CHAPTER 11

Working-Class Adult Students: Negotiating Inequalities in the Graduate Labour Market

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Introduction

Higher education institutions in the UK, Europe and beyond have undergone a transformation in recent years as a result of political, social and economic changes, internationalisation and globalisation. Increasingly, these changes have embodied a move towards marketisation, commodification and neoliberalism (Dahlsted & Fejes, 2019; Rikowski, 2019) at the expense of a more liberal and social purpose stance. One of the consequences of this process is that universities now have to be more attuned to the graduate labour market. Graduates have typically, in terms of their role and input, been positioned as key players on the economic stage. The discussion over 'work-readiness' and the economic contribution they can make has spawned a narrative and language in HE around the question of 'employability' which is dominated by a human capital approach. This has changed the nature of what being a student means. As Tomlinson asserts: 'It now appears no longer enough just to be a graduate, but instead an employable graduate' (2012, p. 25).

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The growing concern with employability by universities in Europe was also partly driven by a policy push from the EU and national governments. Employability was a key goal of the EU Bologna Process (The European Higher Education, 2012, Bologna Implementation Report). The report stressed the need for universities to modernise and thus meet the needs of society. The determination to change the nature of universities within the EU was further enhanced at the Leuven and Louvain la Neuve iCommuniquê in 2009. It stressed the need for universities to 'equip students with the advanced knowledge, skills, competences they need throughout their professional lives' (2009, p. 2). Economic competitiveness and the move towards knowledge-based societies (Castells, 2001) have led to a closer relationship between universities and the labour market (Morley, 2001; Barnett, 2017). This process has changed the fundamental purpose and nature of the university, as stated above, and critics point out that this situation entails a shift away from the social purpose of a university to what Gumport (2000) calls an industry. As Barnett explains:

> The idea of the university has closed in ideologically, spatially and ethically. Ideologically, the contemporary envelope of ideas encouraged the university to pursue quite narrow interests, particularly those of money (in the service of a national—and even global-knowledge economy; spatially, the university is enjoined to engage with its region, especially with industrial and business organisations). (2013, p. 2)

The focus on employability and market needs also obscures, as Blackmore and Sachs (2003) point out, the academic and social educational benefits of education.

A key concern of many universities now is to enhance human capital. In turn, this has impacted upon the perspectives and expectations which students bring with them towards their undergraduate studies. A university education is now viewed by many students, as Tomlinson (2012) stresses, as being an investment in their future lives in the labour market, requiring them to offer more to prospective employers than just their university degree qualification. There is pressure on students to engage in activities outside of their degree work in order to gain extra credentials to assist them in the graduate labour market. This also individualises education, echoing Beck's (1992) notion that society has become an individualised and risky business. Universities have, therefore, been more closely interwoven with the labour market (Morley, 2001), with the pressure on

universities to ensure that they educate their students to meet the needs of employers in terms of relevant skills, competences and attitudes (Barnett, 2017). Strategies such as vocational courses and degrees, work-based learning at departmental and institutional levels as well as an enhanced role for career services have been introduced to facilitate this process. The employability of students and graduate recruitment rates is now a competitive business as university league tables are published nationally and also at European and worldwide levels.

