Paired Peers: Moving on Up?

Project Report

Social Class and Graduate Trajectories

Paired Peers: Moving on up?

Paired Peers phase 2, year 3 Report – July 2017

The Paired Peers project research team

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Front cover

The image on the front cover is a word cloud created from data collected in phase 2 of the project. The size of the word indicates the frequency it was used in students' responses.

Introductory note

This is the first draft of a report that will be presented to The Leverhulme Trust at the end of the Paired Peers project, which has run in two phases from 2010 to 2017 (2010-2013 phase 1 and 2014-2017 phase 2). It has followed a cohort of young men and women through university and into the labour market. In the report we have tried in particular to highlight the voices of our participants, young people entering adulthood at a difficult conjuncture.

INTRODUCTION: The Paired Peers Project

> *I wasn't doing that well at uni because I was drinking too much probably, so I felt like my grades went really down. Then second year was like quite low, I felt pretty depressed to be honest, I didn't have many friends and I found that year really hard…. because I felt like I really didn't fit in, didn't feel like I could make friends, I felt really like un-cool. (Anna, w/c, UoB)*

> *Coming down here and not understanding how things work in different places and mixing with different people and losing your accent, or changing it temporarily when you're speaking to people who weren't from the north, changing your vocab…I was surrounded by a lot of privately educated students who couldn't understand what I was saying. (Samantha, w/c UoB)*

The Paired Peers project, which is funded by The Leverhulme Trust, is a qualitative longitudinal study which has explored the impact of social class on the student experience and outcomes for the past seven years. Its aims were to explore how the experience of study and student life differed according to the undergraduates' class backgrounds, and to investigate the kind of capitals (economic, social and cultural) which helped them to get into university, those which they acquired during their studies, and how they mobilised these in graduate transitions. Our aim has been to contribute to the debates, highlighted in the various Milburn reports, as to whether Higher Education (HE) promotes social mobility or only serves to reproduce existing hierarchies of class, gender and ethnicity. The two quotations at the top of this section are indicative of the problems of 'fit' initially encountered by many students from working-class backgrounds, as shown in previous studies (for example, Reay et al, 2009).

The project, starting in 2010, has followed a cohort of students from Bristol's two universities, University of Bristol (UoB) and the University of the West of England (UWE), through three degree years and into the labour market. Participants were drawn from eleven disciplines (which were taught at both institutions to facilitate comparison): Biology; Drama; Economics/Accounting/Finance; Engineering; English; Geography; History; Law; Politics; Psychology and Sociology. The participants were matched by social class: for example, we recruited four law students from each university, two identified as working-class and two as middle-class.

We used a multifactoral approach to defining class, based on demographic information from an initial questionnaire to all students in the above disciplines: the occupations of both parents, whether the parents had degrees, home postcode, type of school attended, whether most friends were going to university, award of a bursary and self-defined class. Students were then classified as clearly working-class, clearly middle-class or intermediate/unclear. Chart 1 shows the class profile of all students at the two universities, who completed the initial questionnaires, using the class allocation scheme described above. On the basis of this allocation we recruited an initial cohort of 90 students. These were interviewed twice in each of the three project years.

Figure 1: *Class profiles of students who completed initial questionnaire at UoB and UWE in 2010 (n=2,130)*
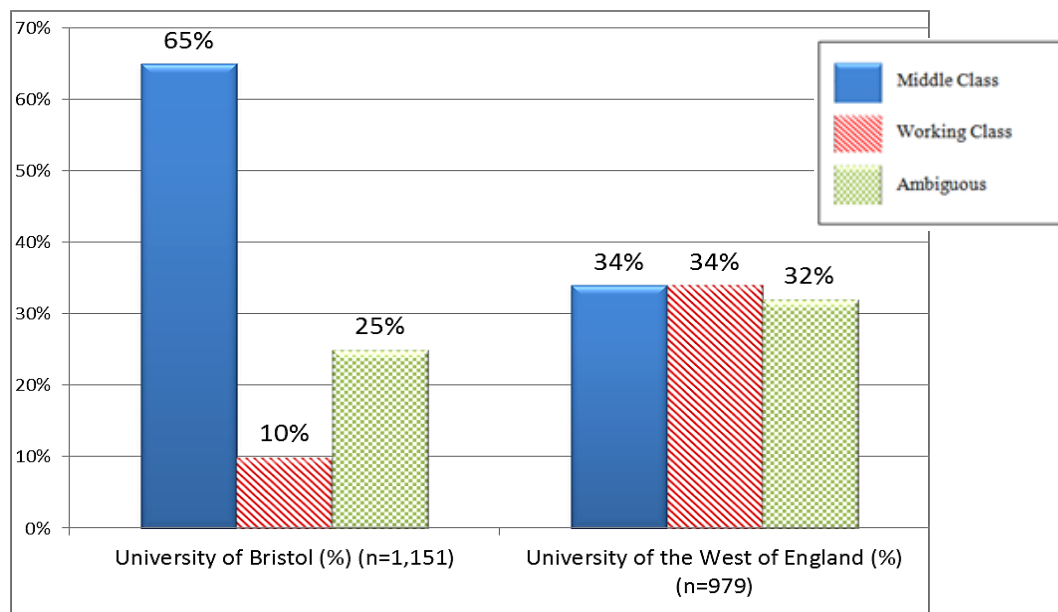
Phase 1 of the project, which concluded in 2014, followed the students through the first three years of their degree (up to their final exams or submissions for the majority of the cohort). They were interviewed twice annually and we collected other data including journals, time logs, focus groups and maps. The findings of Phase 1 are presented in the report *A Degree Generation?[1]* and our monograph, *Higher Education, Social Class and Social Mobility,* published by Palgrave in 2016, along with a number of journal articles and book chapters.[2]

Phase 2 commenced in 2014, exploring what had happened to our participants after leaving HE. At the end of Phase 1 we had retained 71 graduates; we sought to re-recruit 60 of them, achieving a cohort of 55. They were interviewed twice in the first year and once in subsequent years. The first two interviews involved a catch up on what had happened in the intervening year, followed by a focus on their experiences of their jobs. Interview 9 focused on patterns of cultural consumption, and the final interview, which included the construction of a life history timeline, sought to capture the full experience of their transition from student to adult worker.

