1ER7dE4uK9**Investing in the self: structure, agency and identity in graduates’ employability**

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*This article presents an alternative approach to the dominant analysis of graduate*

*employability, through a consideration of the dynamic and socially mediated interaction*

*that graduates have with labour market. This interaction is largely constitutive of their*

*dispositions and identities as graduates, and entails a dynamic interplay between*

*graduates’ agency and the wider structural context of the labour market. Informed by*

*structuration theory, this perspective offers a richer, more socially nuanced account*

*into employability than that presented by dominant policy-based approaches, namely*

*the human capital and ‘skills’ agenda. Such approaches present a largely de-contextualised*

*account of employability and a somewhat simplistic notion of the link between*

*education and the labour market more generally. In this article, we argue that employability*

*must be seen as an active social process, and that this process is mediated significantly*

*by the way graduates position themselves, and are positioned, within a*

*continually shifting labour market context.*

**Keywords:** employability; human capital; skills; agency; identity

**Introduction**

Employability has become an increasingly significant area of higher education policy,

which at one level reflects shifting dynamics in the relationship between higher education

and the labour market (Edvardsson Stiwne and Alves 2010; Morley 2001). The political

economy of higher education has been re-shaped, driven mainly by large-scale economic

transformations and reinforced by a range of state measures aimed at enhancing the effectiveness

and output of universities. Changes in the global economy, and move towards a

more knowledge-intensive economy, have led to some far-reaching implications for the

way in which human resource capacity is understood and delivered (Farrell and Fenwick

2007). Moreover, this has further presented some major permutations for the way in which

employees themselves respond to the changing labour market demands, and go about

managing their career progression. Employability, and its development and management,

has taken greater prominence in discussions about the future of people’s working

lives; it continues to be emphasised as a key organising principle in the way individuals

manage their futures in the labour market (Clarke 2007; Hesketh 2003).

These changes have corresponded in part with the exponential growth in higher education.

Governments continue to invest considerable faith in the role of higher education as a

vehicle in economic growth, and a way of enhancing the human resource capacity of the

labour market (Department for Education and Skills [DfES] 2003; OECD 2008). They

have tended to see this operating on two main levels: first at a collective, social level

through the production of a skilled and employable workforce that can aid economic competitiveness;

and second at an individual level through enhancing people’s level of labour

market potential and access to relatively high economic returns. In short, higher education

is equated positively with the development of individuals’ employability, and so further

expansion of the system continues to be seen as the way forward. The intersecting changes

between higher education and the economy have brought into sharper focus the future role

and economic potential of graduates. They have tended to be depicted as archetypal future

‘knowledge workers’ who can utilise the skills developed through higher education, as

well as offering valuable contributions to the corporate world.

This article first places the issues of employability within the changing dynamic interaction

between higher education, the knowledge-driven economy and employer and

policy-based discourses that reflect changing employment demands, as well as changes in

the nature of work and careers in the new economy. It then explores some of the dominant

thinking in graduate employability as presented in much of current policy, and in turn

critiques some of the conceptual and philosophical underpinnings of this. It focuses particularly

on supply-side approaches as reflected in human capital and skills perspectives.

Such approaches are critiqued not only for offering somewhat de-contextualised and

one-dimensional analyses of the nature of employability, but also for positing a simplistic

link between education and the labour market – and individuals’ responses to this – more

generally.

It will then put forward an account of employability that draws upon structuration

theory, and its associated dimensions of negotiated order and identity. We argue that it

might be beneficial to conceive of graduate employability in terms of the dynamic interplay

between structure and agency; that is, as a relational dynamic that encompasses graduates’

active relationship to the labour market, and as purposive and meaningful action that is

linked to the wider social and economic context. This is further driven by identities that,

while forming the main basis for their future action and orientations, are also framed

within this wider context. Further, that these are also contingent upon conditions in the

labour market that may give rise to particular dispositions and orientations to future work

and employment. We argue that this constitutes a more socially sensitive account of a

dimension that we conceive as ultimately linked to graduates’ lived experiences of higher

education and the wider economic context within which these are framed.

**Graduate employability, mass higher education and the knowledge-driven economy**

The discourse into graduate employability to a large extent maps onto the shifting

dynamic in the relationship between higher education and the labour market. While higher

education has traditionally fulfilled the role of reproducing and regulating a professional

elite, processes of organisational change have disrupted this pattern (Brown and Hesketh

2004). Consequently, issues have been raised about the overall positioning of higher

education within the wider social and economic field (Coffield and Williamson 1997;

Naidoo 2003).

These changes are also associated with new forms of state-driven involvement

over the functioning and utility of higher education institutions (HEIs), geared around

optimising the potential economic return and value of university output (Deem, Hillyard,

and Reed 2007). Graduates continue to be represented as a major component of university

output, having the potential to trade in their knowledge capital in a labour market that increasingly

demands the skills of the highly educated (Department for Innovation, Universities and

Skills [DIUS] 2008; OECD 2008). At a global level, higher education has been transformed

from an elite to a mass system (Scott 1995; Trow 1989), heralding at one level a new

democratisation of opportunity and, at another, new cultural tensions and ambiguities

around the status of university credentials and the nature of *graduateness* (Jary and Parker

1998; Wright 2001).

