

# Moving on: class, Race and Gender in Progression from Higher Education

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New book: Ingram, N., Bathmaker, A.M. et al (2023) *The Degree Generation: the making of unequal graduate lives*, Bristol: Policy.

# About the Paired Peers project



**Overall aim: to consider the classed experience of university in two different types of institution in the one city, and to explore the complexities of social mobility through education**



- ▶ Phase 1: Cohort of 90 students from UWE/UoB tracked through UG degree (2010-2013)
- ▶ Phase 2: 57 graduates tracked through labour market transitions (2014-2017)
- ▶ Matched pairs from 9 subjects taught at both HEIs
- ▶ PP1 Biannual interviews, plus diaries, time logs, maps etc (interviews 1-6)
- ▶ PP2 (Interviews 7-10).
- ▶ All remaining participants in part 2 were in some form of employment or continued to study (self selection bias)

# Graduate labour markets

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- As the growth of graduate labour markets slow down across European countries and the number of graduates increase, it is timely to consider issues of social class and social mobility in high skilled employment.
- In 2022, more young people than in previous decades are accessing universities globally, with many countries seeing an increase in participation from traditionally under-represented groups.
- Concurrently, however, the link between education and employment is weakening, and this presents an interesting point of tension in the connection between capitals and labour market outcomes.
- In the 'degree generation', the cultural capital of higher level accreditation is losing its value on the labour market, and consequently other aspects of capital are operating as markers of differentiation and the locus of symbolic value.
- Embodied cultural capital, in particular, has become a key form of capital to be mobilised in producing positive graduate outcomes, and this paper will demonstrate its importance in the employment transition processes for young leavers of higher education.

# Graduate outcomes and employability within the UK Higher Education policy landscape

- The percentage of the UK population classified as a graduate rose significantly from 17% in 1992 to 38% in 2013 (ONS 2013)
- This *massification* of higher education has resulted in an important generational shift in degree qualification status for the millennial cohort (Finn et al 2021) who are now widely regarded in academic literature as ‘the degree generation’ (Bathmaker et al 2016).
- At the same time, the returns to higher education (understood as the increased earnings linked to higher education study) have been diminishing (Boero et al 2019).
- In a comparison of data from different birth cohorts, Boero et al show that the millennial cohort of graduates at age 25 earn 11 percent more than their non-graduate counterparts but that this compares negatively with the previous generation (Generation X) of graduates, who earned 19 percent more than their non-graduate peers.
- Contemporary graduates now face both substantial underemployment and a struggle to find work that utilises their knowledge and skills, and this continues to disproportionately affect those from working-class backgrounds (Elias et al 2021).

# Employability approaches

- Many universities have adopted an approach to enhancing employability that places the emphasis on developing individual skills and attributes (Burke and Christie 2019)
- University departments held to account for their students' performance in the Graduate Outcomes Survey and its impact on TEF awards.
- Institutional level assumption that enhancing employability through the development of skills will itself lead to better results
- Tackling underlying structural causes of social inequality and labour market opportunity is a task beyond the control of the education sector.
- Tomlinson (2017) advocates for increased understandings of the sorts of capital that graduates need to enhance employability.
- This goes beyond developing additional skills, to consider the importance of forms of social and cultural capital, such as building networks and engaging in valued forms of work experience.
- However, the problem with an approach based on enhancing employability at the individual level is that structural issues are regularly denied or at least obscured (Moreau and Leathwood 2006).
- Failure to take account of a myriad of important factors that impact on inequalities in access to employment, such as: race, ethnicity, social class, gender, disability, regional disparities in relation to opportunity and institution attended.

# The making of unequal graduate lives

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Embodied cultural capital and transitions to the labour market

Two illustrative narratives

- Adele
- Luke

# Adele – working-class/mixed race/woman/University of the West of England graduate

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Was working part-time fundraising for a charity whilst studying

Went full-time in this role upon graduation (history degree)

Not ideal job but was grateful to have work

Aspired for more but struggled to move on




# Adele's struggles for symbolic recognition

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As soon as I walked in I just felt like they had disengaged immediately. I don't know if it's because they looked at me and thought 'well no we don't like the look'

As soon as I walked in I think I was like 'no, it's not for me' perhaps I think sometimes that affects your performance in an interview as well.

I had to do a presentation, it was one of the best presentations I've done, I was cracking jokes and I had a....you know we were talking beforehand, like personally, just about different things, and that kind of set the scene and it made me a lot more relaxed when I was doing my presentation. But other presentations, like my leg's been going and I've been really....and I was just like 'oh', it just made so much more of a difference.





# Luke – middle-class white man

## University of Bristol graduate

- ▶ Returns to family home after graduating (Biology degree)
- ▶ Spent four months ‘messing around’ and travelling
- ▶ Described getting a graduate job (in a very congested graduate labour market) as ‘easy’
- ▶ Took a job in recruitment then quit after several months
- ▶ Rebranded himself in technology
- ▶ Lands a well paid job in tech that he admits he wasn’t qualified for.

# Luke continued

But anyway, this guy [recruitment agency] called me up and was just like 'oh yeah I've got a job at an Investment Management firm doing IT' and I was like 'how have you actually managed to find me'. And it was because of the key word searches on my CV dealing with technology. So I think he actually also kind of lied on my cover sheet a little bit and said that I had like practical experience with working with the technologies that I said on my CV. And I know they would have recruited me, but I've only got like theoretical knowledge. And I said this straight up in the interview, because again I went to the interview, like straight up 'I know nothing about the practical experience of computers' and they were like 'that's fine, yeah'. But the thing about this company is they hire...they don't hire sort of anyone who's proficient in IT, they hire graduates who have like intelligent sort of personas and grades. So it's people from Oxford erm...