Table 1: *Project Participants by university, gender and class at Interview 7*

	UoB m/c	**UoB w/c**	**UWE m/c**	**UWE w/c**	**Total**
Female	8	12	6	4	30
Male	9	6	6	5	26
Total	17	18	12	9	56

As Table 1 demonstrates, fewer graduates from UWE remain in the study than from UoB. This continues a pattern of attrition seen in Phase 1. Dropout from the project can partly be attributed

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[1] This report can be found at: http://www.bristol.ac.uk/media-library/sites/spais/migrated/documents/report.pdf

[2] These can be found at: http://www.bristol.ac.uk/spais/research/paired-peers/

to interviewer inconsistency. But we also speculate that UWE graduates have experienced more challenges in negotiating the labour market than UoB graduates, and thus dropped out of the project as they did not wish to share their experiences with us. The advantage of attending a 'redbrick' university are discussed in this report.

'TWENTY YEARS OF SCHOOLING AND THEY'LL PUT YOU ON THE DAY SHIFT': graduate trajectories in a precarious labour market.

Compared to previous generations of students, our graduates were entering a labour market which has been characterized by extreme competitiveness and by *precarity*. The work of Guy Standing (2014) has highlighted the global emergence of a new class, the 'precariat' who are confined to unstable, impermanent work on a variety of non-standard contractual arrangements, including the notorious zero-hours contracts which have been on the rise in the UK over the past two decades. Such contracts may also contain quite highly skilled but short term project-based employment in what has been described as the 'gig economy'. As Bradley (2014) has pointed out, compared to previously identified disadvantaged groups (such as the 'lumpenproletariat' or the 'underclass') the precariat contains numbers of highly skilled and highly qualified people, for example, hourly paid lecturing staff, or paralegals working in the finance and legal profession on temporary contracts, as well as less-skilled workers in areas such as retail and social care:

> It is not itself new, but its constitution is new, with the addition of skilled and well-educated workers who suffer from the policies of austerity and neo-liberal globalism (Bradley 2014, 435).

Many first-time employees obtain work through recruitment agencies which promotes precarity. Thus among this generation of hopeful graduates many struggle to find secure, permanent employment in a profession that they embrace. Freya, a biology graduate from UoB, gave us a good account of the psychological impact of returning from a job abroad in Malaysia where she felt respected and valued, and encountering the precarious labour market:

> .   *I think a low point was coming home and being unemployed and no-one wanting me, and actually discovering that my skills…in the time I'd been away, like it wasn't enough anymore… suddenly you have to have a Masters, or you have to have a PhD…I felt so unskilled, just so kind of like so useless and I had to go back to waitressing…Even taking the internship…it should have been a high point, but for me it was like 'I can't believe that no-one even wants to pay me, like I have to work for free' which really kind of hits home with you in the sense that like 'well am I not good enough for skilled paid work'. (Freya, m/c UoB)*

While our graduates, in common with less qualified young people, are having to grapple with these precarious labour market conditions, our research suggests that, because of their educational capital, they are better equipped than non-graduates to negotiate paths through them. Our participants have told us of short spells of unemployment, of shifting between jobs, of uncertainty faced with unattractive work options, of having to return to their parental homes to sustain themselves, but none have experienced long-term unemployment; most of them have obtained professional or semi-professional occupational status; and some are working their way up the ladders in their chosen careers. At the end of the project all but one are in employment. Tables 2 show their occupational positions at interview 7 (roughly one year after graduation).

Table 2: Participants' occupations by class and gender at Interview 7

	m/c	w/c	female	Male	Total
Finance	6	4	3	7	10
Law	2	1	1	2	3
Teaching	5	8	10	3	13
Engineering	2	3	1	4	5
Third Sector	3	2	4	1	5
Office/ Administration	2	2	2	2	4
Public Sector	1	1	0	2	2
Further Education	6	1	4	3	7
Editing/Journalism	1	2	2	1	3
Other	3	1	3	1	4
Unemployed/temping	2	2	2	2	4
Total	33	27	32	28	60

Notes: Office/admin jobs included: marketing, project management, HR and administration. Temporary jobs included: waitressing, teaching English overseas and post room at DVLA. Other jobs included: waitressing, box office, paramedic, field biologist. Further Education: 4 of the participants were doing part-time postgraduate courses and working part-time at the same time, 1 was doing law conversion as part of a law training programme and 2 of them were studying full-time.

In Phase 1 of the project most of our participants described similar experiences, dilemmas and outcomes as they progressed through their studies. However, in their labour market transitions their pathways are highly variable. In this section and the next we present some individual narratives which highlight this variability, while also identifying some commonalities of experience. We also emphasise sectoral patterns; for example, virtually all our group of engineering graduates have found their way into stable employment, several of them in the same well-known engineering company. Economics and accounting graduates, though often having to start in low-level administrative jobs, tended to progress within the finance industries. By contrast the experience of graduates from arts subjects has been much more diverse. They were more likely at the end of their degree to have rather vague ideas of what career to pursue; many of them struggled to find a secure job; and there was a drift into teaching (and sometimes out of it) as other options failed to materialise.

Two examples of precarious pathways are those of Cerys and Harry, middle-class students, who studied History and Politics respectively, at UoB. Cerys was typical of a number of female graduates who left university unsure of their next steps. She had some aspirations towards social or voluntary sector work. After leaving university she had a series of temporary jobs in call centres, an environmental agency, a power company, and two spells as a teaching assistant which convinced her that teaching was not for her but that she would like to work with young

people. This led her to take a job with an organisation focused on helping young NEET (Not in Employment, Education or Training) people, which paid her around £14-15k per year.

> *I prefer to be more of an engagement worker type thing, so I kind of took the job to see if it would be like a stepping stone… I hated that job in the office, and I only had to do it for 3 months...Basically my plan was to use that job to get into the company to then get the job that I now have. And it was just like basically cold calling teenagers asking them if they were in employment or education, and it was just horrendous. Same task, all repeat, all day.*

Cerys, thinking strategically, had also taken an additional zero-hours role as a youth worker which led her eventually to move into that role. At her final interview she reported earning £22k, enjoying the work and planning to complete an MA in Social Work. Thus she had used her experience of precarity and the 'gig economy' to manoeuvre her way to a career.

Harry's experiences were similar, as he too aspired towards voluntary sector work, with particular interests in social housing. He left university without anything fixed, worked for some while at a food cooperative but quit after a conflict with other staff. Subsequently he followed a typically precarious career path:

> *I picked up some temporary work up at UWE actually and I worked for them on various temp jobs for about 3 months. They've got a pool of temporary staff.*

He then acquired a permanent administrator job at UoB:

> *£22,000 you know for kind of an admin job….it was pretty good you know compared to what I'd been earning before, which wasn't very much. But I actually left after 3 months because I really didn't like it.*

Leaving the post, he went travelling for 3 months to New Zealand, including some farm work and is currently a rider for Deliveroo.

