Chapter Twelve

Gendered and classed graduate transitions to work: How the unequal playing field is constructed, maintained and experienced

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Abstract

A recent Institute of Fiscal Studies report (Crawford and Vignoles, 2014) of 200,000 graduates showed those who had attended independent schools on average earned 18% more than peers from state schools 3.5 years after university. Even for graduates from the same universities studying the same subjects going into the same jobs upon graduation, the pay gap was still 6%! Using data from a three year Leverhulme Trust funded study of the experiences of working- and middle-class students at Bristol's two universities (the Paired Peers study), we explore the processes of capital acquisition, accumulation and mobilisation necessary to secure advantageous graduate outcomes for those from established middle-class backgrounds, as enjoyed by the young men in particular. We present a typology of four graduate outcomes: 'on-track', 'pushing forward', 'drifting' and 'deferred career', and demonstrate how, whilst agency does have a part to play in deciding the pathway followed, structural positioning is significantly more influential for any given individual's outcome. We also show how attending a Russell Group university does indeed increase an individual's chances of securing a professional graduate outcome, especially if it follows attendance at a fee paying or otherwise selective school.

Introduction

> *That's the scary thing, like there's so much choice and, you know, you're out of University and for your whole life, it's almost kind of like stages. You have choice in terms of like what you want to do but now you're an adult, literally, you can do anything within reason if you succeed in doing it. But it's, it's scary 'cos like once you make a choice that's kind of like the path you lead and you can't do it all, and time is like limited and the choices that I make now will have like huge ramifications for me later on so I'm very, it feels like a bit of a burden. (Martin, middle-class, UoB)*

As a *rite de passage* from adolescence into the adult world, university education in the UK has never been more popular. For children from middle-class families, 'going to uni' has become very much an unquestioned norm. For many working-class families, too, who in the past might have wanted their children to leave school aged 15 or 16 and get quickly into jobs, university education has become an aspiration (Bathmaker *et al.,* 2016). In an increasingly precarious economic climate marked by short-term contracts and low-paid work (Standing, 2011) the degree seems one way of grasping at some kind of security and hope for the future.

Certainly, gaining a degree still conveys some kind of economic advantages. Graduates are less likely to experience long-term unemployment. There is a very pronounced graduate pay premium. Official figures for 2014 (BIS, 2015) showed that the median average earnings for all in the 16-64 age group with postgraduate degrees is £40,000, for graduates £31,000, compared with £22,000 for non-graduates. For those aged 21-30 the differentials are lower, with median earnings at around £28,000, £26,000 and £18,000. Of course, the premium will also vary according to the type of degree gained: doctors and lawyers are better paid than philosophers and drama teachers. A young person who is determined to find well-paid and secure employment would make a wise choice in opting for engineering. Sociologists do tend to find a career in the end, but the path may be circuitous and rocky!

However, though research (e.g. Crawford and Vignoles, 2014; BIS, 2015) shows that the graduate salary premium persists and that those with degrees are less likely to be unemployed, there is no doubt that the labour market for graduates is changing in the first decades of the twenty-first century. The major Future Track study has highlighted the

changing nature of occupational options facing graduates: as the supply of graduates increases, a smaller proportion will be able to access 'traditional' graduate jobs, (such as law, accounting and medicine) and more will have to move into 'new' graduate jobs (e.g. event organising, new media jobs, social enterprise) or non-graduate jobs (e.g. leisure industry, retail) (Purcell *et al.,* 2013). Phil Brown's research into the graduate labour market has highlighted 'the opportunity trap' and the 'global auction' (Brown 2003; Brown *et al.,* 2011). He argues that the promise of success and money lures many into higher education (HE) but the system is increasingly unable to fulfil the demand for graduate-level jobs. While the search for 'good jobs' has always been competitive, there is no doubt that the continued expansion of recruits to HE, especially since the lifting of the cap on student numbers at many universities, along with competition from students from overseas for top jobs in London, has led to a kind of hyper-competitiveness, as highlighted in the following comment from a middle-class Bristol University graduate seeking a permanent teaching job:

> *It is very competitive and at the moment it is all of the PGCEs, all of the year three undergrads plus every other teacher in Bristol who decides that they want to move jobs and inevitably you are competing very fiercely for what is often one, two jobs - one school reckoned that they were going to get 85 applications for one job. It's no wonder really is it? Because it is very competitive. (Justin, middle-class, UoB)*

This *hyper-competivity* combines with the multiplicity of choices faced by young people to create an environment of uncertainty and anxiety, as highlighted in the opening quotation from Martin. This is compounded by the neoliberal ethos of individual responsibility which makes young people believe that success or failure lies in their own hands entirely and is not shaped by structural forces (Roberts, 1995; Furlong and Cartmel, 2007; Woodman and Wyn, 2015; Bradley, 2016). It is not surprising if graduates find their situation 'scary' as they contend with the 'burden of choice'. Young people from all backgrounds face these conditions. However, middle-class young people may have resources behind them to cushion them from precarity, which their working-class peers lack. They are more familiar with the 'rules of the game' of professional life, their parents have the financial capital to help them through unpaid internships and placements and fund them for masters degrees or helping with rent in London. Especially importantly, through their parents' young people can tap into networks which can help them gain access to elite organizations. This type of social capital is

3

also crucial in accessing useful internships which so often serve as the first steps into permanent jobs (Redmond, 2010; Stevenson and Clegg, 2010); Bathmaker *et al.,* 2016). Working-class students lacking such resources have to rely on their own initiatives and resilience to see them through. As this chapter will show, at least some of them succeed in this.

