Conceptualising transitions from higher education to employment: navigating liminal spaces

Michael Tomlinson

Published online: 09 Apr 2023.

Submit your article to this journal ↗

Article views: 311

View related articles ↗

View Crossmark data ↗

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Conceptualising transitions from higher education to employment: navigating liminal spaces

Michael Tomlinson 🔘

Southampton Education School, University of Southampton, Southampton, UK

ABSTRACT

This article develops and applies the concept of liminality and liminal identities to illustrate the relative positioning of graduates within the transitional spaces of moving from one institutional context to another and navigating an uncertain and challenging labour market. The current pandemic-affected labour market provided a rich context through which recent graduates have to sense-make and negotiate a future identity trajectory, exacerbating challenges evident over the past several decades. Drawing on qualitative interview data with recent graduates, this article depicts the liminal spaces they occupy through a typology of transitional positionings, including movement between these spaces. These ideas carry wider implications for supporting graduates' transition to a challenging and volatile labour market.

Introduction and context

Those entering the labour market with minimal employment experience are at greater risk of unemployment and, if they find employment, more precarious working conditions, including lower wages and job quality, and poorer working conditions and career development opportunities (O'Higgins 2012; Aronson, Callahan, and Davis 2015). Existing literature on education-work transitions shows this to be far from smooth or linear and is instead marked by considerable rupture, delayed entry and navigation of a complex range of potential pathways (Côté 2014; Wyn et al. 2020). Post-school and college transitions represent for many an individualised life project, often with the task of exercising self-responsibility in forging chosen employment outcomes (Walsh and Black 2021; Furlong 2017). These issues are increasingly salient for highly qualified university graduates whose distinction from other young people or school-leavers has become blurred and problematic (Mason 2020).

The economic context of a pandemic-affected recessionary labour market is clearly important in influencing how successfully graduates transit from university to employment, exacerbating many of the challenges experienced by first-time labour market

entrants since the 2008 recession (Powell, Francis-Devine, and Clark 2022). Evidence indicates that the COVID-19 pandemic reinforced growing patterns of unemployment and under-employment amongst degree-level entrants, income and opportunity disparity between graduates, and equity issues in accessing more prestigious roles and quality work experience and internships (IFS 2021). Immediate effects include withdrawn job offers, delayed entry to targeted employment and reduction of clear early career pathways towards skilled employment. Less observable impacts include the destabilisation of initial career decisions and goals, reduced morale and early scarring amongst those struggling to attain meaningful employment outcomes.

Drawing on a recent research project exploring the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on graduates' early career experiences and outcomes, this article provides analysis on how the transition from university to the labour market is experienced and negotiated by recent graduates. One of its principal aims was to explore the impacts of the pandemic on recent graduates' early career transitions and outcomes and how they sought to develop early a career trajectory during this challenging context, including during periods of unemployment.

This article develops an analytical framework which uncovers the different transitional spaces, or positionings, that graduates were occupying a year on from their graduation. Significantly, this shows that to varying degrees all graduates were actively sense-making their current and future employment trajectories and in a process of 'becoming' and endeavouring to move from student to graduate identities.

The framework draws on the concept of *liminality* to show the majority of graduates' experiences are characterised by significant transitional ambiguity, role uncertainty and identity incoherence. This was especially the case for those who remained unemployed, underemployed or in contingent forms of employment up to fifteen months since graduating. We show that these liminal spaces interact with how graduates are forming and (re)negotiating identity: in the process of sense-making their future trajectories in the labour market and establishing a labour market position, graduates are engaged in identity negotiation. Yet this can be fragile and disaffirming for those in precarious positions when their liminal experience extends to the point where their desired outcome of a graduate role seems remote. The temporal context of COVID-19 is significant because the disjuncture and delay engendered by a weakened labour market exacerbates recurrent challenges accessing desired target employment. In this context, agential pursuits towards realising employment goals are more often met with structural barriers in the form of perceived joblessness, opportunity reduction and undesirable employer signalling on accommodating current graduates. Whilst acknowledging that the labour market and its opportunity structures have changed in more recent times (ONS 2023), this study's data reveal important transitional experiences during the crucial juncture between leaving formal education and negotiating access to initial employment.

Utilising the concept of liminality to understand transitions into employment

The concept of liminality has gained increased attention in the field of work and employment, partly reflecting the significant rupturing of traditional foundations of career movement and employee workplace integration. In the classic account of liminality developed

by Turner (1967), liminality is conceived as a state of being between two defined points in time and space; a betweenness state of existence that forms part of rites of passage whereby an individual inhabits a space not marked by a clear social role or identity. When making significant life transitions, individuals occupy a threshold between a previous and future state of being. This traditional approach to liminality conceives the temporal and spatial reconfigurations of transitional episodes to be relatively clear and finite: a liminal experience represents a transient state of ambiguous role disruption and renegotiation before the individual is reintegrated into a well-defined social role and status. This entails a three-stage process of; separation (moving away from a clearer identity position); transition (in betweenness of identity and roles); and reincorporation (achievement of a defined social identity position).

Some of these states are more structurally defined than others and may depend upon how clearly defined role conferment is achieved (for example moving from a role as unemployed to employed, an adolescent to becoming an adult). However, in many cases inter-structural states of indeterminacy can be more ambiguous, protracted and not easily resolved through externally imposed role conferment. The external achievement of a social role does not always signal the completion of a threshold state, and the negotiation of an identity position within a new status order continues. For example, someone taking on a new or different organisational role may still retain a strong residual identification with a previous one. Such individuals may be externally incorporated into a public identity or status but have not entirely jettisoned former states and may occupy residual features of a previous identity.