Over time, the triadic inter-relationship between university, state and the

economy (Clark 1983) has been reconfigured to the effect of universities being increasingly

colonised by a host of new commercial ideologies and imperatives (Barnett 2003).

The future employability of graduates has been linked closely to wider policy-driven

constructions of the knowledge-driven economy, which tend to develop normative

accounts of the future state of labour markets, and further, the role of education in fulfilling

their changing demands (Avis 2007; Peters 2003). Within these discourses, graduates

have tended to be depicted as archetypal ‘knowledge workers’ (Drucker 1993) who,

through their experience of higher education, bring forward a large corpus of skills, knowledge

and intellectual capital that helps springboard them into desirable occupational positions.

They also add significant knowledge value, and are most likely to be at the forefront of

company innovation and creativity. To this extent, knowledge economy discourses have

ascribed much significance to the role of higher education (Bell 1973; Brint 2001) for its

capacity to transfer onto graduates abstract, theoretically rich knowledge that are sacrosanct

within a labour market characterised by rapid change and technological advancement.

In short, higher education is seen to accommodate the shifting demands in the occupational

and professional sphere, with a relatively strong congruence between the aptitudes

acquired by graduates within higher education and the changing demands of a new fluid,

cognitively intensive economy.

Several features stand out within the new knowledge economy discourse. The first

concerns the nature of work organisations, in terms of their changing organisational form

and modes of production. The knowledge-driven economy heralds a new dawn in the

nature of work and organisations, brought about by structural transformations in the development

of capitalism. Capitalist production has shifted from the production of large-scale,

standardised goods and services based on mass production towards a new informationand

service-driven base (Kumar 2005). Although this is driven in part by the global spread

of information communication, sometimes referred to as ‘informational capitalism’

(Castells 2000), it also reflects the re-positioning of labour and capital, and new forms of

labour organisation that are re-shaping output and modes of consumption. Thus, the new

‘weightless’ knowledge economy deals in the currencies of symbolic exchange and

manipulation and the exploitation of intangible assets (Leadbetter 1999). For the knowledge

worker, this requires drawing upon a dynamic skills-set that encompass a wider

range of communicative, behavioural and symbolic resources. A further feature of the new

economy has been the increasing flexibility in the career management process, and a more

proactive and personal management of new flexible, protean careers within increasingly

adaptive and responsive work organisations (Arthur and Rousseau 2001; Hassard,

McCann, and Morris 2008).

There has, however, been continued critical scepticism over the specific nature and

prevalence of the knowledge economy (Keep and Mayhew 2004; Thompson 2004). One

of the most prominent criticisms has been towards the assumption of whole-scale employment

change and the creation of a new work utopia that enables an increasingly empowered

body of employees to make meaningful outputs within new skills-rich, polyvalent workplaces.

Sceptics have tended to point to existing divisions of labour and the continued

prevalence of low discretion and low output work, often set within rigid, hierarchical and

managerially heavy organisational settings. This can be further applied to the professional

classes who have also witnessed an overall de-skilling around their traditional work output

(Braverman 1974) and an increasing routinisation of their working conditions. There is

also considerable national and regional variance in these patterns, with some labour markets

continuing to draw upon a traditional skills-base (Hepworth, Binks, and Ziemann 2005).

Knowledge economy discourses have nevertheless been widely utilised by policy

makers seeking to establish positive trade-offs between the expanded post-compulsory

sector and future economic development. For proponents of the knowledge economy thesis,

employability is empowering and enabling as it extends the range of labour market opportunities

open to individuals. Much has been said of the role of higher education in meeting

these challenges, in particular in providing graduates with the requisite skills and dispositions

needed to negotiate the challenges of a fast-changing economy. The future employability

of graduates has therefore been positively associated with the knowledge and skills

possessed by graduates, and which provides them with a more empowered labour market

platform.

**Dominant frameworks in the discussion of graduate employability**

We now turn to a critique of some of the dominant approaches to employability, and some

of the assumptions they carry about both the nature, and potential development, of

employability and graduates’ relationship to the labour market. These dominant policy

accounts are most evident in the human capital and graduate skills approaches. These have

achieved significant purchase in the policy arena on several main grounds. First, they offer

an account of employability that depicts a relatively stable and consensual dynamic

between higher education and the labour market. HEIs provide individuals with the skills

and credentials demanded by the labour market, and which are taken as proxy to their individual

employability. These credentials are matched up neatly in a hierarchically ranked

jobs market where the highest educational achievers find forms of employment that are

commensurate with their level of education.