Methods

The data used here are primarily taken from interviews towards the end of the final year of a *Leverhulme Trust* funded longitudinal study exploring the progress of a cohort of students through their three year undergraduate degree course in England (2010-2013). The *Paired Peers* study aimed to compare systematically the experiences of pairs of students from different social classes, attending university in the same English city. The 'new' (i.e. 'post-1992') teaching-focused University of the West of England, Bristol (UWE) is a member of the University Alliance mission group, whilst the traditional 'elite' University of Bristol (UoB) is a member of the high status, research-intensive Russell Group of universities. As we shall see, this is an important discriminator.

Pairs of students studying one of eleven subject areas taught across both universities were matched by class, by institution and by discipline. Among our objectives were to identify the various kinds of capital that students from different classes brought into their university experience (economic, social, cultural, and so forth), and to explore the types of capital they acquired over the three years. In this way we aimed to examine differing processes of capital mobilisation and acquisition by students that might enhance future social positioning and career prospects.

By attending the programme induction sessions in 2010 and asking all students to complete a questionnaire (n=2,130), we recruited a sample of 90 students from the eleven disciplines (Biology; Drama; Economics & Finance; Engineering; English; Geography; History; Law; Politics; Psychology and Sociology). There were at least eight from each subject (e.g. two middle-class and two working-class Biology students at UoB and the same at UWE), enabling us to compare the experiences of students from differing class backgrounds. Our primary concern was to operationalise class, despite this necessitating a simplification of its complexities (Savage *et al.,* 2015). We classified students using seven different factors,

including the occupation and educational attainment of both parents, the type of school the participants had attended, the number of their school friends who were going to university, and their self-reported class. Using their responses, we divided all responses into three groups: clearly working-class, clearly middle-class and those 'in between' which we rather aptly if jokingly named 'the muddle in the middle'. Whilst we observed differences in the class fractions of students between the two institutions (middle-class students at UoB often had parents in the 'higher professions' such as law, finance or medicine, as opposed to nurses and teachers who were typical parents of our UWE recruits)), we readily found sufficient participants at both universities who pretty clearly belonged to the middle classes; the relative paucity of unambiguously working-class students, particularly at UoB, led us to draw from the intermediate grouping in some disciplines. We tried to make sure that these displayed some feature of disadvantage (for example coming from a lone parent family).

This chapter focuses on social class. To avoid the additional variable of age, we only included 'young' (18-21-year-old) students, and there were insufficient students in our sample with disabilities, or members of black and minority communities to enable a meaningful discussion of disability or 'race', but we do refer to some emerging differences along the lines of gender. However, we do offer a more detailed consideration of other experiences of social or demographic demarcation elsewhere (e.g.; Bradley and Ingram, 2012; Abrahams and Ingram, 2013; Ingram and Waller, 2015; Ingram and Abraham, 2016; Bathmaker *et al.,* 2016).

All interview data have been analysed and thematically coded using NVivo data analysis software, and we present some of this interview data in this chapter. Currently the Paired Peers project has entered a second phase (2014-2017), following a group of our participants into the labour market after graduation; some interview data from Phase 2 is also drawn on here.

The contemporary graduate careers market

When we asked our participants to look back at their final year of study, many highlighted the considerable level of stress they had felt. In addition to completing course work and revising for their final exams, most felt the growing pressure from the need to secure an appropriate outcome following their studies, i.e. a graduate level job or further study. Many

also needed to decide where to live the following year, a choice which for many came down between moving back to the family home (often in an attempt to save money), to stay in Bristol or to move elsewhere in pursuit of work. For some this meant re-locating to London, a move which would generally come at considerable expense in terms of rental costs, a phenomenon which Bristol also is increasingly suffering from. As stated above, our participants were confronted upon graduation in 2013 with an incredibly competitive careers' market, with greater numbers of graduates than ever before due to the expansion of higher education in the preceding decades, but without a commensurate growth in 'graduate level' jobs. This situation had evolved especially since the global financial crash of 2008 and the politics and economics of austerity that it heralded in in the UK and beyond. Thus Sally who had taken, along with many hopefuls, the prestigious law degree at UoB reflected:

Basically hardly anyone I know who did the Law degree actually went on to become a lawyer. Like there's a couple of sort of like events management sort of things, sort of business. And then there's a few people who have gone into law but not as a lawyer, so they're sort of like paralegals or legal secretaries, that sort of thing, because it was just so difficult to get into a law firm and do a training contract there because there just aren't enough and there's too many graduates, so actually not many of them are lawyers at all. (Sally, middle-class, UoB)