Recent empirical depictions of liminality have emerged from organisational studies and have developed the concept beyond the relatively simple separation, betweenness and reincorporation approach outlined by Turner (Ibarra and Obudaru 2016; Garsten 1999). The fluid conditions of contemporary employment experience are ripe for states of liminality given that clearer structural and temporal ordering of working life are disrupting the coherency by which employees form career narratives (Ybema, Beech, and Ellis 2011) provide case illustrations of employees experiencing organisational role transitions and the varying level of transience or endurance to liminal states, including continued liminality when goals have been realised and a new role attained. Ibarra and Obudaru (2016) discuss the concept in relation to weaker institutional structuring of contemporary life experience, largely in the absence of dominant authoritative norms that frame transitions across the life course. This contrasts to earlier approaches to liminality which understood liminal threshold states to be largely transient and structured through clear and certain role boundaries that enabled the eventual fulfilment of a social status. In the absence of strong institutionalised structuring of life trajectories, liminality has been latterly understood to entail threshold experiences that are more protracted and less determined by movement through clear and certain role boundaries. In essence, liminal states are likely to be experienced continuously as individuals negotiate their way through a series of transitional moments, some of which may be of their own choosing.

Transitions, liminality and temporal discontinuities

In conceiving the transition from higher education to employment as an active and dynamic social process, greater attention is given to how graduates negotiate, achieve

and actively sustain an identity that helps confirm their place within the economic order. Therefore, the way in which liminality is experienced by recent graduates entering a precarious economy interacts with ongoing challenges in crafting an early employment narrative and meeting labour market interruptions and potential hurdles.

Much of the identity work graduates undertake in managing the transition process connects to schematic self-perceptions of who they are in relation to future employment within an unfolding trajectory of self (Bamberg 1977; Giddens 1991). The formations between their personal and future professional selves can mediate graduates' job-related behaviours. As Holmes (2013) discusses, graduates' movement into the labour market is processual in nature and entails formation, negotiation and presentation of publicly conferred identities as graduates. The strength of these identities may depend on how much graduates have invested their future employment as a form of identity capital (Côté 2016; Tomlinson 2017) and are able to develop appropriate narratives aligned to a chosen area of employment. The development and enactment of such identity capital influences goals, choices and responses to immediate realities and potentially provides a compass for conceptualising a future place in the labour market and how successfully individuals might acquire other resources that add to their emerging trajectories.

Greater focus has been given to the temporal dimension of transitional experience, including how those leaving formal education actively orientate toward their trajectories (Woodman 2011; Brennen and Nilsen 2007; Cuzzocrea 2019). Such analysis shows that the intersection of present and future orientations is characterised by marked tensions. These invariably include tensions between increased expectations of self-managed pathways and structural hindrances; agential endeavours calling for social adaptiveness and a fluidly and unpredictable social and economic world; and between expectation of short-term work-focused, proactive employability enhancing behaviours and careful deliberation of career pathways and choices. One temporal challenge in college-to-work transitions, resonant with the concept of liminality, is negotiating present realities and knowing how they work in tandem, or tension with, ongoing identities. Honwana's (2012) concept of 'waithood' captures the liminal space between the endurance of a prolonged present and postponed realisation of career aspiration (extended youth) and actualisation of an idealised status. This can entail both experimentation and existential disruption in life course transitions, and is increasingly met with risks. One of the risks of 'slower track' transitions (MacDonald 2011) is longer-term underemployment leading to stagnation of education and work-related profiles and gradual calcification of non-graduate employment.

Those leaving formal education for the first time and entering a precarious job market are more prone to experience what Berlant (2011) has termed a 'cruel optimism' where the existential crises of seeking jobs in a precarious market becomes normalised as part of one's identity project towards idealised employment: a form of 'crisis ordinary'. For those waiting to embark on their role of choice, the extended present of seeking work in a contracted labour market is often problematic; yet optimism helps maintains a sense of self, purpose and existential continuity in circumstances that can be frustrating or alienating.

Methods

The study on which this article is based formed part of a wider mixed methods, longitudinal study that explored the impacts of COVID-19 on recent graduates' early employment

decisions, transitions and outcomes. The respondents were drawn from a wide sample: 2,767 graduates who had completed a survey at the start of 2021 on their labour market experiences since graduating. Respondents who indicated their willingness to participate in an interview were invited to do so by the researcher several weeks after the survey had been completed. Around 1 in 7 accepted the invitation. The interviews explored in further depth graduates' experiences of the labour market since leaving university; their views on the impacts of COVID-19 on their career planning and prospects; and gave voice to graduates who had completed the earlier survey.

Two rounds of interviews took place. The first was between January and April 2021 and involved 56 graduates. Given the social distancing measures in place during this period, all interviews took place via Zoom and lasted approximately 45 min. The respondents represented a broad range of graduate profiles and came from a wide spread of higher education institutions across the UK. Of the 56 graduates who were interviewed, 22 had graduated from higher-ranked institutions, 12 from medium ranked institutions and 22 from lower-ranked institutions. The majority of the sample were 2020 graduates (n = 47), although some had graduated in 2019 (n = 9). The latter were included as some may have planned to enter full-time employment during 2020 after a gap-year or for other reasons. The gender spilt was 30 females, 24 males and two individuals who identify as non-binary. 38 were White British, eight White European, one White Other, five Asian, four Mixed/Multiple ethnic group. 39 of these fell into the age bracket of 21-25, eight were 26–30 year olds, five 31–40 year olds, three 40–50 year olds and one person aged 50-60.

The initial part of the interviews engaged graduates on their experiences post-graduation, i.e. sharing their post-university experiences, including some key episodes, reflections on their current situation, and how their career plans were unfolding. The second part of the interviews were more specific to the pandemic and its perceived personal and job market impacts.

The second round of interviews involved 24 of the original 56 interviewees and were conducted between August and October 2021, some 6–7 months after the initial round, when social restrictions had eased, and some sectors had re-opened. The aim was to conduct between 20 and 30 follow-up interviews and graduates were selected primarily on their willingness to be interviewed again. Roughly half responded affirmatively. The 24 s stage graduates comprised 12 male and 12 females, 17 of whom were aged 21–25, four aged 25–40 and three over 40. The majority of these were White British (18), three being White European and three Asian.