Second, employability is framed in a strongly individualistic way, focusing almost

exclusively on individuals’ employment potential in terms of the types of employment-related

attributes they bring forward to the work setting. To this extent, employability is

framed as having a particular character or internal dimension that is constitutive of the

types of knowledge, skills, competences and attitudes that individuals possess. Viewed in

this light, employability is something that can be developed in *absolute* terms, through the

acquisition and deployment of these specific employability-related attributes (Department

for Education and Employment [DfEE] 2000; Hillage and Pollard 1998). Moreover, there is

a responsibility on the part of individuals to enhance their absolute level of employability

through actively seeking to acquire and enrich these individual employability characteristics

at all stages of their educational and working lives.

Ultimately, these approaches tend to conceive employability as a supply-side problem:

it is something that can be almost exclusively supported and enhanced through effective

educational provision and planning (DfEE 2000). For graduates entering the labour market,

their employment potential can be effectively nurtured within the university context,

with universities being seen as having a significant role in equipping graduates with the

necessary skills and competences to meet the demands of their respective forms of graduate

employment. This position tends to overlook features of the labour market that might

shape both graduates’ opportunities for realising their employability as well as the overall

capacity for employer organisations to accommodate them. Thus employability may be as

much determined by the *demand* for specific types of graduates and their skills and

credentials, as by the extent to which these are appropriately matched up in the job market.

***Graduate employability as human capital***

Much of the current higher education policy, whether in relation to expansion of the

system, the introduction of students fees or the more recent agenda around exploiting the

commercial benefits of university research outputs (DIUS 2008), has tended to be built

strongly on human capital theory (Becker 1993; Schultz 1961). A central tenet of this

theory is the direct and positive relationship between ‘investment’ in education and training,

and its productive economic value within the labour market. Individuals’ investment

in their education and training results in significant and tangible returns, reflected in their

relatively higher earning potential and stronger overall labour market standing. Additional

layers of education and training help shape individuals’ productive capacity, or to use

Becker’s term, their ‘marginal product’: it effectively acts as a springboard in empowering

people to become more productive and economically resourceful, positively facilitating

their access to better economic opportunities.

Graduates are actively encouraged by policy makers to see themselves as investing in, as

well as actively consuming, their higher education (DfES 2003; Naidoo and Jamieson 2005).

The potential costs of investing in higher education in terms of delayed income, time, effort

and in the case of graduates, financial expenditure, are far outweighed by the returns via

access to greater labour market opportunities and higher financial gain. This is evident in the

higher wage differentials that graduates experience over non-graduates. Approached in this

light, participation in higher education is strongly equated with graduates’ overall employability,

which itself accounts for their differential labour market position and hierarchy.

We would argue that, at both an economic and social level, there are some inherent

problems in its account of the relationship between higher education and future labour

market outcomes. Moreover, there are problems in the way in which ‘employability’ is

located within this relationship. There is a clear paradox running through much policy

discourse on the relationship between higher education and graduates’ employability: at

one level it is almost taken as axiomatic that graduates’ higher education will propel them

towards greater labour market returns; yet at another level, continued concerns prevail

around the mismatch between graduates’ skills and those required for graduate-level work

(Raybould and Sheedy 2005). This tension sits uneasily with the notion of graduate-level

education boosting the productive capacity of work organisations, whether we see this in

terms of graduates falling short of employer expectations, or indeed employment not

meeting the expectations and skills level of the graduate. This is further built on an

assumption that the skills possessed by graduates and those demanded by the labour

market are stable over time and well coordinated.

The prevailing concerns advanced by employers reflects to some degree their continued

ambiguity around the types of skills requirements from graduates, and the extent to which

this might translate into actual workforce development strategy (Hesketh 2000; Keep,

Mayhew, and Payne 2006). This has often spilled over into inevitable charges against

universities as failing to instil the appropriate dispositions, competences and attitudes needed

by graduates. Yet it similarly reflects a tension between the faith placed in higher education to

produce economically viable future workers, and the continued concern about the lack of utility

in graduates’ skills when they enter the job market. Whatever the accuracy of employers’

perceptions, it appears that the link between graduates’ participation in higher education and

labour market return, at both an objective and subjective level, is far from straight-forward

and consensual (O’Leary and Sloane 2005; Smetherham 2006; Tomlinson 2007).

A second key criticism of the human capital model is its heavily economistic and

instrumentalist framing of individuals’ activities, which tends to divorce economic outcomes

from the wider social processes within which they are embedded (Fevre 2003; Granovetter

1985). Labour market behaviours, and the outcomes they might produce, are dislocated

from social context in a way that renders any form of social mediation in people’s relationship

with the wider economic world as arbitrary. Through its heavy emphasis on

economistic factors, the human capital approach tends to reduce individuals’ goals and

value systems to being exclusively utilitarian. This is further problematic when we consider

how people understand the nature of their participation in education, as well as its

future utility in the job market. We know from a range of sociological research in lifelong

learning (Coffield 2000; Fevre, Rees, and Gorard 1999) that participation in learning forms

part of a patterned learning trajectory that is itself culturally and historically contingent.