> *It's not a great job for a lot of reasons…it's all commission, so you only get paid per delivery. Because you're not an employee, you're a sub-contractor essentially so you don't get a basic wage, you don't get any benefits or cover…So you have like an app on your phone and you log in and then you get given jobs… So you can just get assigned jobs according to how close you are. I don't agree with it as a model to employ people because it's really bad, it's really exploitative, but it works for me. And then after I get back from Canada later in the month I'm probably going to go and work with the temp staff at UWE again because they've said they'll take me back. So that will take me through to September.*

In September Harry was returning to academic life, with a funded place to pursue an MA at a Welsh University. A role in the 'gig economy' was tolerated by him, seen as a stopgap while waiting for the next career stage. Harry's story illustrates two other trends observed in our study: undertaking a master's degree as a way of putting off a final career choice; and a move to 'travel' and find employment abroad in flight from unrewarding work in the UK.

LABOUR MARKET POLARISATION

Whether one successfully gains desired employment is influenced by a number of factors: discipline and sector, as discussed above; university attended (the 'Bristol brand' being a clear advantage in competition for elite jobs); class of degree; gender and class. The psycho-social dispositions of individuals are also a factor.

To illustrate this, we can look at some exemplary cases. A stark contrast is offered by two students who studied law at UoB, Nathan and Zoe. Nathan, a middle-class student, had a very

clear plan which he followed through his degree (see Bathmaker et al., 2016 for details). He gained a first and went to work on a graduate scheme at a highly prestigious merchant bank. As an undergraduate he had indulged in 'hyper-mobilization' of capitals (educational, cultural and social) to build an outstanding CV. Through Phase 2, Nathan has continued to plan for his career, building up a network, changing jobs strategically and has now started his own company with a friend. Just as the initial attainment of a prestigious job is often facilitated by contacts, building links in the profession aids career progression:

> *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….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.*

Nathan managed to save enough money to leave his job and start his own business, and is currently living off his savings. While this has been a huge risk and in some way has led to precartiy – he is earning nothing and might lose everything- his situation might be better conceived of as a form of 'privileged precarity' as even if it all goes wrong he has built enough social and cultural capital to go back to working in the City.

In contrast is the case of Zoe, a young woman who was highly ambitious, aiming to find high-paid work as a lawyer or in acting. As an undergraduate she struggled to fit in with the culture of Bristol University, where, she told us, most of her fellow law students had been privately educated. On graduation she returned home to rural Wales to seek work. She was well aware that the best jobs and training contacts were in London, but she and her family could not afford the cost of her living there.

> *You get this kind of perception, like if you've got a good degree from a good uni you'll come out and people are going to be crawling all over you and it's just the absolute opposite….I'd have loved to have done like the internships and stuff, the unpaid internships in London, but I can't afford to live there because my parents don't have any money. I'd have loved to gain the experience, to gain the training contracts or the vacation placements, and you need to have the money to do the work experience to get the experience to get the job that you want. And that is the Catch 22.*

She found work as a paralegal (an option taken by many law graduates) at a salary of £14,500. Though the job offered permanency, Zoe became disillusioned:

> *There was just like no trajectory for any kind of progression, and I stopped learning and it was just a dead end, and I just knew that the longer I stayed there the harder it would be to leave and to find something else.*

She quit and then found much better paid work (£28k) as a temporary project worker compiling a legal database. This move into the 'gig economy' allows her the flexibility of working from home and managing her own workload, but she still lacks the security of a permanent post and a future career plan. In her penultimate interview she described herself as 'terrified' as to what might happen when her contract ended:

> *Really, really worried, because I don't know what's going to happen in September, like I just don't know what kind of jobs are out there. I've been looking but there's like nothing really, especially in Wales, it's terrible. So I was really lucky to get this [law project] thing and to be able to work from home, it's like absolutely ideal, but …yeah I'm really concerned for my prospects.*

Our data reveals that there is polarisation between high-paid and low-paid jobs. Some of our engineering and finance graduates commanded good jobs with salaries over £24,000. However, jobs in voluntary organizations, sought after by many of our social science and arts graduates, are often poorly paid, as are jobs in the creative sector. Adele (w/c, UWE) earned £21,500 working for a small charity immediately post-graduation, and Cerys now earns £21,000. Harry's starting salary at a co-op was £16,429. Harriet is earning £22k as an editorial assistant, while Rose has been running the box office for a local arts centre for £18k.

Even in the more traditional professions starting salaries can be low. Christopher worked as a paralegal for a solicitors' firm in South London for £14k, a salary clearly inadequate for the high cost of living in London. Even now he struggles with his salary. Although he has an LLB, an MA in Law and an LPC, he is now only earning £24k on his training contract:

> *What I dislike is the terrible pay! And it's not just that it's low…it's just that I'm constantly still having to rely on my partner…It's just irritating always having to borrow money. (Christopher, m/c, UWE)*

Apart from low pay, our graduates often find themselves caught up in the pressures of long hours culture, effectively self-exploiting themselves in order to prove their worth to their employer. Adele, now working for a large national charity and paid £28k, describes her day:

> *I leave the house about 7.30am, sometimes earlier than that, sometimes 7am, and it takes me about half an hour to get to work, so I either start work at 8 or 7.30 depending on how busy I am. And I normally try to leave by 6pm, but that doesn't always happen so it's normally like 6.30pm, sometimes 7, 7.30. I think most people (in London) have a work/life balance which is skewed in favour of work.… Especially recently, we've been like half a team down so I've been doing an awful lot and it's really interesting because sometimes people are like 'oh you should just go home', and I'm like 'well no because things are expected to be done and if I don't do it and you ask why, and I'm like 'there wasn't enough time' you're going to look at me funny as if I should have done it'. So you have no choice really. (Adele, w/c, UWE)*

Even in the most prestigious jobs the pressures on recruits can be immense. Nathan, our top earner, described the intensity of working for a leading merchant bank:

> *The hours are so brutal, you need to take I think a holiday every 3 months otherwise you just couldn't do it. There was a stretch in January through to about March where it was just non-stop, like every weekend every other week, like I did 127 hours in one week, which just completely destroyed you. Like a couple of weeks ago it was more reasonable for finance hours, so it was like come in at 9 and finish at 9, which to everyone else sounds quite long but in the City that's not too bad for a junior person.*

Nathan described how many of the graduates who started out with him could not take the pace and dropped out. The motivation for him was that if he stuck it out and moved up the ladder the pressures would cease. In fact, the next year he got offers from other firms and having carefully 'scoped' their working conditions opted for a job as a hedge fund manager which offered promotion, better pay and crucially a more humane work-life balance. His comment is a trenchant critique of companies' attitudes to their young recruits:

> *They're buying your youth, that's what they're doing, they're buying your youth from you. We are selling our souls.*