The second stage interviews took a similar approach to the first, this time exploring how the interviewee's employment situation had unfolded over the six months since the initial interview. This enabled insight on what changes were taking place, including changes in how graduates perceived their immediate and longer-term futures, and reflections on some of the most salient experiences that shaped any developments in their progression towards, or within, their targeted employment. Their accounts continued to reveal mixed fortunes and outcomes, and although there was notable variability in where they perceived they were at in their career progression, interviewees generally expressed more positive outlooks than earlier in the year.

The two waves of interviews discovered four dominant transitional experiences (see Table 1 for a summary). Graduates' accounts of their transitional experiences further

Table 1. Dominant transitional positionings and their features.

Transition type	Characteristics	Main experiences	Transitional challenges	Outlook
Disorientated	Graduates who feel disorientated and discouraged by the current context and concerned about their immediate and longer-term future. More prone to perceived significant impacts of pandemic and lower external self-perceived employability.	Precariousness. Frustration. Destabilisation of emerging goals. Significant challenge breaking into relevant employment fields; Perceptions of disruptive effects of pandemic.	Limited opportunities. Challenges in finding appropriate employment. Perceptions of agency being constrained. Opportunity awareness and knowledge. Situational challenges (e.g. mobility, lack of independence).	Early latent scarring (lowered motivation, confidence and morale). Generalised pessimism. Lowered sense of perceived employability. Compromised employment situation (e.g. under-employment or unpaid voluntary work.
Indeterminate	Graduates who have yet to enter the graduate job market but are actively looking for employment and remain orientated towards establishing employment and building employment narrative.	Profile building. Pragmatic behaviours towards finding suitable employment. Mapping out strategic pathways. Re-alignment of careers goals.	Delay in entry to chosen or related fields. Challenge in finding and applying for suitable employment. Frustration but overall optimism about longer-term prospects.	Quiet optimism but mixed with general concern about immediate challenges. Confident of change in circumstances. Partly depending on career orientation and emerging identity.
Emergent	Graduates who are in the process of forming an employment narrative by undertaking relevant work experience or having found recent employment.	Have experienced initial transitional employment challenges (as above) but are on course towards building relevant experience and profiles.	Experience of initial challenge and disappointment, including extensive applications. Re-appraisal of initial employment goals. Building up relevant experience.	Higher levels of perceived employability and career choices. Confident about benefits of initial breakthrough on longer-term prospects.
Integrating	Graduates who have started to establish a meaningful employment narrative having continued an early trajectory before graduating or found employment fairy seamlessly (often in targeted employment).	Relatively fluid movement into targeted or related employment. Early career success and confirmation of graduate status and employability. Purposive starting out of graduate-level employment. Not adversely impacted by COVID-19 context.	These tend to be confined to ensuring best fit with strong emerging profile and company. Having to prove their value in the initial stages. Challenges of working in a COVID-19 environment (including home working, limited social interaction.	Overall optimism, including high levels of self-perceived employability. Perceptions of extended career choice. Higher level of career control. Strong sense of employability and early career narrative.

revealed how they were developing their profile; key challenges and opportunities that arose; and how their graduate identities were being formed, negotiated or disrupted during these important stages. A largely inductive interpretation of the data led to the emergence of the typological schema presented in this paper. Previous typological analysis has often highlighted clusters of attitudes and schematic orientations to immediate or future lives; for example, vocationally orientated vs. academically focused (Katchadourian

and Boli 1985), future planning, or career goals (Tomlinson 2007) but often within HE contexts rather than during the post-graduation period.

Whilst the analysis generated a significant proportion of superordinate themes that recurred through the interviews (e.g. perceptions of the current labour market; level of challenge in finding employment, support networks, career goals, etc.), the key transitional experience and related experiences of liminality needed to be unpacked more fully within the latent structure of the data. The interviews were coded thematically by developing both superordinate and ancillary semantic patterns from what were often rich accounts of post-HE graduation experiences. NVivo software was used to organised the coded data based on the thematic analysis.

Analysis: mapping out transitional positionings

Disorientated: alienated liminality on the margins of identity formation

Disorientated graduates expressed discouragement and disenchantment about their immediate employment prospects. They perceived that an unaccommodating pandemic-affected labour market was limiting available opportunities, reducing their prospects and thwarting their potential. As liminals, experiencing marginalisation and disruption from their intended career course, their views on their immediate prospects and the wider economic situation for graduates revealed a perceived distance between their current status and the identities they were seeking. Their actual experience of being either unemployed or undertaking contingent work was in tension with their idealised goal of being affirmed in a valued graduate position. The sense of identity dislocation between their idealised and actual self, meant that many felt neither anchored in the previous identity (student) that they wished to abandon nor the idealised one of being integrated into their targeted employment. This period of liminality was one marked by discernible role ambiguity and identity disruption.

Feeling distanced from jobs for which they felt they were suitable, present status suggested significant existential injury in not achieving graduate-level employment. The COVID-19 context, perceived as it was to be profoundly rupturing their plans and destabilising pathways towards desired employment, was accentuating the perceived distance between aspired and actual identities as well as the institutional contexts of their previous higher education and intended workplaces. Reflecting on the nine months since graduation, Sean, an Environmental Science graduate who had experienced a placement year during his degree, typified the frustration of feeling misplaced from the labour market and unsure how his circumstances would improve in the immediate term:

> It has been abysmal, to be honest! I mean I don't know, I always kind of considered myself, well … I always try and stay positive and stuff, but I think especially since about September I have just got smacked with reality, really. I mean I can't even get a job full-stop let alone something in my field. I can't even get a job at Tesco or something. So yes it has not really been very good, at all (*Male, Environmental Sciences, English HEI*).

Disorientated graduates such as Sean expressed clear motivation to finding suitable employment and developing their early careers. Like other marginalised graduates, future career was perceived as a source of identity. However, in most cases, the means were perceived to be inaccessible or operating by different rules in a pandemic-

affected labour market. Their initial perceptions of being employable and having the potential to succeed in their targeted employment was in tension with the limited scope to be able to realise this.

