Graduates' employment and the discourse of employability: a critical analysis

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In a context of considerable changes in the labour market and higher education sector in the UK, a discourse of employability has become increasingly dominant. Universities are urged to ensure that they produce 'employable' graduates, and graduates themselves are exhorted to continually develop their personal skills, qualities and experiences in order to compete in the graduate labour market. Drawing on a study of 'non-traditional' graduates from a post-1992 inner-city university in England, this paper offers a critical appraisal of the discourse of employability. In contrast to assumptions of a level playing field in which graduates' skills and personal qualities are the key to their success in the labour market, social class, gender, ethnicity, age, disability and university attended all impact on the opportunities available. It is argued that the discourse of employability, with its emphasis on individual responsibility and neglect of social inequalities, has potentially damaging consequences for these graduates.

Introduction

In a context where post-industrial economies are described as more and more competitive and knowledge-driven, and where human capital theories represent the backdrop against which policies are drafted, enhancing the qualifications and skills of the workforce has been perceived by the UK government as a way to increase national growth and prosperity. Such beliefs have resulted in increased pressure on Higher Education Institutions, and the 'employability' of graduates now stands high on the Government agenda.

Graduates' experiences of the university-work transition have been transformed in relation to changes in Higher Education and the labour market. There is evidence that the returns graduates can expect from higher education are less certain than in

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the past (Brown, 2003; Taylor, 2005) and that different groups of graduates receive different levels of returns, depending for example on gender, ethnicity and social class (Connor *et al.*, 1997, 2004; Elias *et al.*, 1999; Blasko *et al.*, 2002; Smetherham, 2004). Yet, we know relatively little about the interpretative frameworks mobilised by graduates to make sense of their anticipated or actual experiences of post-graduation employment. A key question the paper attempts to answer is: to what extent do graduates' discourses reproduce or challenge the dominant policy discourse of employability?

The paper begins with an account of the changing context of graduates' employment, and moves on to critically explore the discourse of employability. This discourse is then paralleled with graduates' experiences and perceptions of the labour market, drawing on data collected through a telephone survey and semi-structured interviews with graduates from a post-1992 inner-city university.

The changing context of graduates' employment

The transformations of higher education and the labour market

In recent decades, the higher education system in the UK has undergone major transformations. The number of students nearly doubled between 1991 and 2001 (DfES, 2003a), and with a 37.4% graduation rate, the United Kingdom is now well above the OECD average (OECD, 2003).[1] The development of 'mass' higher education, mainly through the post-1992 universities (Scott, 1995), has been associated with a relative diversification of the student body, though middle-class students remain widely over represented in HE (Archer *et al.*, 2003a).

There have also been significant changes in the labour market over the last 20 years. Changes in occupational structures and in employers' expectations mean that a degree is more often a pre-requisite for a job, including those jobs for which a degree was not traditionally required (Scott, 1995). Moreover, the development of an 'insecure workforce', with less predictable careers, now extends to all segments of the labour market, including to occupations for which a degree is usually necessary (Heery & Salmon, 2000).

In relation to these transformations, graduates have become more likely to initially enter jobs not considered to require a degree (Meager, 1999) and/or jobs characterized by 'non standard' forms of employment (e.g. non full-time or long-contracted employment). Graduates' unemployment has also risen, with 6.8% of first-degree graduates with a known destination unemployed in 2001–02 (DfES, 2003a), something that compares with 6.2% in 2000–2001 (DfES, 2002a) and 5.4% in 1999–2000 (DfES, 2001). Competition between graduates has increased[2] (AGR, 2003), and 'returns' from HE have become less obvious. As Brown notes, 'As opportunities for education increase, they are proving harder to cash-in' (2003, p. 149). Despite questions about the returns graduates can expect from gaining a degree,[3] UK graduates remain in a favourable position overall, both in comparison with UK non-graduates (Couppié & Mansuy, 2000) and graduates from other EU countries (Brennan *et al.*, 2001). Still,

all graduates do not benefit to the same extent from having a degree (Archer *et al.*, 2003b) and research shows that women graduates, graduates from 'new' universities, minority ethnic groups and/or working-class backgrounds are likely to benefit less from having a degree in terms of employment opportunities and/or salary. Elias and colleagues (1999) reported that even 3 and a half years after graduation, non-graduate occupation was associated with gender, low entry qualifications, degree class and particular degree subjects, all factors also impacting on the level of earnings. Unemployment was also associated with class of degree, as well as gender, age and ethnicity. Moreover, they noted that institutional effects persist when students' personal characteristics and degree subject are controlled for. Connor *et al.* (2004) found out that a slightly higher proportion of minority graduates who enter employment take up professional or managerial jobs than white graduates. Minority ethnic graduates are however more likely to undertake part-time jobs, as are women graduates. Blasko and colleagues (2002) identified differences in employment outcomes on the basis of ethnicity, the subject studied and the type of institutions. Smetherham (2004) found that the influence of gender remains even among those graduates who have a first class degree.