THE 'GLOBAL AUCTION': recruitment practices and job search

The reason employers are able to treat their graduate recruits in this way is because of the hyper-competiveness of the current market for traditional graduate jobs. In their important studies of what they call the 'global auction' and the 'opportunity trap' Phil Brown et al (2011) shows how a number of trends interlock together to create this heightened competition: the greater numbers of students enrolled in HE, the patterns of migration resulting from globalization, the right of EU nationals to work anywhere in Europe, the decline of manufacturing industries and the introduction of labour saving new technologies. All these have created an over-supply of graduates, national and international, and a decline in available high-level jobs. We might add to those trends the recent contractions in the public sector with the loss of professional jobs in education, the health services, local government and the third-sector organizations funded by the state. The impact of this situation, in which young men and women are lured into HE in search of opportunities, has been noted by our participants:

> *I had this wonderfully naïve notion…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! And like, 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 adverts saying graduate job opportunities…The stuff they're advertising is entry level stuff but there's no graduate jobs. (Oscar, m/c, UWE)*

Like many of the graduates who had little idea of their career moves, Oscar had applied for some 20 to 30 jobs before he acquired one. The realities of job search in this climate add to the pressure and uncertainty experienced by these young adults. Jasmine, a working-class Sociology student from UWE, told us that when she moved to Manchester to be with her boyfriend she had applied for some 40 jobs, getting interviewed for four before she finally was offered a post. Rob, a working-class student from UWE, with the advantage of an engineering degree, was putting in four applications a week, but actually got his job through an agency after putting his CV on the internet, nowadays a common route into work.

Ruby, a working-class student from UWE who took a PGCE, told us that there had been 80 to 100 applicants for the teaching job she eventually was offered, and was told that for jobs in Bristol there were often 200 applicants. This level of competition is found across the sectors. Liam, a middle-class student from UoB, commented that training contracts in law were like gold dust'. As Ruby noted, applicants need to do something special to 'stand out'.

Being faced with such large numbers of well-qualified applicants poses dilemmas for recruiters and as a result recruitment processes themselves become ever more elaborate. Single interviews have been replaced by a series of two or three. Before the interview stage employers have found ways to screen candidates. Ruby was told by one head-teacher that he ripped up any applications which contained a single spelling mistake. Most law and finance firms are using psychometric tests of various types to screen applicants (inevitably expensive packs of 'practice tests' can be purchased). Finally, there may be an 'assessment day', when candidates are put through a series of group and individual exercises. The more prestigious the organization the more complex the recruitment process may be: the time and expense required is an obvious deterrent to less advantaged candidates. There is, of course, an extremely common practice which clearly disadvantages working-class students: the selection by some firms only of candidates from a core group of elite Russell Group universities, and the overlooking of graduates from the post 1992 universities where the proportion of students from working-class and minority ethnic backgrounds is much higher.

Even for public sector work the recruitment processes can be demanding. Cerys told us about the assessment process for a Master's in social work:

> *One interview I had a reading list, like a 2 page reading list, like you would have for an essay. So we had a written task in the morning, if you didn't pass the written task they would send you home. So in that interview you had the written task and then you have an hour to wait to see if you get through. Got through, had a group task which is like a discussion 'is discrimination always bad' then had to do a role play. And then you had a sort of individual interview…At Cardiff I had to do an academic presentation, which was fine… And then for Sussex I had to do an extended personal interview where they asked me really personal questions like 'what sort of relationship have you struggled with' and 'what sort of relationship have you gained strength from' and 'what have you learned about yourself'*

We were interested in how some of our graduates succeeded in getting jobs that they considered desirable. The following stories illustrate some of their tactics, and also illustrate the different kind of capitals used to acquire them. Liam, a middle-class Politics graduate from UoB, got his job by the now common method of getting a foot in the firm through a vacation scheme. Becoming qualified involved four years' training, sponsored by the firm, but Liam would also require additional financial support from his parents:

> *Decided I want to be a lawyer, so spent time like researching that, applying, got a vacation scheme and had an interview and they offered me a job which consists of 2 years at Law School starting at September 2014, which they sort of pay your fees and they pay you like a living grant, tax free grant, and then a 2 year training contract which will run from September 2016 to September 2018, which you basically spend 4 lots of 6 months in four departments of the firm.*

Liam had the advantage of a degree from UoB, and the 'Bristol cachet' was an advantage noted by others, including Luke who also used technical skills in his search. He described learning how to 'work the system' through the use of 'white text' on his CV:

> *My job was trawling job boards, so I knew exactly how to get them (his CVs) noticed… white text and search engine automization and stuff like that, it's skills that you learn in recruitment that are quite useful for getting CV burns. I don't know if you've heard of white text. It's basically you have another page in your CV that's just full of non text that is white, so no-one sees it and if they print it off there's nothing. But in a search engine, that will search there. I can't remember exactly, but it was all the key words, so sort of .net, asp.net…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. (Luke, m/c, UoB)*

In this way, Luke was able to make his CV stand out in search engines. This is a significant yet hidden way in which some graduates are able to understand and play the game, getting themselves noticed in an extremely congested graduate labour market. His strategies also indicate the significance of UoB in getting him picked by employers.

Persistence and determination in pursuing a goal are helpful, but frequently need to be backed by economic resources. Graduates were often reliant on their families to provide accommodation and financial support during periods of job search and unpaid placements and internships. Harriet was set on journalism, particularly working on a magazine, and moved back home to spend a year building up bits of experience through freelance work and networking. She told us about an internet job site, Go Think Big, designed to help young people get into media work

> *It's a company that help young people get into media jobs. So, the website has like internships, work experience, and they have lots of articles on like how to improve your CV, little YouTube videos on say people in like radio or TV and everything*

She described one event she had found from the site

> *It was like 6 people from the magazine and they had different tables. They grouped you up. So you weren't one on one, it was say four of you and one person who worked there, and it was just like a 10 minutes on each table just asking questions. (Harriet, m/c, UoB)*

Her endeavours bought her an unpaid internship at one magazine and this experience helped her to a permanent job as an editorial assistant.

Contacts and networks are important at various levels in helping to secure work. Bianca, a working-class student from UoB, described how she found jobs through friends and family while waiting to take up a Teach First place:

> *A friend from college, she went to university in Winchester and she sort of did the care work as a part time job while she was at university. But when I got home my friend finished her university degree, so she sort of stopped working doing the care work and they were looking for someone else, and obviously because I'd just come home she sort of recommended me to them, so that was handy.*

> *I initially found out about it through my sister who works for the same company. She works in a different department, like Property Management, but because she had contacts with the letting agents' side of it they were looking for like someone. So yeah, and again it was an interview but quite informal because they knew my sister and they'd met me a few times,*

Interestingly, a number of participants spoke of 'luck' as being key to getting their jobs. Although there is clearly an element of chance in any job search process, our impression is that a lot of thought and planning was exercised by the graduates. Even among those who had started out with little clue as to what they wanted to do, many by their final interview had acquired a focus.