Our participants were often painfully aware of the message that, to compete in the contemporary graduate careers market 'a degree is not enough' (Tomlinson, 2008; Bathmaker *et al.,* 2016), and that to thrive within the highly competitive field of graduate careers, they must undertake cv enhancing activities alongside their studies (Redmond, 2010; Stevenson and Clegg, 2011; Bathmaker *et al.,* 2013). It is also worthy of note that the process of applying for 'top' graduate jobs has become extremely onerous, something akin to 'a global war for talent' (Brown and Tannock, 2009; Brown, Lauder and Ashton, 2011). The burden of recruitment has shifted from graduate employers to the students themselves, witness the decline of the so-called 'milk round'. Many major employers no longer take part in this, except at a handful of elite universities, amongst which UoB is usually numbered. Graduate recruitment fairs at UWE tend to focus more on local firms, who are targeted by the university in its employability strategies, reflecting its view of itself as a locally-oriented and 'down to earth' organisation, a self-proclaimed 'university for the real world'.

This chapter explores the strategies of our participants as they moved into the labour market. We identify patterns among the group, in respect of their progress in seeking a 'good job'. We examine the influence of their class backgrounds and their gender upon these processes, and how they mobilised the capitals (Bourdieu, 1986) acquired through their family backgrounds or at university

The Impact of Class and Gender on Graduate Destinations

> *I think it's getting more and more difficult to get a job after university unless you go down like a specific career path. Like for me when I specifically decided I'm going to be a teacher and there's a sort of chain of like events, just like steps that you have to take and then you sort of get there. But I think if you're a graduate and you graduate and then that's it and you just have to go and find a job by yourself, I think it's getting more and more difficult to get on to like a graduate work sort of programme or into a graduate job straightaway. So many people I know have just ...are working in like shops and cafes and bakeries and that sort of thing just sort of applying for jobs and then just like waiting to find a better one. Yeah. I think it's sort of slow progress after university, you sort of expect to go straight into a job and then suddenly it's like you can't actually find one. (Sally, middle-class, UoB)*

In terms of moving out of what many called the 'student bubble' and into work, we would expect some undergraduates to be doing this with greater success than others. Generally speaking we could make a number of assumptions, for instance that those taking more vocational courses (e.g. Law) will be closer to establishing a career than others, as Sally acknowledges in the quotation above. Likewise, those achieving well in their courses will probably find it easier moving into desirable jobs than those who struggled. This is why, as any lecturer will testify, undergraduate students may become fixated on getting a first class degree or a 2:1.

Some students have personal circumstances limiting them to certain locations (e.g. where their family lives), whilst others can effectively go wherever the fancy takes them – upon graduation some of our participants moved abroad to work for instance. Meanwhile some undergraduates have the financial resources necessary to enable them to immediately commence further study, whilst others need to earn money before embarking on an MA. And,

perhaps most tellingly, some have a clear idea of what they would like their future lives to be like, while others barely have a clue! Our remaining cohort of 71 participants (we had lost 19 across the three years of the study who had either left university altogether or simply left the project) were no different.

While we acknowledge that each student was moving along their own individual trajectory, upon analysing their narrative accounts we were able to group them into four broad clusters, (leaving aside the few who were going onto a 4th year of their course). Some had already got a destination fixed by the end of their final year (e.g. a course, a job, or an internship). These we defined as being 'on track'. We identified another group who had not yet secured a destination upon completing their studies, but who had a fairly clear idea of where they wanted to go and were actively taking steps to get there,(e.g. they were applying for jobs or placements); we labelled these as 'pushing forward'. A third if smaller cluster was made up of people who felt they needed some kind of break before moving on to a career, some of whom had already been offered jobs or places on courses but had postponed the start in order to recharge their batteries.. We referred to this group as having 'deferred careers'. The final group seemed to have had very little idea of what they wanted to do, or how to go about it, and we named them 'drifters'. Some of them were vaguely oriented to specific sectors – overseas development, charities, local government – but without much idea about particular occupations or career paths. Graduates in these latter two groups spoke of needing 'time to think' about where they should go next.

The table below shows how the students from the two universities are clustered by class background. We distinguish here between the two 'on track' groups, those going into work and those undertaking further study.

Table 1 Student destinations by university and class of origin

	UoB middle-class	UoB working-class	UWE middle-class	UWE working-class	Totals
Further study	7	5	2	1	15

On track	4	3	1	0	8
Pushing forward	2	2	3	3	10
Drifting	5	4	8	3	20
Deferred career	1	3	1	3	8
Final year study	2	2	3	3	10
Totals	21	19	18	13	71

The above table suggests that whilst there are clear class differences between the backgrounds of those making up the clusters, they are strongly mediated by attendance at the two rather different universities. Although it is only data from the start of the students' working lives, the most striking feature is that those who attended UoB, whatever their class, are making a speedier and smoother transition into work than those who attended UWE. This is a crucial finding in terms of the debates over widening participation and social mobility (e.g. Milburn 2009; 2012; 2014; Waller *et al.,* 2014; 2015). It suggests that attending a Russell Group university does indeed heighten the chances for working-class students of upward mobility and securing professional employment, while for middle-class students it is likely to help them maintain their original class status. While UWE has a strong record of getting its graduates into employment – at 95.6% one of the highest in the sector (HESA, 2016), it may be that they will take longer to find a niche, or, more worryingly, end up in non-graduate jobs. Whilst it is too early at this stage to be sure, we can say that the Russell Group graduates have a head start.

