

Higher education, social class and the mobilisation of capitals: recognising and playing the game

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Strategies employed by middle-class families to ensure successful educational outcomes for their children have long been the focus of theoretical and empirical analysis in the UK and beyond. In austerity England, the issue of middle-class social reproduction through higher education increases in saliency, and students' awareness of how to 'play the game' of enhancing their chances to acquire a sought-after graduate position becomes increasingly important.

Using data from a longitudinal study of working-class and middle-class undergraduates at Bristol's two universities (the Paired Peers project), we employ Bourdieu's conceptual tools to examine processes of capital mobilisation and acquisition by students to enhance future social positioning. We highlight middle-class advantage over privileged access to valued capitals, and argue that the emphasis on competition, both in terms of educational outcomes and the accrual of capital in the lives of working-class and middle-class students, compounds rather than alleviates social inequalities.

Introduction

Education as a route to social mobility and economic prosperity remains a key tenet of 21st century UK government policy. This includes higher education (HE), which under both the previous Labour (1997-2010), and current Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition Governments, is promoted as extremely important for both individuals and national prosperity in a high skills globalised economy. In England, young peoples' participation in HE increased from some fifteen per cent in 1988 (Chowdry *et al.*, 2010) to 47 per cent by 2010/11 (BIS, 2012). However, successful transition into well-paid employment in graduate labour markets remains uncertain. Brown and colleagues' work argues that labour markets have not kept up with the increasing number of graduates, resulting in ever greater competition for graduate jobs. Getting a degree is no longer enough, and students are urged to mobilise different forms of 'capital' during their undergraduate study to enhance their future social and economic positioning (Tomlinson, 2008).

Whilst the study reported here is based in England, its findings resonate far more widely, the issues discussed being of relevance not just within the UK and European countries, but also beyond. Social mobility, higher education and graduate employability are concerns in all developed nations, and increasingly so as the impact of globalisation intensifies and much of the world confronts a period of severe austerity. Brown and colleagues (Brown and Tannock, 2009; Brown, Lauder and Ashton, 2011) talk of a 'global war' for the most talented graduates, acknowledging the increasingly international character of the career market for today's highest achieving young people.

Our focus in this paper is on how students from different class backgrounds respond to an increasingly competitive environment. As the 'rules of the game' in the HE field shift and adapt, how do students respond, how aware are they of the changing nature of 'the game', and what resources and strategies do they use to enable them to succeed? We draw on data from a three year study¹ of working- and middle-class undergraduates at Bristol's² two universities, one a research-intensive university, the other a more teaching-oriented institution. We use Bourdieu's conceptual tools (1986) to examine processes of capital mobilisation and acquisition by students and their families aimed at enhancing future social positioning.

We begin the paper by considering debates and research concerning the need to enhance employability in order to compete in changing graduate labour markets. We then outline the methods of the project from which the data are drawn, before presenting the data in three sections. The first considers how 'knowing the game' helps some students maintain social advantage, the second and third consider extra-curricular activities (ECAs) and internships as instances of how different forms of capital may be mobilised and generated, distinguishing between 'active' and 'internalised' behaviours and strategies. The paper concludes with a discussion of how 'knowing' and 'playing the game' generally further advantage those with the greatest accumulated capital.

Changing graduate labour markets and the need to enhance 'employability'

UK public and policy discourse around HE study has been dominated by the understanding that participation leads to long-term financial benefit, with graduates enjoying increased earnings over their working life compared to their non-graduate peers. This argument, cited as justification for recent changes transferring the major cost of university study from the tax payer to the student, is known by economists as 'a graduate premium'. While some economists including Chowdry *et al.* (2010) acknowledge differential returns based on degree subject studied and university attended, others (e.g. O'Leary and Sloane, 2011) emphasise that despite substantially increased numbers, graduates retain a salary premium over their non-graduate peers. Using Labour Force Survey data from 1997 to 2006, and Elias and Purcell (2004), they maintain that the earnings advantage of graduates has remained largely stable across this period, for both men and women, across all subject areas and across the 'ability distribution', and continue to do so during the current economic downturn. Even if the graduate premium does exist there are still differences in the occupational attainment by class. Bukodi and Goldthorpe (2011) show that significant class differences in relative occupational outcome have persisted over the past sixty years despite increased absolute mobility.

