

Possibilities, Practicalities and Paying the Bills: Exploring Factors that Shape Graduate Goals

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My background



- NERUPI framework (co-developer)
- Evaluator: Widening Participation Interventions
- Researcher: Youth Identity; Student Identities
- Youth worker
- Senior Lecturer, Psychology
 - Qualitative Research Design & Analysis
 - Social Psychology



Bath Spa University

About Bath Spa

- Small university
- Teaching-led university [Silver TEF]
- 94th (University league tables, 2020)
- Entry requirements (e.g. CCC Psychology)

Bath Spa students

- 79% at least one marker of under-representation in profile
- 66% from households where annual income below £25,000
- 39.4% from NS-SEC 4-8
- 32% from backgrounds with no parental experience of HE
- 31% from Polar 3 LPN [quintiles 1-2] (2018)
- 23.3% with a disability (inc. Specific Learning Difficulties)
- 7.9% BME students

2019-20, Access and Participation Plan

Success and progression

- Widening access to university
- Student success
- Student progression



Graduate Futures

- How (2017-2019) students construct their graduate selves?
- Strategies for achieving future employment goals
- Possible selves (Markus & Nurius, 1986; Stevenson & Clegg, 2010)

Where do you see your future?



'Graduate Futures' is a Bath Spa University research project, which is investigating the career goals its students have when they graduate and the different strategies they take to work towards their ambitions. The research is being conducted in a number of stages and we'd like your help with the online survey part of it!

If you are a second- or third-year student, we'd like your views on the opportunities and services you have experienced outside of your study while at Bath Spa. We'd like to know your views on whether we are meeting your needs, or if there is more that all of us could be doing to support, inspire and deliver a positive graduate outcome for you.

Everyone will be entered into a prize draw to win Amazon vouchers. For more details and to complete our survey, please visit:
<https://bathspa.onlinesurveys.ac.uk/graduatefutures>



Online survey

- Knowledge of extra curricula opportunities
- Engagement with extra curricula opportunities
- Evaluation of extra curricula opportunities

Students' sociocultural background

- First in family
- Parental employment

Focus Group Discussions

- Level 6 students
- What they are hoping to do in the future?
- How they have identified these future goals?
- How confident they are in achieving these goals?
- Long-term and short-term plans
- Factors that will help and hinder them

Emerging themes

- Students experience university very differently
- Students future goals and pathways vary

Career goals

- Orientation: strategic planning and mobilisation and accrual of capitals
- Negotiation: ideal vs practicalities; adaptation and taking up of opportunities

Natural progression

“I think I was always going to go. Cos my sister, I have an older sister who’s five years older, she went to university. It was just like a conversation, like as natural as you progress from primary to secondary school. That progression was secondary school to sixth form, and then sixth form to university. That was just like, er, not even a thing of like ‘why wouldn’t you do that’.” (Jack, 2018)

I got this idea...

“I think I was quite young when I got this idea of university. I’d say I was a child, because I just saw this thing on TV and movies and it looked amazing. Getting to that level was a goal for me, it was something I could set my sights on..., yes...that’s what smart people did- I wanted to be one of those people. I wanted to be at that level. I have two older siblings and neither of them ever went to university.”
(Jane, 2018)

I wasn't ready to get an apprenticeship

“I think it was like...it was end of GCE's. Because I knew that I wanted....I didn't want to finish education- I wasn't ready to get an apprenticeship or something, so then I knew that if I went to sixth form then there was an option to carry on education if I got to that and decided that I still don't know what I want to do, which is what happened..there wasn't a massive, like....there was no pressure from my parents, like-‘you have to go to university’ or anything like that.” (Jill, 2018)

Beyond University



- How do students constitute their possible graduate futures?
- How does sociocultural background influence students' understanding of possible selves?
- How do students negotiate opportunities, possibilities and risks?
- What factors help and hinder the realisation of possible selves?

