

NERUPI Student Progression and Employability Event 22nd Nov 2023

Classed based inequality in graduate employability and progression outcomes: Lessons from the Paired Peers project

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Overview of session

- Constructions of graduate success
- Reimagining constructions of graduate success – making a life, not just making a living
- Background to project
- Key findings PP1 & PP2
- Policy recommendations

Constructions of graduate success

Contemporary policy emphasis on employability, employment outcomes and graduate earnings – ‘learn to earn’:

- ❖ Employability skills
- ❖ The ‘graduate labour market’
- ❖ The ‘graduate job’
- ❖ ‘High-skilled’ and professional roles
- ❖ The ‘graduate premium’ measured by financial returns of a degree

Believing the dream of graduate success

“I’m going to get this really amazing job, and I’m going to change the world, and I’m going to be middle-class, then I’ll have, like, a great amount of money coming in, and I’ll have a nice suburban house and drive a jeep.”

Jasmine, w/c, UWE

The Paired Peers participants are part of the millennial cohort (born between 1981 and 1996): What we've called 'the degree generation'

Constructions of graduate success set against the context for 'the degree generation':

- ▶ **Increasing participation:** 47% participation rate for 18–30 yr-olds 2010 in England (DBIS, 2011)
- ▶ **Increasing numbers of graduates:** from 17% of UK population in 1992 to 38% in 2013 (when our participants graduated) (ONS, 2013)
- ▶ **Increasing costs:** Tuition fees of £3k in 2010/11 to £9k from 2012/13 (£1k in 1998/99)
- ▶ **Decreasing graduate premium:** Millennial generation grads aged 25 earned 11% more than non-grads; Generation X graduates earned 19% more than non-grad peers
- ▶ **Graduate unemployment:** 13% in 2014 (BIS, 2014)
- ▶ **Graduates in 'graduate'/high skill jobs:** 68% in 2014 (BIS, 2014)

Re-imagining constructions of graduate success: Making a life, not just making a living

- ▶ I would like to stay around this area, I'm a home bird. I love mum, dad I've got nan, grandad, I've got my sister who lives around here, and I love where I live...I play skittles on my mum's skittles team. I'm on the darts team at the local pub. (Ruby, w/c, UWE)
- ▶ Just to have a family and to have a job that I can sustain myself. I don't necessarily want the most high paid job in the world, I'd rather not be so stressed out and just have a job that I can live on the wages and splash out now and again, but I don't necessarily want like a stressful high rolling job. (Sophie, w/c, UWE)
- ▶ I think a good job would be something that you enjoyed really and was diverse, so it wasn't boring, it challenged you, it paid a decent wage, yeah and just kind of gave you a purpose [...] there's no point having a really, really good job that pays loads and loads of money if you really hate it or you don't find any sort of fulfilment out of doing it, it's sort of striking a balance I think between those two things. (Jade, w/c, UoB)

Making a life, not just making a living

- ▶ Escaping precarity and finding security (not the same as escaping your class background)
- ▶ Avoiding risk of unemployment, or poorly paid work (when there's no fall-back option e.g., 'bank of mum and dad')
- ▶ Enjoying work and workplace colleagues
- ▶ Spending time with friends
- ▶ Staying close to family

Unlike the activities of the middle-classes that accumulate value for the future, the practices of the working-classes that are valued such as 'being with, hanging around, listening to, being funny, sharp, anti-pretentious, being caring...cannot be objectified into an event and measured' (Skeggs, [2015](#), p. 216)