One of the outcomes of the changing nature of universities has been a move away from elite institutions (with some exceptions) to what Trow (1989) calls a mass-based system. Doors have opened since the 1990s, and the student population is now more diverse by age, class, gender and race (Merrill, 2015). Widening participation and lifelong learning policy initiatives have enabled working-class adults to return to education and study for a degree. Working-class adult students and issues of employability are at the heart of this chapter. In particular, we focus on working-class adults studying in an elite UK university, and taking a critical stance, we explore their perceptions of how they are positioned in the graduate labour market. Using biographical methods and the voices of adult students, we look at how they experience inequalities due to class, age, gender and race when accessing the graduate labour market. We draw on the findings of an EU project: Enhancing the Employability of Non-traditional Students in HE (EMPLOY), which involved eight partners from England, Germany, Ireland, Poland, Portugal, Scotland, Spain and Sweden. The project looked critically at the concept and practice of employability in European universities. The voices of adult students we interviewed revealed a different language to those of employees and some university staff (who we also interviewed). The emphasis on employability has in HEIs resulted in increasing inequalities between traditional and non-traditional students. Adult students do not share a level playing field with their younger middle-class students, and their experiences in relation to employability highlight the role of universities in reproducing class inequalities. We examine these challenges experienced by adult students and investigate how it has impacted upon them and their attempts to enter the graduate labour market by drawing on the work of Bourdieu in particular in relation to his concepts of capitals, habitus and field. The main focus is on class, but our adult students' experiences were also shaped by age, gender and, for some, race. While there is a large amount of studies which look at adult students' experiences of learning in HE, there is little research which extends this to the labour market.

Taking a Critical Look at Employability

Despite its influence on the path of contemporary HE, employability remains an anomalous and beguiling concept, one that Tymon discerned as being 'complex and multidimensional' (2013, p. 842). This is partly due to its meaning being perceived not only differently by the respective actors involved, whether in the form of students, higher education institutions or employers (Hugh-Jones et al., 2006), but also differently within those groups.

Nevertheless, the framing of policymakers and employers concerned with identifying and satisfying market-led assumptions has featured heavily in the discourse (McQuaid & Lindsay, 2005). In this regard, employers have emphasised the importance of enhancing soft skills such as communication, team working, problem-solving and integrity (Archer & Davison, 2008) while also observing the lack of these skills evidenced by students on entry into graduate employment (Cumming, 2010).

HEIs have responded to the challenge by reproducing language associated with this demand and formulated institutional strategies and pedagogic initiatives in the endeavour to meet the needs of the market (McCowan, 2015; Holmes, 2013). As a consequence, the language of graduate employability often uncritically authenticates and reinforces a particular ideological narrative. This narrative maintains implicit ideological assumptions premised on the idea of independent self-driven rational subjects making decisions while operating within the selective pressures of a free market. In this regard, human capital theory has played a significant role (Tomlinson, 2012). It has advanced within higher education according to Hyslop-Marginson and Sears' 'a neoliberal education policy' in which learning is reduced 'to a discursive ideological apparatus', one that 'encourages student conformity to the market economy' (2006, p. 14).

Such human capital-led assessments, however, fail to fully account for the relation between structure and agency in their analyses. The nature of the experience of those engaged in the process or the stakes at play are assessed in relation to a specific locus around the production of relevant skills and the discernment of a market that warrants these skills. The corollary of pursuing such an agenda is an evolving inflation of skills and attributes expected by the employment market. It is a trajectory that both threatens to shift or even displace the traditional assumptions around the value of academic knowledge insofar as HE becomes subordinate to market-led determinations of value as well as reproducing inequalities within the structure.

While theories of self and identity provide an important reference point within sociological analysis (Giddens, 1991; Beck, 1992; Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002) that addresses the way in which individuals establish themselves in their environment, these are nevertheless cultivated in relation to acknowledging the significance of the contexts and institutions in which they operate. In this vein, Brown et al. (2002) highlight that a student does not operate in a vacuum but rather operates within a context made up of others and institutions.

Furthermore, as James et al. (2013) argue, there is a wider meaning and definition of skills than those identified by employability. 'Graduate skills' are not self-similar with 'skills graduates have'. Indeed, the conflation of the two only serves to hide diverse and context-specific aptitudes. Although more nuanced attempts have been made to capture what skills are advantageous in employment settings (Bridgstock, 2009), other evidence has advanced the view that skills initiatives delivered in HE are of limited efficacy with regards to future employability (Mason et al., 2009; Wilton, 2011).

