hardest with falling average wages 'been borne almost entirely by middle and lower paid employees' (Lansley and Reed, 2013:8). Growing social inequality has been accelerated by the growth of 'in-work' poverty, research by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation in 2011/12 found that 6.7 million people defined as living in poverty were in employment as opposed to 6.3 million who were 'work-less' or retired (MacInnes et

al, 2013:26). The belief that a 'rising tide lifts all boats' has been shown to be little more than an 'article of faith' (Stiglitz, 2002:78). So too, the idea that unfettered markets, deregulated and freed from burdensome state controls can be both dynamic and 'self-correcting', is now becoming somewhat discredited given the global financial collapse since 2008. The necessity for substantial state intervention and a bail out of the UK banking sector which with minimal regulation, had grown to dominate the economy to such an extent it was deemed 'too big to fail', suggests a necessary role for governments to help mitigate against the more deleterious effects of free markets and their profound social consequences.

Winlow and Hall (2013:4) argue that it is important for sociologists to do more than simply 'question the justice of existing socio-economic arrangements' submitting to campaigns for incremental and piecemeal reform within the prevailing order and instead, argue for a more substantial rejection of a system which is seemingly failing to provide the basic material needs for an increasing number of the population. Couldry (2010:64) argues that neoliberalism 'is not a democracy at all but an example of how a particular illusion of democracy can be sustained'. Its continued operation is achieved by the expansion of economic rationality as simply 'pre-given' or 'common sense', (Harvey, 2005) its market-driven logic imperceptibly internalised and embedded within social organisation. Neoliberalism has thus become a new normality, its many faults existing beyond the recognition of those struggling to keep afloat amidst the many demands of busy, contemporary life. Therefore, the first step in dismantling such a project is to illuminate its flaws, injustices and failings and allow those who are most effected by its operation to voice their views and experiences.

This study makes a key contribution to existing debates which both critique and question the legitimacy of neoliberalism at the theoretical and policy level, and how this transmits into everyday experience. It has added to the continued discussion of the composition and experience of those deemed to be within the 'precariat' (Standing, 2011; 2014) as well as the changing nature of youth transitions in the twenty-first century. But more importantly, it makes an explicit link between the changes in higher education participation and the expansion of precarious work with the many other problems facing young people today as they transition to adulthood (debt, unaffordable housing and inadequate pension provision). Critically, this study relates all of these issues directly to processes associated with neoliberal political ideology, arguing that fundamentally, such processes are having a negative impact upon the lives and experiences of young people. By speaking to those who have lived the entirety of their lives under the neoliberal social order, this study has also given a

voice to those whose lives have been significantly affected by such far reaching social, political and economic change, the validity of their views and experiences strongly refute suggestions that this new capitalism is by definition productive, liberating and fair.

Nowhere has this disparity between neoliberalism's rhetorical promises of meritocratic social advancement and the reality of external constraints which prevent and control individual choice been more deeply felt than amongst young people. What stood out most strongly throughout the study was the fundamental disjuncture between the participants' hopes and aspirations against the real possibility of actually being able to realise these ambitions and carve out a progressive life narrative in a market-dominated and risk saturated environment (McDonald et al, 2011). The participants were seemingly influenced by neoliberal agendas at every stage of the transitional process from school to work, expectations of and decision-making about their future was largely informed by prevailing ideological discourses on the importance of obtaining an education, the emancipatory potential of paid work and the responsibility of individuals to equip themselves with the skills and knowledge required to succeed in the labour market. Yet the gulf between culturally informed expectations and the reality of experience appeared to widen with every step of the transitional process. The frustration the participants felt at being unable to fulfil particular career or life goals in spite of following routes that were deemed to lead to a promising future often manifested itself in internalising feelings of 'failure' and increasing despondency about their life prospects.

The growth of 'mass' university education in the UK, driven forward by decades of increasingly market-led reform, had managed to recruit fourteen of the twenty participants with promises of increased employment prospects and higher earning potential. Continuing into higher education appeared to be seen as 'the norm' and this is reflected nationally in increasing university participation rates (DBIS, 2014). As market competition increases in the sector forcing institutions to package and 'sell' their university with carefully selected graduate employment statistics and student satisfaction scores, and with the near trebling of tuition fees, the participants expectations of both the university experience and the value of obtaining a degree were heavily influenced by idealistic representations of corporate and professional careers which enable social mobility. As a consequence, the participants were fairly utilitarian in their views on the purpose of going to university and despite the increasing costs associated with higher education they hoped to see a future 'return' in the form of the so-called 'graduate premium'. Reassured and encouraged by

parents, teachers and peers they felt sure that the growth of professional vocations, promised to exist in Britain's burgeoning 'knowledge economy' would enable them to obtain the kinds of stable and fulfilling employment which would allow them to build a secure and prosperous future.