The unfolding of the discourse of employability

As Gazier notes (1999, quoted in Garsten & Jacobsson, 2003), the term 'employability' has been in use since the early twentieth century, with its meaning changing over time. Yet, in the context of an economy described as global, 'knowledge-driven' and increasingly competitive, its use seems to have sharply increased in policy discourses. For example, the UK Government Skills Strategy White Paper states that 'The global economy has made largely extinct the notion of a "job for life". The imperative now is employability for life' (DfES, 2003c). Such developments are not specific to HE, nor to the UK. Within EU policy, employability was introduced by the 1988 Regulation on the Structural Funds and the related 1988 Regulation of the Social Fund (Brine, 2002), and 'employability' is one of the four 'pillars' of the European Employment Strategy. In many countries, graduates' employability is high on the Government agenda, with expectations that higher education should contribute to national economic growth (Harvey, 2000). In the UK, where government policy in relation to graduates' employability is 'part of a wider strategy to extend the skill base' (Harvey, 2000, p. 4), Gordon Brown noted that 'given the substantial public investment in university students, it is particularly important that they are employable upon graduation' (cited in HEFCE-PISG, 1999, p. 27). Following the Dearing report recommendations (National Committee of Enquiry into Higher Education, 1997), in 1999 the UK government introduced a performance indicator based on graduates' employment-related outcomes to measure Higher Education institutions' performance (Smith *et al.*, 2000), something which reflects the growing attempt to develop links between HE and the labour market.

   Employability is constructed as primarily a matter of an individual's skills. Hillage and Pollard, for example, state that:

> For the individual, employability depends on the knowledge, skills and aptitudes they possess, the way they use those assets and present them to employers and the context (e.g. personal circumstances and labour market environment) within which they seek work. (1998, p. 2)

In the same vein, Yorke suggests that employability is, at an individual level,

> a set of achievements – skills, understandings and personal attributes – that make graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy. (2004, p. 7)

It is not surprising, therefore, that higher education institutions have been urged to focus on such skill development. The Dearing report recommended that:

> Institutions of higher education begin immediately to develop, for each programme they offer, a 'programme specification' which… gives the intended outcomes of the programme in terms of: the knowledge and understanding that a student will be expected to have upon completion; key skills…; cognitive skills…; subject specific skills… (National Committee of Enquiry into Higher Education, 2003, paragraph 9.52)

As a consequence, many HEIs institutions have attempted to embed skills in the curriculum (Atlay & Harris, 2000; Chapple & Tolley, 2000; Harvey *et al.*, 2002).

In the workplace, a study by Purcell and colleagues (2002) highlighted the particular importance some employers place on generic skills (such as communication skills and team-working) and personal attributes (such as resilience and commitment). Earlier, Scott noted that:

> Formal credentials are a less reliable guide to success in the adaptable organizations of post-industrial society… personal qualities are more important than professional discipline, possession of specific credentials, mastery of specialized knowledge or even of expert skills. (1995, p. 112)

Purcell and colleagues' findings suggest that for some employers, a degree may now not represent anything more than a 'threshold to requirement in addition to other evidence of suitability' (2002, p. 10), a trend also noted by Brown and Hesketh (2004). However, this shift from academic credentials towards skills and personality should not be overstated. Purcell *et al.* (2002) identified a limited expansion of this approach for specialist professional and technical occupations compared with general management, administration and service occupations. Moreover, though only recently expressed through a new discourse of skills, the influence of cultural and social capital on recruitment and promotion processes has long been established (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1964, 1970).

The notion of skills has attracted much controversy. Within higher education, the skills agenda has been criticised as reflecting a narrow view of educational aims and a threat to academic freedom (Morley, 2001), and their definition and identification has been problematised (Holmes, 1996). Skills are socially constructed, with, for example Blackmore (1997) and Burton (1987) highlighting the ways in which skills are gendered, with particular implications for women in organisations. They are also classed and racialised. In the context of recruitment, the decision to appoint a candidate is not the result of a purely rational and neutral decision. Brown and

Hesketh (2004, p. 92), in their research in recruitment assessment centres of major companies, found that the assessment measures used relied on the prior categorisations and subjective interpretations of the recruiters – or the 'science of gut feeling'. It is likely that different employers will have different representations of an individual's skills, and that what is taken as evidence of skills depends on who the worker is and what the circumstances are. For example, Morley (2001) illustrates how a woman may be described as having perfect communication skills, but may find herself a lot less employable if she uses such skills to challenge harassment or discrimination in the workplace.