Sensitive research



Researcher perspective:

- WP students: research subject(s)
 - Disparities in access, attainment and progression
 - Disparate experience of HE
 - Disparities in social and relative cultural capital

**Objects
of study**

Lecturer perspective:

- WP students: agents
 - Disparities in access, attainment and progression
 - Disparate experience of HE
 - Disparities in social and relative cultural capital

Student experience

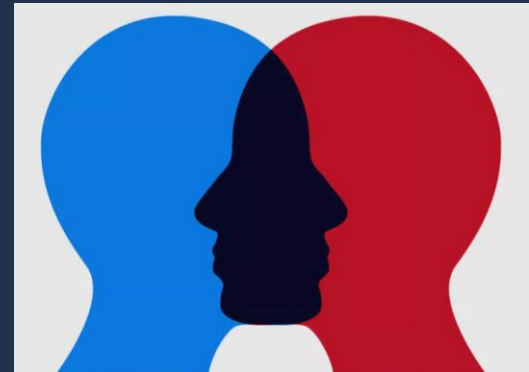
Student identities

Determining factors

**Predetermined
outcomes**

Qualitative Psychological Research Design and Analysis module

- New qualitative research module
- Develop students' qualitative research skills
- Develop students' reflexivity
- Careers and employability element



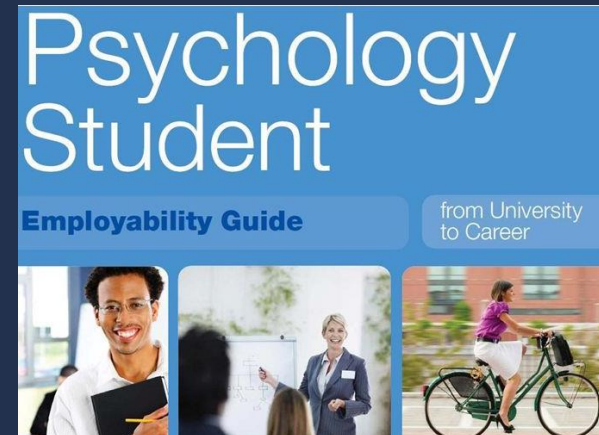
Designing the module

- Careers element integral to module, not bolt-on.
- Integrated into design of two assessments
 - Employability Portfolio
 - Qualitative practical report



Employability Portfolio

- HEA student employability guide exercises:
‘Personal profile’
- Identify ‘graduate-level’ opportunity they could apply for (course/job)
- Produce a CV
- Produce supporting statement/
covering letter



Qualitative practical project

- Design, conduct and write up small qualitative project
- Formulate a research question
- Search/review relevant research
- Devise an interview schedule
- Conduct semi-structured interview
- Transcribe interview data
- Conduct Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006)
- Include reflexivity section



Research Topic

- Graduate career choices
- Future career/education pathways
- Careers/sectors – appeal to particular groups
- Factors that influence students' choices
- Factors that help and hinder student progression
- Ideal careers vs practical options
- Usefulness of higher education
- How students plan their futures
- Usefulness of placements

Avoid

- Personal and sensitive areas
- Vulnerable individuals or groups



Key reading

- Possible selves (Markus and Nurius, 1986)

Additional reading

- Stevenson, J., Clegg, S. (2011) Possible selves: students orientating themselves towards the future through extracurricular activity. *British Educational Research Journal*, 37(2): 231–246
- Harrison, N. (2018) Using the Lens of 'Possible Selves' to Explore Access to Higher Education: A New Conceptual Model for Practice, Policy and Research. *Social Sciences*, 7(10): 1-21



Possible selves: 'reflexive'

thinking tool

Useful for considering...

- How students constitute a graduate identity?
- How students differentiate between 'realistic'/'unrealistic' goals?
- How students orientate themselves towards future goals?
- How students assess their capacity to achieve goals?
- How students evaluate benefits/risks of career choices?
- How background factors influence career choices/trajectories?
- How students understand applications of degree/skills/attributes?