In terms of how we would explain this phenomenon, we suggest that the working-class young people who make it to UoB – often against significant odds and through demonstrating significant resilience – are generally highly aspirational, well-motivated, and determined to achieve. They are more likely to learn how to 'play the game' in terms of enhancing their CVs or using their newly acquired capitals than their counterparts at UWE. (see Bathmaker *et al.,* 2013, 2016, and Ingram and Waller 2015, for a detailed discussion of this process). The

9

other side of the picture is the action of employers who appear to seek out Russell Group applicants. Our students told us of the '(University of) Bristol cachet':

Because I was in such a bubble before I never realised how rare like say a Bristol graduate is actually with these 'A' levels and GCSEs are, and you don't realise the value of yourself. So you're just like 'oh I'll take any job' but then you realise that actually we're actually quite hard to come by. But in a search engine, that will search there…all the key words…anything technical like language wise that they'd search, like graduate…biology, Bristol. I did Bristol on like loads of pages, I knew they were looking for that, Bristol University, A* as well, that was like just a big ream of that. (Luke, middle-class, UoB)

But I shouldn't let it define me and what I do to the point that I give up and do a big corporate job because that option is there with you know you have a degree from Bristol you can do those jobs. (Elliot, middle-class, UoB).

The table also demonstrates how over 20% of the working-class students (although mainly those from UoB) were utilising their cultural gains in proceeding to PGCE qualifications or higher degrees, with ambitions to pursue careers as teachers or in some cases academics. These students had achieved well academically, gaining upper second or first-class degrees, and across the cohort as a whole the working-class students had performed as well in their degrees as their middle-class peers. Since most had attended non-selective state schools this shows that doing so does not present a barrier to subsequent high academic achievement. Indeed, as we suggest elsewhere (Bradley and Waller, 2014), in common with other 'non-traditional students', the difficulties they had faced in getting into university had apparently made them predisposed to work harder than their middle-class and public-school counterparts. This replicates the findings of earlier research by Brown and Scase (1994) and more recently the report from the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) (2014).

A more surprising finding was that middle-class students were more likely to end up as drifters. This may partly be because going to university has become a middle-class norm whether or not young people have formed career plans, while for working-class students the motivation for university attendance may be more focused in terms of 'getting a good job', or

'giving something back' (Brine and Waller, 2004) or 'bettering themselves' (Bathmaker *et al.,* 2016). Another factor may be the ability of their parents to support them for a period through the transition. This means that the pressure to find a job and become independent is less acute. Generally, the working-class students who were not yet 'on track' seemed to have a clearer idea of what they wanted to do, although it might take them longer to achieve it, for instance by taking non-graduate work in the short term to be able to save for a master's degree course, while many middle-class parents could – and would – pay outright. Thus Kyle, a working-class student from UWE, was working as a carer for learning disabled people to pay his way through his LPC (legal practice course). However, it is also possible that the phenomenon of the middle-classes drifting reflects a genuine decline in their fortunes in austerity Britain, particularly as the public-sector jobs which past cohorts were able to access in significant numbers have been in significant decline.

Thus some doubt may be cast on whether having a university degree may continue to serve as a way of maintaining middle-class distinction as clearly as it has done in the past. As we touched on earlier, the middle-class is fractionalised. The children of doctors, lecturers and lawyers who attend UoB may do better than the children of nurses, teachers and social workers at UWE. But the data do suggest, that for working-class young people who manage to overcome the systemic barriers and disadvantages and get into university, it appears to remain a vehicle for upward social mobility and a potential route into more secure employment, especially if they attend elite universities (Savage *et al.,* 2015).

Analysis of the students' destinations also suggests that initial career outcomes for graduates are shaped by gender as well as class, as is shown in Table 2. Interestingly, whilst at the start of our research there seemed to be little difference in the aspirations and expectations between our male and female participants, there was an apparent 'cooling-out' process where the women's horizons contracted. The table reflects this is in the higher numbers of women who were either drifting or deferring their careers.

Table 2 Student destinations by university and gender

	UoB males	UoB females	UWE males	UWE females	Totals

Further study	3	9	0	3	15
On track -jobs	5	2	0	1	8
Moving on	2	2	3	3	10
Drifting	3	6	4	7	20
Deferred career	2	2	1	3	8
Final year	2	2	5	1	10
Totals	17	23	13	18	71

Especially notable was a tendency for women move towards teaching. Table 2 shows that women were more likely to go on to further study than men, but whereas all the men were taking masters of various kinds, six of these twelve women were taking PGCEs (the one-year postgraduate course in education).

Some young women came to university already intending to teach, often themselves the children of teachers. Indeed, many of the middle-class students had parents who were education professionals. Teaching has historically been seen as an appropriate job for women, and can be considered more compatible with the responsibilities of domesticity and motherhood, given that the hours and holidays coincide with children's. This is even truer in the context of today's 'long hours' work culture and lengthy commutes into work. It also chimes with the desire expressed by many of the female undergraduates to 'give something back' (Brine and Waller, 2004) to their communities. For example, Anna was a working-class student at UoB, who was keen to do something with her politics degree to challenge social injustices and inequalities. But she was deterred from a more academic career by the behaviour of male students and tutors which she found overbearing, and decided that a better choice for her would be to teach maths to children in disadvantaged areas.