As noted by Brown and Hesketh (2004) amongst others, the recurrent use of the 'employability' word is not only a shift of terminology, but also a shift of discourses drawing on different explanatory frameworks of employment and different constructions of the worker. The employment question has been reformulated into the 'employability' question. As Garsten and Jacobsson suggest, there has been a 'shift from a systematic view of the labour market to a focus on the individuals and their qualities' (2003, p. 2). Unemployment is now more likely to be seen as an individual problem. This is not to say that nation states have entirely stepped back: rather their focus is now more on how to equip individuals for the 'knowledge-driven', increasingly competitive economy and on encouraging them to take responsibility for their own employment/employability. A particular feature of this discourse is its reliance on skills with, in a climate of changing demands on workers, individuals being held responsible for upgrading such 'perishable goods' (Garsten & Jacobsson, 2003) through lifelong learning. As suggested in the report *Foundation Degrees: Meeting the Need for Higher Level Skills*,

> If we want a competitive economy and an inclusive society we need more young people and adults to acquire higher level skills and knowledge. This is the era of lifelong learning with adults returning to learning full-time or part-time often on more than one occasion in their lifetime in order to refresh their knowledge, upgrade their skills and sustain their employability. (DfES, 2003b, p. 5)

This policy discourse constructs employability as matter of individual attributes and responsibility, with scarce reference to structured opportunities in the education and labour markets. This echoes constructions of employability among the EU policy circles, with the employable individual described as being equipped with the appropriate skills in EC texts, and the European Employment Strategy suggesting that:

> In order to influence the trend in youth and long-term unemployment the Member States will intensify their efforts to develop preventive and employability-oriented strategies, building on the early identification of individual needs. (Council of the European Union, 2000, p. 3)

Others, however, have suggested that 'employability is primarily determined by the labour market rather than the capabilities of individuals' (Brown *et al.*, 2003, p. 110). Couppié and Mansuy (2000) argue that patterns of employment can be explained not only by the characteristics of new entrants to the labour market but are also rooted in the forms of organisation which predominate in the labour market.

Employability and issues of equality

Policy discourses of employability in the UK, along with the human capital theories (Becker, 1975) on which they draw, have, therefore, been criticized for giving limited recognition to the labour market and occupational structures, and to the ways in which opportunities for graduates are framed, for example by gender, 'race' and social class (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1964, 1970; Connor *et al.*, 1997, 2003, 2004; Elias *et al.*, 1999; Morley, 2001; Blasko *et al.*, 2002; Brown, 2003; Brown & Hesketh, 2004; Smetherham, 2004). As Morley puts it,

> Arguably, employability is a decontextualised signifier in so far as it overlooks how structures such as gender, race, social class and disability interact with the labour market opportunities. (Morley, 2001, p. 132)

The emphasis on employability and skills can also be seen as a part of the 'projects of masculinity' of late modernism (Leonard, 2000, p. 181) in its emphasis on a rational, technical and utilitarian construction of higher education study. For the proponents of the employability discourse, in contrast, being a skilled individual equals being empowered. As Michaels *et al.* (2001) suggest: 'If organisations depend on the knowledge and skills of the workforce then power rests with those that have the knowledge, skills and insights that companies want' (quoted in Brown *et al.*, 2003, p. 108). Equating skills and power fails to recognise that skills are socially constructed, and valued and rewarded in different ways by employers depending on workers' identity markers and educational path (such as the type of university from which individuals graduate). Issues of inequality disappear within this discursive framing, with achievement and/or failure in the labour market located solely as the responsibility of the individual. This is not to say, however, that Government policy discourses do not acknowledge the existence of different opportunities for different groups of workers, nor that discourses of structured opportunities deny individual agency (Giddens, 1984). Perrons suggests that equal opportunity legislation and initiatives are consistent with the UK government liberal political philosophy, and that such policies aim to remedy market failures:

> The liberal market model promotes formal equality and it is believed that competition will eliminate systematic discrimination. Where market failure occurs, policies to promote equality in pay between individuals performing the same type of work within a particular firm and which prohibit discrimination on the basis of gender or ethnicity are acceptable… Thus while equal opportunities legislation, to the extent that it seeks to secure formal legal equality between individual workers, is consistent with this framework, employment regulations or legislative protection that would apply to groups of workers is not and is strongly resisted. Indeed efforts are made to deregulate employment and to restore market discipline. (1995, p. 73)

Rather than challenging increasing individualisation, therefore, such equal opportunities approaches risk further reinforcing it, whilst also failing to problematise the organisational structures and cultures that continue to produce and reinforce inequalities.

Despite evidence that social injustice persists (Hills & Stewart, 2005), Brown (2003) suggests that the growth in personal freedom and the rhetoric of the knowledge

economy have led to the belief that we have more opportunities than before, and that better credentials lead to good jobs and higher rewards: 'Credentials are the currency of opportunity' (p. 142). The conjunction of the ideology of equal opportunities and of the employability discourse reinforces the construction of the labour market as meritocratic. Failure in this context thereby becomes personal failure, something that is reinforced with the emphasis on personal skills.

