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An unjust balance: a systematic review of the employability perceptions of UK undergraduates from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds

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ABSTRACT

A systematic review of qualitative primary data (2010–2021) was undertaken to understand how inequality is experienced by undergraduate students from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds transitioning to the UK labour market. A ten-step protocol for qualitative synthesis was adapted to guide the study, whilst the PRISMA flow diagram was used to report the search. Data was extracted from 14 papers with thematic synthesis used to analyse the results inductively. This review illustrates multiple barriers faced by disadvantaged socio-economic students in a competitive graduate labour market and the severe impact this may have on student career development. Disadvantaged students often apply more effort than advantaged counterparts in seeking work and internship opportunities and live more precariously, as they lack finance to buffer them. In contrast, advantaged socio-economic status students can act quickly to build their employability profiles from the beginning of their degree studies, with the strategic application of social, cultural and economic capital. The qualitative papers in this review complement previous quantitative research, illustrating that despite participation rates in high education increasing for disadvantaged students, their career outcomes have not generally improved relative to their more advantaged peers. The review includes recommendations for stakeholders including government, universities, careers services and employers.

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Employability; transition; degree; disadvantage; capitals; Socio-economic status

Introduction

In the last decade, students from disadvantaged backgrounds have entered university in increasing numbers (Bekhradnia and Beech 2018). However, whilst their participation in Higher Education (HE) has increased, evidence suggests that students from lower socio-economic backgrounds are still at a significant disadvantage when transitioning to the UK labour market. When disadvantaged students attend university, they are less likely to go

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to high-status universities with the best employability outcomes (Britton et al. 2019; Crawford et al. 2016). Upon graduation they have a lower chance of entering the most highly skilled employment (Office for Students 2021a). Even when students from poorer backgrounds attend the same university and gain the same degree class, they still have a lower chance of accessing the top professions compared to their advantaged peers (Crawford et al. 2016; Friedman and Laurison 2019). Moreover, students from disadvantaged backgrounds find it generally more difficult to progress throughout their careers, resulting in a loss of lifelong earnings (Britton et al. 2019; Elias et al. 2021; Friedman and Laurison 2019). Whilst previous studies illustrate that HE does not result in improved employability outcomes for disadvantaged students relative to their advantaged peers, the reasons for this have not been fully established.

This paper begins with a brief contextual piece about employability. It then summarises the methods used which adhered strictly to the Boland, Cherry, and Dickson (2017) 10-step protocol for systematic reviews. The results section identifies six key points of balance which serve to build a picture of how HE employability outcomes are continuously balanced in favour of advantaged students. The application of a systematic review illustrates the dominance of the theories of capital development to employability which are primarily anchored in economic, social and cultural capital (Bourdieu 1990), but include the recent emergence of identity and psychological capital within the literature (Tomlinson 2017a). The paper concludes with recommendations to key stakeholders including the role of government, universities and employers in addressing structural inequalities.

The AIM of the study to answer: how is inequality experienced by undergraduate students from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds in their transitions to the UK graduate labour market?

Context

Graduate employability has been positioned as a 'priority' within government policy, which is 'vital to the UK's economic growth' for some time (Tibby and Norton 2020, 6 p). However, what is required to make graduates employable and how this might lead to social mobility remains obscure and understudied (Baruch, Szűcs, and Gunz 2015; Tholen 2012). Dominant definitions of employability in the UK tend to be skills-based with an emphasis on graduates being responsible for gaining the correct skills, experiences, attitudes and behaviours to secure positive graduate outcomes and in turn make them employable for life (Tomlinson 2017b; Cole and Tibby 2013). This approach to the conceptualisation of employability is most closely aligned to Human Capital Theory (that is the investment in key

qualifications and skills to purposefully enhance labour market outcomes, Becker 1964). Critics of this approach to employability suggest it lacks an understanding of structural inequalities, arguing that it is not a deficit on the behalf of the individual as much as an oversupply of graduates caused by the massification of HE which has led to the real problems in all individuals having equal access to graduate roles (Burke et al. 2017; Morrison 2019). Furthermore, individualistic views of employability fail to acknowledge the structural barriers faced by some and at their most extreme blame those who fail to make progress as being at fault for lacking talent or desire (Forrier, De Cuyper, and Akkermans 2018). An ongoing and key debate exists about the extent to which employability outcomes are agentic or shaped by context (Tholen 2015; Tomlinson 2017b). In response to these debates, there have been calls for rigorous and evidence-based research to understand the possible factors causing the gaps in outcome (HEFCE and OFFA, Department for Business, I.a.S 2014; Social Mobility Advisory Group 2016) and the subjective processes at play (Reay 2021). This review aims to explore these processes with the careful examination of existing qualitative research.

Methods

A systematic review was employed to assimilate and evaluate the current state of knowledge in this field, by integrating all high-quality qualitative research available on the subject. Systematic reviews have value in identifying patterns within the research and underlying theoretical constructs (Gough, Oliver, and Thomas 2017). In this case, a systematic review was key to understanding the underlying mechanisms which act to continually reinforce inequalities within the HE UK labour market. Employing well documented and standardised methods is essential for the outcomes of a systematic review if it is to be judged as rigorous, transparent and replicable (Gough, Oliver, and Thomas 2017). With this in mind, the Boland, Cherry, and Dickson (2017) 10-step protocol for qualitative synthesis was used to ensure that the study results would have clarity and replicability. This protocol was adopted because it can be readily adapted to cross-discipline research and lends itself well to qualitative studies. The Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews – PRISMA (Liberati et al. 2009) was used to both guide and report the research outcomes.