A theme throughout the interviews was the enduring sense of spatial, temporal and existential challenges tied to the current labour market context, which appeared to compound their liminal anxieties. Spatially, for some of these graduates, the immediate post-university experience was marked by significant geographical and physical constraints and an unwanted extension of their youth. This was certainly the case for those who had moved back into their parental home, not been able to develop social contacts with friends, or in-person interaction with employers. The feeling of social isolation informed the sense of time passing by and not being able to gain momentum. Struggling to get feedback on the 40-plus applications he had made since graduating, Tariq had grown acutely sensitive to the immediate context of job shortages at the time of graduating which he directly attributed to the pandemic:

> I feel like if COVID hadn't happened, I most likely would have got a job. Because I would have continued to look for more jobs through March. I would have had the potential interviews from the couple of second stages that I'd got in March (*Male, Business Finance, English HEI*).

Temporally, these graduates indicated concerns about the amount of time since their graduation and the duration of their current situation. Several expressed concerns about being in contrasting situations with newer or future graduates, who were perceived to be less severely impacted by a post-pandemic context. There was an acute sense of a static or extended present whereby minimal momentum had been gained in the months following graduation. Those who were unemployed or in jobs which did not require their degrees expressed some anxiety about the impact this might have on longer-term prospects. A sense of suspended and unproductive time, compounded by new levels of competition from more recent graduate cohorts, was a concern expressed at length by Gus, an Engineering graduate:

> I don't know what I feel. I feel that I might just be stuck within a non-professional role. Hopefully not. But it just feels that every passing day is a day closer to that expiry date, if you want to call it that. It's not bright.
>
> It has definitely affected my confidence and there are days where it's like, what's the point? Just to give you context, I'm working part-time at present. That's what I do to get income … I'll have to get back into the swing of things, but it is soul-destroying … (*Male, Mechanical Engineering, Scottish HEI*)

Six months on from this interview and still struggling to break into targeted employment in the engineering or finance sector, he discussed maintaining the goal of finding professional employment and utilising the value of his qualification, but again was acutely aware of the risks of ongoing distance from his targeted employment by continuing in non-aligned retail employment. He continued to express concerns about the temporal dangers of being in this situation for prolonged periods:

> I'll put it this way. You get your discount card after six months of working with (*superstore*). If I get my discount card, I will be very upset. I don't want to be there that long. I cannot put into words how much I loathe retail. It is a necessary evil just to get out of the house and to be working and not have an absolute black hole on my CV, even though I've not referenced it in any of my CVs today.

Concerns about being 'stuck' and 'trapped' in a continuous period of unemployment or under-unemployment extended to anxieties over the consequences for longer-term career prospects. Working in non-graduate or lower-skilled job sectors was seen to create further distance from aspired targeted employment if it did not engender the right forms of experience that could enhance their profiles. The below quote from Eilidh reflects how such situations were often accompanied by feelings of disempowerment in not knowing how to access these jobs, and in many cases this was directly attributed to the immediate impacts of COVID-19:

> I'm still stuck working in hospitality and it feels like I'm never going to get anywhere else. I've had so many interviews for some really interesting jobs that I would have loved to have got but the feedback is always just that someone else had more experience. And each job I've applied for has been very different so I can't possibly gain experience in allof these things (Female, Social Sciences, Scottish HEI, unemployed)

Indeterminate: biding time, waithood and identity maintenance

The data revealed a widespread transitional experience that captured the perspectives of many within this cohort. This was typically expressed as clear feelings of in-betweenness and transitional ambiguity; of being some way off from fulfilling aspired job market roles and identities yet being able to maintain identities towards a desired graduate job. This perspective, referred to here as *indeterminate*, captures many of the experiences of limbo and uncertainty about the future as the disorientated graduates, but this experience is accepted as an inevitable, albeit frustrating, feature of navigating a challenging post-HE space. A subtle, yet significant, difference between this position and the previous one is the perceived manageability, or transience, of this liminal uncertainty and how the spatial and temporal dynamics are negotiated. These graduates remained orientated towards the employment they sought and felt more confident that improved job market outcomes would emerge post-pandemic.

The challenges they had experienced in finding their ideal employment were met with some frustration but were not significantly rupturing their overall trajectories. Their experiences represented a managed liminality as they had maintained their sense of graduate identity and were trying to use the extended limbo, or waithood, to pragmatically develop experiences that enhanced their profile and to map out pathways towards their desired employment. They revealed signs of being engaged in identity maintenance activities that helped manage the extended thresholds period, including 'side projects' that enabled them to establish a sense of continuity towards a more defined outcome.

Some graduates had become discouraged by the impact of the pandemic on their targeted sector and had decided to reorientate to a different career pathway. In some cases, self-employment was perceived to be an alternative pathway to waiting for opportunities within larger companies, which were often viewed to be highly competitive and selective in their entry demands. This was the case for some graduates who had undertaken specialised courses aligned to niche job areas.

Lukas represented a typical liminal experience of indeterminacy. Graduating with a Masters degree in Cultural Heritage Management, he was actively seeking a management-level position in a sector which had recently scaled down available opportunities. At the same time, he straddled a variety of roles including continuing to work as a

hotel employee and engaging in a freelance business start-up with several of his graduating peers. Such experience, alongside voluntary work in the cultural heritage sector, was seen to add value in terms of enriched social contacts and building an emerging identity around heritage management. It also opened up possible identity trajectories that were continuing to be formed as he straddled multiple roles and he maintained some optimism about moving into a heritage management role:

> I hope that through working with different sorts of organisations, like charities and doing this master planning project, I will get enough connection, and enough knowledge, and enough experience, to get into not a starter or a graduate position anymore, but as a bit higher and more experienced member of the team. Hopefully it's easier to get it. Because they're not really looking for interns and graduates (*Male, Cultural Heritage Management, Scottish HEI*).