Critical reflexivity

What factors might influence how students' constitute possible selves?

What factors might impact on what is 'possible' for students in different contexts?



Students research

questions

- How do students decide what they want to do when they graduate?
- How does completing a degree influence a student's views on postgraduate study?
- How does completing a degree influence a student's perspective on their future options?
- Why does a student choose to progress to postgraduate study?
- What role do parents play in students' academic and career choices?
- What factors influence a female student to pursue a career in science?
- How does a students' assessment of their academic success influence their future career goals and aspirations?
- How do students evaluate the usefulness of their degrees in terms of achieving future goals?



Reviewing WP literature

- Reading and reviewing literature, which ‘theorises’ their lives

“This project is really getting to me. It’s just I am going through so much shit to do this degree and it’s like I am reading about my life”



Seminars – Critical safe spaces

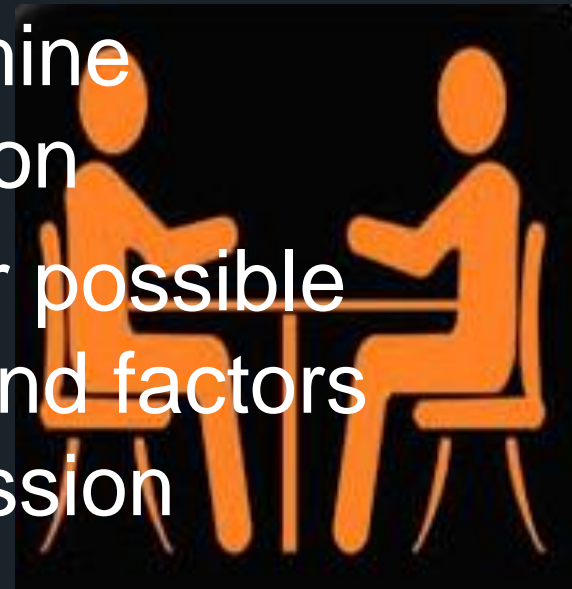
- Developing research design and analysis skills

Reflexivity

- Critical engagement with research literature
- Critical discussion about Higher Education and postgraduate education/employment sector and intersectional factors
- Critical reflection on personal circumstances/goals/strategies/challenges
- Social identification: First Generation students

Semi-structured interviews

- Practical opportunity: design interview schedule; develop interviewing skills
- Investigative opportunity: examine pertinent research topic/question
- Reflexive opportunity: consider possible selves, orientation strategies and factors than impact on student progression



Personal reflexivity

Extracts from students reports

“On a personal level, I have a lot in common with my participant, in terms of route of study and considerations for the future. This not only meant that in design of the interview I was considering my own answers to questions, but also meant that throughout the interview I was linking to my own experiences and views, shaping the analysis of the data.”

“This is particularly relevant to me as I am a first-generation student, and this research made me feel like an active participant trying to gain help and support for the first-generation students who need it as I will be thinking about post graduate options in a year’s time.”

“As an individual who would like to become a primary school teacher myself, I believed it would be interesting to investigate how another individual’s own experiences have influenced their own decisions to go into teaching.”

“As an insider researcher I may have a shared understanding of the student as I faced factors that influenced my decision in choosing a career path therefore, I wanted to find out if other people faced similar challenges.”

“Out of all the questions I could have asked, I chose ‘What do you plan on doing with your degree ?’. I found that most of my friends and classmates have pursued further education because of their parents influence and pressure from them, not wanting to end up without a job , or they just want to make money. Additionally, I noticed that most students who are in university do not know what they are going to do with their degrees. I wanted to find out from a student who knew exactly what he/she wanted to do with their degree to understand the process of the decision making, what influenced their decisions and what helps them achieve their future goals.”

Thank You

Any Questions?