An initial scoping search revealed that two systematic reviews had been undertaken to examine employability within the timeframe of the study (Artes, Hooley, and Mellors-Bourne 2017; Williams et al. 2015). However, neither addressed social mobility specifically. Further, scoping searches using the terms ‘employability AND mobility’ (limited to March 2021),

resulted in 1130 results (March 2021) and ensured that a sufficient breadth of papers would be available for the systematic review to proceed.

By applying the PICO framework (Boland, Cherry, and Dickson 2017), initial search terms relating to the study's question were developed incorporating both 'natural' and 'academic' synonyms. Suggested inclusion and exclusion criteria were also developed. This framework was subsequently developed via consultation with a specialist subject librarian and two academic colleagues knowledgeable about employability to ensure that the terms captured the subject sufficiently. Four abstracts were chosen as lead articles (Bathmaker 2021b; Hordosy and Clark 2018; Waller et al. 2012; Wright and Mulvey 2021) to check the search terms for accuracy and to do trial searches. The abstracts were previously known or recommended to the author and were chosen because they represented a range of authors, journals, dates of publication and high citation indices. Notably, search terms had to be adjusted to reflect the high prevalence of Bourdieu (1986) within the papers and in particular the conceptual framing of the subject via 'capitals'.

Four bibliographic databases (IBSS, Web of Science, Sociological Abstracts and Scopus) were used to search for journal articles from January 2010 – June 2021. Searches were confined to titles, abstracts, and key words because search terms such as graduate were found too commonly within the main body of articles. Boolean search terms were developed as follows:

- Population of the study (undergraduate*/'HE'/ degree/ "university student* AND 'first generation'/ 'working class'/ 'social class'/ class)
- Phenomena of interest ('social mobility'/ inequality*/ "social inequalit*')
- Context (career*/ employability/ employment/skill*/ capital*/ transition*)

Complementary search strategies comprised hand citation and searching the author's own files, as well as consulting with two colleagues and a specialist subject librarian for additional relevant papers. Google Scholar UK and Open Grey were used as a further way of collecting literature.

As illustrated by Figure 1, electronic and hand searches resulted in 1259 papers being identified and stored. Once duplicates were removed via Endnote and manually, 766 citations were screened. The titles and abstracts of all these studies were assessed for their relevance during stage 1 screening. Most studies were excluded for being outside of the UK (more than 297). 30 papers were retained for detailed reading. The full text of all but one of these was obtained and examined in detail. After the study's inclusion and exclusion criteria were applied 14 citations were retained for the study. (Reasons for final exclusion from the study were as follows: outside of UK – 2; outside

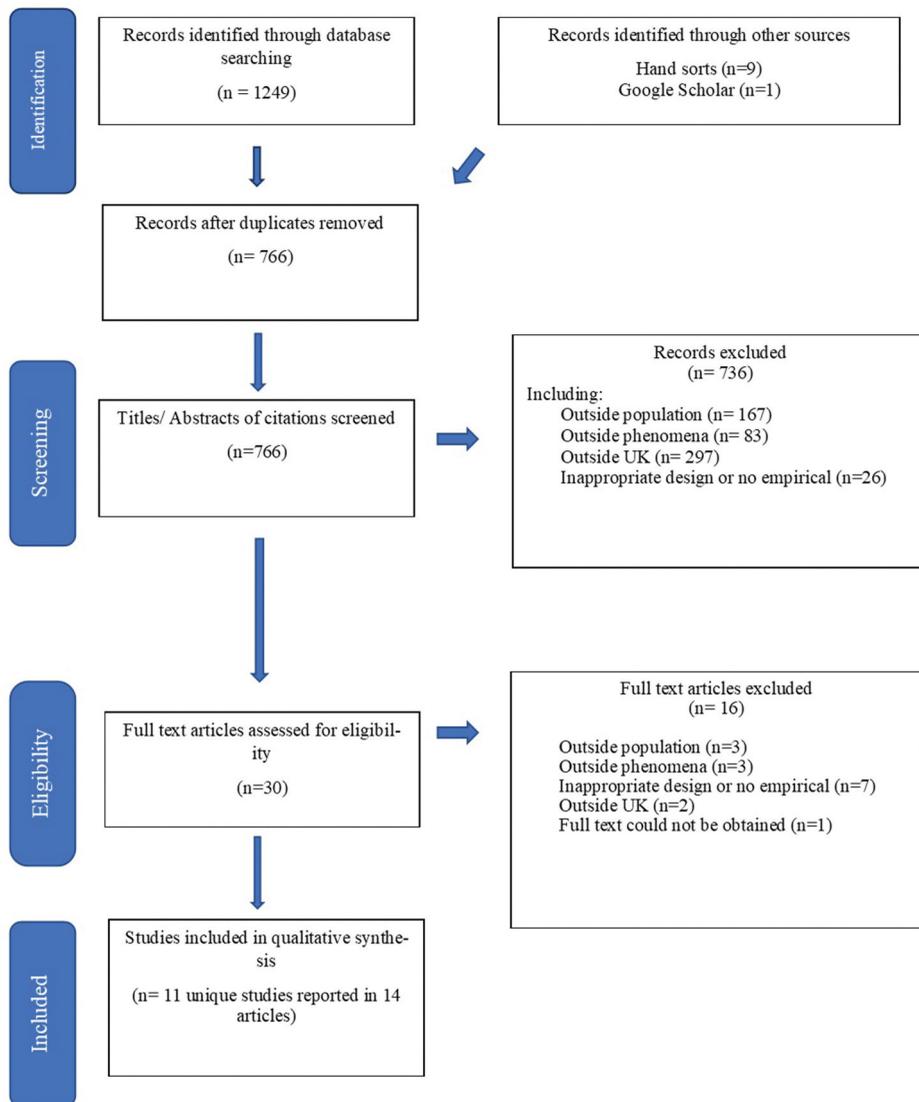


Figure 1. PRISMA flow diagram.

of study population – 5; not within context – 2; quantitative data only – 4; no empirical data – 2). 14 studies were included as highly salient for this study as they included qualitative data about UK undergraduates from lower socio-economic backgrounds on the topic of social mobility and relating to employment transitions.