The participants subsequent feelings on both their university experience and the value of gaining a degree was representative of a broader general trend of frustration, disappointment and pessimism that seemed to resonate throughout many different aspects of their lives. Half of the participants that started university either dropped out, changed course or took a sabbatical because the course was not what they expected, and there was a strong sense in the data that university had been mis-sold. Straddling a difficult terrain between its conventional function as a site of critical pedagogy and knowledge acquisition and competing narratives of employability and workplace 'training', the participants' answers seemed to suggest that the contemporary academe is trapped in an existential crisis. With market and economic agendas driving educational reform away from traditional modes of learning, and students' expectations of university now informed by these approaches, the costs of this ontological dilemma were ultimately borne by the students themselves. Serious questions were raised about the suitability of the university as an academic institution to furnish young people with practical and work-based employability skills and if in fact, such moves are simply part of a broader neoliberal trend of transferring the costs (and risks) of maintaining a trained workforce away from employers and onto individuals.

Six of the participants had made the decision not to continue into higher education, largely this was due to anxieties about accruing significant levels of debt, but also because they felt that gaining experience in the workplace would be more beneficial. The data did reveal some evidence of the persistence of traditional inequalities impacting upon life biographies. For example, it was not surprising to see that those from low-income families such as Dave, who at one point was working three jobs in order to provide for his disabled mother and younger brother, considered the debt attached to going to university too much of a risk. In addition, the lack of cultural resources available to him and the inability of his college to assist him with his university application both discouraged and prevented him from entering higher education. This is in contrast to the experience of Jennifer, whose parents were both Solicitors and could afford to educate her at a private school. Jennifer benefitted from her parents financial security and professional connections and was able to undertake unpaid work experience whilst being supported by her parents. As such, availability

and access to cultural, social and financial resources, continues to play a part in informing and shaping transitional pathways and biographies.

Seven of the participants had undertaken postgraduate study in order to improve or further their careers or in some cases simply to 'ride out' labour market uncertainty in the wake of the global recession. The requirement to adopt an entrepreneurial persona, chasing more and more credentials which 'just might be enough to secure a job' (Standing, 2011:78) as well as the constant emphasis on gaining more 'work experience' shifted the requirement for perpetual upskilling, training and making oneself employable solely onto the shoulders of the individual. Within this context, it was felt that employers' were at liberty to demand more of potential employees and the participants argued that often, such expectations were both unrealistic and unreasonable. This included the excessive requirements placed on candidates within the recruitment process even for basic roles, the increasing use of additional testing, assessment centres, role-plays and presentations, as well as the requirement to perform quickly upon appointment and 'hit the ground running' with minimal training. Such examples demonstrate how several decades of flexible labour market policy, alongside a deliberate curtailment of trade union influence has shifted bargaining power back into the hands of employers, granting them the authority to manage and control labour in ways which are most suitable to productivity with employees having limited scope to counter or reject such demands.

It was interesting that there appeared to be very little difference in the initial labour market experiences of the graduates in comparison to those who had not been to university. Despite their different social and educational backgrounds, all of the participants shared a similarly disorganised and fragmented work history comprised of frequent job changes, interspersed with spells of temporary or part-time work and occasionally, redundancy. Even among the older members of the sample, there was little evidence of incremental career progress or overall job mobility over time. Given the turbulence of the labour market since 2008, perhaps it is unsurprising to find that images of professional progress and career development had given way to a simple focus on economic survival (Bauman, 2007). The only discernible difference is that only four (out of a possible sixteen) of those who were graduates had experienced a period of unemployment, as opposed to all six of those who had not attended, or completed university. In addition, those who were graduates were generally out of work for a much shorter period of time. For this group of young people, gaining a university degree did not provide them with easy entry to a graduate level job,

although it may have served as something of a 'buffer' against more persistent labour market exclusion.

The notion of 'survival', of desperately clinging on to the labour market and some form of employment irrespective of the pay and conditions attached, was echoed strongly throughout the interviews. The presence of an enduring work ethic and commitment to 'having a job' was routinely voiced by the participants as they juxtaposed the banalities of their temporary role with the perceived greater tedium and indignity of being unemployed and having to 'sign on'. There was some evidence of 'othering' those on benefits (Patrick, 2014; Shildrick et al, 2012) even among those who had previously been claimants themselves and the culturally driven stigma attached to unemployment led many of the participants to greet their precarious work with a resigned acceptance (Southwood, 2011). Despite their temporary roles often requiring only menial duties such as filing, photocopying and answering the telephone, most of the participants were keen to broaden the scope of their role wherever possible and happily took on additional tasks and responsibilities when required, even though this usually went unremunerated. Commitment to their temporary job, a willingness to learn and 'up-skill' alongside a continued perseverance in trying to gain a foothold on their chosen career, was representative of a strong work ethic that counters dominant narratives of young people as possessing high expectations and lacking motivation (Chorley, 2013). Echoing strong neoliberal sentiments on the transformative potential of work, there was a implicit belief in the notion that 'work will set you free' and a vain hope that by demonstrating commitment and a willingness to learn, recognition of their efforts may eventually lead to potential opportunities.