More importantly, how individuals engage with the labour market is strongly influenced

by contingent features such as their physical location, their access to employment and their

desire to undertake particular forms of employment, irrespective of the financial trade-offs or

whether they might commensurate with their skills. Even though an individual’s goals might

be towards overall economic betterment, it is still questionable whether people approach

learning and subsequent labour market orientations in an exclusive utilitarian way, looking to

optimise their own ‘functional utility’. Whatever the shaping of people’s identities around

both learning and future employment, they are still likely to transcend a narrow self-perception

around optimising their market value, or being a ‘smart machine’ (Schultz 1961).

There is a further tendency in human capital approaches to reduce employability to

crude labour market outcomes, often abstracted and descriptively inferred through large-scale

data patterns and trends. To this extent, the evidence in the form of wage returns tends to

override any form of analysis of social, educational or labour market *processes*, which are

instead simply inferred through outcomes. Labour market behaviour, including individuals’

approach towards employment, is treated in a descriptively empirical fashion: it is extrapolated

from large-scale patterns and trends which infer a notion of individuals’ labour

market potential. This is often complicated by the evidence that challenges the link

between education and economic growth, and which questions the overall extent to which

economic outcomes can be realised through educational means (Keep and Mayhew 2004;

Wolf 2002; Wolf, Jenkins, and Vignoles 2006).

In terms of graduate work, the evidence appears to point to a new diversification and

heterogeneity in the UK graduate labour market (Elias and Purcell 2004; Purcell and

Pitcher 1996). This has increasingly brought into question more traditional notions of a

single ‘graduate’ labour market or a time-proof model of a ‘graduate career’ more typical

during elite higher education (Kelsall, Poole, and Kuhn 1972). It may be more appropriate

to conceive graduate work as falling within a more generic market context which absorbs

different types of graduate skills, profiles and backgrounds, and which graduates enter at

different levels. This signals, at one level, the general accommodation of a changing and

diverse range of graduate skills (Elias and Purcell 2004). Yet, at another, it may signal the

overall downgrading of graduate-level employment, or a wider mismatch between graduates’

skills and their utility in the market (Brynin 2002). Whatever interpretation we may

subscribe to, the overall reshaping of graduate employment implies that graduates are entering

different markets, at different levels and with differing rates of return.

***Graduate employability as ‘skills’***

Another dominant approach to graduate employability, and one that has shaped much

thinking about the role of universities in facilitating labour market demands, has been the

skills approach. Much of the discourse on graduate skills followed the influential Dearing

Report (1997), largely concerned with enhancing the overall functional and economic

value and output of universities. In part, this has reflected a wider agenda to make HEIs more

publicly accountable and transparent. Universities have been exposed to greater pressures in

forging closer alignments between their practices and the changing demands of the economy,

with an increased emphasis on measuring tangible ‘outcomes’ generated through higher education

(Barnett 2003; Jary and Parker 1998). While part of this reflects a state-driven attempt

for higher education to become more responsive towards its wider environment, including

the labour market, it also engenders a heavily neo-liberal view of universities as vehicles for

future economic growth (Lynch 2006; Wolf 2002). In effect, universities are encouraged to

develop provisions and practices that can significantly accommodate the future skills

demands of employers, including their demands for greater technological proficiency.

As with the human capital model, there is a strong notion of graduate employability

being a supply-side problem: responsibility lies at the doors of universities in reproducing

the types of economically viable learners who will add value in the labour market. Growing

efforts have been made over time to incorporate strong ‘employability skills’ components

into university curricula, geared largely around fulfilling the anticipated needs of employers

(Harvey, Moon, and Geall 1997). Over the past decade there has been a concerted effort

towards building graduate ‘employability skills’ into undergraduate programmes, reflecting

the increasing demand for what Barnett (1994) refers to as ‘knowledge for use’, which has

an essentially future-orientated and performative character. Liberal notions of the universities

as places promoting citizenship, democratic values and personal enlightenment have

been supplanted by a more instrumental and narrowly economistic ethos that placed heavy

emphasis on the productive capabilities of the graduate.

The skills agenda has not been without its criticisms, not only at the level of ideology

but also through its conceptualisation of the linkages between learning, skills development

and future employment-related activities (Hyland and Johnson 1998). Studies have shown

a generally receptive attitude amongst university teachers towards the accommodation of

employability skill components into curricula activities, and an attempt to balance with

this more traditional pedagogic practices and values (Bennett, Dunne, and Carre 2000).

Similarly, there have been some important curricular developments around enhancing

students’ future career-related skills through effective employment-related learning and

planning (Yorke and Wright 2006). However, questions have been raised about the efficacy

of ‘employability skills’ for shaping graduates’ labour market outcomes, leading

Harvey (2001) to invoke the metaphor of the ‘magic bullet’: institutional provision is

effectively seen to trigger graduates into desired labour market positions by virtue of

imbuing them with skills that can be directly deployed in future employment. This, however,

again portrays a simplistic relationship between institutional provision and graduates’

labour market outcomes, whereby the core of graduates’ future employment-related

skills are produced within the specific educational context of higher education.