Quality checks using the CASP Checklist (Critical Appraisal Skills Programme 2018) were undertaken and indicated that whilst the studies differed in their methods (including scope of studies, sampling methods, nature of participants), there was evidence of robustness in design throughout all of them exemplified by clear research aims and outcomes and

alignment in methodology. All included qualitative, empirical, primary research focussed on the UK, undergraduate population.

Thematic Synthesis was used to analyse the data (Thomas and Harden 2008). An inclusive approach was taken whereby data was summarised and then coded inductively and completely from both primary results such as participant quotations, but also from the authors' discussions and conclusions (Braun and Clarke 2013). Codes included 'role of work experience', 'recognising competition', 'rule/games' and 'barriers'. Once the papers had been coded, the resulting output was summarised and organised into 13 themes. These included: social/structural themes such as the role of social networks; psychological themes including individual naivety; but also, theoretical constructs such as capital development. These were further developed and became points of balance, which will be presented within the results section. Where possible, results were discounted where they were purely from the perspective of 'others' and in particular advantaged students, but in some of the papers these voices were used to emphasise contrasting experiences and have been included here in recognition of disadvantage as a relational and contextualised concept (Reay 2021).

Results

Data were extracted from 14 papers (Appendix 1), including their overarching purpose and methods. The 'Paired Peers Project' (Abrahams 2017; Bathmaker, Ingram, and Waller 2013; Bathmaker 2021a, 2021b) had contributed to the outcomes of four of the papers, this was noted, but the results of each study were still included as they were all found to represent a different part of this extensive study. The research methods ranged from single-case studies to extensive longitudinal projects following 80 'paired' students throughout the course of their degrees. Whilst not always stated, most of the authors positioned their research firmly within an interpretivist paradigm, with the aim of 'hearing stories' (Waller et al. 2012). Interpretivism being the use of research to understand and explore individual lived experiences with the aim of discovering subjective reality (Boswell and Corbett 2015). All the papers situated their research questions within detailed research contexts and theoretical concepts such as capital development. The most common form of data gathering was interviews, with only one project making use of focus groups (Burke, Scurry, and Blenkinsopp 2020). Data collection was entirely situated within universities. The majority of authors primarily focussed on recent undergraduate experiences. Notably Waller et al. (2012) acknowledged their study as a reflective piece looking back to school. They accepted there may be a weakness in this design as over time participants might have become unwittingly selective in their memories. Nine authors located their data collection across more than two

universities to enable student experience in pre- and post-1992 universities to be contrasted, the other studies were in one university only. Whilst the results of these studies might be seen to be less generalisable, if viewed through an interpretivist paradigm their content still adds plausible knowledge to our understanding of the lived experiences of some students. Furthermore, when combined in this study they allow a broad understanding of the graduate labour market from the perspective of the undergraduates experiencing it. Only one paper made explicit reference to randomised sampling (Parutis and Howson 2020). When sampling was described in the other papers it tended to be purposeful or convenient in nature with studies being advertised to students via inductions for example (Bathmaker, Ingram, and Waller 2013). Whilst this approach to sampling might mean self-selecting students (who are more conscious of the subject matter) engage with the study more readily it does mean that a research population was found which could comment on student employability. Furthermore, many researchers do not have access to the whole datasets needed to create random samples. Data was often analysed thematically, with data being cited verbatim to enable to the reader to get a direct sense of the participants' experiences.

Language

A range of terms were used to describe socioeconomic disadvantage throughout the papers including working-classes, Low Socio-Economic Status (LSES) and first-generation students. On occasion, these were directly contrasted to terms such as upper and middle-classes. This being in line with the language used by Bourdieu (1990). (Appendix A gives details of studies and summarises key terms). The descriptions were often used broadly and represented not only lower income but also educational level, parental occupation, neighbourhood characteristics and 'subjective perceptions of social status and social class' (American Psychological Association [APA] 2021). Whilst all the papers were chosen for their focus on socioeconomic disadvantage, some adopted proxy terms to explore this, for example, Morrison's use of accent (2014). For the purposes of this review and in line with the research question, the following abbreviations have been created and adopted throughout for consistency: *DisSES* (*Disadvantaged Socioeconomic Status*) and *AdvSES* (*Advantaged Socioeconomic Status*). The aim of this is not to imply that these students are homogeneous, but rather to acknowledge the merging of multiple findings.