Frequently, the participants made distinctions between those forms of employment that were classed as 'jobs' and those which were 'careers', a division increasingly borne out by research on the changing nature of employment in the UK. The growing polarisation of the labour market into 'good' professional and managerial jobs in industries such as finance, information technology and services at the top and 'bad' jobs in areas such as retail, care and hospitality at the bottom, is becoming evident as mid-level jobs are increasingly displaced (DBIS, 2013; Clayton et al, 2014; Sissons, 2011). The consequent 'hourglass' shape of the labour market was recognised by the participants. Possession of a 'job', a term used to describe the menial, low-paid and precarious work that they currently found themselves in, was repeatedly juxtaposed with notions of a 'career', embodying the kinds of secure, lucrative and fulfilling roles that would enable personal and professional progression. The significance of employment as providing more than just a predictable income but also a source of

self-fulfilment and individual expression (Brown and Hesketh, 2004) was evident in the importance they attributed to having 'pride' in their work.

It was generally felt that 'jobs' were in plentiful supply but accessing the kinds of 'careers' that they aspired to was proving exceptionally difficult. More importantly, mobility from jobs into careers and progression from the kinds of entry-level roles that young people have historically occupied when entering the labour market, has become more stymied given the absence of mid-level jobs to progress into. Securing a 'good' job sooner rather than later, therefore becomes all the more important to avoid becoming trapped in low-skill and precarious work, an act which can lead to long-term harm to both career prospects and personal lives (Shildrick et al, 2011). For this group of young people, it was the absence of good quality jobs, and the numerous barriers and obstacles to obtaining the few roles that did exist, that were responsible for driving them into temporary employment.

Most of the participants classed themselves as 'involuntary' precarious workers who felt compelled to undertake temp work in the absence of (or whilst they attempt to obtain) permanent roles. Those participants classed as the 'grinners' (Standing, 2011), who were choosing to temp whilst they saved to go travelling or to fund further study, felt better able to cope with the mundanity and insecurity of such work by convincing themselves that their situation was temporary. Confident that when the time comes to embark upon a career they would be able to secure well-paid and fulfilling work relatively quickly, they seemed unaware that they were temping alongside former travellers and postgrads that had been in their optimistic position some years before.

The growth of non-standard and 'precarious' work, often represented positively for employees as liberating and empowering them from the rigid and paternalistic work of industrial labour (Boltanski and Chiappello, 2007; Southwood, 2011) or providing choice in the form of 'flexible hours' (Duncan-Smith, cited in Mason, 2015:unpaginated) masks the difficult reality of trying to build a life with little financial security and stability. It was clear that the experience of 'precarity' went much further than the status of an employment contract as the uncertainty of such work resonated more widely in the participants' personal lives. Crucial to this was the fragility of their financial situation as low wages and accumulated debts added to their position of vulnerability. Once again it was interesting to find that excluding student loan debt, the financial position of both the graduates and non-graduates were overall very similar, both groups had managed to amass personal debts in the form of store/credit cards,

overdrafts or loans and had done so in order to supplement low incomes. As a result many described that they were 'struggling' financially, some had moved back in with parents and others admitted to using online gambling sites and selling personal belongings on eBay, in order to generate some extra money.

Given the instability of their employment and financial situation, it was not surprising to find that the participants felt unsure and anxious about the future, questioning not only when but *if,* they would ever reach the biographical benchmarks which have traditionally been associated with reaching adulthood such as buying a home, getting married and starting a family (Blatterer, 2007). The aspiration for such milestones was much in evidence, but they were currently unable to conceive of such events as ever being possible, focused as they were on more immediate goals such as securing a permanent job and paying off their debts. Any conception of what the future may hold was met with apprehension, given the enduring nature of their precarity and in spite of their best attempts to 'escape', it was impossible to assess where they would be in five or ten years time with many describing an 'ideal' vs. 'reality' scenario. The realities of engagement with 'ad hoc' jobs, was ostensibly an improvisation of lives around short-term projects and a feeling of passivity and collective impotence (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2007; Bauman, 2007).