A main criticism around the employability-as-skill approach has therefore been

around the assumed transposition of skills and competences from the educational context

into the workplace (Hodkinson 2005; Holmes 2000). This has challenged the relatively

neat fit between the types of knowledge and skills acquired through higher education and its

overall utility and transferability in employment settings. By placing heavy emphasis on

the rather mechanistic link between skills acquired in an educational context and its

deployment in the workplace, the skills approach tends to downplay the way in which

graduates become articulated, or at least ‘realised’, as skilled, employable workers (Darrah

1994; Grugulis, Westwood, and Keep 2004). To this extent, skills approached have tended to

de-contextualise graduate skills from the environments in which they might be deployed.

There has often been a descriptive labelling of these skills, whereby their meaning is simply

inferred through the assumed set of attributes that characterise them. This again further

implies a somewhat stable and coherent consensus between what employers desire and

expect from graduates, and what HEIs provide. The evidence would appear to suggest that

employers have different modes of human resource strategy when deciding the types of

core competencies and attributes they expect and demand. This is based not only on the

types of profile, histories and trajectories of specific organisations, but also the extent to

which they view graduates as constituting a core dimension of their future human resource

strategy (Adamson, Doherty, and Viney 1998; Brown and Hesketh 2004; Herriot 1992).

The descriptive and de-contextualised nature of graduate ‘skills’ often means that they

suffer from what Holmes (2000) has termed as ‘possessive instrumentalism’; they effectively

reside inside an individual’s head, almost like tools in a tool-kit, and can then be used

to operate upon the work setting in which they are applied. Numerous studies into workplace

learning and skills and competence have tended to be sceptical of reductive notions of

employee development, instead seeing work-related performance as being located within a

wider community of practice, and channelled through wider sets of social relationships that

serve to affirm and legitimate various work behaviours (Hodkinson 2005; Lave and Wenger

1991). Seen in this light, skills and competence often transcend descriptive forms of behaviours,

and instead entail a negotiated relationship between employers and workers. Ultimately,

notions of employability, skills and competence only have meaning when located

within socially constructed channels of inter-employee engagement and interaction.

So far we have outlined some of the dominant conceptual and philosophical characterisations

to the understanding of graduate employability, and as evident in much policy

discourse in this area. These have helped frame the debate in a way that focuses almost

exclusively on the employment capacity of individual graduates, and the role of educational

institutions in enhancing employability. Both are steeped in the positivist, objectivist

tradition that tends to depict employability as having an essentially objective character,

and as being principally the outcome of prior educational experiences and processes.

To this extent, employability is seen to involve the matching-up of the supply appropriate

skills and knowledge developed in the educational domain with the specific demands of

labour market; in effect, graduates’ educational experiences correspond clearly with their

activities in the labour market.

**Employability: agency, structure and negotiated order**

Having examined dominant approaches to graduate employability, and their characterisations

within policy, we now turn to an alternative approach based on structuration theory and

the associated perspective of negotiated order (Bourdieu 1977; Giddens 1984, 1991;

Strauss 1993). We believe this may capture more fully the complex and contingent dimension

of employability, as well as placing it in a broader overall social context. Moreover, in

contrast to the dominant approaches that have been outlined, this approach allows us to

conceptualise employability more in terms of being a dynamic, relational and socially

mediated process. Employability may be seen as a social process as much as a labour

market ‘outcome’, and this process inevitably entails the active positioning of graduates

within the wider labour market context within which they are located. This further relates

to the way in which graduates make sense of, and interact with, the world of work. This

interaction is itself constitutive of the types of labour market identities and dispositions

they are developing.

At a further level, these identities are mediated not only by the labour

market context, but also by wider aspects of graduates’ social and cultural experiences that

frame their self-perception as graduates, and how they approach both their employability

and the world of work more generally. This perspective has potential for explaining

graduates’ on-going and active relations to the labour market, as well as the outcomes that

may result from these. In his outline of the structuration model, Giddens (1984) has

emphasised the conjoined nature of agency and structure. Social structures, and the

contexts within which these are located, give rise to particular actions and behaviours. Yet

this agency can help shape structures, or at least people’s relationships to them, by generating

new contexts which may carry particular forms of experiences and outcomes. Individual

agents continually endeavour to draw upon agency to navigate through social structures,

which themselves set the parameters for their actions.

The structuration approach therefore pays greater attention to individuals’ relationship

with the social and economic world, and the sets of actions, behaviours and, significantly,

identities that this engenders. Overall, it offers a more nuanced and socially contextualised

approach than the dominant perspectives, allowing for fuller insight into the *social processes*

involved in the way people construct, negotiate and manage their employability.

Rather than positing an understanding of employability simply in terms of the employabilityrelated

potential people bring forward, the structuration approach allows greater scope for

analysing the dynamic interaction between individuals and the wider labour market

context that frames their positions and outlooks. To this extent, individuals’ actions are

both constitutive and reproductive of wider social relations and structures, which themselves

frame the overall scope for their actions.