His vivid depiction of his current situation was captured in this quote toward the end of the interview when asked how he would sum up his current employment situation. A notable feature is the sense of navigating uncharted territory and working against external unpredictability:

> It's really, I'm feeling like navigating a ship. So, you know the port, or you know the stars, but you don't know how the sea is going to be. You don't know the waves. You don't know the weather. So, you have to be really open, and you don't know if you're going to get there. That's another thing because you don't. So, there is no certainty in the end. I think that's what describes, probably, the best situation. You are navigating constantly.

Matti was also in the process of developing a Business Start-up, having encountered difficulties in establishing himself in an arts field related to his degree in the months following graduation. As with Lucas, there were undercurrents of an entrepreneurial shape-shifting disposition in trying to adapt to contingent circumstances and carve out new opportunities (Kelly 2006).

Reflecting on his switch towards self-employment, he framed this changed course of action as a deliberate response to the starkly reduced employment openings in the cultural industries during the first year of the pandemic. Whilst this had continued to be fledgling for much of the period between the interviews, he felt continued momentum and sensed he was establishing some career control through continued proactivity:

> What is the case is that I have recognised that it's not there to succeed in at the moment (in theatre). And that I've seen something that, a, I enjoy, b, I can control to a certain extent and, c, that actually something to succeed in if I get it right and if I get the support, which I am getting from The Prince's Trust or whatever, to help me succeed (*Male, Theatre Studies, English HEI)*

Several graduates occupying this space who had found employment still felt some way from where they wanted to be, although this was manageable when the graduate felt that their situation was not immediately pressing, with the option of reorienting towards a different employment path or pursuing further qualifications. Daniella had also carved out various employment experiences, including work in a health centre and other admin roles. She had managed to maintain a sense of career identity by investing personal interests and goals in their future work in this case moving into health research or sports management:

It's quite frustrating (COVID-19) that I can't immediately leave university and get into a role that I want. But at the same time a lot of the roles that I want they require a lot of extra qualifications and some of them do take a couple of years, so I suppose during the pandemic I have been able to complete some of those qualifications or at least make a start so that that looks more desirable (*Female, Sports Science and Management, English HEI*)

The follow-up interviews revealed how, in the interim period, some graduates had moved from a period of consternation to an improved outlook. Whilst in some cases their employment situation had not significantly improved, an extended period of profile building and a gradually improving labour market provided further optimism. Some of these graduates had engaged in career-building pursuits (for example doing short programmes or voluntary work experience) alongside work in part-time roles, which was seen to at least give them space to develop their profiles. Finn, a First-class Honours Politics and International Relations graduate, perceived some improvement since the first interview, where he expressed clear, often visible, disillusionment with his prospects for working in government and being able to capitalise on his degree and enter the politics field. He was also eager to move out from his parental home, a feeling greatly compounded by the lockdown context at the time of interview.

Six months on he had experienced some improvement in his immediate employment situation through his current role as a store supervisor and was enjoying more social interaction. He had also been proactive in writing blogs and developing further contacts in Parliament, including encouragement from a local MP to undertake a voluntary placement. He was confident that once he had gained such experience, this would improve his profile and positioning in what was perceived to be a competitive and contacts-driven field. The ongoing crisis ordinary of not yet being gainfully employed was tempered by a feeling of momentum towards an ideal state of job realisation. Attaining germane employment experience was often viewed as helping position themselves favourably in a competitive field where additional experience was signalled to be a crucial part of selection criteria:

And I think from the outside, it probably looks like things are happening. When you're living it, it just feels like nothing's changed. But it has changed, it's just I'm sure I'll look back on it, hopefully in a year's time and think, okay, that was a horrible time (*Male, Politics, Scottish, HEI*)

Indeterminacy was also expressed with less positive ambivalence towards their current position, particularly in cases where initial outcomes had not eventuated in the kinds of graduate roles interviewees had aspired to. For example, Bikram, a Business and Finance graduate, had found a financial support role in a company's retail division but felt over-qualified for and under-challenged in this role. As such, he felt at a crossroads and ambivalent about the ways in which this role could support his longer-term career goals, while acknowledging that some of his experience over the past several months could help with future job applications and provide stronger job searching purchase. He indicated that he was continuing to look for alternative work, whilst trying to maximise the value of his current role to present to potential employers:

I'd definitely say there's quite a sense of frustration, and disappointment as well. There are quite a lot of times where you just think, what am I doing here? Sometimes I feel like going forward, if I'm in this role for so much longer then it's a case of prospects later on. It

might not help me, because I might not have demonstrated X, Y, Z for this role (*Male, Business and Finance, English HEI*).

Emerging: moving from the margins

Emerging graduates had experienced a meaningful breakthrough in their employment situation and were beginning to transition to positions which were aligned with their targeted employment. In some cases such positions were defined graduate roles. These graduates had gained initial employment or relevant work experience that was perceived to be meaningfully contributing to their emerging career narrative and employment in a specialised or general domain. Consequently, they perceived their job prospects to be relatively strong and they conveyed a stronger sense of career confidence and control. Many acknowledged the relative novelty of their situation, the continued distance from where they ultimately wanted to be, and some degree of ambivalence about the roles they were undertaking. In a number of cases, these graduates expressed similar outlooks to those in more indeterminate positions, particularly when their current role was not matched to their future career intention. Overall, however, they were experiencing tangible career development which was viewed as providing a sound platform for the future.