In contrast, by drawing on Bourdieu's work, and more specifically by attending to cultural, social and economic capital, our investigation delineates the ways in which securing a job in the graduate labour market can also be understood in terms of considerations and challenges that go beyond the assessments provided by the dominant skills-based discourse of employability. This is particularly useful when engaging with the experiences of working-class and non-traditional students in higher education. Bourdieu's presentation allows for a more dynamic assessment of the ways in which employability can be understood in relation to the evolving tensions between structure and agency. In the current job market, this structure is both increasingly competitive and less secure or stable in terms of its outcomes (Moreau & Leathwood, 2006). In this context, employability discourse tends to narrow the focus to one of addressing questions of market-demand and skills-based accumulation. In contrast, Bourdieu's approach allows for attention to be drawn to the broader implications of this style of market-led inflation of skills as well as to understanding the experiences of those who are directly advantaged or disadvantaged by it.

In Bourdieu's account of social capital, the emphasis is advanced with respect to the relations that can be entered into and advanced within a social group. An analysis of social capital operates in terms of being able to identify the ways in which groups identify and bond with each other. In employability terms, social capital can be discerned in the ways in which it

shapes and facilitates graduates' access to particular labour market opportunities. The participation in certain activities can advance 'bridging ties' (Putnam, 1999) with other social actors that could then open up opportunities either directly or indirectly when it comes to future employment. However, one of the consequent outcomes of such an analysis is that when it comes to those who are unable to participate in these relations, then they are liable to suffer as a result.

Similarly, Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital in terms of employability can be applied to the question of what knowledge is sought out amongst employers and what groups this applies to. A shared economy of associations has drawn from cultural dependencies that circle around sociocultural milieus and the educational contexts out of which they arose. These associations prove to be of considerable significance in relation to understanding the experiences of working-class students.

The next section will continue the debate with Bourdieu by providing a more detailed engagement with the question of class by focusing on the UK context.

A Discussion on Class

As stated above, the adult students we interviewed were working-class, and this is how they defined themselves. Yet research on employability in higher education ignores, with a few exceptions, issues of inequality such as class, gender, race and age.

Social class is integral to UK society, as it is deeply rooted in the culture and structure of society so that it affects people's everyday lives. The education system is one area where class is clearly visible and persistent and where class inequalities are reproduced including in higher education. Within the academic world, social class was central in the UK sociological research in the 1960s and 1970s until postmodernism emerged and became fashionable along with the 'cultural turn' (Abbott, 2001). Postmodernists launched an attack on 'grand narratives' theory, dismissing the work of Marx, for example, and notions of class. Sociologists advocated that class had become an out-of-date concept, and as Pahl (1989) argued, it was no longer useful in categorising people's lives. Quantitative research, however, indicated that class differences had not disappeared and that wealth inequalities were increasing between the rich and the poor (Breen, 2004; Erikson & Goldthorpe, 1992). In recent years, other sociologists have begun to re-engage with research on class and re-assert that

class is still central and important in UK society, albeit in a different way to earlier UK sociological research (Sayer, 2005; Devine et al., 2005; Savage, 2000; Skeggs, 1997; Kuhn, 1995). For as Beverly Skeggs poignantly asserts: 'To abandon class as a theoretical tool does not mean that it does not exist any more; only that some theorists do not value it' (1997, pp. 6–7). Kuhn (1995) stresses that class encompasses a person's whole life—not only in terms of material conditions but also in relation to the psyche. Similarly, Sayer reminds us that class 'affects how others value us and respond to us, which in turn affects our sense of self-worth' (2005, p. 1). Class, therefore, 'shapes embodied experience and practical sense' (Finnegan & Merrill, 2015, p. 3), as well as revealing power relations and inequalities in a society.