The work of Brown and colleagues (Brown, 2003; Brown and Hesketh, 2004; Brown and Tannock, 2009; Brown, Lauder and Ashton, 2011), in contrast, proposes that an explosion of HE across the world is driving changes in graduate labour markets. Brown *et al.* (2011: 132) argue that the competition for 'good, middle-class jobs' is increasingly a global struggle, with middle-class families in particular adopting increasingly desperate measures to 'stay ahead' of the competition for future employment. However, as Brown (2003: 142) comments elsewhere, 'if all adopt the same tactics, nobody gets ahead', yet 'if one does not play the game, there is little chance of winning'. This is Brown's *opportunity trap*, something he considers an inevitable and defining feature of contemporary society. The consequences of this are efforts by upper- and upper-middle-class families 'to position their children in the most prestigious schools and programmes, to become one of the select members of the internationally sought after, high skill elite' (Brown and Tannock, 2009:384). We acknowledge that the focus of these authors' work is oriented towards competition for elite jobs, and therefore particularly applicable to some but not all of the present study's participants. Nevertheless, the overall argument that a degree is no longer enough in the competition for graduate jobs has increasing authority across HE provision. In this paper we explore how such arguments may result in strategies aimed at capital acquisition and curriculum vitae (CV) building by undergraduates. Drawing upon Bourdieu (1990), we refer to this strategic enhancing of graduate employment opportunities as 'having a feel for the game'.

To 'play the game' successfully, students are encouraged to enhance their 'employability' through additional activities including work experience and internships, and by exploiting the skills gained through extra-curricular activities (ECA) (Tomlinson, 2008). Lareau's (2011) work suggests that working on the self in these ways may be taken-for-granted practice amongst middle-class students, as a result

of what she calls 'concerted cultivation' in the family, which involves the continual working on the child to create an individual with the right capitals to succeed in life. For many middle-class families this involves a high degree of engagement in structured ECAs. This may entail increasingly overt and conscious strategising, firstly to accrue 'valuable' capitals, and secondly, to mobilise these capitals to gain advantage in both education and labour markets.

Following this view, once in HE, how students spend their non-study time may be of growing importance in determining future life chances. However, as Stuart et al (2008) emphasise in their study of students' involvement in ECA in English higher education, students' lifestyles and activities are shaped and constrained by level of income, social background and so on, and media coverage of internships suggests that similar constraints apply here too (e.g. Chakraborty, 2011). Studies of students from different social backgrounds (Redmond, 2010; Stevenson and Clegg, 2011; Tomlinson, 2008) find differences not only in their engagement in ECA and internship or work experience opportunities, but in their capacity and orientation towards mobilising additional experience into valuable capitals in the transition to the labour market. Whereas Tomlinson (2008) found that middle-class students at an elite university increasingly saw the need to add value to their 'hard' academic credentials through the addition of 'soft credentials' gained through various forms of ECA, Redmond's study of mature 'widening participation' students at a post-1992 English university found that these students 'tended to conceptualise higher education in terms of academic achievement'. There was 'an almost non-existent engagement in any non-academic related, extra-curricular activities' (2010: 128), partly due to constraints including family responsibilities.

Other research indicates the highly complex process of mobilising different experiences into 'valuable' capital. Stuart et al (2008) cite contradictory evidence of the value employers placed on different forms of ECA, and Tchibozo's (2007) study of UK graduates found although ECA had a significant effect on graduates' transition into the labour market, different types of activity had different effects, with activities demonstrating leadership capabilities particularly beneficial. While Tchibozo argues that students need to understand and exploit the 'strategic potential of extra-curricular activity' for transition to the labour market (2007: 55), this requires both tacit and explicit know-how of how to package ECA into valuable 'personal capital' (Brown, Lauder and Ashton, 2011; Tomlinson, 2008). Moreover certain students can more readily mobilise several forms of capital simultaneously, for example combining cultural capital in the form of 'what they know' with social capital in the form of 'who they know'.

In contrast to more broadly defined forms of ECA, studies focusing specifically on internships and work experience suggest they play a significant role in gaining access to graduate labour markets, as highlighted in a UK government report on accessing the professions (Millburn, 2009). Browne's (2006) research into recruitment to the UK's financial services industry provides an example of this. She found employers recruited an elite cohort to their fast track leadership programmes specifically via internships. However, there are clear patterns of inequality in students' experience of such opportunities (Allen et al, 2012; Browne, 2006; Lehmann, 2012), which raise concerns about the implications for social mobility. Allen et al's study of undergraduate work placements in arts and creative disciplines in England found that students needed a fund of social, cultural and economic capital to successfully access placements in the creative industries. Lehmann's research found a similar pattern amongst working-class students in Canada, where relative lack of financial resources and social networks were barriers to accessing career-relevant internships and work experience. Other studies demonstrate the salience of these issues in a wider international context including Jonsson et al (2009) in the US, Sweden, Germany and Japan, and Swartz (2008), also in America.