The second round of interviews revealed the ways in which graduates had moved from either being disorientated or in indeterminate positions to one where their situation had improved, and new opportunities had presented themselves. In some cases, this had occurred not long after they had been previously interviewed. Some of the graduates in the second round had progressed positively over the intervening six-month period. They had started on an initial career path which offered promising longer-term routes where they were building direct job-related skills and employer contacts and growing into professionally facing roles. In Sandy's case, since gaining employment as an employment officer she had moved from a position of dejection and anxiety (disorientated) about her prospects in the first interview to one of greater optimism about her career prospects:

> But I never expected to be looking for a job for so long, and just hearing absolutely nothing back. Because I felt like I was quite a good candidate. Yes, I think it's definitely just a difference in how optimistic I feel about it now (*Female, Psychology, Scottish HEI*)

In some cases graduates had moved towards what they perceived to be meaningful career progression and had developed a significant breakthrough, but still felt some way off from their longer-term goals. Overall, they were still able to build a meaningful career narrative that utilised graduate-level skills and allowed them to build up important career capital. But their position of being relative novices or lacking professional experience in their current roles meant that they still perceived they needed further professional socialisation.

Kimberly had been involved periodically in a Kickstarter programme since the beginning of 2021, involving digital film production, and this had given her some opportunity to utilise skills from her degree which was aligned to this field. Whilst acknowledging notable gains in her profile over the past year, including getting industry insight and experience and building autonomous platforms, she also expressed some indifference towards the conditions of her employment, job quality and the skill profile of her

placement. However, knowing that she could frame this experience advantageously to prospective employers enabled her to frame this as part of her emerging career narrative in the quest to move towards more sustainable employment:

> So I think I just established myself as the leader of the group and delegated things to people and I think that the kind of groupwork that we did at university did help with that. But in terms of the quality of the content we were putting out, I wouldn't say it was as high as the kind of stuff that we got to do at university *(Female, Film and Television Production, English HEI)*

Other graduates had been employed in short-term contractual work that was perceived to provide a significant foothold into their target sectors. As an example, Tania had developed a somewhat different pathway as a self-defined 'portfolio' careerist, having had a series of jobs prior to entering HE as a mature student. Since the first interview, when she was still actively looking for a breakthrough in film, she had managed to secure contract work in digital film production. As someone who was adopting an experience-based, portfolio-type pathway as a freelancer, she was aware of the transient nature of her recent job and was looking to find a more sustainable pathway in a stage production role. But the experience she was gaining from her contract work was seen as valuable and its short-term nature continued to enable her to acquire and build up relevant industry contracts:

> My driving force is still learning. It's learning more skills and it's about getting myself into a position where I'm wanted because of the skills and knowledge that I have. I'm not really too fussed where that is. In film it's very varied and that's the huge attraction there. *(Female, Model Design, English HEI)*

Integrating: towards actualising a graduate identity

Integrating graduates were the furthest ahead in their career development. They had experienced smoother transitions into the labour market and had not been adversely impacted by the COVID-19 job market context. This was partly because they had found employment before they had graduated or were working in fields which had experienced minimal impact (for example, the civil service, teaching, finance). These graduates had built up a significant career profile in the year since graduating which they perceived to have created significant value and provided them with a clear and well-defined graduate identity. This identity had overall been positively affirmed during some crucial periods of professional development and this had allowed them to become more strongly integrated into their chosen fields. Integrating graduates tended to be strategic careerists. They had formed crystalised views of their place in the labour market early in their studies, knew how to capitalise their work experience and develop career capitals, and knew how to actively market themselves.

A number of dynamics were at play in this process, not least the ways in which these graduates had started to strongly invest themselves in their work and presented this in the form of professional dispositions and codes which signified their emerging occupational roles. Those who were integrating more strongly into their chosen fields, had experienced some significant forms of professional socialisation which was helping build an early career identity. In Stefan's case, having secured a competitive work

experience placement on his degree programme, he had moved quite quickly into a graduate HR training programme with a large bank and was gaining significant career capital through acquiring important cultural knowledge, technical knowledge and wider organisational networks. He also acknowledged his position as a relative novice, still to fully establish himself, and his early career experience was not without challenges whereby he also reported some experience of liminality in not being fully established in his professional role.

In the case of Louisa, a coherent graduate identity had started to emerge having completed a rigorous graduate training programme, and she evaluated her longer-term career prospects favourably:

> So, I was really keen to continue that work in my next posting because I really, really enjoyed it and also understanding how governments interact with external contractors and how to work with them along with multiple other people each with their own interests I find really interesting and it's a real challenge *(Female, Politics graduate, English HEI)*

The cumulative effect of gaining aligned first-time experience was perceived as a strong catalyst in their early career trajectory and engendered the shift in perspective between interviews. Some of these graduates had been in a more indeterminate position six months earlier. Eloise had earlier experienced a breakthrough with an intensive training programme in cybersecurity run by her home city's council. Six months on, she reported further development, including a stronger sense of ownership of her career situation and a renewed sense of what she could offer prospective employers:

> It's been a really weird turn of events, and I can't really say there's one reason why I've gone into cybersecurity. I was looking for a career beforehand, and I couldn't find anything that I really thought I'd enjoy, and I did that cybersecurity course as a stab in the dark. And I hit something, and I found something that I actually enjoyed and I could see myself going into. And yes, it has been a bit of a wild rollercoaster, but I have ended up doing a career that I really enjoy *(Female, Psychology graduate, Welsh HEI)*

The most noticeable shift across the interviews was in Delphine. Slumped on her parent's sofa during the first interview appearing dejected and indifferent to the interview, her physical demeanour and disposition had significantly transformed in the second interview seven months later. Whereas the initial interview conveyed a strong sense of constraint and disempowerment in capitalising on university qualifications and the work experience that was built into the degree programme, the second interview revealed movement towards actualising and mobilising these qualifications.