The potential significance of this approach in analysing employability rests on several

main grounds. At one level, it captures the relational nature of employability in terms of

the dynamic and on-going interplay between individuals and their wider social and

economic environment. Key here is the fluid and recursive relationship between people’s

propensities towards reflexive and independent action – their human agency – and the

wider structural context within which this agency is bounded. Thus, although at one level

employability is a measure of individuals’ capacity towards achieving particular types of

labour market outcomes, it is also contingent upon structural arrangements which give rise

to particular forms of labour market actions (and outcomes). Through this approach, we

can begin to frame employability not simply in individualistic and absolute terms, but also

as contingent on contextual features in both the wider economic domain and the wider

social context of graduates’ lives. This interaction provides the basis for understanding

how individuals relate to areas of economic life such as employment, and the way this

relationship is mediated by the wider social context that they traverse.

Structuration approaches are rooted largely in the interpretative tradition of social

science, which places strong emphasis on the socially constructed nature of knowledge

and meaning. Social reality is constituted through interpretative schemata, rather than

being pre-determined by purely objective characteristics of the social world that govern

aspects of people’s perceptions (Gergen 1999; Jessop 1996). It is instead constructed on

the basis of a socially mediated engagement and interaction with the world, and channelled

through the meanings that competent and knowledgeable social actors use to

inform their engagement with the wider social context surrounding their actions. Such an

approach therefore offers an alternative to the more de-contextualised approaches to

employability as propagated by the objectivist and techno-rational perspectives of policy

makers. Instead, it would approach employability as a negotiated process that is intractably

linked to individuals’ engagement with the social and economic world.

This approach therefore invites a form of analysis of employability that transcends the

individualistic, technically focused and capability-led approaches dominant in policy

discourse. Individuals’ relations to the labour market are neither static nor unformed; nor

are they based purely on a techno-rational positioning of the graduate (their skills, knowledge

and credentials) to the labour market domain they choose to enter. This approach instead

brings fuller attention the meaningful, purposive and intentional action of individuals

based on a reflexive understanding of both themselves as individual agents, and the social

world through which this meaning is generated. Individual agents are in possession with

levels of personal knowledge, or to use Giddens’ notion, ‘knowlegeability’, based largely

on reserves of both discursive and practical knowledge developed through the life-course,

and which frames how they perceive the world, and position themselves in it.

So not only are individuals developing a sense of what they are about, and what they

consider to be appropriate, but are also actively internalising signals about the social and

economic world. This entails a negotiated ordering of the individual to the social world

and, to a large degree, an attempt to match up personal knowledge about oneself, with

knowledge about the wider social and economic world (Strauss 1993). For Strauss, the

social world serves to produce social relations, structural hierarchies and systems of role

allocation that provide individuals with a sense of what they sit in relation to wider social

structures. Yet people actively draw upon agency and sense-making to negotiate their

place within these orders, rather than passively slotting into a pre-existing social order.

A further important link in agency-structure approach is the way in which individuals

negotiate a sense of self and identity, and the way this marshals their future orientations

and actions. For Giddens (1991), identities are fluid and contingent, as well as being

reflexively organised around the on-going personal trajectories and life projects that individuals

forge. The labour market may be one area where these identities are played out,

potentially providing a platform for people to project modes of being and narrative identities

that facilitate expression of the self. The fluid nature of people’s identity construction

in some ways mirrors the more fluid conditions of social institutions, including work institutions,

in late modernity (Bauman 2000; Beck 2006). The increasingly fluid and flexible

nature of people’s identities means that their trajectories are increasingly less anchored

around set expectations, or indeed stable pathways.

Also working within the structuration tradition, Bourdieu (1977) has also made some

valuable contributions to the analysis of individuals’ positioning in the social world,

including their educational and labour market experiences, and the interaction between

these domains. For Bourdieu, people’s orientation towards the social and economic world

entails the meeting up of objective and subjective dimensions: wider sets of cultural

relationships effectively shape people’s personal life-worlds and realities. In Bourdieu’s

conceptualisation, individuals’ dispositions (including their labour market ones) are generative

and recursive: they both reflect and reproduce the structural arrangements that

shape them. To this extent, subjective dispositions are the active embodiment of objective

conditions from which they are derived. Using this approach, it might be that graduates’

behaviours might be both constitutive of wider structural arrangements, for instance their

cultural location, while at the same time reproducing them through the choices and orientations

they make. For instance, a graduates’ location within a particular social structure (e.g.

their class background, gender or ethnicity) may propel them towards a particular labour

market that they perceive to be appropriate based on these culturally derived dispositions.