While developing capitals appropriate to future employability through various forms of ECA, internships and work experience has generated increasing research interest, students do not spend all their time at university strategising for the future. Students may also be oriented to the present (Stevenson and Clegg, 2011), and constructing a viable identity and sense of belonging at university (Stuart et al, 2008). Amongst working-class and non-traditional students in particular, for whom HE is not a taken-for-granted stage in a trajectory to adulthood (Quinn et al, 2005), successful attainment and progression during HE study involve a constant fashioning and re-fashioning of the self (Reay, Crozier and Clayton, 2009), in order to fit in or stand out (Reay, Crozier and Clayton, 2010). Decisions about involvement in different forms of ECA may therefore be about finding like-minded people, and spending time doing things that 'a person like me' does. On this view, concerted cultivation of valued capitals through structured ECA may fit more with middle-class notions of 'the worthy individual', than the values of students from working-class backgrounds (Lehmann, 2009).

This paper builds on the research discussed above by considering in more detail the processes of capital acquisition and mobilisation by middle-class and working-class students while at university. We focus on the potential generation of 'valuable' capital through two types of activity: first, social and cultural activities that we refer to as extra-curricular activities, and secondly, internships and work experience. Whilst we acknowledge arguments for a broad understanding of ECA that reflects the diversity of student experience in mass HE (Stevenson and Clegg, 2011; Stuart et al, 2008), we use a narrower definition of ECA here and treat internships/work experience separately, because we found that students in our study oriented themselves in particular ways to these different types of activity. As we show, internships and work experience were clearly understood as important for generating capital useful in the transition to the labour market. Students' orientations to ECA in the form of social and cultural activities were more varied, with only some of these second year students clearly strategic in relation to their involvement in ECA. Moreover, the majority described how they spent leisure time as involving the construction of a viable identity and a sense of belonging as a student (Stuart et al, 2008), by engaging in the sorts of things that 'a person like me' does.

Methods

The data used here are taken from the first two years of a longitudinal study, exploring the progress of a cohort of students through their three year undergraduate degree course in England (2010-2013). The study aimed to compare systematically the experiences of pairs of students from different social classes, attending the traditional 'elite' University of Bristol (UoB) and the 'new' more teaching-focused University of the West of England (UWE), in the same English city. Pairs were matched in three ways: by class, by institution and by discipline. 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 may enhance future social positioning.

Our target was to follow a sample of 80 students from ten disciplines taught at both universities, involving 40 students from UWE and 40 from UoB, eight from each subject, comparing the experiences of students from differing class backgrounds. This presented both theoretical and operational problems, especially given the fact that students could be seen as partially removed from any class nexus in a moratorium between their class of origin and their class of destination (Brake 1980). Such problems are not easy to resolve. Our predominant concern was the need to

operationalize class which necessitated a simplification of its complexities. We sought to classify students using a number of indicators, including: occupations of both parents, type of school/college attended, parents' experience of HE, and self-reported class. On this basis we divided all responses into three groups: clearly working-class, clearly middle-class and 'in between' – a division which might correspond to Bourdieu's (1984) three-class model of dominant, dominated and intermediate. We only included 'young' (18-21 year old) students, to avoid the additional complexities of comparing mature and younger students. All students were enrolled on 3 year degree programmes, however, in engineering at both universities, and in geography at UoB there was an option to follow a four year track depending upon grades achieved at the end of year two.

We found 40 students who pretty clearly belonged to the dominant classes, as defined by Bourdieu, but the paucity of unambiguously working-class students in some disciplines led us to draw from the intermediate grouping. Inevitably during interviews some of our original classifications appeared inaccurate. Eventually it seemed to us that students' backgrounds fell into four clusters: unambiguously middle-class; ambiguously middle-class (including for example some self-employed people, teachers, nurses, graduates in low-paid work); ambiguously working-class (similar occupations, but lacking qualifications or having climbed up from lower echelons); and unambiguously working-class (manual and unskilled occupations). We would argue, however, that in Bourdieusian terms, those students we designate as working-class fall within the dominated groupings, not the dominant, and they do display differentiated patterns of attitudes, experiences and behaviours, as we go on to discuss later in this paper.

In this paper we focus on social class. There were insufficient students in our sample from black and minority ethnic backgrounds to discuss 'race' in a meaningful way, but we do refer to some emerging differences in the experiences of male and female students. However, a more detailed consideration of gender alongside class will be the subject of future papers. We also concur with Sayer (2005) who argues that on occasions it is both important and legitimate to focus explicitly on social class in developing understandings of how class as a source of inequality works.

Our study also concerns how attending an elite versus a more teaching-focused university may affect students' movement through and progression beyond HE. This paper does not give a detailed account of such differences, because they were only beginning to emerge at this stage in the study. We identify some examples of unambiguously middle-class students at UWE, the teaching-focused university, who sought to stand out and distinguish themselves from other students there, but at this point in the study, we more typically found middle-class students in both universities enjoying advantages over their working-class peers.

The paper is based on data from four interviews undertaken during the first two years of the study. At this point there were 81 students in the study, 40 working-class and 41 middle-class. Of these, eight lived 'at home' for one or both years, five working-class (four from UWE, one from UoB) and three middle-class (two from UWE and one from UoB).