Her reflections on her experience between interviews conveyed a sense of gaining public recognition and affirmation of early career achievement and profile building. The combination of an empowering training period, mapped against a well-defined career structure, had provided a considerable sense of ownership and identity achievement that was in direct contrast to her earlier situation:

> I think I'm more optimistic now because obviously, I have a job now, so it's like I have skills that could then be applied somewhere else. I think having a job now makes me an attractive candidate in the future. However, I'd still say that the situation now is a really difficult one for job hunting. I couldn't go through all of those applications and just say, it was easy. *(Female, Psychology, English HEI)*

Discussion and implications

The contrasting accounts of the recent graduates interviewed in this study reveal some important dynamics in how they navigated an important structured turning point in a context of significant social and economic upheaval. These experiences ranged from marginalisation, consternation and perceived misalignment between employment goals and present situations, through to growing certainty and coherence in how emerging employment narratives were unfolding. Within these spaces are many who occupy a conterminous zone where emerging identities and related goals that provide a self-sustaining career narrative meet a labour market environment that is yet to recognise and validate these through a formal graduate role or status. Emergent identities and related identity capital continues to help maintain a sense of transitional continuity. The extended waithood of in-betweenness for many allows some degree of experimentation with alternative options and possible future selves. However, it can also constitute a form of cruel optimism, experienced as a schism between an idealised state of being (being a publicly affirmed graduate) and here-and-now realities of joblessness, delay or underemployment.

The conceptual frame of liminality helps capture the increasingly complex and uneven spaces that represent the transition from higher education to the labour market and support more temporally focused analysis (Brennen and Nilsen 2007). Liminality has general applicability to understanding life course transitions given that key transitional periods, especially from formal education to working life, entail movement from one social role and context to new ones. The concept also has specific applications to those entering an unstable labour market, and on various levels.

First, periods of labour market instability and restricted economic activity such as during the pandemic further ruptures institutional pathways into employment. Such a context dilates temporal spaces and creates new tension between 'objective' and 'subjective' liminal states, how these connect, and the potential discord between current realities and their experiential management. The objective conditions of their present situation (being unemployed/underemployed, geo-socially wedded) led many to feel uneasy and apprehensive about immediate and future prospects. Contextual changes in the graduates' lives, including improved levels of social engagement post-lockdown, the take-up of promising new openings and, in some cases being able to enrich social ties, influence movement within and between different transitional spaces from university to employment. Improved post-pandemic labour market conditions, including lower unemployment and labour shortages in retail and service sectors (ONS 2023), invariably impact job entry rates and access to usable forms of work experience; for example, fewer graduates are likely to experience marginalisation with more integrating into aligned work than the current sample. The contrasting experiences nonetheless reveal significant transitional challenges, which less optimistic economic forecasts (IFS 2022) indicate as impacting longer-term outcomes. The first two transitional positions, including those apprehensive over employment futures (Tomlinson 2007), are certainly prevalent since 2008 recession when graduate labour markets have been characterised by heightened levels of unemployment, under-employment and earnings differentials (Green and Henske 2017; MacDonald 2011).

Second, this approach can illustrate both continuity and disruption to identity and how individuals undertake and maintain identity work within transitional and early career

stages. The extent to which liminality is part of a managed trajectory that entails necessary rupture in life course mobility is partly contingent on how successfully individuals can use this as part of an ongoing identity project and maintain emergent identities (Holmes 2013; Tomlinson 2017; Pham, Tomlinson, and Thompson 2019). This also includes how malleable their identities may be when confronting declining institutional support mechanisms. The indeterminate graduates, faced with delayed entry sought to engage in work that maintained their emerging identity, entailing some degree of experimentation with alternative future selves (new ventures, reskilling, purposeful volunteering). In the case of integrating graduates, there was greater continuity between earlier student and emerging graduate identity. Liminal space here was characterised by adaptation to a new role and being recognised as an emerging early professional. Much of the agential efforts of those who had yet to realise their potential helped sustain a narrative of identity: waithood may nonetheless be felt acutely, but is tempered by a perceived sense of momentum.

Third, the concept maps onto structure-agency dynamics, mainly how agency interacts against depleted opportunity structures. The study showed that there remains a complex dialectic between structure and agency with no clear ascendency of one (Woodman 2009). The objective and material impacts of the pandemic – in this case job vacancy freezing, delayed job offers, lack of immediate training pathways – presented a structural barrier for many graduates. These were perceived to intensify existing challenges of flexible career paths, positional competition amongst graduates and the need for proactive job market signalling. A fundamental tension emerged in the need for proactivity to meet immediate challenge and pressure, and the experience of decelerated movement and depleted opportunity structures engendered by the pandemic. For indeterminate graduates, the perceived temporariness of their situations, agentially working towards crafting alternative pathways, and achieving small gains in career building, partly mitigated the effects of postponed job entry and related angst. In the final two positions, graduates began realising outcomes that enabled them to begin establishing new working identities, yet they were still striving to establish clear ownership of these, manage role ambiguity and complete intensive training programmes that were sometimes yet to confirm their matriculation into an established professional position.

A related structural issue concerns graduates' socio-cultural positioning, albeit that contexts such as those of the current study mean there is some blurring of class, gendered and racial lines in early career outcomes (for example, second generation graduates experiencing disorientation and first-generation ones securing target employment). However, graduates' variable access to traditional resource structures, including family support, economic buffering, and social networks may determine how manageable the crisis ordinary of protracted job entry becomes. Those with less economic and social capital based on socio-economic background are more likely to experience prolonged challenge in finding suitable employment, potentially leading to longer-term economic employment scarring and exclusion.

This approach also has implications beyond immediate policy remedies in the form of active employer engagement and training. HEI practitioners may find a transitional positioning approach helpful because it offers bespoke data relating to an individual student's or graduate's level of resource in terms of where they are currently at and the steps they may need to take to further enhance this. Challenging economic contexts clearly raise

wider policy implications for supporting transition, including structured training pathways and paid work experience as bridging for those in non-aligned employment.

Conclusions

The analysis on which this article is based provides two core contributions. First it has provided insight on the different ways in which contemporary graduates experience the transition into the labour market, most significantly during a period of social and economic turbulence. Second, the article has provided additional empirical application of the concept of liminality and used the transition from university to the labour market as an example of significant threshold experiences. The pandemic-context of the study appears to have intensified conditions of liminality where the process is protracted and challenging, often resulting in the destabilisation of previously formed career goals, identities and early trajectories. This has exacerbated disruption to the social mechanisms and institutional pathways through which graduates can integrate into a labour market for which many have been primed during their prior education.