Standing (2011) argues that the precariat is yet to mobilise as a 'class for itself' and a force for political change. Private energies are often exhausted in daily survival and a determination to achieve short-term goals leaves little room for contemplating and actively rejecting wider political and economic processes. However, in contrast to national statistics on youth voter apathy (ONS 2014b, Ipsos Mori, 2010) the participants showed a moderate interest in politics and political issues with many showing strong support for social democratic institutions and services. Yet they were seemingly unaware of the wider political and economic structures and processes that connected many of the problems they were facing; issues such as unaffordable housing, debt, precarious work and inadequate pension provision were discussed as isolated issues and seldom related to specific policies or economic decision-making. It was only when questioned about their parents' experience of transitioning to adulthood that unfavourable comparisons were drawn. The prospect of a comparatively lower standard of living and suppressed social mobility refuted any assertions of increased opportunity and choice, as the reality of their own experiences failed to validate such optimistic claims.

The aim of this study was to understand how processes of neoliberalism are shaping and affecting young people's lives and their ability to achieve the traditional socio-economic markets of adulthood. It has become clear that the dual reconfiguration of both higher education and the labour market around neoliberal imperatives, alongside a concomitant decline in traditional patterns of social reproduction has been fundamental in transforming this intermediary period into an extended period of risk and uncertainty that needs to be carefully negotiated and managed. Such risk is justified as an unavoidable consequence of the freedom neoliberal capitalism bestows in which 'either both the choice and the risk rest with the individual or he is relieved of both' (Hayek, 1944:131). As Beck (2000:86) argues, new freedom to shape and coordinate ones life is accompanied by new trapdoors that can 'lead to exclusion' as risk is transferred away from economy and state and onto the shoulders of the individual. The reduction of social life into market exchange poses a risk for young people on a number of levels. Markets operate by creating both winners and losers in a game in which dominant interests prevail and resources for players are allocated unequally. In addition, the 'rules of the game' are becoming harder to grasp in a rapidly mutating global economy driven forward by a need for ceaseless capital accumulation (Beck, 2000). Young people by virtue of their age, lack the accumulated knowledge, experience, resources and resilience to be able to bear the risks associated with a life that is fully exposed to the vagaries of market decisions, without some form of guidance or support. To be young *and* in precarious employment, was to be doubly vulnerable and exposed to such risk.

Yet what appeared most prominently within the course of this research was the omnipresence of risk alongside an absence of *authentic* opportunity. Young people are now faced with a 'perfect storm', a highly flexible global labour market which has transferred bargaining power into the hands of employers, an annual oversupply of qualified labour and a polarised job market increasingly driven by a growth of precarious low skill, low pay jobs of poor quality (Brinkley, 2012; TUC, 2013; TUC 2014). In addition, sustained high unemployment, government driven 'austerity' and the recent economic downturn served to exacerbate an already difficult situation. This, alongside a crisis in affordable housing, insufficient pension savings and increasing personal debt, exposed the participants to such extensive risk that it seemed highly unlikely that any semblance of security would be achieved in the near future. They were in effect; 'swimming against the tide' any momentum they attempted to sustain in carving out their life biographies seemed to be constantly pushed back by forces beyond their control. It is difficult therefore, to give any credence to arguments which suggest neoliberalism has created a landscape of biographical choice and opportunity

when for this particular group of young people, such a landscape was perpetually out of their reach. Being presented with limitless prospects for mapping out ones life trajectory is useless if external influences continue to control and restrict the ability of individuals to act upon such choices, a notion which stands in direct contrast to the 'non-coercive' freedom neoliberalism supposedly embodies. It appears that the new social order has simply substituted previous modes of control with new, illegible rules which serve only to individualise a seemingly inevitable failure (Sennett, 1998).

It would be interesting to conduct further research in the future to follow up where the participants went next. Qualitative longitudinal research provides great potential to explore not only processes of social change but also how they are experienced, interpreted and responded to by the participants themselves across the life course (Neale and Flowerdew, 2003). By tracking the participants over time, it would be possible to relate their experiences to wider labour market and policy changes as well as looking more closely at their work trajectories and how this shapes their personal lives. Did those 'voluntary' temps, subsequently find themselves back in precarious work but this time on an involuntary basis? Did attitudes and feelings about work and the importance of obtaining a career change over time? Perhaps most importantly, it would be useful to find out not only if they managed to 'escape' the precarious employment they found themselves in and were able to secure that much longed-for career, but also to examine if such roles did provide the stability and progression they envisaged. In short, did their hopes for a secure, debt-free future eventually come to pass? It would also be interesting to explore the social composition of precarious workers in the future. In particular, to assess whether the number of 'middle-class' participants in temporary employment in this study were symptomatic of the recent economic downturn and associated job cuts or indicative of a broader process of social change.