Table 1: *Class background of participants*

	UWE	UoB	Total
Working-class female	6	15	21

Working-class male	13	6	19
Middle-class female	10	11	21
Middle-class male	8	12	20
Total working-class	19	21	40
Total middle-class	18	23	41
Total	37	44	81

All interview data were analysed and coded using NVivo data analysis software, employing broad, thematic codes. Specifically relevant to this paper were data coded under extra-curricular activities, internships and work experience. Other activities, including paid employment and family roles and relations were coded separately and are not considered here.

‘Knowing the game’: Playing the higher education game to maintain advantage

Our analysis draws on the work of Pierre Bourdieu and specifically his concept of capital (Bourdieu 1986), and his analogy of ‘playing the game’, to explore ways middle-class university students may maintain their advantages through the acquisition, maintenance, development and mobilisation of cultural, social and economic resources. Using the analogy of ‘playing the game’ we consider the extent that students mobilise capitals in both ‘active’ and ‘internalised’ ways to position themselves advantageously for a future career, whilst seeking to avoid a dichotomy between ‘agentic’ and ‘determined’ players, recognising that people are ‘neither fully determined nor fully willed’ (McNay 1999, p.100). Some students may have a *more* active self-awareness about acquiring and mobilising their resources than others. However, regardless of the degree of perceived agency or internalised action, students may still operate within the game in a way that secures advantage. That is, some middle-class students have an internalised, understanding of the game and play it well without actively considering the mechanisms of their own operations while others operate in a more intentional way. We concur with Bourdieu that ‘[O]ne can refuse to see strategy as the product of an unconscious program without making it the product of a conscious and rational calculation’ (Lamaison, 1986: 112). Although this paper identifies some students as more active in their acquisition and mobilisation of capitals, others are less active and appear to have a more internalised or taken-for-granted orientation to the mobilisation of capitals, we stress that our conceptualisation precludes neither structure nor agency from the equation of individual practice.

We have found Bourdieu’s (1990) notion of ‘the feel for the game’ helpful in thinking about ways in which certain students ensure their advantage through the development of capitals and put themselves in the best position to win the game. Bourdieu (1990: 64) writes ‘(W)hoever wants to win this game, appropriate the stakes, catch the ball...must have a feel for the game, that is, a feel for the necessity and the logic of the game’. The majority of our participants - both working-class and middle-class - demonstrated an awareness of ‘the game’ of obtaining a much sought after graduate position, including how the rules of the game had changed. Garry (working-class, UoB) for instance suggested:

Going back a few years...a degree in anything...was a statement in itself about someone, (but now)...more and more people do go on to higher education and have degrees, (which)...seems to, perhaps unfairly, water down what a degree is or how it’s regarded...It’s...market forces...if there’s more of something, that something becomes less valuable.

Middle-class students in particular emphasised the status of different universities, as outlined by Liam below:

It just...seems to be first of all what classification of degree you get – you have to get a 2:1 or above – and *where* you get it from. You know...basically you've got the top tier, then you've got the rest of the Russell Group³. The kind of stuff they do, they do take into account where you've got it from and the reputation the university has, how hard it is to get into that university. (Liam, middle-class, UoB)

Harvey, a working-class student, recognised, like Liam above, that attending UoB was advantageous for him. He chose to study Economics, a subject he assumed would further his ambitions for a lucrative job in a City bank, but he lacked the necessary capitals to secure a desirable internship:

I've realised that, especially when it comes to university, that where you went is a lot more important than what you did. And there's people now that are doing...like they've got the internships that I'd love and they're doing sort of Sociology degrees! (Harvey, working-class, UoB)

Harvey's disappointment that his strategically chosen degree subject – which he claimed not to enjoy – had not conferred the advantages he had anticipated in terms of securing an internship in a City bank, indicates how 'playing the game' is not simply about making strategic choices about university and course, but being able to mobilise additional resources as well.

In contrast, Nathan (middle-class, UoB) enjoyed the social networks so helpful in getting the 'foot in the door' that eluded Harvey, and enthusiastically exploited them fully:

I'm sure my networking helped as well, I'm absolutely convinced...I have one family member in an investment bank in London who...my dad put me in contact with and said "oh yeah do you know such and such...". So I met with him in London, which was a useful contact, and if I'd got to the final stages of the interview process there that probably would have been quite helpful. As regards other contacts....(I)...worked for my mum and dad's accountant...spending a few days with him, whacked it on the CV and they think "oh look he's done some accounting" – 'tick box'.

Whilst Nathan's strategising was by no means universal amongst our participants, the following sections provide numerous examples of strategising to accumulate and mobilise capital amongst some, and they were disproportionately found amongst particular sub-sections of the sample: middle-class students generally and male students in particular.