BEYOND THE LABOUR MARKET: millennial values

Along with many of our graduates, Freya's ambition to travel far and wide with the desire to visit 50 countries before she is 30:

> *My aim is to do it by 30, but financially I'm not sure I'm going to be able to finance that. So I'm up to 35 at the moment, so it's not actually that far off. I'm on a good trajectory. But that's like a sort of personal thing that, you know, travelling is a really big part of who I am. (Freya, m/c, UoB)*

Indeed, one of the most striking findings from our study is the way many our graduates locate themselves in a global context. Some have already spent time studying or working in other countries (for example, Denmark, Spain, Malaysia, Australia, Vietnam and China). Others have contemplated working abroad as a future career option

> *I want to go and live abroad, and me and my husband both really want to do this, go on a bit more of an adventure, live somewhere else, learn a new language. (Anna, w/c, UoB)*

> *I'd quite like to work abroad whether that be as a secondment from here or whether that be actually based abroad, is something I definitely think I'd like to do because I like travelling anyway. (Samantha, w/c, UoB)*

> *Recently both me and my girlfriend have sort of contemplated the idea of after working for a couple of years after I qualify (as a solicitor), just kind of packing it in and moving abroad and….so there's still that thought of maybe going over and setting up some kind of company in the Netherlands, more just like a…it would just be like a café/restaurant*

> *or something like that, a really small thing but just something more enjoyable, yeah.*
> *(Christopher, m/c, UWE)*

Having a degree from a 'good university' enhanced by a Master's, a PGCE or TEFL training, offers the option of teaching abroad: several of our participants have already utilized this educational capital and others are contemplating it:

> *Teaching is something that you can quite easily go abroad and do, probably not permanently but I definitely wouldn't rule it out for a couple of years. I certainly know that if I wanted to go and teach in Asia that that would help me get a job--- having a degree from a red brick university definitely helps. (Scarlett, m/c, UoB)*

> *A teaching qualification will give you a really, really good chance of working abroad. And yeah I'd just like to be somewhere with a bit more wilderness ...I've got that sort of craving and just that sense of adventure, and also to see how other education systems work. (Jeff, m/c, UWE)*

This desire to try working overseas is closely linked to the high value some of our respondents put on the concept of 'travelling'. We need to distinguish this clearly from the enthusiasm for 'holidays abroad' which might have been a key lifestyle feature of previous generations. Travelling for these young people is not just about a short break from work lying on a beach getting a tan, but about adventure, cultural learning, self-development and typically involves more than one country and a lengthy time away from the UK. The now well established 'gap year' can be seen as the progenitor of this trend:

> *I'd like to go travelling again or like live abroad...It's abroad to get away really, just to experience a different culture. (Jenifer, m/c, UoB)*

> *So I've kind of planned that I want to leave and go travelling at some point if circumstances permit at the time. (Lizzie, w/c UoB)*

> *I'd say I definitely travel more. I think I've got more confidence travelling. After I finished my PGCE I went to Peru for 3 weeks and that definitely gave me a bit more confidence just to go out and travel and see things. Because...my family didn't go on holidays a huge amount when we were younger, we had like caravanning holidays in the UK and a beach in the UK but we didn't go outside of the UK a huge amount, so I guess I just didn't really know what to expect. But yeah since I've started travelling I want to do it more and more. (Scarlett, m/c, UoB)*

This interest in seeing new places, having new experiences can be linked to accounts of the millennials displaying an element of restlessness, appreciating change and concerned with personal growth. Unlike their twentieth century predecessors these young adults neither expect nor desire 'a job for life'. Young women such as Anna and Bianca described the '9 to 5' of office life as 'boring'. Engineering graduates spoke of not wanting a 'desk job'

> *I like CAE (computer aided engineering) but I don't want to say in three years' time still be sat at the same desk doing the same thing. (Lizzie, w/c, UoB)*

In a climate which has promoted 'aspirations' and 'ambition' as core values, our participants have expectations of a fulfilling life. A careers officer interviewed for the project told us that the undergraduates he worked with increasingly spoke of wanting a career which allowed for a decent work/life balance. The search for a job that is stimulating, offers room for development but does not take over your whole life has led to a certain amount of job shift among our participants, a rather extreme case being that of Harvey who decided to leave a well-paid post as a broker in London since the pace was proving too much. He secured a similar job in Australia,

delayed his start by a month to go travelling and then threw in the financial job for an apprenticeship in the wine industry:

> *I was having a bit too much fun on the holiday, and then we went to some really nice wineries in Queensland and I basically sort of fell in love with this winery place....so I just decided to ditch it altogether and I've been contracted as a winemaker for the last 3 months. (Harvey, w/c, UoB)*

Perhaps one of the most troubling examples of the refusal to work exploitative hours can be seen with an exodus from the teaching sector. As can be seen in Table 2 above, a large number of our graduates started off in teaching, the most common destination. However, we have seen an active refusal by many to remain in the teaching sector due to the immense pressures and unsociable hours. Megan, an English secondary school teacher, told us about the intensity of their working patterns of at present:

> *The workload is so impossible and so stressful and so exhausting, and we just got to Easter break which is really the first holiday that I've had since September. My average day is at least 12 hours, mostly more like 14… So from 7 til 8 is a good day. I'd say an average day 7 til 9, and a bad day 7 til 11.30/12 at night. And then on top of that I am working all the weekends. So I have had two weekends off this year so far until this week. I always have to plan lessons for Monday and I have six lessons a day on both Mondays…My average week is about 70 hours a week. For £22,000! Like you have to laugh. (Megan, m/c, UoB)*

These working patterns actively pushed keen and passionate teachers out of the industry due to a desperation to secure some kind of work life balance. Megan is one of those who decided to quit after qualifying. Megan felt that teaching was a career that she was 'meant for' but at the same time she was unable and unwilling to participate in a system where teachers are not valued:

> *It's nice to know that by having stuck it out to do my NQT year I've kept my options open, so if in the future I want to go back into it that's a door that's open to me. But for the moment I'm pretty sure that I don't want anything to do with teaching, don't want to touch it with a barge pole in this country to be honest. And I am quite bitter about it and I do blame the government and the situation at the moment in public sector work because I genuinely believe that part of me is made for being a teacher*

Anna is another graduate who decided to leave teaching due to the desire for work-life balance. After qualifying she left for a better paid 9-5 job as a risk analyst in a bank. Like, Anna felt frustrated at being pushed out of teaching and found her new job unsatisfying. Feeling that her passion for teaching was too great to ignore, she decided to return part time

> *So I decided I'm going to go back to teaching. Because I enjoy teaching and I only left because of the work/life balance, not because I didn't enjoy it. So I decided to go back part time, not severely part time, only 80%. So I work a full week but I do 80% of the lessons that a normal teacher would do, so my workload is so much better. So I've got a much better work/life balance, I have my evenings and weekends free, which is really nice for a change. Because before I just had no life. (Anna, w/c, UoB)*

Whilst Anna appeared to be much happier with this decision, it is troubling that graduates are having to resort to such strategies to manage to maintain a career in teaching.