However, the 'turn' back to class in UK sociology led to new analyses, discussions and perspectives on what social class encompasses. Social class analysis no longer focused solely on a person's socio-economic status and the ownership or non-ownership of the means of production as outlined by Marx. Class is more than this. Such an analysis had been criticised by feminists as it often excluded women. As Savage elaborates, 'culture is not the product of class relations but itself a field in which class relations operate' (2000, p. 106). From this perspective, class power is not just about economic capital but also social and cultural capital:

> Thus Bourdieu (1984) argues that class should be plotted relationally according to the distribution and differentiation of various sorts of power and the composition and volume of economic, cultural and social capital at one's disposal defines one's class position within social space as a whole. (O'Neill et al., 2018, p. 4)

We do recognise that feminists in the past criticised Bourdieu for downplaying women and issues of class and gender. Yet some feminists such as Adkins and Skeggs (2006), in their edited book *Feminism After Bourdieu*, argued that Bourdieu's work does have something to offer feminism, and vice versa.

In our research, Bourdieu was useful to us, as with other researchers such as Skeggs (1997) and Reay et al. (2005), because of his work on the social reproduction of class and identity, habitus, field and social and cultural capitals as well as his study on universities—*Homo Academicus* (1988). The concept of habitus allowed us to explore how the social and cultural capitals of working-class students cope and adjust or not to the

symbolic and intellectual capitals of the university. Middle-class students because of their particular cultural and social capitals, as Bourdieu elicits, are more likely to be 'fish in water', while working-class students may find themselves as 'fish out of water'. A person's habitus is a culture which shapes how they view the world, their behaviour, language and lifestyle. Habitus is linked to disposition, whereby through socialisation in the family and school, for example, a person learns how to present themselves within a particular habitus in everyday life. As other researchers in the project explain:

> Bourdieu's ideas about forms of capital and the ways they operate in specific fields offer a tool for understanding the enduring impact of social inequality in students' lives. Stories are clearly formed by lived experiences of social power. (West, Fleming and Finnegan, 2013, p. 122)

Habitus and the levels of social and cultural capitals locate a person's position or 'a sense of one's place' (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 131) in relation to others and the social structure. While habitus reproduces and determines an individual's class and social trajectory, Bourdieu did acknowledge that it is not necessarily static and can be transformed through the use of agency:

> Habitus is not the fate that some people read into it. Being the product of history, it is an open system of dispositions that is constantly subjected to experiences and therefore constantly affected by at interview, in a way that either reinforces or modifies its structures. (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 133)

Bourdieu's work on habitus powerfully illuminates social inequalities which are experienced by working-class students when entering the graduate labour market. Graduate employability is a problem across Europe (Tomlinson, 2008). Research indicates that non-traditional students are more affected in terms of graduateness than other students (Brown & Hesketh, 2004; Reay et al., 2005). Such students experience a longer transition period to gain employment, and when they do, it may not be at graduate level. Linking to Bourdieu & Passeron (1994) points out that those from a privileged class background have higher levels of social and cultural capital, which puts them at an advantage in the labour market or what is termed in the UK as 'the old boys network'. Overwhelmingly, those who have been to public schools (private schools) and then graduate

from Oxford or Cambridge (Oxbridge) secure the top jobs. Middle-class students are also more likely to possess extensive social capital and networks which gives them an advantage in obtaining jobs. For Brown and Scase:

> The idea of cultural capital has been helpful in understanding how individuals and families from middle class backgrounds are able to 'capitalise' on their cultural assets in ways that those from disadvantaged backgrounds are not…When employers reject candidates as unsuitable it could be argued that they are being rejected for lacking 'cultural' capital. There is absolutely no doubt that this happens when people are seen to have the wrong accent, dress inappropriately, or do not know the rules of the game when candidates are invited to a formal dinner to meet company employees. (1994, p. 28)

A study by the Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission (2015) also reinforces the role of habitus and cultural and social capital in the graduate labour market by concluding that recruitment to top jobs is now favouring 'poshness'. In our research, there was evidence from the stories of English, Scottish and Irish adult students that after obtaining a degree, some ended up in a precarious labour market (Merrill et al., 2019). In recent years, the precariat have become a growing section of the working class in the UK (Standing, 2011; Roberts, 2020).