Another who abandoned her original aspirations was Sally, a middle-class student studying law at UoB. She was differentiated from the rest of the sample in having a small child but her mother took on much of the necessary childcare for her. At first Sally seemed typically

ambitious, set on becoming a barrister. In her second year she had decided being a solicitor would be her preference: 'I'm doing a law degree so I'll be a lawyer.' But doubts began to set in in her third year:

I think I still want to be a solicitor but it's just really hard to be a solicitor. You have to work really long hours and things like that, so it's sort of not a particularly practical route to go down. Because I was thinking for a while over summer about teaching.

Sally decided that the legal profession was too competitive and demanding for her, especially as a lone parent. She reported seeing how lawyer friends of her parents worked long hours and then brought work home and this led her to a new decision:

Because I think I would much prefer to teach and then sort of maybe be able to teach Law than have the stresses of having to practice it as a profession. Because everyone seems so stressed about it, all the lawyers that like I know who live on my road, they're all up at 3 in the morning ringing China every day and it just doesn't…the more I think about the less it appeals to me.

Sally struggled with this career switch, because she knew her parents had been set on her becoming a well-paid lawyer, and she did not want to disappoint them. This might inform her middle-class aspirational take on her potential career path:

I don't see being a teacher as like what I'm going to do for ever. I feel like I could do a lot more than just being a teacher. After like maybe two years as a teacher, so in like three years' time, I would have started thinking about trying to go for Head of Department or an external examiner for something, or like something a bit different. I feel like being a teacher is just like a stepping stone to something like bigger and more elaborate.

Interestingly when we interviewed her two years' later she was still in a temporary post and told us that her ambition was to be headmistress of a girls' private school, but acknowledged it might take 20 years!

This clinging to aspirations to career progression, to be as Sally put it, 'a hotshot teacher' if she couldn't be 'a hotshot lawyer', contrasts with the statement of Jackie, a working-class UoB student also headed for a PGCE:

> *Like if I went on a special educational needs course. I'd be interested in that. But I'm not particularly interested in being head teacher or deputy or anything, like senior member of staff.*

Another working-class graduate, Ruby, described herself as 'driven' and ambitious', but also emphasised the importance of security as shaping her job choice:

> *I've chosen a secure career and I've chosen a career that I'm able to work up and become…you know to take it as far as I want to, I can do as little as I want or I could do as much as I want to. So I think in that respect I'm really optimistic that I'll be able to continue with this. So I think yeah I am, yeah.*

For Ruby and Jackie, both of them were the first in their family to go to university, the achievement of a teaching career was a considerable step upward in occupational terms. While both of them looked set for possible early promotion if they wanted it, there was no pressure from their families to go further.

On track: moving on up

Many of those we categorized as being 'on track' had known before coming to university what they wanted to do, and had chosen courses which would lead them towards that destination. Engineering was an obvious example. For instance, Marcus was a highly motivated student who had wanted to be an engineer since childhood and had clear plans to achieve this goal:

> *I definitely want a first, it's just something else to have. I'm already doing a Masters' degree which you have to do for engineering, but going to careers fairs it is all a 2:1 required, and 80% of Bristol students, I believe is the quoted figure, achieve a 2:1. So ideally I want a first. .I will be a manager of some sort, hopefully a chartered*

engineer if I go into engineering – this is based on my chosen career path. (Marcus, working-class,, UoB)

Marcus subsequently got his first and moved straight into a graduate scheme at a top firm.

A similarly strategic route was planned out by Tony, who studied economics at UoB:

It's gone the way that I wanted it to go actually, get an internship, get a graduate role, go straight into work...I think I can kind of rise quite well within the industry. It's what I like so if it's what I like I'd assume that I can at least kind of motivate myself to do it well. Yeah I'm reasonably confident. I think a bit of confidence will probably help.
(Tony, working-class, UoB)

Nathan was another who throughout his degree had been remarkably focused on obtaining his goal: a very well paid job in the City (see Ingram and Waller (2015) for a fuller discussion of this). He was contemptuous of fellow students whom he saw as wasting their time. By contrast he was doing everything he could to get the high-status career he aspired to:

Get exposed to the companies and the industries that you might want to work for as early as possible. Research the opportunities available, (which I did), and summer internships (which I did and got the job off the back off). Join societies and clubs and try and take up leadership positions in those clubs that are relevant to the potential career that you want – if the society doesn't exist, create it….Just try and do everything to build up your CV, just add little bits of experience, add little bits of training, competitions if you can, and make yourself look busy. (Nathan, middle-class, UoB)

Nathan got a first-class degree in Law and gained a place at a leading merchant bank which would start him off on a high salary destined for a high-flying career. In this first stage of his career he was still carefully planning his next moves, which now focused on using his position as a base for setting up his own company:

The job market for people with 2 to 3 years of banking experience is ridiculously hot, you know I would typically get maybe an email or two in a week for potential

jobs. .It's not a very big industry, there may be a couple of hundred people who do the kind of thing that we do in London, and so once you have a little bit of a reputation or some people have worked with you on a couple of deals, they start thinking 'oh this guy might be alright, he's a good guy, and he's also good at his job'. So you start to get invites from head hunters, generic ones and also ones that people have referred you for. And you just kind of filter through and see if there's anything you might like. (Nathan, middle-class, UoB)

While table 2 shows that male graduates are more likely than female to be on track, there were one or two women who fell in to this category. One such was Lizzie, a very bright young working-class woman doing engineering at UoB. Interestingly, unlike Marcus, Lizzie had had one or two wobbles along the way wondering whether this was really the direction for her. But her story of how she got her first job after graduating with a first-class degree illustrates the advantages of attendance at a Russell Group research intensive university:

Well I was invited by the professor at the University to go to Farnborough Air Show with him in July, cos he'd been invited as a guest and he could bring a student with him to go to. So the company have a chalet at Farnborough Air Show so we went there to watch the Air Show and whilst I was there they approached me and told me that they would like me to join the graduate scheme next year, so this is in 2016, because they'd heard, my professor told them all about me and they knew that I wanted to go travelling so they offered me some work experience before I went travelling, with no commitments, so if I didn't want to join them next September I don't have to. But, you know, they put my name around in the company and then one of the managers picked up my CV and name and stuff and he contacted me, and so, yeah it was quite fortunate. (Lizzie, working-class, UoB)

A bright working-class young woman had been pushed forward by her tutor using his social capital to get her on the scheme; it is indicative that unlike the self-motivated young men mentioned above, she had needed that intervention from her tutor.

Pushing forward: progress towards a goal

As we mentioned earlier, many of the students found the final year of their degree stressful, especially the run up to the final assessments. Preoccupations with exams stopped them from getting ahead with securing placements or internships, even when they had a good idea what they wanted to do, as in the following account from Sophie who told us 'I think I should get the grades first and then look for jobs':

> *I'm looking for like graduate schemes at home, so like with the councils. But because I've got my job I can leave it a bit because I can live on my wages at the moment because I'll be moving back home. But I think I need to focus more on getting the grades first rather than looking for jobs because I could apply like in the summer. (Sophie, working-class, UWE)*

Sophie's case is also an interesting example of the 'cooling off' process we observed among young women. She came from a local working-class family taking Politics at UWE. Her account tells of the way many working-class students deliberately impose limits on their aspirations.

> *I didn't really want to choose universities that were too high, I wanted to become like my level, I didn't want to aim 'above my station', so I only applied for three places, like here, Aston and Coventry. (Sophie, working-class, UWE)*

Her apprehension of a class ceiling, however, was not reflected in the aspirations she expressed in her first interview for the project when she spoke of possible jobs in the civil service, foreign office or diplomatic service. Such ambitions seemed to conflict with her self-analysis which again were redolent of delineated class horizons: 'I don't like to fail, I like to be comfortable'. Indeed by the second year she was contemplating voluntary sector or council work. The latter must have appeared both familiar and attainable as she had a relative working there. She still aspires to work for the council but currently has a permanent job with an accountancy firm.

Like others in this cluster, Sophie's immediate plan was to move back home to her parents and start looking for jobs. Such was the fate of Leo, another working-class student who had

nothing fixed at the end of his three years and was anticipating moving home to Wales while he sought a place on a graduate scheme:

I've only applied for two, and got turned down for one, still waiting on the other one, but yeah I haven't really put as much effort into finding a graduate scheme as I should have. But that's what I'm hoping to do. I'm applying to go anywhere over the country, usually in the finance departments for large businesses. (Leo, working-class, UWE)

Leo, also a UWE student, was interesting because he had left school, gone straight into an accountancy firm, got fed up and went off to university hoping for a 'good time' and improved career prospects. Leo achieved a first –class degree, but was unable to find his way into a top job like Tony and Nathan, partly no doubt because he lacked the 'Bristol cachet', but also because he not 'played the game' as carefully as they had and had no social contacts to unlock closed doors for him. Finally he secured himself a moderately well-paid job in a large public sector organisation's finance office which satisfied him. (See Ingram and Waller, 2015 for a further discussion of this).

Leo and Sophie, it seems to us, are typical of working-class students from the new university sector with moderate ambitions. Furthermore, these ambitions may have been moderated over the course of their degree to something realistic in terms of their qualifications and achievements. Such students are not' driven' in the same way as the Nathans and Sallys of this world. Moreover, in terms of their class backgrounds they have achieved much in getting decent reasonably secure jobs, as have Jackie and Ruby. They have escaped the traps of unemployment and precarious work which are the fate of many of their school fellows and probably made their families proud.