In 2005, think-tank *Reform* published a report on the economic and social position of under 35's, whom they consequently dubbed the 'IPOD Generation' ('Insecure, Pressurised, Overtaxed and Debt-ridden'). Whilst there is a general trend for each generation to see their successive youth as 'having it easy', in recent years a growing body of literature and research has begun to suggest that such views are misplaced (Howker and Malik, 2010; Southwood, 2011; Bukodi et al, 2014). Maybe, as some suggest (Blatterer, 2007), what we are actually witnessing is a complete redefinition of what adulthood entails as neoliberalism stalls (and prevents) the achievement of those standard socio-economic markers of what traditionally constituted 'adulthood'. If this is the case, the study of complex and problematic youth transitions may need to

be extended to address how today's young people, grow and 'adjust' to this new social order. Whilst some of the participants appeared to be 'grinning and bearing it', coping with the uncertainty and instability of their position by simply 'getting on with it', there was an underlying anxiety and apprehension that suggests we may be storing up a plethora of mental health problems in our youth population to be gradually unveiled in the years to come (Vives et al, 2013).

Or perhaps more optimistically, it is in redefining adulthood that the wellspring of resistance will grow. As more and more of the educated young are dragged into precarious work, the sense of frustration and resentment they feel about the gap between the rhetoric of neoliberalism's promises of success and the everyday experience of soul-destroying precarity, will stir them into a politics of resistance. Indeed, groups such as UK Uncut, Precarious Workers Brigade, and student involvement in both the 2010 tuition fee protests and Occupy movement may suggest a stirring of opposition amongst young people. Standing argues that they may grit their teeth and keep their heads down for so long, but eventually 'a little extra pressure makes them snap' and they come to realise that 'the situation is unendurable' (2014:382). As young people compare their decreasing life prospects to the experiences of their parents, coming to recognise that cheap consumer items and holidays abroad are no compensation for a life with no prospect of a secure and comfortable future and as the possibility of downward generational mobility becomes increasingly evident (Bukodi et al, 2014), the deterioration of life under neoliberalism will finally be exposed. If one thing can be surmised from this research it is that 'without economic security, liberty is not worth having' (Laski, 1937:51).

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: Record of contact with recruitment agencies

APPENDIX B: Initial e-mail to participants

APPENDIX C: Participant Information Sheet

APPENDIX A: Record of contact with recruitment agencies

The following table is a record of attempts made to access temporary workers to be interviewed in the study. A total of 22 agencies based in either Leeds or Bradford were approached and the table below outlines the timeline of communication, and the responses received (see page 147 for full discussion). False names have been used to prevent the identification of individuals and organisations.

Agency	Date	Contact
TIGER RECRUITMENT, Leeds	05/05/2011	Initial e-mail sent to Office Manager of Leeds Branch, explaining the study and my request to access temps aged between 18-30 for the purposes for interview. An information sheet outlining the aims and objectives of the study was attached
	16/05/2011	Response received agreeing to act as gatekeeper and send out information on the study to all candidates aged between 18 and 30
	17/05/2011	E-mail sent to Faye thanking her for her time in assiting with my study and outlining the timescales of the project - the study is currently been reviewed by the University's Ethical Review Panel so a provisional start date of beginning recruitment on Friday 29th June has been suggested, subject to ethical approval being granted before this time
	21/06/2011	E-mail sent to Faye to update her on current status of study. Currently still being reviewed by the Ethics Committee, informed Faye I will be in touch as soon as clearance is granted
	25/07/2011	Ethical approval has been granted. E-mailed Faye to confirm that she is still happy to go ahead with recruitment
	06/08/2011	No response. Called and left a message with receptionist requesting a callback from Faye
	15/08/2011	E-mailed again to confirm she is still willing to act as gatekeeper and able to begin recruiting participants

	23/08/2011	No response. Called and was told by receptionist that Faye is on holiday and will be back at the beginning of September. I requested that Faye contact me upon her return
	08/09/2011	E-mail received from Faye confirming that she is happy to go ahead with recruitment. Cover e-mail (to accompany participant information sheet) is e-mailed to Faye and forwarded on to all temp workers aged between 18 and 30. My contact details are provided for those that are interested in participating in the study
	27/09/2011	No responses received from potential participants. Telephoned and left a message for Faye to call me back
	30/09/2011	E-mailed to see if it would be possible to schedule a brief meeting to discuss potential ways to gain candidates interest in participating, possibly incentivising etc
	06/10/2011	Called into the agency in person to see if it would be possible to speak to Faye. I was told by the receptionist that she was out for the afternoon. I requested a call back as soon as possible
	13/10/2011	Called into the agency in person again to be told that Faye was on holiday for two weeks and the best thing to do is send her an e-mail so she can deal with it on her return. I explained that I had tried to get in touch with her via e-mail and telephone on numerous occasions and had no response and was told by the receptionist that she was 'extremely busy'.
	20/10/2011	E-mailed Faye a link to the online survey asking kindly if she could forward this on to her temps. The offer of a £10 gift voucher has now been included for those who are interviewed as a small incentive. It is hoped this will bring people forward. Received her out of office but hope that she will forward the survey on when she returns from her holiday
	04/11/2011	It is assumed that Faye has returned from her holiday by now. Still no response, and having not heard from her at all for nearly two months I feel it is time to accept that Faye is no longer willing to assist with the study.
REDLINE RECRUITMENT, Leeds	12/10/2011	Initial telephone enquiry. I was given the e-mail address of the appropriate contact to approach regarding my study. E-mail sent to contact with information sheet, outlining my request to interview temp workers and requesting a response
	20/10/2011	Follow-up e-mail sent
	27/10/2011	Telephoned to speak to contact. Left a message requesting a call back.
DISTRICT RECRUITMENT, Leeds	12/10/2011	Initial telephone enquiry. I was given the e-mail address of the appropriate contact to approach regarding my study. E-mail sent to contact with information sheet, outlining my request to interview temp workers and requesting a response