Acknowledgements

Disclosure statement

Funding

ORCID

Michael Tomlinson http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1057-5188

References

Aronson, P., T. Callahan, and T. Davis. 2015. "The Transition from College to Work During Great Recession: Employment, Financial and Identity Challenges." *Journal of Youth Studies* 18 (9): 1097–1118. doi:10.1080/13676261.2015.1020931

Bamberg, M. 1997. "Positioning Between Structure and Performance." *Journal of Narrative and Life History* 7 (3): 335–342. doi:10.1075/jnlh.7.42pos

Berlant, L. 2011. *Cruel Optimism*. London: Duke University.

Brennen, J., and A. Nilsen. 2007. "Young People's Time Perspective: From Youth to Adulthood." *Sociology* 36 (3): 513–537. doi:10.1177/0038038502036003002

Côté, J. 2014. "Towards a new Political Economy of Youth." *Journal of Youth Studies* 17 (4): 527–543. doi:10.1080/13676261.2013.836592

Côté, J. 2016. "The Identity Capital Handbook: A Handbook of Theory, Methods, and Findings." (Unpublished manuscript). Department of Sociology, The University of Western Ontario.

Cuzzocrea, V. 2019. "Moratorium or Waithood? Forms of Time-Taking and the Changing Shape of Youth." *Time and Society* 28 (2): 567–586. doi:10.1177/0961463X18763680

Furlong, A. 2017. "The Changing Landscape of Youth and Young Adulthood." In *Routledge Handbook of Youth ad Young Adulthood*, edited by Andy Furlong, 3–11. London: Routledge.

Garsten, G. 1999. "Betwixt and Between: Temporary Employees as Liminal Subjects in Flexible Organisations." *Organization Studies* 20 (4): 601–617. doi:10.1177/0170840699204004

Giddens, A. 1991. *Modernity and Self-Identity*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Green, F., and G. Henske. 2017. *Graduates and Graduate Jobs in Europe: A Picture of Growth and Diversification*. London: Centre for Global Higher Education.

Holmes, L. 2013. "Competing Perspectives on Graduate Employability: Possession, Position and Process." *Studies in Higher Education* 38 (4): 538–544. doi:10.1080/03075079.2011.587140

Honwana, A. 2012. *The Time of Youth: Work, Social Change and Politics in Africa*. Sterling, VA: Kumarian Press, Lynne Rienner.

Ibarra, H., and O. Obudaru. 2016. "Betwixt and Between Identities: Liminal Experience in Contemporary Careers." *Research in Organizational Behavior* 36 (1): 47–64. doi:10.1016/j.riob.2016.11.003

Institute for Fiscal Studies. 2021. *Job Opportunities During the Pandemic*. London: ISF.

Institute for Fiscal Studies. 2022. *Global Economic Outlook: Heading for a Fall?* London: ISF.

Katchadourian, H. A., and J. Boli. 1985. *Careerism and Intellectualism Among College Students*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass Higher and Adult Education Series.

Kelly, P. 2006. "The Entrepreneurial Self and 'Youth at Risk': Exploring the Horizons of Identity in Twenty-First Century." *Journal of Youth Studies* 9 (1): 17–32. doi:10.1080/13676260500523606

MacDonald, R. 2011. "Youth Transitions, Unemployment and Underemployment: Plus ça Change, Plus c'est la même chose?" *Journal of Sociology* 47 (4): 427–444. doi:10.1177/1440783311420794

Mason, G. 2020. "Higher Education, Initial Vocational Education and Continuing Education and Training: Where Should the Balance be?" *Journal of Education and Work* 33 (7): 468–490. doi:10.1080/13639080.2020.1755428

Office for National Statistics. 2023. *Labour Market Overview: March 2023*. London: ONS.

O'Higgins, N. 2012. "This Time It's Different? Youth Labour Markets During the Great Recession'." *Comparative Economic Studies* 52 (2): 395–412. doi:10.1057/ces.2012.15

Pham, T., M. Tomlinson, and C. Thompson. 2019. "Forms of Capital and Agency as Mediators in Negotiating Employability of International Graduates." *Globalisation, Societies and Education* 17 (3): 394–405. doi:10.1080/14767724.2019.1583091

Powell, A., B. Francis-Devine, and H. Clark. 2022. *Coronavirus: Impact on the Labour Market*. London: House of Commons Library.

Tomlinson, M. 2007. "Graduate Employability and Student Attitudes and Orientations to the Labour Market." *Journal of Education and Work* 20 (4): 285–304.

Tomlinson, M. 2017. "Forms of Graduate Capital and Their Relationship to Graduate Employability." *Education + Training* 59 (4): 338–352. doi:10.1108/ET-05-2016-0090

Turner, V. 1967. *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*. Cornell: Cornell University Press.

Walsh, L., and R. Black. 2021. "Flexible and Ongoing: The University Student as Homo Promptus." *Journal of Youth Studies* 24 (4): 499–514. doi:10.1080/13676261.2020.1742302

Woodman, D. 2009. "The Mysterious Case of the Pervasive Choice Biography: Ulrich Beck, Structure/Agency, and the Middling State of Theory in the Sociology of Youth." *Journal of Youth Studies* 12 (3): 243–256. doi:10.1080/13676260902807227

Woodman, D. 2011. "Young People and the Future: Multiple Temporalities Shaped in Interaction with Significant Others." *Young* 19 (2): 111–128. doi:10.1177/110330881001900201

Wyn, J., H. Cahill, D. Woodman, H. Cuervo, C. Leccardi, and J. Chesters. 2020. *Youth and the New Adulthood: Generations of Change*. New York, NY: Springer.

Ybema, S., N. Beech, and N. Ellis. 2011. "Transitional and Perpetual Liminality: An Identity Practice Perspective." *Anthropology Southern Africa* 34 (1): 21–29. doi:10.1080/23323256.2011.11500005