We recognise that class does not stand alone, as class intersects with gender and race. In our study, gender inequality was also important as the women defined themselves as working-class women. As Skeggs (1997) explains in her research on women studying in a UK further education college (post-compulsory education): 'The women never see themselves as just women, it is always read through class' (1997, p. 91). Their life experiences are, therefore, both classed and gendered (Thompson, 2000; Skeggs, 1997). And as Anthias states, the intersectionality of inequalities means that 'classes are always gendered and racialised and gender is always classed and racialised and so on' (2005, p. 33). We would argue that for our adult students, age acted as another form of inequality in relation to accessing the graduate labour market alongside class, gender and race. The adult students viewed themselves as 'other' in relation to younger students in terms of age and class. They recognised that they had more life experiences than younger students because of their age, but they also felt that age (and class) constrained their opportunities in the graduate labour market. While age is a social construct (Siivonen & Isopahkala-Bouret, 2014), social and institutional attitudes limit their use of agency.

A Note on Methodology: Using Biographical Methods

Biographical methods were the core of our research approach (for all our European partners), and in the UK, our focus was on using feminist biographical approaches. We wanted, in the feminist tradition, to place the participants at the centre of our research by giving them voice to enable them to tell their stories as:

> such methods offer rich insights into the dynamic interplay of individuals and history. Inner and outer worlds. Self and other. We use the word 'dynamic' to covey the use of human beings as active agents in making their lives rather than being simply determined by historical and social forces. (Merrill & West, 2009, p. 1)

Importantly, biographical research embodies a humanistic and subjective approach to research (Plummer, 2001). The use of biographical methods is popular within European adult education research (West et al., 2007) propelled by the 'biographical turn' (Chamberlayne et al., 2000). The 'turn' signified a move away from positivistic quantitative research in adult education which had reduced and dehumanised adult students to numbers and statistics. We also embrace the work of C. Wright Mills (1957) which links biography, history, social structures and individual agency through the concept of 'the sociological imagination'.

The Warwick team drew on critical feminist approaches for our biographical research. Such a perspective allowed us to use a dialogical approach to interviewing which can be empowering and transformative for the interviewees. In contrast to traditional interviewing methods, it takes into account emotions, feelings, subjectivities and social context. The engagement between the researcher and researched is both subjective and intersubjective. It is also challenging and strives to break down power differences, thus establishing a more democratic relationship between the researcher and the researched (Stanley & Wise, 1993). For Liz Stanley and Sue Wise, 'personhood cannot be left out of the research process. We see the presence of the researcher's self as central in all the research' (1993, p. 161). It is also a relational process. Ann Oakley (1981) argues that in using a feminist approach, the interview becomes more like a conversation.

Biographical interviews appear to be individual, but in reading people's stories, shared experiences of class and gender, for example, emerge so that stories are also collective ones (Merrill, 2007), thus revealing the interaction between structure and agency. In our research, the stories and voices of working-class adult students illuminate how structural inequalities and constraints impact on their studies and labour market opportunities.

In relation to the practicalities of interviewing, the Warwick team undertook 40 interviews with 30 undergraduate and 10 graduate students. Ten of the undergraduate students were interviewed for a second time after they graduated. Biographical interviews produce a large amount of data for analysis. We immersed ourselves in the stories by reading and listening to the interview tapes. Giving voice to participants is central to feminist research as well as interpretation and relating the voices to theory. In analysing the stories, we identify how individual stories become collective ones in relation to class and other factors. In doing so, the stories reveal the interaction of structure and agency in people's lives. All were adults, and most were in their 30s and 40s. In the UK, adult students are 21 years and more, while younger students are 18–21 at undergraduate level. Lecturers, career guidance workers, university managers and employers were also interviewed to obtain their perspectives on employability. The adult students we interviewed told us their whole life story as well as their experiences of studying as an adult at university. However, for the purposes of this chapter, we are focusing on their experiences in relation to employability and the graduate labour market.