	20/10/2011	Follow-up e-mail sent
	27/10/2011	Phoned to speak to contact. Left a message requesting a call back.
NATIONWIDE RECRUITMENT, Leeds	12/10/2011	Initial telephone enquiry. I was given the e-mail address of the appropriate contact to approach regarding my study. E-mail sent to contact with information sheet, outlining my request to interview temp workers and requesting a response
	20/10/2011	Follow-up e-mail sent
	27/10/2011	Phoned to speak to contact. Left a message requesting a call back.
VISION, Leeds	12/10/2011	Initial telephone enquiry. I was given the e-mail address of the appropriate contact to approach regarding my study. E-mail sent to contact with information sheet, outlining my request to interview temp workers and requesting a response
	20/10/2011	Response received - awaiting approval from Area Manager
	21/10/2011	E-mail received from stating that unfortunately, approval has not been granted by senior management
SUPER-TEMPS, Leeds	12/10/2011	Initial telephone enquiry. After being passed to the Office Manager I was told that due to frequent requests, Head Office has prohibited any research to be undertaken within the company from outside groups.
PROGRESS RECRUITMENT, Leeds	12/10/2011	Initial telephone enquiry. I was given the e-mail address of the appropriate contact to approach regarding my study. E-mail sent to contact with information sheet, outlining my request to interview temp workers and requesting a response
	20/10/2011	Follow-up e-mail sent
	20/10/2011	E-mail received stating that 'unfortunately we don't have the facility to e-mail all our candidates in a group and being short-staffed at the moment, we don't have time to send individual e-mails'
	27/10/2011	E-mailed back suggesting that I produce paper copies of the questionnaire to be made available to candidates and collected in person by myself. No response received
DISCOVER, Leeds	12/10/2011	Initial telephone enquiry. I was given the e-mail address of the appropriate contact to approach regarding the study. E-mail sent to contact with information sheet, outlining a request to interview temp workers and requesting a response
	20/10/2011	Follow-up e-mail sent
	27/10/2011	Telephoned to speak to contact. Was told she would call back later that afternoon.
	03/11/2011	Called into the agency in person and left 40 paper questionnaires with the receptionist. I sent an e-mail to the contact (who was unavailable when I called in) explaining the request and could she

		kindly get in touch to discuss
	10/11/2011	Called into the agency again to speak to contact who was again, 'unavailable'. I spoke to the receptionist who said none of the questionnaires had been distributed and to try and e-mail my request again. An e-mail was sent later that afternoon when I got home. No response was received
FOUNTAIN RECRUITMENT, Leeds	12/10/2011	Initial telephone enquiry. I was given the e-mail address of the appropriate contact to approach regarding the study. E-mail sent to contact with information sheet, outlining a request to interview temp workers and requesting a response
	20/10/2011	Follow-up e-mail sent
	27/10/2011	Phoned and spoke to contact, she said she was awaiting approval from her Area Manager and would be in touch as soon as possible.
	03/10/2011	Follow up telephone call. Left a message, no response received.
MORGAN GREEN , Leeds	12/10/2011	Initial telephone enquiry. I was given the e-mail address of the appropriate contact to approach regarding my study. E-mail sent to contact with information sheet, outlining my request to interview temp workers and requesting a response
	20/10/2011	Follow-up e-mail sent
	27/10/2011	Telephoned to speak to contact - was told she is currently out of office and to please call back
	03/11/2011	Called into agency in person and spoke to a very helpful lady on the reception desk who was sure that access would not be a problem. I left 40 paper questionnaires and my details and she assured me the office manager would be in touch
	09/11/2011	No response. Follow-up e-mail sent to clarify feasibility of study and ascertain if any of the paper questionnaires had been distributed.
	11/11/2011	Phoned to speak to contact, was told she would call back. No response
ATTICUS RECRUITMENT, Leeds	12/10/2011	Initial telephone enquiry. I was given the e-mail address of the appropriate contact to approach regarding the study. E-mail sent to contact with information sheet, outlining the request to interview temp workers and requesting a response
	20/10/2011	Follow-up e-mail sent
	27/10/2011	Follow-up telephone call. Left a message with receptionist, no response
WORKWISE, Leeds	12/10/2011	Initial telephone enquiry. I was given the e-mail address of the appropriate contact to approach regarding the study. E-mail sent to contact with information sheet, outlining the request to interview temp workers and requesting a response