This review sought to answer how inequality is experienced by undergraduate students from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds (*DisSES*) in their transitions to the UK labour market. It found that whilst widening participation may have resulted in increased access to HE, most

undergraduates fear a competitive labour market with complex and often hidden barriers. Whilst AdvSES students can act quickly to utilise their advantages (economic, social and cultural) throughout their degrees, DisSES students can face persistent deficits in understanding, networks and finances which affect the lifecycle of their degree and crucially their transitions to employment, potentially leading to lowered self-esteem and self-selection away from elite graduate roles. Patterns emerge throughout the papers of DisSES students becoming acutely aware of the constraints facing them, but working from a position of deficit consequently finding themselves unable to act sufficiently to overcome these. The dominant discourse of employability in the UK often positions individuals as fully responsible for their employment outcomes with little attention paid to structural inequalities, furthermore students are sometimes described as lacking if they fail to achieve positive destination outcomes (Tholen 2012; Tomlinson 2017b). Yet, this research would tend to suggest that DisSES students need to be more resilient than their counterparts to overcome the myriad of factors balanced against them. The differences in these lived experiences are summarised by the ‘Contrasting Experience – An Unjust Balance’ in Figure 2.

These contrasting experiences will be explored next to understand further the experiences of DisSES students in their transitions to the graduate labour market.

Navigating the labour market: meritocracy versus game

The competitive nature of the labour market was apparent throughout the papers, with students expressing concern about the competition for graduate-level roles (Abrahams 2017; Bathmaker, Ingram, and Waller 2013; Parutis and Howson 2020). Several authors found evidence that DisSES students were more likely to believe in meritocracy and the pure value of their degree in comparison to their advantaged counterparts who understood that there was a game to be played and competed within (Abrahams 2017; Burke, Scurry, and Blenkinsopp 2020; Merrill et al. 2020). Burke, Scurry, and Blenkinsopp (2020) took this further by suggesting that DisSES students tended to have a ‘naïve’ or ‘linear’ understanding of the labour market; these students believing in the power of ‘scholastic capital’ whereby a degree would be ‘life-changing’ with a ‘guaranteed link between a degree and graduate employment’ (p. 1715). Likewise, Bathmaker (2021b) found evidence that DisSES students’ future career aspirations were often ‘lofty’ and ‘highly idealised’ (p. 9). Whilst Burke, Scurry, and Blenkinsopp (2020) suggested that this over-reliance on degree outcomes might be due to the pervasive influence of Human Capital Theory (with HCT being defined as an investment in self via qualifications and skills to increase labour market chances – Becker 1964), like Bathmaker (2021b) they also

Contrasting Experiences—An Unjust Balance		
DisSES Students		AdvSES Students
Perceive the graduate labour market as a meritocracy. Focus on studies to the detriment of engaging in extras valued by employers.	<p>Navigating the Labour Market: Meritocracy versus Game</p> 	Perceive the graduate labour market as a game. Degrees are a starting point only. Strategically building capitals from the start of their degrees to ensure successful labour market outcomes.
Work from a position of deficit, lacking ready connections to find work experience.	<p>Connections: Deficit versus Hot Knowledge</p> 	Use hot knowledge and networks to secure advantageous connections for work experience and permanent roles.
Because of lack of connections and finance, internships are secured less often and via formally advertised channels.	<p>Internships: Lack versus Ready Access</p> 	More often secure internships by making use of connections. Tend to gravitate towards high status summer internships.
Need to work part time for money.	<p>Outside of studies: Work versus Extras</p> 	Take part in extra-curricular activities to knowingly generate social and cultural capital.
A transitional space with high levels of discomfort. It takes time to settle.	<p>University: Transitional versus Familiar</p> 	A familiar space introduced by prior experiences.
Need to act quickly on graduation to secure paid work.	<p>Finance: Exposed versus Protected</p> 	Buffered, more easily affording post-graduate study and career breaks.

Figure 2. Contrasting experiences – An unjust balance.

acknowledged the role that competitive marketing by universities had in terms of framing achievable outcomes. Importantly and in contrast to DisSES students, Abrahams (2017) and Bathmaker, Ingram, and Waller (2013) found AdvSES students to be deliberately and consciously strategic in their approach to career development. They found that AdvSES students acted quickly to build ‘capital’ beyond their degrees to stand out in

a crowded market. Likewise, Wright and Mulvey (2021) suggest that AdvSES students have advantages from the start of their degree and act quickly to build upon these deliberately using ‘opportunity stacking’ to result in an ‘accumulation of advantage’ from first year through to graduation.

Connections: deficit versus hot knowledge

All but one of the papers, gave clear evidence as to the central importance of students’ social capital (connections and networks) in allowing students to gain positional advantage within the graduate labour market. References were made throughout to AdvSES students being aware of the processes of networking and the value of practical, contemporary advice about options within a competitive market (Abrahams 2017; Bathmaker, Ingram, and Waller 2013; Bathmaker 2021a, 2021b; Burke, Scurry, and Blenkinsopp 2020; Byrom and Lightfoot 2013; Parutis and Howson 2020). There were examples of AdvSES students having confidence that they or their family ‘must know someone’ (Dylan participant quoted in Abrahams 2017, 629). In effect, AdvSES students could act upon their former knowledge of HE, gained through the lived experiences of family and friends, to build their CVs from the start of their degrees. In contrast, there was evidence of DisSES students beginning from a position of deficit, with instances of DisSES students becoming painfully aware of the barriers they were facing (Hordosy and Clark 2018; Merrill et al. 2020), this contrasting with the meritocratic idealism mentioned previously. Whilst Burke, Scurry, and Blenkinsopp (2020) recognised that DisSES students might be actively encouraged by their families, unfortunately these families often lacked the connections to enable them to accrue strategic labour market insight.