For Bourdieu, these dispositions, more commonly referred to as ‘habitus’, are intuitive

and culturally grounded; ultimately, they shape individuals’ propensities towards particular

forms of actions and frame a sense of what is appropriate and meaningful. Crucially, in the

context of employability, these dispositions may determine the scope of people’s aspirations,

orientating them towards, or away from, particular forms of employment. They may not

always be consciously reflecting on this, but such is the grounded nature of these dispositions

that they intuitively pattern people’s orientations towards work and careers. In effect,

such dispositions may mediate how people understand and approach their employability.

Taking these two broad approaches to identity and disposition into consideration, it may

be seen that graduates are actively and reflexively constructing a sense of identity around

their place in the labour market. Their actions are meaningful and purposive, often entailing

a decision about employment-related goals and the various means for fulfilling them. Yet,

their dispositions are also rooted within a broader culturally derived context. There are also

patterns by perceived conditions within the labour market that frame scope for future action.

So although at one level individuals’ orientations and actions around the labour market are

agency-driven, fluid and, in some instances, highly individualised (Evans 2007; Roberts

1995), they are also anchored in part around to wider social and labour market structures that

frame their orientations; a process that Evans (2007) terms ‘bounded agency’.

**Towards a dynamic relational approach for graduate employability**

It is clear then that some of the main conceptual tools in structuration theory can offer

much potential value in examining graduates’ future work and employability. The main

strength, as has been outlined, lies in its consideration of the dynamic interaction between

graduates’ agencies and identities as individuals actively seeking to negotiate a future

position in the labour market, and the wider social and economic context within which this

is played out. Also important here is the way employability is mediated through the identities

and dispositions graduates carry, which themselves are structurally located. Graduates’

identities and dispositions towards particular forms of future employment shape various

employment-related responses and behaviours; yet at the same time these are patterned by

wider structural arrangements pertaining to both the graduate labour market context, as

well as the wider social context of graduates’ own lives. These arrangements effectively

anchor the types of labour market actions and orientation they develop, and are likely to

have a significant bearing on their overall labour market trajectories. Moreover, they will

frame graduates’ perceptions of their own employability and their propensities towards

seeking various forms of employment.

For graduates making the transition into the labour market, the process of adapting to

the labour market in terms of finding appropriate employment and integrating into the

work context has been shown to be a challenging, sometimes destabilising, one (Bowman,

Colley, and Hodkinson 2005; Brown and Hesketh 2004; Holden and Hamblett 2007;

Tomlinson 2007). In some cases, this transition may be relatively smooth and stable; in

other cases it might be characterised by significant fracture and disruption. This evidence

suggests that students’ and graduates’ engagement with the labour market is active, on-going

and in a process of continual negotiation: graduates are making active and meaningful

choices, reflexively constructed and linked to agency and self-identity. In all cases, enduring

concerns about ‘employability’, in terms of its value, presentation and potential deployment

frame graduates’ relationships with the labour market. This is itself underpinned by

perceptions of the market as higher-risk and competitive, whereby where the ‘rules of the

game’ have shifted in terms of the distribution and allocation of labour market rewards.

It is clear therefore that graduates are negotiating identities around future work that,

far from being static, are often fluid and contingent upon specific aspects of graduates’

lives. Such identities relate to the way they perceive themselves as graduates, as well as a

wider range of biographical, educational and work-related experiences that shape their

outlooks and orientations to future actions. They are likely to exercise a powerful influence

in shaping their self-perceptions, mainly though schematic frameworks that colour perceptions

about the appropriateness of particular forms of employment, graduate-level or otherwise.

Such frameworks are further likely to exert substantial influence on the choices and orientations

graduates make and, to a large extent, their outcomes in the labour market. Their

dispositions not only propel them towards certain jobs and job markets, but also towards

values and ideals about what constitutes meaningful future employment.

In terms of these graduates’ relationship towards, and integration within, the labour

market, this has been shown to involve more than a simple trading in of educational

credentials for equitable forms of employment (Brooks and Everett 2008; Smetherham

2006; Tomlinson 2007). In this sense, their employability is not reducible to their

educational credentials, and associated skills. Graduates perceive there to be less of a

structured shaping to their transition to employment, with the labour market acting as a

protective shelter that readily accommodates their graduate credentials. Further, they

anticipate that such realities are likely to continue through their working lives, and

map onto the wider shaping of their career progression. This in many ways connects

to the increasing fragmentation and individualisation of personal narratives (Beck and

Beck-Gernsheim 2002) being played in the late modern world. Individuals must increasingly

shape their own futures through careful personal planning and self-management. This is

likely to entail what Beck and Beck-Gernsheim refer to as the ‘individualisation of experience’,

and the wider sense that as graduates they have to play a more proactive and generic role

in the shaping of their employment outcomes.