Graduates' discourses and experiences of employment

We now turn to graduates' accounts of their experiences and their representations of post-graduation employment. While a number of studies examine the university-work transition, the perspectives of graduates are often ignored. As Johnston argues, one of the limitations of research on graduate employment is its tendency to focus on groups with the potential to influence the government, while 'the voices of other partners in the graduate recruitment process, the graduates, are deafening in their silence' (2003, p. 419). One exception is the research by Brown and Hesketh (2004) in which 60 graduate applicants to fast-track management programmes were interviewed. As the authors themselves note, however, most of these graduates were from elite universities and middle-class backgrounds – a rather different graduate cohort, therefore, from that of post-1992 universities. This paper, in contrast, draws on a study of predominantly 'non-traditional' graduates (Webb, 1997) from a post-1992 institution.

The research on which this paper draws was a longitudinal study of undergraduate students conducted in a post-1992 inner-city university in England (see Leathwood & O'Connell, 2003; Moreau & Leathwood, 2006). Graduates from post-1992 universities are more likely to belong to groups that face additional difficulties in terms of employment-related outcomes to HE (Elias *et al.*, 1999; Blasko, 2002; Purcell, 2002) and employers continue to target their graduate recruitment activities at old, elite institutions (AGR, 1999; Leathwood & Hutchings, 2003; Brown & Hesketh, 2004). With the increase in the number of graduates, it has been suggested that employers put a greater emphasis on the type of university attended and the class of degree (Coffield, 1999), or on individual skills (Purcell, 2002). Research also shows that even once factors known to impact on graduates' employment are controlled for, the impact of the type of institution remains (Elias *et al.*, 1999).

This study began in 1999, when students from four courses/programmes from different disciplinary areas (Psychology, Business, Computing and Film Studies) were selected to take part in the research programme, and ended in 2005. A range of research methods were used, including questionnaires, focus groups and in-depth interviews. A sample of 310 students (out of the 667 who had enrolled on the study courses in 1999) consisted of all those students who completed an initial questionnaire in induction: they form the main cohort which has been tracked throughout their studies in terms of their progression and achievements. Individual case study interviews (with 18 students interviewed annually, 62 interviews in total) and focus

groups (30 focus groups with 132 participants) were also conducted with students coming from this main cohort. Towards the end of this longitudinal study, issues of graduate employment began to emerge as a key issue. In order to explore this further, a telephone survey of graduates' destinations and an additional five semi-structured interviews focussing specifically on employment were conducted (all drawn from the main research cohort).

The telephone survey was conducted between December 2003 and March 2004 from those in the main research cohort who had graduated before November 2003 (n = 127). We were able to contact and conduct short telephone interviews with 32 of these graduates. The main aim of the telephone survey was to provide an overview of the employment situation of the wider cohort of graduates. The telephone interviews therefore focused on the current situation of graduates with regard to employment, i.e. whether they were employed, studying, looking for work, and the nature of the job they were doing if employed. In particular, we were interested in whether the graduates felt that their occupation was a graduate-level position of the kind that they had expected to gain after graduation. This was not, therefore, an objective measure of graduates in graduate-level or non-graduate level employment—indeed given the changing employment context, such a measure would be difficult to attain. Instead, we were interested in the extent to which graduates' expectations of employment had been met or not. In contrast to the face-to-face interviews (see below), the phone interviews were not recorded or transcribed, but contemporaneous notes were taken. The phone interviews were designed to provide a brief 'snapshot' of the current situation of graduates at a specific time, rather than to explore in depth their use of, and positioning within, discourses of employability.

Of the 32 graduates interviewed by telephone, 17 are women and 15 are men. Fourteen students described themselves as white, 13 as Asian and four as black (information unknown for one graduate).[4] The following table indicates the situation of graduates by sex and ethnicity at the time of the telephone interview. The numbers are small, yet they give us some indications of trends among the cohort.

The face-to-face interviews focused on interviewees' representations of the labour market and the factors they perceived as facilitating/hindering their access to post-graduation employment. These semi-structured interviews enabled us to explore in some depth the discourses graduates used in relation to employment and employability. They were recorded and transcribed to facilitate in-depth analysis. All of these respondents had recently graduated, with some still awaiting their results. However, all were engaged in a search for a graduate job (or had been at some stage: one had decided to undertake further studies). Their experiences of work were of a diverse, often multiple nature: some had come to university as mature students after several years of employment, others had worked during term-time (see Moreau & Leathwood, 2006), and/or had undertaken a work experience placement. Though some were employed at the time of the interview, all but one (who was now studying) were currently seeking employment.

This paper, whilst informed by the larger longitudinal study, draws mainly on the telephone survey and additional interviews. The findings are indicative, and are being explored further in a follow-up study of university graduates.