The picture of how students respond to the deficit in their networks was more mixed. Parutis and Howson (2020) suggested that DisSES, who lacked insight from their family and friends about HE, were more reliant on formal and scheduled information via lectures, employer seminars and job fairs. Despite being part of the ‘Paired Peers’ project, Abrahams (2017) was alone in finding that DisSES students might reject the use of contacts and prefer to ‘make it themselves’ (p. 631).

Internships: lack of access versus ready access

A common theme within the papers (with ten mentioning it) was the recognition of the importance of relevant work experience and specifically industry internships for all students. In their study, Bathmaker, Ingram, and Waller (2013) found that AdvSES students were consistently more successful in securing internships than their DisSES students. Other authors found

the same, suggesting that whilst DisSES students were clear on the benefits of work experience, they were often not able to access it as readily as their AdvSES counterparts (Merrill et al. 2020; Wright and Mulvey 2021). Barriers to securing internships were twofold with DisSES students lacking both the connections to secure unadvertised positions and the finances to take unpaid work (Bathmaker, Ingram, and Waller 2013; Hordosy and Clark 2018; Wright and Mulvey 2021). Consequently, whilst DisSES students might recognise the value of internships, for them they were classed as luxury items with prohibitive costs (Roberts and Li 2017; Wright and Mulvey 2021).

Crucially, Waller et al. (2012, 336) found that DisSES students often lacked 'hot knowledge' (relevant, current contacts) and were unable to fall back on family resources to find work experience. As a result of this, securing placements acted as an additional burden for DisSES students, this contrasting with AdvSES students who saw it as an opportunity to more easily differentialise themselves in a crowded job market (Allen et al. 2013). Whilst DisSES students might use significant personal agency and creativity to secure Dis work experience (Waller et al. 2012), overall, they were obliged to apply more effort. An example of this was found in Allen et al.'s (2013) research in the creative industry where DisSES students had to engage in time-consuming and frustrating cold-calling to arrange course-related experience in contrast to their AdvSES counterparts who could rely upon their networks.

A further barrier was the developing hierarchy of what counts as the best experience. Whilst all students might appreciate the value of relevant placements, AdvSES students were more strategically orientated towards high-status employers, placements, summer internships and a year abroad from the beginning of their degrees (Parutis and Howson 2020; Wright and Mulvey 2021). Wright and Mulvey (2021) found that AdvSES students had gained an awareness of the value of internships from their families long before their degrees had commenced. These students could draw on family connections to secure the most sought-after opportunities even before they were advertised or in some limited cases afford to pay agencies to secure prestigious and international internships (Wright and Mulvey 2021). When DisSES students did secure internships, Wright and Mulvey (2021) found this was often through formal channels such as advertised positions within careers services, furthermore the internships were often in less impressive sectors and companies. Allen et al. (2013) argue that placements were one of the specific mechanisms acting to reproduce disadvantage, in some cases acting as a 'filtering site' (p. 447); suggesting that this was unfair, when DisSES students are classed as somehow lacking effort if they fail to secure unpaid and unadvertised work experience.

Outside of studies: work versus extra-curricular activities

A further theme in the papers was how students used their time outside their academic studies. Whilst DisSES students were more likely to work part-time to fund their studies, AdvSES students more often chose to engage in extra-curricular activities – ECAs (such as sports clubs and university societies) with an aim to generate social and cultural capital (Bathmaker, Ingram, and Waller 2013; Parutis and Howson 2020; Roberts and Li 2017). ECAs matter because they are more often associated with the ‘brand’ desired by graduate employers including elements such as leadership, passion and proactivity which these employers associate more readily with ECA than lower-level jobs aimed at paying the bills (Ingram and Allen 2018). The studies by Burke, Scurry, and Blenkinsopp (2020), Parutis and Howson (2020) and Roberts and Li (2017) suggested that DisSES students did not fully appreciate the additional value attached to ECAs by employers, whereas AdvSES students stressed the importance of ECAs as a means of signalling cultural capital. However, Bathmaker, Ingram, and Waller (2013) found an alternative explanation, concluding that a lack of engagement with ECAs was the direct result of financial and time constraints. Both Roberts and Li (2017) and Wright and Mulvey (2021) found evidence that DisSES students more often had to take part-time jobs to fund their studies; with the students framing these roles as being about effort and learning to keep ‘your head down’ (Roberts and Li 2017, p. 746). In contrast, AdvSES students were more able to choose those experiences which allowed them to develop skillsets which were more ‘advantageous to managerial positions’ (Roberts and Li 2017, p. 746). Overall, DisSES students were often aware of and frustrated by the barriers they were obliged to overcome (Allen et al. 2013; Bathmaker, Ingram, and Waller 2013) and the ‘hierarchy of employment’ described by authors such as Roberts and Li whereby part-time paid jobs were ascribed less value than unpaid internships by some employers (2017, p. 744).

University: transitional versus familiar

For some authors, the concept of ‘hysteresis’ (Bourdieu 1990) enabled them to understand the challenges faced by students struggling to settle into university and placements. This sense of disconnect or feeling like a fish out of water is important, because if students feel themselves to be in a state of tension, whereby they struggle to fit in naturally, they have less time and energy to apply themselves to their studies and the additional tasks required in CV building. Multiple authors found evidence of HE environments being difficult to adjust to, resulting in students failing to flourish or in some cases even continue with their studies (Byrom and Lightfoot 2013; Parutis and

Howson 2020). This discomfort was also experienced by some DisSES students within unfamiliar placement and work environments (Allen et al. 2013). In contrast, AdvSES students used ‘habitus’ (Bourdieu 1990) to draw on earlier educational and life experiences to settle quickly into their studies. This early establishment allowing them to apply more quickly and confidently for the extras which they knew would impress future employers (Parutis and Howson 2020; Waller et al. 2012), Wright and Mulvey (2021).