Generating capital through extra-curricular activities

Active and internalised generation of capitals through ECA

Fifteen students (ten middle-class and five working-class) engaged in what we define as the active generation of capitals through ECA. These students were involved in a range of societies and activities, but additionally, they were assuming positions of responsibility, including joining committees, becoming secretary of their sports society, or becoming vice-president or president of a specialist subject society.

For two middle-class students at UWE, ECA was a means of standing out from their peers. Both were very conscious of being from different social backgrounds to their perceptions of 'typical' students at a post-1992 university. Amina had become a student peer tutor and applied to be a student ambassador (helping out on open days and welcome weekends), partly because these activities would be useful on her CV,

but also as a means of finding 'the right circle of people' in an environment where she felt out of place. Oscar differentiated himself through his involvement in music, explaining:

I play trumpet, bass guitar, guitar, drums, all that kind of stuff, and I've done lots of stuff playing in orchestras, big bands, rock bands, in plays, musicals, all that kind of thing. Drumming is my big thing, I've played drums in Japan, Italy, France, America, played in the Royal Albert Hall lots of times. (Oscar, middle-class, UWE)

Another middle-class student at UWE emphasised how she continued with ECA to cultivate her CV:

I'm...carrying on really, trying to do well in academic side of it but also keep up like the sports and stuff, because...so many people have good academic skills and academic qualifications. And also you're up against pretty much a lot of people from other countries as well, because I always forget it's not just like English unis. (Francesca, middle-class, UWE)

However, these students were unusual in their *active* generation of capital through ECA. More typical were students for whom ECA involved the internalised generation of valuable capitals.

We categorised 33 students as generating capitals in a taken-for-granted way, building on practices apparently internalised through childhood experiences. Of these, the majority (25) were from middle-class backgrounds. Some middle-class students had a conscious awareness of the cultivation of capital that occurred in the family, including moral judgements of which activities counted as worthwhile. When asked about the money his parents invested in their children, Jack explained:

Oh just making sure we've got something that we can have for the future, like windsurfing, surfing, trumpet, climbing, I've done so many activities when I was little it's just stupid...my sister's now working all round the world doing windsurf teaching and stuff like this, and I've taught break dancing and stuff like that. So kind of setting us up for the future rather than just giving us (computer games). (Jack, middle-class, UWE)

We found similar processes amongst some working-class students, all of whom studied at UoB, with interview data suggesting these students mainly came from aspirational working-class families, who encouraged and supported their children's development in ways redolent of more middle-class families. An additional important aspect of internalised generation involved finding a group where an individual student felt they belonged, which was not necessarily at their place of study. This applied to middle-class as well as working-class students. For seven middle-class students at UWE in particular (including one who played football for his brother's team at the city's *other* university), ECA appeared to be a means of dis-identifying with their place of study.

Barriers to the mobilisation of capitals through ECA

Eleven students, all from working-class backgrounds, explained that they did not engage in structured ECA due to financial or time constraints, or because they wanted to prioritise their studies. This was often a source of regret, as Henry suggested:

I love to meet new people so it was a bit disappointing...but this year unfortunately I couldn't really afford to join any societies or anything. But I have been playing football and stuff with my mates just down the local park and stuff. (Henry, working-class, UWE)

and similarly by Zoe:

I physically don't have time...I'd love to get involved but I physically can't. Which is another frustrating thing then because I feel like I am not making the most out of my time here. (Zoe, working-class, UoB)

Three students were not involved in ECA, because they sensed social class differences between themselves and members of the societies they attempted to join. Here Rob attempted to explain why he was not involved in his subject society:

the person who runs the society isn't one we'd...generally ...include in our social group...The sort of vocabulary he uses and things like that, sort of very well spoken vocabulary whereas...we use sort of more relaxed vocabulary as we're good friends, because when you're with friends you don't use a form of vocabulary like you would for example in an interview or something. (Rob, working-class, UWE)

A serious concern for this group of students is that through non-engagement they were precluded from any opportunity to use ECA as a means of mobilising capital for the future.

Engaging in activities unlikely to generate 'valuable' capitals

A final group of 22 students described how, rather than engage in structured extra-curricular activities, they invested in spending time with people like themselves. Some activities named by students in this group would not be deemed worthwhile by middle-class students such as Jack above. A number of male, working-class students talked of playing X box, and one young woman, Sariah (working-class, UWE), said she spent her time 'going out clubbing and stuff and, you know, shopping, every girl likes to shop.' Other students invested energy in cultivating friendships and the social aspects of their lives. Jade for example explained:

There's like four of us in my flat especially that get on really well, we just sit in the kitchen, make food together, have a chat. It's nice to like catch up after like a day, because we all go like our separate ways in the day and then come back. It's quite like a little family. (Jade, working-class, UoB)

These various activities arguably involve the generation of capitals, but they do not easily translate into something for a CV.