Graduates' situation in the labour market

The situation of graduates at the time of the phone interviews is illustrated in Table 1.

Indicative patterns have emerged which reaffirm earlier research evidence. The proportion of men in a graduate-level job is much higher than the proportion of women (six men out of 15 compared with only one woman out of 17). Women are more likely than men to report that they are in a non graduate-level job (eight out of 17, compared with four men out of 15). Women in this category are particularly likely to be in administrative and/or temporary positions, something that they stressed did not match their aspirations. They are also more likely to undertake further studies (postgraduate programmes or professional training), which may reflect a lack of confidence in gaining appropriate employment, a realistic assessment of labour market opportunities open to them and/or a higher level of commitment to study.

In relation to ethnicity, the numbers falling into each category are smaller, which make trends more difficult to identify. In particular, figures from black graduates are particularly small and do not allow any interpretation. However, it is apparent that graduates with Asian ethnicity are more likely to be unemployed. White graduates are slightly more likely to be employed (11 out of 14 graduates with white ethnicity, compared with eight out of 13 graduates with Asian ethnicity), there are similar proportions of white and Asian graduates in a graduate job.

In some subjects, there is also evidence that patterns of employment are strongly gendered. Computer Science graduates make up six out of the seven in graduate-level positions. All but one of these are men, and the woman, despite being in a graduate level position, is working in an unrelated (non-computing) field. The other two

Table 1.   Situation of graduates by sex and ethnicity

	Graduate-level job	Non graduate-level job	Unsure about nature of job	Further studies	Seeking employment	*Total*
Gender						
Men	6	4	2	1	2	*15*
Women	1	8	1	3	4	*17*
Race						
White	3	6	2	2	1	*14*
Asian	3	4	1	1	4	*13*
Black	1	1	0	1	1	*4*
Unknown ethnicity	0	1	0	0	0	*1*
Counts	*7*	*12*	*3*	*4*	*6*	*32*

women computing graduates (both of who gained upper second-class honours degrees) were unemployed. These three women all felt that the IT industry had not given them a chance.

Graduates' experiences and constructions of the labour market

This section of the paper draws specifically on the five additional face-to-face interviews conducted specifically on employment issues. Other interviews conducted with case study students as part of the main study provide a background to the analysis. All names in use are pseudonyms.

Skilled graduates

It is, perhaps, not surprising that when asked about the factors hindering or facilitating their achievements in the labour market, graduates put a great deal of emphasis on their individual aptitudes and skills, thereby reflecting rather than challenging current policy discourses of employability. Throughout this longitudinal study, students repeatedly used a discourse of skills and personal attributes to talk about how they were progressing and what they felt they were learning, echoing the emphasis on such personal skills and capabilities within internal university documents about curriculum and learning outcomes.

David, working as a market researcher, had quite negative views of his current occupation, although he felt it was helping him to develop his communication skills:

> This job I'm doing at the moment is just to earn some money and also to gain experience communicating. Market research, when you're on the phone, you're talking to so many different people. It's all about communication skills. I suppose [this job is] to earn money and to enhance my communication skills. (David, male, white, Film Studies, 18–21[5])

This emphasis on skills is an important feature of graduates' discourses, with much emphasis particularly placed on what are often described as 'personal' skills. Sorah (female, Asian, Computer Science, 18–21), who is thinking of becoming a broadcasting engineer, was asked about the factors which are likely to hinder or facilitate access to the type of job she aspires to. She declared:

> That's a question that I just answered yesterday actually, in the application form… I was trying to explain to them that I am very determined and I'm very motivational and I do rectify problems quite quickly and because I've done programming in my computer education, that's very, very good in the sense that if there were some sort of problem in programming I can correct it logically and that's what they were looking for. I think the minimum requirement to get that job was A-levels in computing or science or maths or engineering. So they are looking for somebody who can work out problems. So I was trying to sell myself and say that I can because I'm quite technical in that sense.

This is echoed by Maya (female, Asian, Film Studies, 18–21):

> I think you have to be a determined person [to get the job I want]. I think you have to be a determined person to do anything really.

It is of particular interest to note here that both Sorah and Maya emphasise being 'a determined person' as their main asset and, for Sorah, being 'very motivational' and problem solving. It is only later in the extract that Sorah refers to required qualifications. In a similar vein, David, who is in the process of applying for a radio presenter position, highlights having 'the voice' and the necessary communication skills:

> I feel I do have the voice. I have been told in the past that I had the voice. I feel I have got the communications skills to be a reporter or a presenter.