Deferred career: time for a break

Given that many of the students, particularly the young women, found the last year of their degree so stressful and draining as they sought to achieve good results in the final assessments, some of those who were well 'on track' decided they needed a break from the pressure. Jasmine wanted to go into social work, but told us of her need for temporary relief

from the intensiveness of university study, which appeared overwhelming. This would allow her to focus on practical life arrangements:

> *I was going to go straight into a masters, but I want a year out, to save up, get a*
> *flat and stuff. Cos I just can't cope. So I'm moving in with my boyfriend.*
> *(Jasmine, working-class, UWE)*

Jenifer was another who wanted time out. She had secured a first-class engineering degree and was thus on track for a well-paid secure job, but preferred to defer for a year. She had taken a waitressing job and was living with her grandmother:

> *It was a bit intense, but that year was worth 75% of my degree grade, so yeah I*
> *felt I had to work hard that year. So I sort of decided that I needed an engineering*
> *break after that and that's why I haven't sort of gone straight into a graduate job*
> *like most people do …and that's why I'm living here now with my granny in*
> *(name of town) for the time being, and then I want to go travelling before I start*
> *my job. (Jenifer, middle-class, UoB)*

The desire to spend some time travelling was strong among many of the students and could be another reason for deferment. Several of the participants were living abroad, either travelling, working or studying. Megan for instance had gained a place on the Teach First programme but decided to take time off so she could indulge her great passion for horses and riding.

> *I've deferred it so I'm having a year out. One thing I will do is the 4 months in*
> *Canada. There's a Work Away placement where I would work with training*
> *young horses on a ranch, which is my dream…And because it's Work Away I*
> *work at their ranch for 4 to 6 hours a day and they pay for my food and board, so*
> *I don't pay for any of that so it will be quite cheap. There's another horse-related*
> *thing I really want to do, which is a project where you live and ride with*
> *Mongolian nomadic people for a month. (Megan, working-class, UoB)*

The choice to defer for these young women can be seen as way to recuperate from the strains of competition and achievement which so many of them told us about. One wonders if

psychologically it is a chance to spend time as a 'free spirit' before the traps of adult responsibilities finally close upon them. This certainly appeared to be the case with Megan.

Drifting: what shall I do with my life?

While over half of the students who were not still carrying on with studies fell into one of these three former groups, the largest number was of those we categorise as 'drifters'. It can be argued that there is a bit of an issue about expecting young people of school age to pick a career and carry that straight through sixth form and into university or college. Many other countries allow for a more leisurely approach to career choice and development. A 'gap year' may be helpful in giving some experience of the world of work, but in many cases it is spent backpacking and acquiring that addiction to 'travelling' which was displayed by many of our respondents. Given the young age of most graduates (typically 21 to 23) and their lack of experience of the wider world and its opportunities, it is quite predictable that many graduates have still no idea about what they want to do with their lives.

The drifters had arrived at university with no clear career ambitions and were still in that condition on graduation. Although nowadays universities, especially those like UWE, make much of 'employability' and preparing the students for the 'real world' (one of UWE's branding slogans), it is understandable that with the intensity of study, social life and changing relationships, undecided students find little time, especially in the final year, to think about future directions. It was noticeable and somewhat surprising that the drifters were mainly women (13 out of 20). This may reflect the fact that despite social change young men are trained towards a future as breadwinners, while for young women things are more ambiguous.

For the drifters, then, it is a question of going out and seeing what the labour market has to offer. Realistically, some of these drifters knew that they were likely to change over the coming years, as Lauren expresses:

> *I'm not going to initially start looking for a career as soon as I've done my exams because I don't think that's practical, I don't think that's realistic, so I think it will take time….. I can't see myself in the future. I try and like think about what*

will I be like in like 5 or 10 years and I just…I can't vision anything, I just can't imagine it. (Lauren, middle-class, UoB)

Amber was another drifter, although unlike Lauren she had arrived at university with a clear ambition to do engineering and work with cars: however, she had become disillusioned and quit after three years of the degree (which normally includes a fourth year qualifying the engineering students for a masters)

I'll probably just move back home and I have a job at a pub at home. Hopefully… I will be able to find a job for either starting in September or like starting in the summer, really just for a year, and then hopefully within that year I'll figure out, like try at maybe do some work experience in different sectors and see what sort of thing I fancy going into I've not decided on anything yet. Just try and get some work experience in different areas. (Amber, middle-class, UWE).

Both these middle-class young women moved back to the family home. Perhaps such a strategy offers them a sense of stability and security in a precarious and shifting world. In a time of austerity families become even more important as places of refuge and economic support, especially given the high costs of rented accommodation in the southern part of the country, where many of the city's undergraduate students originate

As the tables show, we identified drifters from both universities and all classes, although male students from both classes at UoB were least likely to drift. It may be the case, however, that working-class students end up as drifters not because of personal indecisiveness but because they lack insider knowledge of the professional world and its cultural and social parameters. Entering HE they do not have the cultural capital that middle-class students possess. They have no topographical overview or map of this terrain to guide them so they can only learn by experimenting.

It is important to stress we should not equate drifting with laziness. Sussing out the labour market, applying for jobs and trying out jobs can be hard work as the following comments imply:

It's been really difficult, really, really difficult and just in a sense that it's quite disheartening when you're kind of filling out loads of job applications, it's time consuming as well because obviously you've got work, you've got a life but I always make sure, 'right you know, I've got to at least do one or two applications a week', which doesn't sound like a lot but when you're kind of doing your personal statement and obviously you're taking a bit of time to tailor it, it's quite disheartening when you don't hear back from people and you kind of think 'oh what am I doing wrong'. The jobs I have been going for have been mainly in like the third sector or the public sector and for charities as such - also for universities as well. And I haven't really got much kind of luck in kind of getting interviews or anything. (Adele, working-class, UWE).