However important these notions of agency are to understanding individuals’ relations

to the labour market and the construction of their own employability, the role of structure

in shaping these should not be downplayed. We would argue that key structural influences

play a significant role in shaping graduates’ perceived employability, and entail the influence

of cultural location relating to social class, gender and ethnicity (Archer, Hutchens, and

Ross 2003; Connor et al. 2004; Moreau and Leathwood 2006; Reay, Ball, and David

2006). It also relates to both the wider and the more immediate labour market context, and

to patterns of opportunity that frame graduates’ transitions (Rae 2007). We have seen that

the wider structural shift towards the new economy has presented itself to graduates as

offering significant new challenges in the shaping of their career trajectories. The availability

of particular forms of employment further influences how employable one is

perceived, and perceives themselves to be (Brown, Hesketh, and Williams 2003).

Although some graduates may still carry elements of a traditional graduate identity with

its elite connotations, it appears that mass higher education and the accompanying diversification

of graduate employment has dissolved traditional forms of cultural capital, and its

associated identities, in the construction of graduates’ status (Scott 2005). Thus, higher

education may be playing a lesser role in regulating these graduates’ work identities;

although mass higher education is likely to strengthen divisions in students’ differential

access to ‘invisible’ forms of pedagogy and symbolic resources (Bernstein 1996), that

may confer onto graduates a sense of where they stand in the labour market field.

What the studies into the changing dynamic between mass higher education, social class

and employment change therefore show is that mass higher education may be effectively

reinforcing class cultural tensions between different groups of graduates, located differently

within a changing higher education and labour market field (Bourdieu 1977). Thus, the dynamics

of social class and, still to a large degree, gender, still frame graduates’ expectations,

experiences and outcomes when they enter the labour market (Moreau and Leathwood

2006). The cognitive-cultural identities, or habitus, that graduates have developed still

frames in powerful and immediate ways the way they socially construct the job market, and

their potential options and pathways. Moreover, they will determine how these graduates

align their perceived sense of employability to the changing demands of the labour market.

Such structural shifts in higher education and class dynamics have interacted with a

changing graduate labour market context. This tends to reflect a multiplicity of labour

market contexts that demand different skills and attributes from graduates (Elias and

Purcell 2004; Purcell and Pitcher 1996). The increasingly heterogeneous work settings

that graduates enter is likely to have substantial bearing upon their own career trajectories

and outcomes, as well as how their employability is played out and affirmed in the labour

market. To this extent, their employability is a socially constructed process that encompasses

the lived realities that graduates experience within a multitude of different workplaces,

and within different graduate roles. All of this is played out within the cultural

dynamics and structures of different work settings that confer onto graduates different

identities. The perceived employability of one set of graduates in one setting is likely to

bear little resemblance to graduates in other settings, irrespective of calls for a generic

graduate skill-set by employers and policy makers.

Moreover, the structure of labour market opportunity, which for graduates is likely to

be historically and geographically contingent, will determine the scope for graduates’

career progression and labour market entry. In a current climate of economic precariousness,

labour market contraction and higher overall risk and uncertainty, graduates’ perception of

what are desirable, and indeed feasible, employment routes may be reformulated. This is

further likely to spill over into their propensities towards certain pathways such as enterprise,

self-employment and innovation (Rae 2007). Crucially, these shifting contexts are

likely to significantly frame the dispositions, choices and likely trajectories of graduates,

as well as the way they perceive and anticipate their labour market futures.

**Conclusions**

Our aim in this article has been to highlight some of the inherent problems with the dominant

approaches to graduate employability, and to advance an approach that pays greater attention

to the dynamic relationship graduates have with the labour market. The dominant policybased

approaches have been shown to posit a simplistic view of employability, invariably

reducing the problem to techno-rational processes, and steeped in a heavily positivistic

paradigm. Moreover, these approaches tend to offer an under-developed conception of

personal agency as well as social structure. The issue of agency and structure is at the

heart of graduates’ transitions to the labour market, mediating their dispositions towards

future employment, and the possible experiences and outcomes they encounter. These

processes are more firmly implicated in the way they understand and manage their

employability, which should be conceived as an active and socially constructed process

that engenders graduates’ on-going engagement with the labour market.

Moreover, these processes capture the more contingent and relational dimensions of

graduates’ employability, more so than descriptive labels around graduate skills and

competence. By conceptualising employability as a relational dynamic between the individual

and the labour market, we transcend notions of employability as nomadic and internally

located, and also as something driven exclusively by supply-side of the graduate market.

This

re-conceptualisation puts into sharper focus the ways in which graduates make meaningful

and purposive actions, based on their agency and identities, around their future place in the

economy. The approach also pays attention to a wider contextual framing of graduate

employability, which is the changing inter-relationship between higher education and the

labour market. This invariably acknowledges changing dynamics within higher education

in the formation of graduate identities, and the way in which higher education regulates the

production of graduates and their transitions and progression into the labour market. This is

further set within a changing graduate market context that challenges pre-existing assumptions

about graduate work and future work identities. Crucially, such an approach invites a

wider analysis of the wider social arrangements that frame graduates’ real and perceived

employability, including the way they adapt to, and integrate within, the changing economic

context. Moreover, it has potential to capture the way graduates’ employability is

played out through their on-going and recursive interaction within their work setting, and is

further mediated by employers and other significant organisational actors.

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