Drawing on available classifications of skills (e.g. Coopers & Lybrand, 1998; Yorke & Knight, 2004), it becomes apparent that if graduates refer to a range of skills, their focus is mainly on what could be described as personal qualities and attributes. Brennan and colleagues (2001) also found that 81% of the graduates in their sample thought that personality factors were the most important in the eyes of their first employer. A striking example of the importance of personal skills is provided by Sorah, when she says she *is* technical. Her phrasing suggests an embodiment of techniques, and reveals that even for those graduates studying technical subjects, technical, 'hard' skills can be thought of in terms of the personal. These examples echo the importance given by employers to generic skills and personal attributes and the perception of a degree as a 'threshold', as identified by Purcell and colleagues. Although these graduates did not discuss the competition for jobs, it may be that their focus on personal skills reflects the concern about 'credential inflation' identified by Tomlinson (2004), with extra skills seen as necessary to compliment the traditional attainments associated with university learning. Some graduates do, however, feel that having a degree will make a difference to them:

> It is an advantage because even though its hard for me at the moment, there's so many times that I've seen it where I've been working, that once you get in somewhere you can't move around as much without a degree. There's like this degree glass ceiling, you can only go so far. (Simon, male, white, Business Administration, 26–35)

For Simon, a mature student with significant experience of working life, a degree itself is seen as important to his career development. Within the wider longitudinal study, younger students were far more likely to talk about needing to develop personal or 'generic' skills than their older peers, and to describe their learning in such terms. Many of the mature students, in contrast, felt that they had developed such skills in their work and other life experiences – what mattered to them was getting the degree.

Within the employability policy discourse, work experience is seen as important for the development of the appropriate skills. In 2000, the Department for Education and Skills established the Work Experience Group as:

> to consider options and recommend a strategy for increasing the full range of opportunities for all Higher Education (HE) students to undertake work experience, including paid and voluntary work, in a way that better enhances their employability. (DfES, 2002b, p. 1)

Employers also value it (Bowlby *et al.*, 2000; Harvey *et al.*, 2002) and there is evidence that graduates see it as allowing them to both develop their skills and gain further distinction among graduates with similar credentials (Tomlinson, 2004).

Though the effects of certain forms of work experience, such as term-time work, have been identified as positive or negative depending on a number of factors (Blasko *et al.*, 2002), work placements have attracted much consensus with research identifying a positive effect on graduates' employment-related outcomes (e.g. Cooper & Hills, 2003). For example, the Dearing Report recommended that:

> The Government, with immediate effect, works with representative employer and professional organisations to encourage employers to offer more work experience opportunities for students. (National Committee of Enquiry into Higher Education, 1997, paragraph 9.52)

The case study graduates interviewed throughout the duration of the longitudinal study often mentioned work experience and in particular work placements as essential for their employment, and so did the five graduates interviewed specifically on employment issues. One of these graduates (Paulo, male, white Brazilian, Business Studies, 26–35) had gained employment in a company where he had previously undertaken a work placement and this was not particularly unusual. Conversely, graduates demonstrated a sharp awareness that their 'lack of experience', and in particular the fact of not having done a work placement, could hinder the fulfilment of their career aspirations. Some were particularly resentful towards the university for not having been informed of such possibilities during their undergraduate studies. Maya, for example, explained:

> That's one thing that also I was very disappointed about. Neither of my courses had a work placement because my sister's did. She had a year work placement and that's what I am so worried about because in every single job I've applied for, I've looked at and it says one year or two years work experience or experience in the field necessary. I don't have any at all. Even though I have got these qualifications now, I don't have any experience to back me up.

In contrast, casual jobs such as those undertaken by many students during term-time or after graduating while waiting for a better job, were seen as not particularly beneficial for their future career (see Moreau & Leathwood, 2006), though some graduates felt that such work helped them to develop their communication skills.

These graduates reflected the discourse of employability in their expectations that an increase in skills and qualifications will translate into benefits in the labour market. They assumed that systematic returns would accrue from doing a work placement, or conversely they blamed their lack of experience as a major factor hindering their career development. This is not to deny the positive impact of work experience, and in particular of work placement, on graduates' employment-related outcomes, merely to note that this is a further example of these graduates identifying their own personal experience, or lack of it, as a major factor in gaining employment, without reference to the differential opportunity structures of the labour market.

Inequalities and opportunities

The main emphasis of graduates' accounts was, therefore, on their personal skills, aptitudes and experiences. Aspects of identity such as gender or ethnicity were not

spontaneously identified as exerting an influence over their employment, although different employment-related outcomes depending on, for example, gender, were found in the telephone survey. Rather, graduates articulated a discourse in which the workplace was described as offering plenty of opportunities for those willing to make the appropriate effort:

> If you really want something, if it's really you, I think a person can see that in your face … I'm not going to let anything get me down. I am going to go [to job interviews] with the intention that I can do this job and just give me a chance. I might make a few mistakes but everyone does, but I can do this. (Maya)

> I was also lucky to have travelled and acquired five language skills and that's also another positive point for me. I think that will open some doors for me. (Paulo)

Overall, discrimination was thought to be unlikely 'in this day and age' (Maya), with these graduates articulating a discourse of individualisation through which the influence of social structures is downplayed. Tomlinson similarly notes that many undergraduate women in his study appeared less likely to 'view gender as an impediment to career progression' (2004, p. 5) compared with the findings of earlier studies. Morrison and colleagues (2005) have also found reluctance among students to recognise discrimination and suggested this may be the expression of a coping mechanism or an indication of the 'post-feminist' milieu. Similarly, respondents may be reluctant to report expectations or experiences of racial discrimination (see, e.g. Connor *et al.*, 2004).