Working-Class Student Perspectives on Employability

In this section, we present the findings of the Warwick team. For an overview of the findings of the whole European team, see Finnegan et al. (2014) *Student Voices on Inequalities in European Higher Education: Challenges for Theory, Policy and Practice in a Time of Change*. It is important to note that, as referenced earlier, there remains comparatively little focus or research on the experiences of adults in HE. Biographical stories can be either presented as case studies of one or two people or by themes. For the purpose of this article, we have chosen to present the stories by themes to include as many voices as possible. This section is divided into the following themes: class, gender and age, and economic, social and cultural capital.

Class, Gender and Age

In this section, we investigate the ways in which social class, age and gender are intertwined through the voices of the participants. The adult students we interviewed experienced class, gender and age inequalities when trying to access the graduate labour market. These experiences were heightened by the fact that they studied at an elite UK university. Interviews with employers and career guidance workers revealed that the top employers targeted younger middle-class students who are high-flyers through a variety of strategies in elite universities. Some of the adult students we interviewed attended the Careers Fairs hosted by the top companies on campus, but they stated that they sensed that employers were not interested in them. They felt that employers were looking for a particular type of person and that adult students do not fit in with what employers want because of their class and age. As one woman explains:

> I think companies are definitely tailoring it like 'this is our role, this is our company, this is who we want for the job' and they are making that public'. So you can either pretend to be that person or you can make yourself into that person… If you're not the person the company wants you're not going to get employed. (Anne)

Paul was studying for a politics degree and was acutely aware that his class background counted against him in the high-flying graduate labour market but at the same time he did not want to be part of that lifestyle:

> but in the finance industry, as much as they say they can't discriminate for age and all these things, like I know for a fact that they wouldn't be looking for me. Like my accent as well…They're not going to have me sitting in a boardroom in Singapore. Do you know what I mean? I wouldn't want to do that anyway…So when it comes to what employers are looking for, I don't think I'm it for a lot of them.

Paul obtained a first-class degree—the highest classification—and with the help of funding later went on to do postgraduate study.

Employers also stated that they target some of the university societies with funding and other activities with the aim of recruiting potential graduates. Our adult students have work and family commitments, which makes it difficult to attend university societies as well as the fact that there is a cost involved in joining some societies.

The focus and emphasis on employability in universities ignores the everyday lives of adult students and excludes and discriminates them from the employability 'game' in many ways. To be employable, students are expected to get involved in internships, work placements and other graduate schemes. However, these are not practical for adult students. Often, they are not local to where they live or are during the vacation when many either have to work to earn some money or look after children. As one single parent mother explains:

> Most of the graduate schemes that are available are for people without responsibilities. I can't go travelling and leave my son at home… There doesn't seem to be any niche for any graduate schemes that are solely based locally. The jobs I've looked at, they're looking for people who are flexible and are willing to work all the hours that God sends and I have commitments. But this isn't taken into account for the mature student in the job market. (Sally)

Sally's experience and story illuminates that the issues are not just about age and class but also about gender. The commitment to family and place restricts many adult students from being flexible, but flexibility is something that is valued by employers. Schemes such as work placements are often unpaid, so they are not affordable for working-class adult students. Allen et al. (2013), in their qualitative study, were also critical about work placements as they argue that:

> what makes a 'successful' and 'employable' student and 'ideal' creative worker are implicitly classed, raced and gendered. We argue that work placements operate as a key domain in which inequalities within both higher education and the graduate labour market are (re) produced and sustained. (Allen et al., 2013, p. 431)

Age discrimination was spoken about frequently by the adult students we interviewed. As Jane poignantly reflects:

> Yes, at the end of this year I will have a degree but looking at my age and looking at the students—so many young students with the same degree as me when it comes to employment. Employers—maybe they will say 'Yes you have your degree expertise but your age' and would rather be looking at someone younger than me. (Jane)

Employers and universities largely do not take into account the social situation of their diverse students in relation to employability.