	20/10/2011	Follow-up e-mail sent
	20/10/2011	Response received - 'Unfortunately my manager is not able to approve this due to the fact that most of the temps have limited access to the internet on their assignments. Sorry but we will not be able to meet your request'.
	20/10/2011	E-mailed to suggest possibility of sending paper questionnaires.
	27/10/2011	Telephoned and left a message. No response received.
SARAH SMITHS RECRUITMENT, Leeds	12/10/2011	Initial telephone enquiry. I was given the e-mail address of the appropriate contact to approach regarding the study. E-mail sent to contact with information sheet, outlining a request to interview temp workers and requesting a response
	20/10/2011	Follow-up e-mail sent
	21/10/2011	E-mail received - 'Unfortunately we are unable to meet your request at this time'
BEVERLEY DENTON RECRUITMENT, Leeds	12/10/2011	Initial telephone enquiry. I was given the e-mail address of the appropriate contact to approach regarding the study. E-mail sent to contact with information sheet, outlining a request to interview temp workers and requesting a response
	20/10/2011	Follow-up e-mail sent
	27/10/2011	Follow-up telephone call, left a message with receptionist. No response
H&C RECRUITMENT, Leeds	20/10/2011	Initial telephone enquiry. I was given the e-mail address of the appropriate contact to approach regarding the study. E-mail sent to contact with information sheet, outlining a request to interview temp workers and requesting a response
	27/10/2011	Follow-up e-mail sent
	03/11/2011	Follow-up telephone call. Was told by contact to re-send information and she would have a look at it and get in touch. Subsequently, no response
WORKWISE, Bradford	20/10/2011	Initial telephone enquiry. Was told quite bluntly that they were currently understaffed and far too busy to be able to assist with the study
TOTAL RECRUITMENT, Bradford	20/10/2011	Initial telephone enquiry. Spoke to Office Manager who told me to e-mail him some information about the study and he would have a look through
	27/10/2011	Follow up e-mail sent
	03/11/2011	Follow up telephone call. Left a message with colleague. No response
R SKILLS, Bradford	20/10/2011	Initial telephone enquiry. Explained my request to the receptionist who placed me on hold and discussed it with the Office Manager. The receptionist came back and said that they would be

		unable to help as it is not permitted by their head office.
KENILWORTH RECRUITMENT, Bradford	20/10/2011	Initial telephone enquiry. I was given the e-mail address of the appropriate contact to approach regarding my study. E-mail sent to contact with information sheet, outlining a request to interview temp workers and requesting a response
	27/10/2011	Follow-up e-mail sent
	03/11/2011	Follow up telephone call - contact said he hadn't had time to look at it yet but would e-mail me back next week. No response
ATTICUS RECRUITMENT, Bradford	20/10/2011	Initial telephone enquiry. Discussed my request with the receptionist who said that they would be unable to e-mail their temps the online survey but would consider paper questionnaires. She gave me the name of the appropriate contact and suggested I call or e-mail them to confirm before sending the questionnaires in the post
	21/10/2011	Telephoned contact who was out of office. Sent an e-mail with information sheet explaining the study and requesting the possibility of sending some paper questionnaires to be distributed to temps
	27/10/2011	Telephoned contact again and left message with colleague. Requested a call back. No response
INTEGRAL RECRUITMENT, Bradford	20/10/2011	Initial telephone enquiry. I was given the e-mail address of the appropriate contact to approach regarding the study. E-mail sent to contact with information sheet, outlining a request to interview temp workers and requesting a response
	27/10/2011	Follow-up e-mail sent
	03/11/2011	Follow up telephone call - left a message with receptionist. No response
BEST HIRE, Bradford	20/10/2011	Initial telephone enquiry. Spoke to John who said that at present he only had about five people on his books who were both temps and under thirty. He would prefer to speak to them before I send over any questionnaires to be filled in. He said he would call back in a week or so
	01/11/2011	No response. Called back and left a message for John asking him to get in touch
	04/11/2011	E-mailed again to see if it would be possible to send the questionnaires out. No response

APPENDIX B: Initial e-mail to participants

The following e-mail was composed by myself and 'Helen' and sent to all temporary workers aged between 18 and 30 at First Place Recruitment along with the Participant Information Sheet

RE: Invitation to participate in University study on Young People in Temporary Employment

Hi

I am currently working along side Laura who is completing a PhD in Sociology and Social Policy.