   Yet the possibility of discrimination and the potential impact of gender and ethnicity on employment opportunities were acknowledged when graduates in this study were specifically asked about these issues, and some graduates were conscious that their gender, ethnicity and/or disability might create additional difficulties. Maya, for example, when asked directly whether she thought being a British Asian woman could be a hindering factor for the type of job she aimed for, replied:

> I don't know yet. I haven't yet experienced it but I am aware that it could happen. I am aware of that.

Discrimination was perceived as something she could not necessarily avoid, but she regarded it as highly unacceptable, and something she was ready to contest and challenge:

> I don't think I can do anything to avoid [discrimination] really. I think it's there and I have to just think well okay, if someone is going to discriminate against me because of my colour and because I am a woman then I don't want to be working with them anyways. I hope in this day and age it's not going to be like that. I am aware that is going to happen and if I do really, really want a job and I think it's perfect for me and I do feel that I've been discriminated against then I will do everything in my power to get that job. I will do something. I will complain. Big time. A person should not get away with discrimination. If they thought I was rubbish in the interview, that's fine but if they are doing it just because of any other factor, no they are not going to get away with it. (Maya)

Simon, who is dyslexic, also recognises discrimination and, like Maya, is prepared to challenge it:

> I've been writing to a few of the banks, a very long letter explaining my situation and not letting them get away with it because, for example, HSBC give you 2 ticks if you meet their requirements and you're disabled, you are guaranteed an interview. I've written them a letter saying that a lot of people with disabilities, especially dyslexic people, have left school with no GCSEs or A-levels but they've come to university as a mature student, with extra support, so you're actually blocking people out…

These graduates mostly referred to examples of direct, overt discrimination rather than to indirect discrimination. Yet, this is not to say that respondents did not meet what could be regarded as examples of indirect discrimination – rather they do not think of it as discrimination. For example, Sorah explained that going outside London for training as suggested by a company she had applied to could be a problem for a Muslim woman like her. Yet this was also a company which Sorah felt may present opportunities for her because it has an equal opportunities policy and because she is a woman from a minority ethnic group:

> With regard to other jobs that I may be applying for, I wouldn't obviously apply for a position which is going to be against my religion. I don't think there are many jobs out there that are against my religion unless it is going to be very unethical, perhaps illegal, but jobs that aren't going to be compatible with my religion I wouldn't apply for anyway. There might be a tiny problem with the BBC job which requires, before you used to go away for about a month or so out of London to get trained, and me as a woman and a Muslim woman going there without my parents, perhaps without my family, its going to be a bit of a problem but I'm not being too, because I haven't got the job yet, it doesn't matter at the moment.

In that context, equal opportunity policies are perceived as remedial to injustice and a guarantee that the workplace is not only fair, but may offer particular opportunities to those from under-represented groups:

> Sorah: If I were to just focus on the [company] at the moment, I'm quite happy with
>   their requirements which are in fact, they are looking for women in particu-
>   lar for many, many jobs anyway. It's not specific to the job that I am applying
>   for. They are looking for women of ethnic backgrounds.
> Researcher: Do they have an equal opportunities policy?
> Sorah: Absolutely. What it is they are very under rated. They don't have many
>   women working there who are of ethnic backgrounds and they actually want
>   that. They require that so I am hoping that I will have a high chance in that
>   sense.

Sorah's account, therefore, tends to support the construction of equal opportunities policies in policy discourses – i.e. that such policies will remedy any discrimination that has crept into the market. However, whilst these graduates welcome equal opportunities initiatives, they do not necessarily believe that these initiatives will operate effectively to prevent discrimination in the first place – instead they again emphasise their own determination to challenge any discriminatory practices that they encounter. This reflects the individualistic approach on which equal opportunities policies draw:

> The underlying assumption behind an individualistic approach is that the prevailing system is essentially a fair one although there may be some isolated cases where a particular

individual is treated unfairly… The effect of this approach … is to leave existing structures substantially intact. (Huws, 1987, p. 7)

In her distinction between equality of opportunity and equality of outcome, Riley (1994) notes that:

The liberal interpretation of equality, equality of opportunity, has been concerned with ensuring that the rules of the game (…) are set out fairly. The assumption has been that rigorous administrative controls and formalized systems will ensure that fair play takes place and create the circumstances in which previously disadvantaged groups compete equally with other groups of students or employees. (Riley, 1994, p. 13)

Such a liberal interpretation of equality, which simply aims to remedy market failure (Perrons, 1995), does not challenge the structural bases of inequalities and the construction of skills, jobs and workers' identities as gendered, classed and 'raced'. Instead it reinforces the individualism evident in wider policy discourses that is also reflected in the accounts of these graduates.