As Paul's quote illustrates, class is a key factor as perceived by the adult students and affects their opportunities in the graduate labour market in numerous ways. Previous to entering university, Paul was a roofer, and despite having obtained the highest grade in his degree (first-class honours), he could not find employment at graduate level. He was forced to return to roofing but in precarious temporary jobs. As Paul explains, 'Workwise I've been doing exactly what I was doing before because it's my easiest way to get money'. He missed university life and stated that: 'I miss engaging with the ideas and having my mind stretched and even writing essays'. Studying also came at a cost in the sense that it distanced himself from his working-class friends and fellow workers. In Hoggart's (1957) terms, he was distancing himself and getting above one's station. He did not talk to his fellow workers about his degree, as 'it's like a dirty secret—frustrating'. His friends wondered what the point was of doing a degree as he ended back up being a roofer. Paul explained that he felt that he was in two camps—the working-class world and the academic one.

Sharon studied law. The choice of this subject stemmed from her biography and a childhood experience of her father murdering her mother and his subsequent imprisonment. Entering the legal profession in the UK is a costly business, and Sharon, as a single parent on a low income, could not afford this. She lacked the social, economic and cultural capitals, in Bourdieu's terms, and middle-class background which her fellow younger students had:

> Some of the students I've spoken to their parents are partners in solicitor firms so obviously they're going to walk into a job aren't they? Definitely down the barrister route—it's definitely about what private school you've been to. I think money definitely because if you haven't got money you're just not going to get to the Bar really are you. It costs too much money. Their course is £18,000—it's just not an option.

Economic Social and Cultural Capital

This section will serve to highlight the ways in which different capitals are also interwoven in the experiences of our participants. The issues the adult students we interviewed experienced included challenges related to their respective circumstances that highlight social background, and cultural

milieu continue to play a part in the environment of higher education, their experience of employers and the process of entering the labour market.

One of our participants, Sophie, found her experience at an elite university led to an appreciation of the academic sense of fulfilment. Higher educational institutions in this respect 'act as a transitional space enabling women to reflect upon their identity as a working-class woman and reshape and transform themselves' (Merrill & Revers, 2022, forthcoming). However, she felt this was weighed against the 'false impression' that is produced in this environment in relation to future employment opportunities manifest by the economic and social inequalities:

> Because some students make tremendous amounts of money when they leave it raises everything and it gives a false impression….At (elite university) the traditional learners that have probably had private education before they got there and they have parents with high-flying jobs and stuff…That came out, the social networks they mix in, that's the bit that gets them the job. Not necessarily their degree. Who you know rather than what you know. (Sophie)

Furthermore, her awareness of these issues stemming from concerns with background and upbringing impacted on her impressions on what it means to fit in with the expectations of employers, to 'exude an aura':

> I think to be employable…not only do you have to have experience, you have to sort of like, I don't know, the way you present yourself, they have to, just by first appearance, your appearance has to feel like you're somebody that fits. Just who are you… do you exude that aura, I don't know!

Sophie successfully balanced her academic commitments with those of both working and raising a family. Like Paul, she excelled in her degree, attaining first-class honours. However, as became clear in a follow-up interview, as with Paul, such success didn't remove the challenges she faced when seeking employment. In the later interview, she described that her chosen path into employment in HR could only be advanced through intern work. However, this relied on extensive travel commitments and a lack of financial remuneration.

> after I graduated at uni. I worked in London for two days as a HR intern so I used to travel to London at my own expense to be an intern…No interns don't get nothing! It was voluntary. Another sacrifice!

Low-paid internships can operate as an extension of the skills-based narrative of employability in which the inflation of prerequisites to gain higher paid jobs continue to spiral. But as is evident in this case, it serves to advantage those who already have sufficient economic capital to be able to offer or otherwise 'sacrifice' their labour on the premise of better future career possibilities.

Furthermore, her experience of the importance of social and cultural capital was evidenced in her identification of the social networks required in this profession to 'get your foot in the door':

> HR is another difficult field to get into. If you know somebody who knows somebody who's going get you in it's the platform to actually get your foot into the door.