DISADVANTAGE AND DISCRIMINATION: class, ethnicity and gender

The central concern of our project has been to explore the impact of class background on our participants' progress. We are also concerned with the effects of participants' ethnicity and

gender, though these factors were not built into the structure of the project in the same way. In these final sections of the report we try to draw out the implications of our study in relation to debates about social mobility and the persistence of inequalities.

Class

In Paired Peers Phase 1 we noted the various ways in which undergraduates from working class backgrounds were disadvantaged. At UoB in particular they found it hard to fit in with the dominant upper-middle class student milieu. Many had to take term time work to cover living costs, which meant they could not take part in extra-curricular activities vital to CV-building. By contrast middle-class students were often subsidised by their parents. Perhaps most importantly for their subsequent progress, working-class students lacked social contacts to help them 'get a foot in the door' of companies through work experience and placements. Nor could they afford to take unpaid internships which are crucial, for example, in getting into media jobs.

These issues carried over into their labour market engagement, where economic and social capital are still very important in gaining desired employment opportunities:

> *I try so hard not to measure myself against somebody else, but when people from uni who didn't ever have a job, ever, who came from private schools, went straight into training contracts… the end of it, it's a £100,000 job. They were getting £40,000 a year, they'd go straight into a training contract having never worked a day in their life And whereas I'd worked since I was 16… I worked throughout university for 3 years, I worked every weekend in university and weekdays and I did my best to try and do well in my degree – and I almost got a first. And I just felt like that was never acknowledged. Because I didn't go to the right school or because I wasn't the right sort of person, the right sort of fit, I didn't have a look in. (Zoe, w/c, UoB)*

Zoe concluded, 'especially in Law, your background heavily, heavily influences where you go in your legal career.' She pointed to the experience of one of her Bristol peers:

> *My friend whom I lived with in third year, her parents are a taxi driver and a dinner lady. . She had a 2:1 in Bristol, studied Law, she works a £16,000 a year job as a paralegal and she's been self-funding her LPC for 2 years so she can try and get a training contract. Now she has the same degree from the same university, but she has a Welsh background and she's working class, and she's put the same amount of work and effort in…she's been stressed like I was stressed all the way through university about 'can I pay my rent'.*

Law is particularly class-bound because of the necessity to complete an LPC (Legal Practice Certificate) before one can gain an apprenticeship (training contract) with a firm of solicitors or a pupillage in a barristers' chamber. An interesting contrast is between Liam (mentioned earlier), a middle-class graduate with a non-law degree from UoB who was gaining these things with organizational sponsorship and financial help from his parents, and Kyle, a working-class student with a law degree from UWE who was having to fund himself through part-time employment as a care support worker as he studied for his LPC at UoB, with additional living support through his girlfriend's earnings. As Christopher stated, confirming Zoe's view:

> *I think the legal profession is the same as lots of other professions, that kind of targeted people with very privileged wealthy backgrounds, and if you're not from that background I think everything is quite a lot more difficult. (Christopher, m/c, UWE)*

While law can be seen as an extreme example because further study is a requirement, it is increasingly the case in a hypercompetitive graduate market that additional qualifications are needed to secure good jobs. Without a widespread funding system for Masters degrees, working-

class aspirants will either have to take a job, while studying part-time, or work for several years to save up the money to pay for it. It was noticeable that more of the middle-class students in the Phase 1 cohort were going on to do Masters courses. It is also indicative that Kyle transferred from UWE to UoB for his LPC, as a degree with Russell Group cachet is an additional asset in the scramble for top jobs.

As we have noted, the majority of elite job opportunities are in London, and, as we have seen in Zoe's case the high accommodation costs often drive those from working-class backgrounds back to their hometowns or to other parts of the country where the cost of living is more 'affordable', especially if they want to buy a house and start a family. They lack the 'bank of mum and dad' to lend a helping hand:

> *The frustration is, that houses are so expensive, the reality of the wages that we are probably going to be on is that we're probably not going to be able to afford a big house, and if we are we'll probably have to move somewhere cheaper... And maybe that will be fine, but at the moment it just feels like because we're both from families who obviously don't have any money to give us...you know lots of people have their deposit ready from their parents when they want to start buying. (Anna, w/c, UoB)*

As we have noted In terms of the type of university attended, the UoB students do face a labour market advantage in terms of the cachet of the 'Bristol cachet'. In terms of class, a major obstacle for working-class participants is the lack of family economic capital to aid them in career-oriented moves, for example in taking an LPC or a Master's degree or paying for rented accommodation in London and other cities where the cost of living is expensive. These disadvantages may offset the advantages of the 'Bristol cachet' for working-class students like Zoe and Anna with degrees from UoB.

Ethnicity

Since our sampling strategy was based on class, we ended up with a limited number (7) minority ethnic undergraduates in our original sample. Only two of these are still part of our cohort. But as noted in our Phase 1 publication (Bathmaker et al, 2016), we can observe the way in which *being white* and the assumption of its normality is reflected in our participants' experience. Thus Adele, who is of mixed heritage, reflects on the composition of the workforce in her charity;

> *In our team, there's only there's two other Asian people....three people of colour. So somebody said the other day 'oh yeah we're quite diverse' and I looked at her and I was like 'no we're not'. One of my first days there, there was a black guy in the lift with me and he said hello and I was like 'hello' and then he was like 'oh I say hello because there's not many of us here, there's not many people of colour'. Afterwards I was like 'yeah he's right, there's hardly any of us here' so like we stick out.... They're diverse in other ways, there's a few people with disabilities, there's a registered blind individual there as well, but I still think there's a route to go in terms of religious and like culturally different people.*

Martin is one of our millennials working overseas and reflected on the advantage his nationality and his ethnicity gave him in teaching English