Conclusions

The discourse of employability, with its emphasis on the skills of the individual, is pervasive in higher education policy and in the practices of the post-1992 university in which this research was conducted. It is not surprising, therefore, that these graduates echo such a discourse with their emphasis on their own individual skills and personal qualities/attributes. The lack of recognition of wider social and economic inequalities and the differential opportunities in the labour market for different groups of graduates reinforces a notion of individual responsibility.

There is wide research evidence to suggest that the 'non-traditional' graduates in this research are at a disadvantage in seeking graduate employment – whether because they gained a degree at a post-1992 university or because of their ethnicity, gender, social class background, disability or age. The graduate labour market is not a level playing field, and these graduates obviously do need to develop and effectively present the kinds of personal skills and qualities demanded by employers if they are to stand a chance. The university in which this research was conducted explicitly emphasises the importance of developing such skills in its notion of 'employable graduates'. Yet such skills and qualities are not neutral. Employers might want, for example, someone who is strong and decisive, but they will inevitably read these qualities differently in different applicants. Such qualities tend to be identified with masculinity rather than femininity, with the consequence that a woman who presents herself as strong and decisive can easily be seen as not feminine enough or aggressive, whereas a man presenting similar qualities can be seen as simply meeting the requirements for the post. Social class, age, gender, ethnicity and disability are written on the body – they cannot be ignored or somehow neutralised by the development and portrayal of some 'neutral' skill.

The consequences for these graduates are potentially serious. Not only do they have fewer opportunities within the labour market, but they are also likely to blame

themselves for any failure to succeed. Working class groups, and others outside the White male middle-class norm that still dominates professional and managerial positions in the UK, have often been portrayed as somehow falling short or 'lacking' – in the 'right' kinds of qualifications, abilities, personal qualities and cultural capital (see, e.g. Walkerdine *et al.*, 2001). Throughout the longitudinal study, issues of social class, gender and ethnicity have impacted on students as they embarked upon and completed their undergraduate studies. The need to undertake extensive hours of term-time work (Moreau & Leathwood, 2006) and the relatively high levels of debt of many of these graduates add to the pressures on them to secure appropriate graduate-level employment in a market that is stacked against them. Issues of risk, struggle and confidence have all emerged as rooted primarily in social and economic inequalities, rather than being seen as individual traits (Leathwood & O'Connell, 2003). As such, the determination discussed by some of these graduates is perhaps a consequence of the considerable investment they have made in their studies, and the experience of struggle that so often characterised their undergraduate experiences.

As Hesketh notes, 'The discourse of employability encourages individuals to view their personal characteristics—be they social class, gender or race—as irrelevant' (2003, p. 10). In a context where both the employability and equal opportunities discourses contribute to views of the labour market as meritocratic, the failure to attain appropriate employment becomes an individual failure. While widening access to higher education is certainly a legitimate and welcome ambition, the issue is how to ensure that graduates benefit from higher education on the basis of 'merit' rather than gender, ethnicity or social class. Morley (2001) has suggested developing the concept of 'employer-ability' to 'balance out the power relations embedded in the employability discourse' and to sensitise employers to issues of gender, ethnicity, social class, sexual orientation and disability. We suggest it is also of key importance to provide students and graduates with a critical framework within which to interpret concepts of employability and their experiences in entering the graduate labour market—both to mitigate against them interpreting a lack of success as a personal failure and to make collectivist interpretations and challenges seem possible.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1. Percentage based on the number of people graduating from higher education first degrees during the year as a percentage of the population at the typical age of graduation.
2. While employers received 37.2 applications on average for every graduate vacancy in 2001–2002, this figure increased to 42.1 applications in 2002–2003 (AGR, 2003). This strong competition between 'entrants' to the labour market has been identified as a particular pattern of youth employment in the UK (Couppié & Mansuy, 2000).

3. Firsts results from a survey conducted by Sloan and O'Leary at the University of Wales (Guardian, May 31 2005) reveal that rates of return are not as high as supported by the Government when defending its plans to set up top-up fees (£150,000 down from £400,000).
4. Identification of ethnicity was based on self-definitions in relation to the categorisation used on the university enrolment forms. This data was recoded in four categories to provide groups of sufficient size for statistical analysis, although we recognise this risks disguising difference. In the qualitative data, students' own definitions were used.
5. Throughout the paper, the age group corresponds to the age at date of entry back in 1999.

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