The effect on individuals of their continued struggles and whether this would in turn lead to enhanced resilience and flexibility was more contested. Whilst some authors suggested that DisSES students developed heightened resilience in the face of multiple challenges (Abrahams 2017; Byrom and Lightfoot 2013) others such as Parutis and Howson (2020), implied that AdvSES students could draw on additional psychological resources born of confidence from an easier route to and from university. The extent to which resilience or ‘psychological capital’ (Tomlinson 2017a) has been developed by DisSES students merits further investigation.

Finance: exposed versus protected

Taken together, these papers suggest that when students lack economic capital, job exploration and choice become luxury items that poorer students cannot afford. Lack of funding resulted in students not participating in: unpaid work experience (Allen et al. 2013; Merrill et al. 2020); extra-curricular activities (Bathmaker, Ingram, and Waller 2013); or postgraduate study due to the high costs in addition to the accumulation of debt from undergraduate study (Bathmaker 2021b; Hordosy and Clark 2018). There was an overarching sense that DisSES students were aware of their lack of financial security and that this has been exacerbated by the loans system (Bathmaker 2021b; Burke, Scurry, and Blenkinsopp 2020; Hordosy and Clark 2018; Merrill et al. 2020; Parutis and Howson 2020). There was evidence of DisSES students with accumulated debt and lacking parental income, feeling pressurised to secure work immediately upon graduation (Hordosy and Clark 2018). Furthermore, DisSES students faced constraints on their geographical movement to secure both paid and unpaid roles because of the associated costs of moving (Hordosy and Clark 2018). In contrast, AdvSES students could be buffered by family whilst they explored roles, made applications, and gained additional relevant experience (Burke, Scurry, and Blenkinsopp 2020; Parutis and Howson 2020; Roberts and Li 2017).

Discussion and conceptual synthesis

The dominant theoretical underpinning of the papers was provided by Bourdieu. Working across multiple disciplines, Bourdieu’s aim was to

understand the inequalities which exist between groups and how they are reproduced (Bourdieu 1977, 1986, 1990). He saw the upper- and middle-classes as acting deliberately to maintain their status and in response to these developed theories to be applied as ‘tools’ to both understand the complexities of social inequalities, but also to directly challenge existing practice (Bourdieu 1986). Bourdieu used the concepts of economic, social and cultural capital to explore how resources including wealth, knowledge, connections and alliances, and internalised codes such as language and dress might be maintained and valued more highly by the middle classes to protect their status (Bourdieu 1986). Bourdieu further theorised that ‘agents’ (individuals) exist in social settings which he described as ‘fields’; he suggested that each field had its own rituals and rules (much like a game) and that some agents could compete more easily as they had internalised the ways in which they could beat the competition and were in possession of more symbolic capital to compete with (Aubrey and Riley 2017). Bourdieu also described ‘habitus’ as the ‘active role of the whole past’ in a person’s life resulting in a set of dispositions which acted to make the individual comfortable in settings they felt familiar with (Bourdieu 1990, p. 56). Critically, he theorised that forms of middle- and upper-class habitus were often most valued in HE and that these in turn transferred through to better labour market outcomes. Further, he argued that for some, settings, such as HE, would prove too uncomfortable or ‘different from the one they are objectively adjusted to’ for them to thrive or in some cases survive, he called this ‘hysteresis’ (Bourdieu 1990, p. 62).

Throughout the papers there was evidence that on balance AdvSES students possess more capital (economic, social and cultural) when they arrive at university and this enables them to settle more readily into the university experience and consequently act strategically to build their capital further throughout their studies. In contrast, DisSES students are more heavily reliant on human capital based on older notions of meritocracy. DisSES students are often unable to leverage social and economic capital to secure sought after work experience and extra-curricular opportunities.

Two authors (Bathmaker 2021b; Parutis and Howson 2020) still conceptualised employability outcomes via ‘capitals’, but did this with the application of Tomlinson’s Graduate Capital Model (Tomlinson 2017a). This model, with its application of five capitals (human, social, cultural, psychological and identity) can be seen as an extension of Bourdieu, but suggests that there is space for individuals to enact agency via the introduction of psychological and identity capital. More research is needed to understand the role which identity and psychological capital play in enabling individuals to enact agency to overcome structural deficits. Identity capital may enable individuals to create strong and personalised career narratives that will enable them to act strategically to seek opportunities which align with

their career goals (Tomlinson et al. 2017). Whilst psychological capital may enable graduates to adapt and respond to the challenges they might face within a changeable and testing labour market (Tomlinson 2017a).

Implications for practice

UK governments have acted deliberately to widen participation in HE in the belief that securing a degree will directly enhance life prospects (Department for Education 2017). Whilst understanding that DisSES students are heterogeneous, and some do enact personal agency to overcome challenging circumstances this research points to clear evidence that the graduate 'playing field' is not level and the extent to which individuals can influence this complex market is limited. Morrison (2019) questions whether change is ever possible in a context where 'people will tend to privilege their own children's advancement over a sense of wider societal egalitarianism, and will employ all the financial and cultural resources they have to do so' (p. 343). Similarly, Merrill et al. (2020) suggest it would take 'significant change in the structure dynamics of the social space as a whole' (p. 173) to prevent DisSES students experiencing detriment in their transitions. Whilst it is tempting to believe that the UK labour market is unchangeable, research by Tholen (2012) hints some of the obstacles faced by undergraduates are caused by macro policies in which the educational system is only loosely coupled to the labour market and application to jobs is far from a meritocratic process. Some ways in which labour market inequalities might be addressed are explored below.