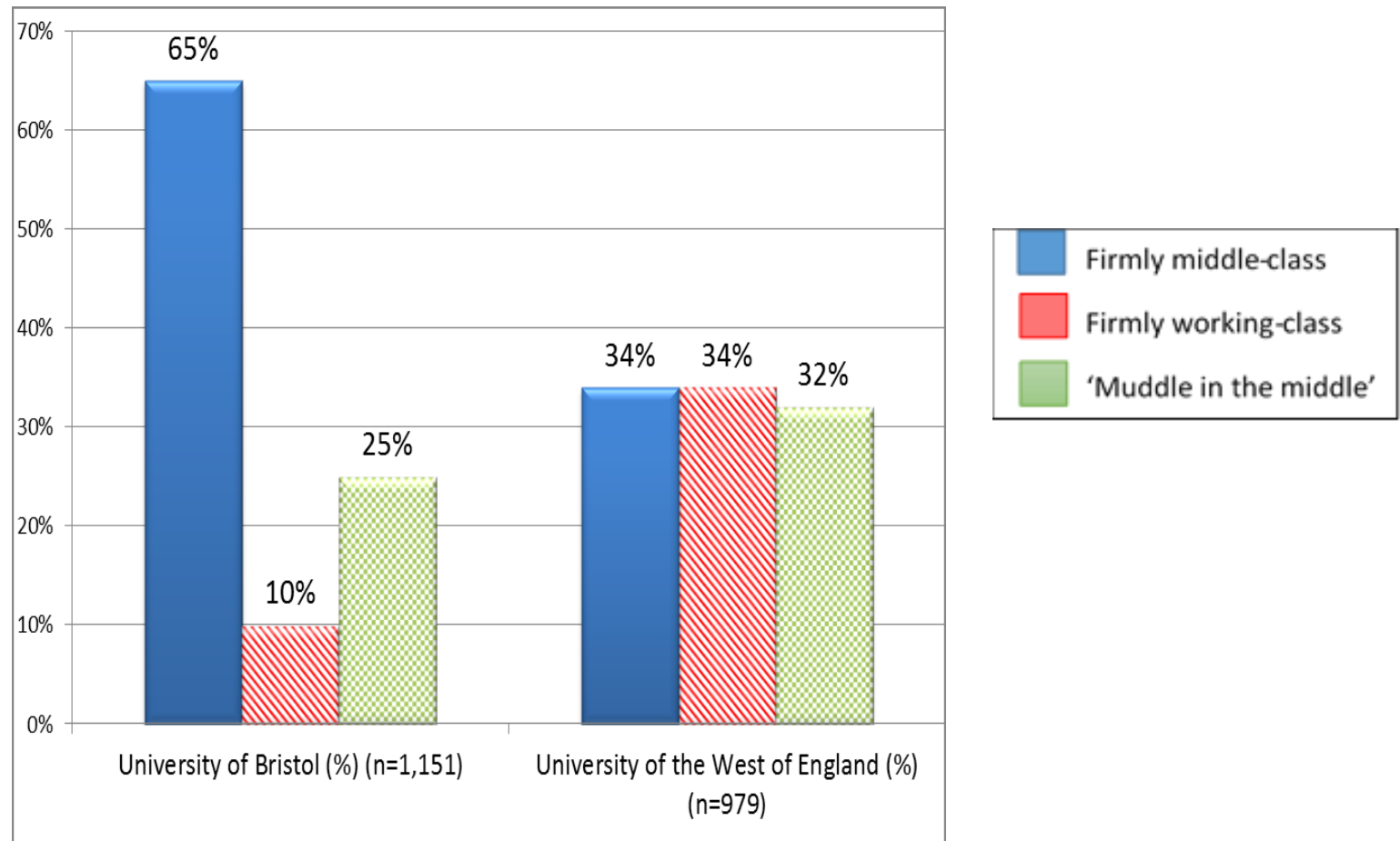
THE PAIRED PEERS PROJECT – A longitudinal qualitative study, funded by The Leverhulme Trust

- ▶ Aims:
 - study of impact of class and gender on student experience and outcomes
 - exploration of HE's role in promoting and/or hindering social mobility (in 2010 a mantra of all political parties)
- ▶ Phase 1 (2010–13): *The impact of class on student university experience*
- ▶ Tracking initial cohort of 88 students from UWE and UoB, 'paired' by class and discipline
- ▶ Phase 2 (2014–17): *Moving On Up? Graduates in the Labour Market*
- ▶ Followed 56 of cohort into labour market, after a year's gap.
- ▶ Interest in the capitals (social, economic and cultural) brought into university and subsequently acquired and utilized e.g., in employment market