> *Obviously you have to speak English well and without too strong a pronunciation but the main thing they're looking for is that like you're white. It's really horrible and it made me like hate doing what I was doing. But I got a job without any effort and that was partly because of my nationality and partly because of my race. And you see it in so many different ways. The teachers and the head teachers, they want to show you off, put you in all the marketing. (Martin, m/c, UoB)*

Even in companies with a distinctly multicultural workforce it may be easier to 'get on' if you are white. Marcus, who tells of working in an engineering company where his co-workers include Vietnamese, Russians, Lithuanians, Indians, South Americans and Germans, admits

> *I think being British, working in a company predominantly with other British people, does sometimes give you an advantage. I have heard managers say 'these are very good engineers but the language barrier, the understanding isn't there'. (Marcus, w/c, UoB)*

The normalization of whiteness has been noticed by our participants:

> *I think I've probably been advantaged from being white, but I don't know it. Because I think when you're advantaged you don't notice it, it's only when you're disadvantaged you notice it. (Anna, w/c, UoB)*

> *I think I'm probably in the most favourable position being a white male... I've got no doubt that that makes everything much easier for me just because of how still deep rootedly racist everyone is. But especially the legal profession, I think if I was anything but white and ...if I was female...I think I'd be struggling a lot more. (Christopher, m/c, UWE)*

Gender

Christopher's observations of the legal profession emphasised gender as well as racial discrimination

> *A lot of firms are still so kind of old fashioned... a lot of them are only just coming to terms with having women working with them...The older Partners, I think it's quite common for them to not really know how to speak to women and they treat them differently. I think it's probably one of the worst professions for kind of sexism.*

However, the successes of feminism and changes to the nature of work have led to the entry of women into a wider range of jobs than in the past, and for that reason, perhaps, many of the participants do not report experience of explicit gender discrimination. However, there is still evidence of a culture of male dominance within particular professions. Jenifer (m/c, UoB) gained a graduate scheme at an engineering company. In response to various micro-aggressions, she made adaptions in order to navigate the dominant masculine culture. These were made via the development of a female comradery in the face of 'lad mentality':

> *You sort of latch onto your female friends a bit more, you sort of need each other a bit more, so you can have a bitch about whatever's happened... We always get really annoyed when like, you know, white middle aged and like, you know, a lot of emails will be sent to lots of people, like, it'll be addressed to "Gents" and it's like "piss off! How hard is it to just say "hey, hi all". It really pisses me off when that happens.*

Moreover, we observed that the male graduates, in both engineering and finance, seemed to be progressing more quickly in their careers. The women's lack of perception of gender disadvantage may be due to the fact that they are at an early stage in their careers and have not yet had direct experience of glass ceilings or sticky floors. A telling example of somebody becoming conscious of gender difference was Freya (w/c, UoB):

> *I actually never thought that being a woman was holding me back in my career until the other day when I wrote a newsletter article for an internal magazine. They wanted to re-write it because they had like a whole different idea of what it was going to be about. And they knew my role like in the work that I do, they knew that I had won this Pride of (Organisation) Award, I'd got promotion, this, this and this. And then when they sent me*

this article to read, I was described as a 'glamorous assistant'. So I do feel more conscious than I did about being female, and I guess don't want to be taken advantage of, want to make sure I can earn the right amount that I deserve. I don't think it's hindered me but I think I'm much more aware of it, if that makes sense, with being female. And I think I'm quite conscious maybe in years to come when it comes to having children or maternity leave, I know there can be issues.

This accords with Brown and Diekman's (2010) study which found that when projecting their futures women were more likely than men to describe selves that could be categorized as 'family selves' and men more than women perceived their future' possible selves' as relevant to career.

As we have seen, many of our graduates consider working overseas. Martin (m/c, UoB) highlights another aspect of gender difference: the threat of violence:

I ain't going to kid anyone, like being a male is obviously like it makes your life more easy in so many different ways that like I'm not even going to get into. Like I've travelled a lot by myself and done a lot of stupid stuff, and being a guy like there are a lot of considerations that you don't worry about at all, whereas you know, I wouldn't be so liberal and taken the kind of risks that I do if I was a woman. Like that's a very obvious part of gender I guess.

'I AM LIKE MY PARENTS': mobility or class reproduction

We have highlighted in the preceding discussion how working-class students may suffer because of the lack of family financial resources and contacts to help them into jobs. In Bourdieusian terms, they have less symbolically legitimated forms of economic and social capital. Recent analysis by Savage et al (2013), however, has argued that cultural capital is a crucial constituent of class difference. We thus sought to explore our participants' patterns of cultural consumption. Had their experience of university changed their cultural practices, thereby contributing to their desire and potential for upward social mobility?

Two trends were discernible. A number of graduates from working-class families stated that their cultural activities were similar to those of their parents. Sophie, whose father is a storekeeper and mother works in a ticket office, talked of going to London with her mother to musical shows. Her account of her cultural tastes suggests they were formed prior to her time at UWE

I like Heart radio. So I do like 80s stuff. I like just happy songs. I'm not really a music person but… At lunch times at work I go on the internet, so the Daily Mail for like the funny stories and BBC news and stuff like that at lunch. I like magic kind of books, like Harry Potter and stuff that's not real. I like Disney films. (Sophie, w/c, UWE)

Sophie explicitly stated that her lifestyle resembled that of her parents:

My parents have always worked, so they're doing the same kind of thing as what we do, just come home, cook tea and watch TV and then go to bed.

In contrast, other participants demonstrated an awareness of the importance of cultural capital, indulging in a kind of post-adolescent version of the 'concerted cultivation' (Lareau, 2011). Thus Dylan, a middle-class graduate from UWE told us he was starting to listen to classical music like his mother, as it helped him to 'chill'. He was compiling a list of books to read, saying he only wanted to watch and read things that 'have value'. Similarly, Nicholas, whose parents were educational professionals told us

I kind of read things which are known as like literature style books, I guess books which are meant to be classics. I try and work my way through my big list. …I read a Nigerian

novel earlier this year called Things Fall Apart which was really good. And I'm reading Crime and Punishment now. (Nicholas, m/c, UWE)

And he was keen to distinguish his taste as highbrow

(T)hings like Bob Dylan, Neil Young. Like highbrow rock. Ry Cooder. Guardian online. Radio 4. I watched The Wire recently... So I guess kind of like highbrow things, I don't like watching trashy TV because it is really, really boring.

And he concluded.

I'm very similar to my parents, it's just…yeah, yeah. I don't listen to as much classical music as them.