This research illustrated the impact of lack of finance or 'economic capital' preventing students from participating equally in internships and postgraduate study. Put simply, they lacked the funds to be able to choose whether to engage in voluntary work and unpaid internships or continue to postgraduate study, even when they recognised this might thwart future progression. DisSES students could benefit from being made more aware of the possibility to access additional bursary funding allocated via their universities before and during their studies. Furthermore, government policy might be usefully directed at enhanced, targeted or more flexible funding for DisSES students choosing to undertake postgraduate study or placements.

Jointly the papers pointed to the increasing importance of specific types of work experience such as summer internships with prestigious firms. However, recent evidence would suggest that placements have become a casualty of the Covid-19 pandemic with advertised internships declining in 2020/1 and only a fifth of students accessing work experience (Mason 2021). Crucially, the same research, found that DisSES students were the least likely to secure work experience and that 64% of all students had worked unpaid with most students citing the lack of relevant work

experience as a barrier to gaining employment (Mason 2021). Furthermore, there is evidence that the massification of HE has led to employers becoming more selective through targeting pre-1992 universities and expecting individuals to package themselves as employable through the acquisition of skills and extra-curricular activities (Tomlinson 2017b). This prejudices DisSES students who are not only less likely to attend the highest status universities (Crawford et al. 2016) but as found in this research do not always appreciate the value attached by employers to ECA or have the finances to engage in them. Reay (2021) explains that employers consistently exclude talented students from DisSES backgrounds because of their recruitment practices which have more to do with notions of merit identified with class, rather than objective measures of talent. In effect, some employers recruit based on arbitrary perceptions and internalised codes centred on social and cultural capital rather than ability (Aubrey and Riley 2017; Burke 2012). Finally, as Abrahams (2017) and Wright and Mulvey (2021) suggest employers might usefully consider why they value certain experiences (such as internships) above others (such as working part-time to self-support). Employers could act to address these inequalities by ensuring that all opportunities are advertised fully and openly within all universities. Paid work experience opportunities which consider the need for some students to self-finance would further address inequities. If employers are unwilling to act on their corporate responsibility, then it may be a time for government to regulate to ensure opportunities are advertised more openly and paid fairly, a position supported by the Sutton Trust (Cullinane and Montacute 2018).

A key finding in this study was the ability of AdvSES students to act quickly and accrue capitals readily during their undergraduate studies, thus enhancing their future employability. In comparison, DisSES students were in a position of deficit, experiencing what Bourdieu identifies as ‘Hysteresis’ (Bourdieu 1990). Universities have a responsibility to ensure equality via their recruitment practices, inductions and ongoing support for those less advantaged, this being a condition of registration with the Office for Students (2021b). Embedded employability and work-based learning as part of an assessed curriculum could relieve DisSES students from some of the additional workload of sourcing opportunities outside of their studies. This review found evidence of students turning to tutors and lecturers for direction on the labour market, hinting at the important role academics have in giving access to networks including alumnus who can give contemporary labour market advice.

This study provided evidence that DisSES students recognised the importance of work experience, networks and access to paid opportunities. Many university careers services already engage with employers for events, mentoring and networking events, but these services may need enhanced funding to

focus further efforts on the needs of DisSES students. Careers services may have a prime role in connecting students who lack social capital with industry contacts via role models and placements and acting as a one stop shop where employers know their vacancies will be advertised to all students.

Limitations

The author was mindful that every research decision influenced the outcomes of the study and hence robustness of content. Attempts have been made towards transparency to aid future reproducibility with the use of tools such as PRISMA (Liberati et al. 2009) and CASP (Critical Appraisal Skills Programme 2018), these being selected in line with the needs of the qualitative nature of this study. Despite extensive searching across multiple databases and using wide search terms, only 14 qualitative papers were found to align with the question posed at the beginning of this review. This perhaps points to the need for more research within this area.

There are some missing perspectives within the study such as employers' biases towards or against AdvSES in their recruitment procedures. Also, important types of disadvantage such as ethnicity and gender were beyond the scope of this study. Furthermore, the paper focussed on the experiences of undergraduates, hence missing the full student lifecycle. For example, significant learning might be gained from studies of graduates reflecting on their experiences of undergraduate learning and how this impacted their life chances such as that conducted by Christie and Burke (2020). Screening of studies also hints at potentially useful insights to be gained from international studies such as those conducted by Lehmann (2014) and Silva and Snellman (2018) in Canada and the United States of America, respectively.

Conclusion

The application of a systematic review has served to highlight both the continued dominance of Bourdieu in the literature, as well as the range and depth of the mechanisms which act to reinforce inequalities within the HE UK labour market. This review shows no evidence of positive changes in the experiences of DisSES students over the past decade, despite the government's apparent desire to widen participation and consequently enhance social mobility (Connell-Smith and Hubble 2018). Collectively, the papers illustrate that whilst participation in HE is seen as a path to career mobility, this is not necessarily the outcome for disadvantaged students, who often experience university as a transitory and uncomfortable space where they must use heightened resilience to build networks and connections from a position of deficit. This matters not only at an individual level, but for society as more diverse recruitment pools are associated with enhanced

innovation (Wright and Mulvey 2021; Reay 2021). The outcomes of this review would suggest that a concerted effort is needed by government, universities and employers if DisSES students are to be given the opportunity to compete more fairly in the graduate labour market.