I had this wonderfully naïve notion that I'd just kind of come up and…with a personal interest in Politics and a degree to boot, you know really it would just be a case of picking from the job offers which obviously would come my way! God, it was pretty bleak at first, I mean it very quickly becomes apparent that it's just like a very horrible environment. I saw some ads saying, you know, graduate job opportunities and the requirements were like 3 Olympic gold medals or world records, you know it's like that because the stuff they're advertising is entry level. I applied for I think about 32 jobs, no…it was mid 20s….but each one of these was like 'monolithic', some of them just wanted a CV and a cover letter… if I'm going do this I'm going to do it really well and not have any trace of reciprocation across different stuff so I'm going to research each company, research each organisation and write something tailor made. So that ended up being like 3 weeks of just doing that full time. (Oscar, middle-class, UWE)

Conclusions

In this chapter we have focused on the difficulties faced by our cohort of graduates as they make the transition from university into adulthood, the labour market and eventually into a career. Our data has concerned the first phase of the transition: as time passes, a different picture may emerge, with more of the drifters finding their way into a job they value. These

initial phases, however, are already revealing classed and gendered differences in the pace and direction of individual trajectories.

As stated at the beginning of this chapter, a degree still brings economic advantages, in the form of greater job security and a graduate premium in lifetime earnings. It remains to be seen whether this premium will persist given the changes in the labour market noted at the start of our discussion. It may be that the young adults will achieve higher levels of pay over their lifetime, especially when and if the economy picks up; on the other hand, it might be the case that, as some commentators have argued, that this generation may find itself trapped in a 'high-skill, low-wage' economy (Shildrick *et al.,* 2012; Howker and Malik, 2013; Gardiner, 2016). However, university remains a gateway into high- and medium-level professional employment, and is also seen as a guarantee of calibre by recruiters and employers who can be mistrustful of young people's work ethic and capabilities.

We have argued in this chapter and elsewhere (e.g. Bradley and Waller, 2014; Waller and Bradley, 2015) that this gateway is open to at least some of the young people from less advantaged background who have grit and determination to overcome barriers into higher education. This is increasingly described as 'resilience' and we have used this term elsewhere (Bradley and Waller, 2014). While we have observed this strength in the face of obstacles among our sample, we recognise that this is an individual attribute, and that requiring working-class students to demonstrate it in itself can serve to exclude more vulnerable youths. Our sample performed as well in their exam results as their middle-class peers and were no more likely to end their undergraduate degrees without a job. However, there is a major advantage for students of all classes if they attend an elite university like UoB, compared to even a leading post-1992 one such as UWE. We find this deeply disappointing, given that many of the UWE students had worked very hard and gained as good degrees as their UoB counterparts. The blame must fall upon employers and recruiters who focus so narrowly on a handful of 'top' universities and do not widen their search for talent into newer arenas. Nonetheless, if we consider the role of universities in offering social mobility to well-qualified and aspirational talented working-class youths (albeit only ever a limited number of them), there is evidence here to suggest that role continues. The problem is that far fewer people from working-class backgrounds make it to the most successful universities. Cherry-picking a few of the most academically able will not make a great difference to this systemic problem as pupils from private schools are steered into mass

uptake of Russell Group places. Parents and schools combine to steer privileged youth towards elite careers (Reay *et al.,* 2005; Khan, 2012; Bathmaker *et al.,* 2016).

We have also pointed to a gender dimension as young women appear more likely to abandon or moderate initial ambitions to be lawyers, engineers, politicians and employees of elite city firms. Our female graduates seemed deterred from the competitive environments into which they were being inducted. Many of them are channelled into teaching, a job which appears to offer a better work-life balance (although that is disputable) and is certainly more compatible with motherhood. Moreover there are gender differences in motivations. When we asked our undergraduates what kind of job they wanted, women often mentioned 'working with people', 'working with children', or 'making a difference' while young men were more likely to talk of money and status. The frame of mind associated with the patriarchal concept of the 'male breadwinner' appears to be still entrenched.

Meanwhile, our cohort of young graduates did not seem too daunted as they set forth on their journey to adult independence. We might describe their mood as apprehensive but hopeful. Some appeared already on the way to traditional graduate employment, as accountants, lawyers, teachers and engineers. Others are resigned to starting out in 'non-graduate' jobs, while they take further steps to better their chances, for example by applying to graduate-entry schemes. Finally, some appear quite directionless, with no real idea of how their lives may turn out.

It is early days yet, however, and, whatever their place on the road to the future, our student participants had few regrets about the choice they had made to attend university. Even if they had not yet attained the economic rewards they had hoped a degree would bring, the vast majority acknowledged the pleasures, intellectual, social and cultural, which their student experience had brought them. A degree indeed may not be enough to secure upward mobility (Tomlinson, 2008) in the climate of hyper-competivity, but it is still a source of personal pride in achievement, especially to those from working-class backgrounds.

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