Such comments suggest that the influence of family background remains strong at this stage, more so perhaps than exposure to the middle-class milieu of university. To explore this further, in our final interview we asked the graduates how they saw their current class position, in relation to their background. Answers suggested conflict for the working-class students:

Middle class? It's weird to say that because my whole life it's always been working class. But, I don't know how I could say we're not, because I'm a teacher, my husband's doing a graduate job in his career and our wages probably qualify for us to be middle class. And we're probably culturally more middle class than say our parents, because you know we go on lots of holidays, we probably like things that are more middle class. It's hard. It's weird…it's like cultural…social thing – not cultural, a social thing – but it's also like a money thing isn't it? But I think probably I couldn't justify saying I was working class. (Anna, w/c, UoB)

I said to somebody…aspirational working class. I still very much say that I'm working class. Although I went to the theatre a few weeks ago and I almost texted my sister 'oh this is so middle class, what the fuck am I doing at the theatre', going to see Salome. Because my flatmate works at the National Theatre and so she got tickets. I just sat there with my Fair Trade chocolates, because that's what they sell at the till…I like things, I like activities that are what people would class as like 'middle class activities' but I'm very aware of the fact that I am working class. (Adele, w/c, UWE)

Adele's account also signified the way a class identity may shift or evolve as context alters:

I think I flip. If I'm around people who I know are like working class or from that kind of background, I flip back to like my language and my behaviour being more kind of… sometimes my Welsh accent comes out a bit more then as well, so they feel more comfortable with me. But then if I'm in a meeting with quite senior people who are quite middle class in their background and how they talk and how they have conversations, then I'll change and I'll make sure that my tone of voice and my language is more appropriate for that setting. So I can kind of flip between the two, which is quite good.

Others are clearer that their experiences have led to upward mobility

Originally I described myself as working class and I was very adamant that that's what I was. I'm probably more in the middle ground now, I'd probably think I was more middle class in terms of financially, having a house, owning it, my outlook is probably more middle class than it used to be. Living in Bristol, having gone to UoB, I definitely think, as much as I wouldn't admit it probably to my family, I'm probably middle class now – and so are they if they were honest with themselves! (Samantha, w/c, UoB)

It is important to stress that while, for the sake of comparison, we categorized our participants as either middle or working-class, we recognise that there are major divisions within both class

groupings. Particularly relevant to our study was the differentiation within the middle-class: UoB students tend to come from its upper echelons (lawyers, doctors, university lecturers, politicians, company directors) while UWE students' parents are more likely to be categorisable as lower-middle (nurses, teachers, administrators, supervisory workers), as Harriet expressed:

> *I've always grown up being considered like fairly middle-class, I guess low end of middle class. Father teacher, mother hospital admin. I think the way I act and the way I've been brought up is still quite middle class, but I think I've had to work as well for it, so that's why I'd still position myself more that end, like it's not just been handed to me on a plate. (Harriet, m/c, UWE)*

'THEY SOLD US UNIVERSITY'. Gains and losses.

Previous research (REF) has highlighted the tensions experienced by upwardly mobile people, torn between their origins and their new positioning – a feeling of not really fitting in either class location. Adele has solved this problem by what she calls 'flipping'. This tension, however, is particularly revealed when our participants compared their situation with that of their friends 'back home'

> *All of my friends now are in Stoke with their own house, quite a few of them have kids now. I think like if you don't go then …it traps you in and that's where you stay. (Lizzie, w/c UoB)*

Lizzie's comment emerged as an answer to a question on what our graduates had gained and lost as a *result* of their degree, apart from upward social mobility. In terms of losses, many mentioned the debts they had accrued, and the fact that their school contemporaries might be further on in career terms and earning more. Anna and Marcus, for example, commented:

> *Part of me thinks my wage wouldn't be that different, so I have a feeling that say I did start something at 16, or 18, I would have had 3 years to be building up a career. I know lots of people who are earning the same as me even though they didn't go to uni. (Anna, w/c, UoB)*

> *I'd say you're probably about £70,000 worse off than your peers. No matter how good your starting salary is, you're not going to overtake those people that don't go to university financially for many years. And it does affect things like housing, it does put a lot of pressure on you choosing to do certain things in life. You're almost…you were sold university as a kid as 'you get this and you are told 'if you do this you can earn all this money'. (Marcus, w/c, UWE)*

However, most commented favourably on the more intangible benefits university had brought them, as well as the expanded opportunities:

> *How would it have been different? …I wouldn't have been doing teaching. I imagine I would have gone into some sort of charity work, like my mum is a support worker for a charity so I can imagine myself doing something like that. (Anna, w/c, UoB)*

> *But I think university wasn't just getting the degree that helped me, it was that being that age and just kind of being in that bubble of university and working through growing up really, living on your own. I think it just helped me work out what I wanted to do a bit. (Harriet, m/c, UWE)*

> *I think it opens your eyes a bit going to uni, you're kind of forced into that kind of social environment. I think that probably helps develop you as a more rounded person, forcing you to interact with lots of different people from various parts of the world. I think culturally and socially it's quite good being mixed up with loads of different people,*

especially if you're from a tiny little Welsh village in the middle of nowhere. (Christopher, m/c, UWE)

CONCLUSIONS: Education, Class and Precarity

I think generations are actually worse off than their parents. People are getting more stretched and people are getting worse off, and the wealth is becoming more concentrated in a smaller amount of people. (Jeff, m/c, UWE)

As we have seen our graduates have entered a hypercompetitive labour market, in which a few reap great rewards but most struggle. In an economy bifurcated between elite 'insider' jobs and low-paid pressurized 'outsider jobs, many of our participants have experienced precarity, while others in what appear to be better jobs are struggling with pressure and stress. We can say many of them have drawn 'short straws'

Class continues to shape trajectories although working-class graduates can achieve professional jobs in some areas (engineering, teaching, finance) especially with Russell Group degrees. There are strong sectoral differences, with law being the most class-exclusionary, and teaching and engineering more class-inclusive. Economic capital remains a key factor. In particular placements and internships are increasingly the way into 'traditional' graduate jobs; they are often unpaid or very poorly paid. High rent costs in core cities, especially London, exclude students without wealthy families from many opportunities

Our graduates have grown up in a culture of meritocratic individualism where 'success' and 'failure' are considered matters of personal responsibility. There is no doubt that this has put pressure on our graduates, many of whom use terms such as 'struggle' and 'anxiety' in relation to their experiences. Compared to non-millennials, there is a much greater level of investment, by both young adults and their families, in acquiring a university degree. Graduates carry a massive burden of debt in a time of inflation and austerity. Some of our participants do feel they have been cheated: raised expectations have not been fulfilled. Moreover, their horizons may be restricted unless they gain further qualifications, again imposing a class penalty on opportunities.

However, many show determination and ingenuity in clinging on to make something of their lives. Some are reluctantly accepting the tough environment and clinging to a hope that things will change; many are using their wits and educational capital to move towards better futures.

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