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Appendix A: Included studies

Study	Author(s)	Date	Methods	Purpose
'Honourable Mobility or Shameless Entitlement? Habitus and Graduate Employment.'	Abrahams, J.	2017	90 interviews with undergraduate students (working-class and middle-class) recruited from the UoB and UWE at induction and tracked throughout degree. (Leverhulme 'Paired Peers' Project)	Focus on graduate outcomes in a congested labour market and specifically the inequalities students face finding work.
'Becoming Employable Students and "Ideal" Creative Workers: Exclusion and Inequality in HE Work Placements.'	Allen, K. Quinn, J. Hollingworth, S. and Rose, A.	2013	26 semi-structured interviews with undergraduate students recruited from 5 HEIs as part of an Equality Challenge Unit Project (2010). One of the equality issues was being from a working-class background.	Examines how HEIs support students from inequality groups into work placements in the creative sector.
'HE, Social Class and the Mobilisation of Capitals: Recognising and Playing the Game.'	Bathmaker, A., Ingram, N. and Waller, R.	2013	'Paired Peers'	Questions how students from different class backgrounds respond to a competitive environment.
'Social Class and Mobility: Student Narratives of Class Location in English HE.'	Bathmaker, A. M.	2021a	4 case studies from 'Paired Peers'	Explores how university students articulate their class positions and opportunities for social mobility.
'Constructing a Graduate Career Future: Working with Bourdieu to Understand Transitions from University to Employment for Students from Working Class Backgrounds in England.'	Bathmaker, A. M.	2021b	2 case studies from 'Paired Peers'	Explores experiences of 2 students without established career goals.
'Navigating the Graduate Labour Market: The Impact of Social Class on Student Understandings of Graduate Careers and the Graduate Labour Market.'	Burke, C., Scurry, T. and Blenkinsopp, J.	2020	15 focus groups conducted with undergraduates: 1 Russell Group and 1 post-1992. Students recruited via posters, emails. Students latterly coded into social classes.	Explores how UK undergraduates understand employment outcomes and how first-generation students navigate compared to second generation.
'Interrupted Trajectories: the Impact of Academic Failure on the Social Mobility of Working-class Students.'	Byrom, T. and Lightfoot, N.	2013	Post 1992 university, 57 students initially recruited to complete a survey (these students classed as coming from low participating neighbourhoods) before stage 2 of the study which was 10 interviews.	Exploration of working-class students' responses to academic failure and the consequence for mobility.

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Study	Author(s)	Date	Methods	Purpose
'It's Scary and It's Big, and There's No Job Security': Undergraduate Experiences of Career Planning and Stratification in an English Red Brick University.'	Hordosy, R. and Clark, T	2018	Longitudinal qualitative project following 40 undergraduate, home students over a period of four years at an English Red Brick University. 151 semi-structured interviews. Study sought to recruit students from lower income backgrounds defined by whether they could access university's fee waiver scheme.	Explores how career strategies are employed and experienced by lower income students and their higher income counterparts.
'When it comes to what employers are looking for, I don't think I'm it for a lot of them': Class and Capitals in, and after, HE.'	Merrill, B., Finnegan, F. O'Neill, J. and Rivers, S.	2020	Part of the EMPLOY project tracking class inequalities across 6 countries including the UK. In the UK 40 interviews were conducted with working-class students and graduates and 10 of these were followed up after graduation.	Aims to understand employability from the student and graduate perspective – in this case for working class students.
'You have to be well spoken': Students' Views on Employability within the Graduate Labour Market.'	Morrison, A. R.	2014	Case study approach with 4 focus groups with final year undergraduates on an Education degree (32 men and 5 men) at a post 1992 university in SE Wales.	Study of transferability of Education Degree and importance of class and gender in framing student perceptions.
'Failing to Level the Playing Field: Student Discourses on graduate Employability.'	Parutis, V. and Howson, C.K.	2020	Exploratory interviews Uni of Essex with 19 1st and 2nd year students from a range of subject areas. Half sample high SES and half low SES based on parental occupation (randomly sampled from registry list).	Explored how students from different socio-economic backgrounds perceive their employability, capital acquisition and mobilisation strategies.
'Capital Limits: Social Class, Motivations for Term-time Job Searching and the Consequences of Joblessness among UK University students.'	Roberts, S. and Li, Z.	2017	Interviews conducted at 2 universities in the South: one research intensive and one post-92. 27 undergraduate students across 14 subjects. All unsuccessfully seeking part-time work. Social class defined by parental occupation.	Exploration of student unemployment during studies and its impact on social inequalities.

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Study	Author(s)	Date	Methods	Purpose
'Undergraduates' Memories of School-based Work Experience and the Role of Social Class in Placement Choices in the UK.'	Waller, R., Harrison, N., Hatt, S. and Chudry, F.	2012	49 first year undergraduates who had work experience between the ages of 14–16. Setting large teaching intensive university. Students were allocated to working,middle, mixed classes dependent on postcodes, education, work histories etc.	Examined whether students made stereotypical work experience choices based on social class and how this impacted on future choices.
"Internships and the Graduate Labour Market: How Upper Middle-Class Students 'Get Ahead'."	Wright, E. and Mulvey, B.	2021	100 final year undergraduates at 2 English universities (RG and post-1992) recruited for interviews. Coded as upper-middle-class, mass-middle-class and working-class.	How social class affects participation in internships and how this impacts future labour market progress.