Laura is keen to interview as many temporary workers as possible for her thesis. Please could you read through the rest of this email together with the attachment and confirm for me whether you are willing to participate.

My name is Laura and I am a funded PhD student studying Sociology and Social Policy at the University of Leeds. I am conducting a study into young people and their experiences of temporary employment and am seeking to recruit participants aged between 18 and 30, who would be willing to spare approximately 1 hour of their time to come and answer a few questions and talk through their views and experiences of temping and how this relates to other aspects of their lives. It will provide you with the opportunity to voice your opinions and help to highlight some of the key issues facing young people in contemporary labour markets.

The information sheet attached provides an outline of the study and how the information provided will be used. The interviews will be arranged at a time suitable to you, and will take place on-site at First Place Recruitment. All interviews will be conducted in the strictest confidence and you will not be able to be identified by the information you provide. If you would like any further information about the study, please contact me using the details below.

As a thank you for giving up an hour of your time, all participants will receive a £10 gift voucher.

If you are interested in participating, please contact Helen to arrange a suitable time. I appreciate that people are extremely busy so if you could spare an hour of your time to assist me with my study I would be extremely grateful!

Many Thanks

Laura Cartwright

E-mail: l.cartwright@leeds.ac.uk

Your help will be very much appreciated.

Hope to hear from you soon.

Keep smiling

Helen

APPENDIX C: PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

The following information sheet was e-mailed to all potential participants.

'Permanently Temping?' – Education, Labour Markets and Precarious Transitions to Adulthood

Information

You are being invited to take part in a research project, before you decide whether to participate it is important for you to fully understand what the research involves and why it is being conducted. Please take the time to read through this information sheet carefully or discuss it with Helen if you wish. Please ask if there is anything which is unclear or you would like further information.

What is the purpose of this project?

The study is an investigation into the working lives and experiences of young temporary workers. There have been a number of significant political, economic and social changes which have occurred in the last 30 years, not least within the labour market. We have witnessed a rise in the number of short-term, temporary contracts and these have come to replace the traditional 'jobs for life' of previous generations. Research shows that young people account for the largest proportion of temporary workers. At the same time, the expansion of higher education and the rise of a global consumer culture, have introduced a range of new pressures into young people's lives, often making them reliant on their parents for much longer, and delaying the implementation of traditional plans like buying a home, getting married and starting a family.

Why have I been chosen?

This project is focused on understanding the views, values and experiences of young people aged between 18 and 30 who are currently employed on a temporary contract. Your opinion is vital in allowing the researcher to fully understand how and why you have come to this particular form of employment, the importance and role that work plays within your life, your experiences of the roles you have undertaken, as well as how this impacts outwardly on your relationships, plans for the future and your interests outside of the workplace.

Do I have to take part?

The decision to participate in the research is *entirely voluntary* and at your own discretion. If you do decide to take part you will be given this information sheet to keep and asked to sign a consent form. **You have the right to withdraw from the project at any time, and you do not have to give a reason for doing so**.

What will happen to me if I take part?

Should you agree to take part, you will be asked to agree to one voice-recorded interview of approximately 60 minutes in which you will be asked about your route through education, your experiences of temporary employment and the labour market, and also on your personal circumstances, relationships, leisure interests and plans/ambitions for the future. The interview will be fairly informal and many of the questions asked will be open-ended – there are no right or wrong answers!

Why will it be voice-recorded?

The audio recordings of the interview will be used only for analysis. No other use will be made of them without your written permission and no-one outside of this project will have access to the recordings.

Where will interviews take place?

Interviews will be conducted at a mutually convenient time, in a meeting room at the offices of First Place Recruitment.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?

Interviewees will receive a £10 gift voucher as a thank you for their time. It will provide an opportunity for you to voice your opinion on a number of issues. It is hoped that this project will help to illuminate some of the key issues facing young people in contemporary society, and support further research into the working lives and experiences of young people.

Will my taking part in the study be kept confidential?

This study has been granted approval by the University of Leeds ethical review panel. **All information collected about participants during the project will be kept strictly confidential and stored securely.** All names and organisations referred to during the interview will be anonymised and appear in the finished thesis under a false name. **You will not be able to be identified in any subsequent reports or publications.**

What will happen to the results of this research?

The primary outcome of this research is the submission of a PhD thesis.

Who is organising and funding this research?

The researcher is being funded by a Frank Stell Scholarship.

Who do I contact for further information?

Please do not hesitate to contact me, should you have any questions regarding this project.

Laura Cartwright

E-mail: L.Cartwright@leeds.ac.uk

Thank you for your time!