These different orientations towards ECA suggest that a considerable number of students (33 out of 81) engaged in processes of internalised generation of capitals, that could allow them to package their experience as valuable 'personal capital' (Brown et al, 2011) when they began looking for employment. A further fifteen were already beginning to use ECA strategically to develop potential capitals that could be mobilised in the future. In contrast, 33 students were not engaged in activities that could be easily repackaged as valuable capital in the future, and of these, 27 were from working-class backgrounds.

Generating capital through internships

Students' attitudes to internships

Students' awareness of the increasingly competitive nature of the graduate employment market and the limited opportunities in a period of financial recession perhaps intensifies their commitment to acquiring as many 'extras' as possible whilst completing their studies (Tomlinson 2008). Another way for students to generate forms of capital that may help them in the future graduate employment market is through internships. Most participants had, by the end of second year, secured (or were actively pursuing) an internship relating to their future aspirations, regardless of social class or institution, although differences emerged in the types of internships gained and the success of their applications. An overview of the experience of applying for internships can be seen in tables 2 and 3.

Table 2: The internship experiences of UWE students

UWE	Secured/ Completed	Rejected	Actively seeking	Not Looking	Total
Working- Class Males	1	3	0	2	6
Middle-Class Males	4	0	3	2	9
Working- Class Females	1	0	2	4	7
Middle-Class Female	7	0	1	0	8
Total	13	3	6	8	30

Table 3: The internship experiences of UoB students

UoB	Secured/ Completed	Rejected	Actively seeking	Not Looking	Total
Working- Class Males	2	2	1	1	6
Middle-Class Males	8	0	1	2	11
Working- Class Females	6	0	2	4	12
Middle-Class Females	4	0	0	5	9
Total	20	2	4	12	38

Clearly, there are class and gender differences regarding who was applying for and securing internships. Overall ten working-class students had secured internships compared with 23 middle-class students. In terms of gender there are interesting institutional differences, which also intersect with class, and while this paper focuses on class differences, we acknowledge the need to further explore gender issues. The types of internships applied for varied across subjects with students taking more 'professional' courses such as law, accounting and engineering applying to jobs in their respective sectors. Other students were attempting to secure broader experience in teaching, the media, retail, and the creative industries.

For some working-class students, the importance of internships needed to be made explicit, as Isabel's comments illustrate:

I need to start volunteer work pretty soon or some sort of work experience, 'cos they've been drilling it into us from the start that like it's all well and good that you've got qualifications, but employers are looking for something else now because everyone's got the same qualifications, like there's going to be however many of us, hundreds of us graduating with this degree, we need something to make us stand out. (Isabel, working-class, UWE)

For other middle-class students, being competitive might be better read as their taken-for-granted dispositions towards university and career advancement. Nathan was one example, whose interviews from the outset showed clear career strategizing, as well as a world view where competition was inevitable, desirable and also cut-throat, as demonstrated in the following comment:

Everyone has A's at GCSEs, you've just got to try and differentiate yourself by doing something extra like Investment Society, or an internship, or do mooting...Because you see some of these people - particularly if you want to become a barrister - it's ridiculous, you see these people who, you know, run a soup kitchen in their spare time, got a First Class Honours in their degree, been to Africa and saved a school from famine, you know, it's absolutely ridiculous how much they have. So you've got to try and aim for that or try to match it, try and build up your CV because it's so competitive. (Nathan, middle-class, UoB)

However, not all students were actively seeking internships. For many of the middle-class females this was because they were unsure what they wanted to do. In contrast, the reason that some working-class students gave for not seek internships was that they were concentrating on what might be considered the 'old' rules of the game, focusing their energies on the quality of their degree:

I think that I'd just rather focus on the degree...obviously internships and stuff like that are useful, I think I'd rather focus on getting the work done and improving essentially the grade of the work, for now, and then consider other stuff later. (Samantha, working-class, UoB)

It may be the case that for some working-class students going to university in itself has taken them far enough from their comfort zone, and that acquiring 'more than a degree' requires excessive energy and generates extra levels of discomfort.

Active and internalised mobilisation of capitals

Middle-class students in both institutions were more successful than their working-class counterparts in gaining access to internships, particularly in high status areas such as law or banking, even though many working-class students had clear internship goals and were achieving top grades on their courses. Largely this was down to middle-class social capital advantage. While working-class students were unlikely to have contacts in big companies to help them, middle-class students could frequently draw on significant connections to secure the best internships. It was striking how the social capital most often employed was firmly embedded in family networks, as the following examples show:

It's a case of who you know not what you know in some cases. So I am trying to pull in any family ties...like my dad's quite friendly with one of the traders at (bank name)...he was head of the internship scheme...(and) my mum's a

governor at my old school and one of the governors was a trader at (bank name), so I am trying to pull some strings there (too).
(Dylan, middle-class, UWE)

And

My dad's quite high up in engineering so like advises the government, so a lot of people owe him a lot of favours around the country...(or)...if everything doesn't go well this summer, I can pretty much go to France and study in Lyon for a couple of months, because people owe him a lot of favours (there).
(Nicholas, middle-class, UWE)

In both cases these students had an awareness of the capital they possessed and were predisposed to utilising this fully. They knew how to "pull strings" and capitalise on "favours" owed to family members.