Methods

- ▶ Students drawn from 11 disciplines taught at both UWE and UoB (biology, drama, economics, engineering, English, geography, history, law, politics, psychology, sociology)
- ▶ Assigned a class and selected on basis of short survey of all students in each discipline (n=2,130) using various factors including UCAS WP indicators
- ▶ Interviewed twice yearly in Phase 1 and four times over 3 years in Phase 2
- ▶ Other data collected: e.g., diaries, time logs, mapping of city use, mind maps, focus groups, photos, life history timelines, social media use

Class composition of sample



Key Findings Phase 1

- ▶ Both class groups acquired similar educational capital
- ▶ M/C students utilized economic and social capital to build CVs, secure internships, and gain advice through social networks
- ▶ W/C students hampered by lack of such capitals e.g., could not take up unpaid internships, had to work p/t term-time and holiday periods, limiting CV building opportunities
- ▶ Male students more likely to have clear career objectives, prioritise pay and promotion
- ▶ Female students less clear about careers, spoke of wanting to 'contribute to society'



Key findings Phase 2

- ▶ Graduates enter hypercompetitive labour market; some gain stable, well-paid jobs, but many experience precarity
- ▶ A strong 'class penalty' endures, and workplace cultures of casual racism and sexism
- ▶ Gaining a degree and entering graduate labour market now involves greater investment and accumulated debt
- ▶ A culture of meritocratic individualism fostered by neoliberalism raises expectations which may be frustrated



Key findings Phase 2

- ▶ Many negotiated entry into 'graduate work', utilizing skills, assets, determination and resourcefulness. This was generally W/C young people
- ▶ Construction of 'graduate' is as person of value, someone who's earned a degree and is entitled to labour market rewards
- ▶ But, not all grads have equal recognition, especially given UK's stratified HE system
- ▶ Some grads have greater symbolic recognition than others, being constructed in policy as the 'right' graduate



Concluding thoughts and recommendations

Implications for HE Policy and Practice

Alongside structural and cultural change, students and graduates from W/C backgrounds need access to resources and capitals

- ▶ Provide *concerted* intervention and *targeted* assistance for students from w/c backgrounds, and others facing disadvantage, which m/c students get from their families, schools and networks (Bathmaker *et al.*, 2016; Lareau, 2003)
- ▶ Offer **active assistance** for students from ‘knowledgeable others’, e.g., university course tutors and mentors from the world of work, specifically targeted at those from disadvantaged backgrounds, and **continuing beyond graduation**
- ▶ **Challenge taken-for-granted assumptions** that all graduates want to move away from their home area and work in a ‘top firm’
- ▶ Provide knowledgeable **support** for all sorts of future graduate employment

Implications for the workplace

- ▶ **Who** do organisations **recruit** for placements and graduate roles?
 - What counts as ‘**experience**’? (i.e., placements vs. working as a sales assistant)?
 - Can they reimburse the cost of travelling for interviews?
- ▶ How are the **graduate roles** structured?
 - Can organisations offer **remote or hybrid working** options to reduce the costs of living in London?
- ▶ **Schemes for career development** for minoritized groups (social class, gender, etc.)

Implications for state policy

- ▶ Current govt. policy focuses on the ‘right sort of graduate’ regarding earnings/particular jobs. Universities must contest this to acknowledge the variety of ‘graduateness’: our participants became responsible, mature, secure, stable citizens, so valuable to society
- ▶ More broadly, we must oppose attempts to channel w/c students into vocational education streams e.g., T levels
- ▶ Campaign with trade unions to fight for better-paid secure jobs and end precarity
- ▶ And FINALLY: a huge threat to the future of this and successive generations is the climate catastrophe. Universities and creative young people should combine their skills and knowledge to produce positive critical thinking about how to reconfigure our society

The Degree Generation: The Making of Unequal Graduate Lives.

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Bathmaker, A.M., Ingram, I., Abrahams, J., Hoare, T., Waller, R., and Bradley, H. (2016) [Palgrave Macmillan]

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For more information about the
paired peers project:

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