Similarly, another of our participants, Jane, observed that after graduating from her degree and seeking work, the expectations of employers paid little attention to the concerns of those with young families:

> Some of them want you to go and stay in London for six months or Scotland and it's impractical when you've got children.

As a single mother with a young son, the option of moving around to suit these requirements impacted on her ability to accept these conditions of employment. As she observed,

> It's not about the university it's about the kind of internships that are out there as well. They could be more focused on people who don't move around.

As Tomlinson and Nghia point out:

> A graduate may be sufficiently 'employable' for a given job but if they are tied to a location of relative under-supply of jobs and have transportation challenges, familial ties, health, mobility and childcare responsibilities (to name a few), then their ability to access suitable kobs is compromised. (2020, p. 6)

Referring back to the case of Sharon, her lack of social, cultural and economic capitals meant that she did not become a lawyer but she felt the fact that she had studied at an elite university helped her to get a job as a personal assistant in a law firm:

> Putting Warwick University on my CV got me the job. Because the first thing they said in the interview was Warwick University? …That was the first thing they said. They didn't say 'Hi!' They said, 'Warwick University … That's a very good university. How did you get in there?' 'What did you do?' And that basically got me the job.

The issue of eliteness also arose for Sharon in a different social situation:

> so at the Christmas party was probably the first time we met the entire firm and they were all saying oh, you know, the other solicitors were saying, "What university did you go to?' And whenever you say Warwick University they 'Huuuh! (exclamation of surprise)… Okay.' It's as if you are in a different light all of a sudden, yeah….Because they've all been educated at Eton and Oxford, Cambridge, so they felt I fitted in because I'm from Warwck University. If I told them I'd been to X university I'd have been cut out.

In short, as evidenced in the stories of our participants, getting the best level degrees at top-tier universities does not guarantee a pathway into graduate-level employment for adult learners. Obstacles remain with regards to future employment due to structural inequalities enhanced by the narrative of employability skills and the continuing inflation of employer expectations. In this climate, working-class adult students often lack the opportunities and resources to satisfy what top employers are looking for, which are particular social and cultural capitals possessed by middle-class students.

Summary

The stories of the working-class women and men we interviewed illustrate that their experiences of studying at a university and their efforts to enter the graduate labour market are not just individual ones but also collective ones in terms of primarily class but also gender, race and age. In this research, some of the participants were interviewed twice to help gauge their experiences over time within the HE setting and in relation to expectations of graduate-level work. Their voices were critical of the way that employability strategies employed by both universities and employers favoured young middle-class students. The employability discourse that they encountered in this context served only to reinforce inequalities by advancing interests based on preexisting assumptions of a graduate labour

market tailored to traditional graduates. The participants in our study had entered university to prove to themselves that they are capable of studying at university level as well as to obtain a better material and employment life for themselves and their family. In contrast to the younger working-class students we interviewed, they were less instrumental in relation to implementing employment strategies as they were realistic about the inequalities they faced. However, despite being a risky business (Reay, 2003), the transitional space of university did offer a place where the self was changed, but as Paul's story illustrates, sometimes at the cost of class distancing from their family and friends.

In relation to employability and access to the labour market, they realised that they were not operating in a level playing field, as class inequalities and class system continue to be reproduced within higher education. Having social capital, networks and cultural and economic capital, in Bourdieu's terms, is influential and essential in getting top graduate jobs so that the process of employability also perpetuates class inequalities (Sayer, 2015; Finnegan et al., 2014). Social class continues to be an important factor in the experiences of UK non-traditional students with respect to their educational background, opportunities, experiences in HE and in the labour market. As a result, social class matters a great deal in terms of biographical experiences and biography and trajectories and affects how HE is interpreted and valued, and this has an impact on their employment trajectory.

In relation to graduate employability, the question needs to be raised—access to what? (Merrill et al., 2019). For many working-class adult students, obtaining a degree has not led to social mobility and graduate-level jobs, and for some they have found themselves in a situation of precarity. Increasing commitment to employability within HEIs has raised issues of inequality for working-class students, which universities and employers need to address.

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