While some students actively mobilised available capital to secure internships, others simply took such advantages for granted. David (middle-class, UoB) for example talked about his work experience without mentioning the role his family connections played in the process. However, when probed he revealed the extent of the help received:

Well I guess this interview I had over Easter was through a family friend who is the partner of the firm so hopefully that would help...Saying that, my previous work experience last summer was...through one of my dad's contacts...so I guess there's always the chance (of finding)...something through them.

Elliot, a middle-class student at UoB who wanted to work in journalism, was casual about the help his parents could provide:

Well my dad worked for the BBC, but...I don't know, actually...he does do a job every year. He runs a conference, oh no, streams a conference...so...he might get me a job there this time in the kind of PR, just doing press releases all the time, which would be tedious and quite hard work, but it's only for a week and it's in Abu Dhabi so...

These students' lack of recognition of their privileged position appeared to stem from a taken-for-granted disposition towards opportunity, considering such opportunity their entitlement.

In addition to social capital, economic capital played a significant role in acquiring experience likely to promote chances of success in graduate labour markets for middle-class students. Economic capital meant they could afford to work in different geographical locations even when the internship was unpaid, and did not need to earn money to cover their living costs. Francesca, for example, a highly motivated UWE student, secured a very competitive internship in an Australian law firm, funded by her parents:

I'm working for six weeks...although the company asked me if I would do twelve weeks, but I didn't want to and I'm paying them...(the)...company don't pay interns anyway...I have to pay for the flights, I have to pay for my accommodation, I have to pay for food, I pay for the privilege of working for the company, and paying the insurance, visa, everything...My parents are funding it all....

Francesca could only conceive of applying for such internships because of her family's economic capital (and their contacts). The financial expense alone closes off this sort of opportunity to students from poorer backgrounds.

Barriers to Internships

Many working-class students cannot access the same resources as their middle-class counterparts. Their families simply did not have the connections to draw upon to offer advantages in the competitive world of student internships. The following examples contrast starkly with the examples of pulling strings and pulling-in favours above:

I find it so weird when people have parents that are lawyers or doctors and they can get you work experience in a hospital or....I just think "that's crazy" that's like something I've never experienced. Because my parents do just ordinary jobs. I don't know how they would help me. I don't think they would be able to. (Anna, working-class, UoB)

And

It's not that they won't give me help, my parents are the most helpful people I could ever imagine. It's just I don't know whether they've got the skills to be able to find me what I want, because I know what I'm looking for, it's not really a "them" sort of thing. (Zoe, working-class, UoB)

Although working-class students seldom had access to high value social capital helpful in gaining internships, they were often aware of the advantages of their middle-class peers. Garry, a working-class history student, talked at length about his observations of the privileged students at UoB:

Two of the girls that live above us....one is going to do a work placement with the other's dad 'cos she does Geography and he's something to do with some sort of environmental management thing...Law's another one...my flatmate Pete...got a placement shadowing a solicitor for two weeks in London this year because of someone he got to know from a placement last year (who) sort of referred him.

However, simple awareness of differential capacities for developing, and importantly mobilising, social capital did not help working-class students compensate for their lack of privilege. In fact it would appear that it was quite frustrating for them to see their peers continue to exploit the advantages they had already acquired through privileged backgrounds.

In addition, Marcus below was not alone in highlighting working-class preclusion from unpaid internships because of a lack of economic capital, and the need for paid employment.

I often worked during the summers but it's never kind of related to any kind of career I want. Last year I did a lot of sport and this year I've decided not to and I'm focussing on myself and trying to get good grades, so there's still I'm trying to get a job and then I might try and maintain some kind of job next year – hopefully it might be one that's relevant to a future career, or if not just a standard job for financial reasons. (Marcus, working-class, UoB)

Marcus, in emphasising his need to earn money to live with any degree of comfort, highlights how students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds might not have the 'luxury' of seeking an unpaid internship, despite being aware of its obvious usefulness to longer-term career aspirations. Marcus knew the rules of the game, but could not compete equally in it.

These working-class students, although perhaps very successful at university, were often disadvantaged when it came to mobilising capitals to improve employment prospects. In particular, their families, whilst supportive and willing to help, did not have access to privileged and valued social capital, as well as having less economic capital, creating an uneven playing field where middle-class students were much better positioned to appropriate the stakes of the game (Bourdieu 1990). University thus does not become a social leveller, rather it becomes another site for the middle-classes to compound and exploit their advantages.

Discussion and Conclusions

We found both working-class and middle-class students in this study were aware of arguments that a degree is no longer enough, and that to gain positional advantage in the graduate recruitment 'game', they would need to mobilise additional capitals that might be gained through a variety of activities beyond their formal curriculum. However, although there was a general awareness that a degree is not enough among working-class and middle-class participants alike, it is our argument in this paper that awareness of these limitations (in terms of future employment) is not the same as having a 'feel for the game' of constructing employable selves.

Using Bourdieu's tools to understand the mobilisation and generation of different forms of capital as contributing prospectively to a particular game, which allows 'players' to gain advantage for their future transition to graduate labour markets, enables us to consider the processes by which advantage may accrue during the course of undergraduate study, and the potential for classed advantages in 'playing the game', even without any conscious or active strategising. For some students in our study, the privileged middle-classes, this advantage was something internalised through their pre-university experiences in their social milieu; these players internalised the logic of the game and played accordingly. As Bourdieu remarks in an interview on the rules of the game: 'The good player, who is as it were the embodiment of the game, is continually doing what needs to be done, what the game demands and requires' (Lamaison 1986 112). In *Weight of the World*, Bourdieu (1999) describes how the middle-classes 'make themselves' and how 'the game' is established to middle-class advantage. To illustrate this we could say that the middle-classes are not only dealt the better cards in a high stakes game, but they have internalised the knowledge, through economic and cultural advantages, of when and how best to play them.

This propensity for 'playing the game' was clearly visible with internships, with numerous examples of class differences in the capacity to mobilise social and economic capital to considerable advantage. In the case of some middle-class students the strategies employed in this mobilisation clearly demonstrated an active recognition of their advantages and how they might be exploited. For other middle-class students capital was mobilised without conscious acknowledgement of its value – what we have termed an internalised approach to capital mobilisation. These differences were more subtle in the context of ECA. Here, apart from a small number of students who understood their activities as a conscious form of strategising towards future goals, ECA was not (yet) an acknowledged part of the 'game'. However, the differences we found in orientation to and engagement in ECA appeared to be generating what would translate into valuable personal capital in the transition to graduate labour markets for some students, and more than three-quarters of these students were middle-class. It could therefore be argued that such students were indeed 'playing the game' in a way that ensured that they would appropriate greater stakes. Their capacity to play the game could appear to be almost instinctive. However, Bourdieu's work on habitus (1984) shows that what happens is not instinctive but learned through prolonged, managed and planned

socialisation. The dispositions of mind, taste and body that are read as 'instinctive' thus become so habitual that they appear instinctive, but are in practice 'internalised' through what Lareau (2011) calls concerted cultivation.

In contrast, working-class students in our study were disadvantaged through not being ready for the game in the same way as their middle-class peers, with a limited pre-disposition towards accumulation of additional capitals. Moreover, some had a pre-disposition towards trying to play a meritocratic game fairly, putting extra effort into securing a higher class of degree rather than securing an internship for instance. Also, while only a minority of students (eleven) said that they did not engage in ECA because of financial and/or time constraints, all these students were working-class.

The capacity of middle-class students to play the game in both a conscious and internalised manner suggests that in the construction of 'personal capital' for graduate employability (Brown et al, 2011), social inequalities are compounded rather than alleviated. Those in dominant and dominated positions are likely to remain so based on the capacity to generate and exploit differing capitals, with middle-class advantage over privileged access to capitals (through economic support from parents, through privileged networks, through long-term investment in leisure activities), meaning they can mobilise these to further weight the game to their advantage.

There are important implications for such an analysis. McLeod (2005: 24) argues that the 'pressing political and analytical challenge' at the present time is 'attempting to theorize both change and continuity, invention and repetition, and understanding the forms they take today'. Whilst previously the arguments on social reproduction through education have focused on differential educational outcomes it is our argument that with shifts in access to education, when the playing field appears to have been levelled for some people (i.e. even when working-class young people make it into higher education) advantage is maintained through a shift in the rules of the game. The game is no longer just about educational advantage based on quality of degree. The stakes have been raised and the privileged seek ever-increasing ways of securing their position and coming out on top. This has implications for HE policy and widening participation strategies and suggests a need for universities to address maximising the experience of university and actively providing opportunities to have 'more than just a degree' in order to begin to address the equity challenges currently facing working-class young people.

¹ The Paired Peers study, funded by the Leverhulme Trust.

<http://www.bristol.ac.uk/spais/research/paired-peers/>

² Bristol is a medium sized city in the South West of England.

³ The Russell Group consists of 24 leading UK universities, which emphasise research as well as outstanding teaching and learning. <http://www.russellgroup.ac.uk/home/>

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