



# Introduction: Rethinking Graduate Employability in Context

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Universities have become central to policy concerns over the production of knowledge workers for economic growth. They have been scrutinised over how well they can maximise graduates' employment and economic potential upon leaving university (e.g. Brown et al., 2003; Tomlinson, 2017; Bridgstock & Jackson, 2019). Higher education institutions (HEIs) face increasing demands from both governments and employers for ensuring economic competitiveness, and from students who expect 'outcomes' for their higher education (HE) investment (Siivonen & Filander, 2020;

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Tomlinson, 2012). Consequently, universities worldwide face an employability imperative that pressures them to position themselves as labour market institutions (Hartmann & Komljenovic, 2021). This has resulted in a technical-rational and instrumental perspective on education that emphasises employability—that is, the ability to obtain and maintain a job, and to ensure the supply of competence in the labour market (Nilsson & Nyström, 2013; Siivonen & Filander, 2020).

Although the employability discourse is promoted worldwide, it is mobilised differently in the EU and beyond. The discourse is well established in such liberal economies as the United Kingdom, the United States and Australia, but it is also becoming prevalent in the Nordic countries, which still follow the welfare state model with its free HE system. In the flexible and competitive UK context, which has a highly differentiated mass HE system, graduates compete for scarce graduate-level jobs (Tomlinson, 2012). They expect returns on their HE degrees in which they have substantially invested in the form of tuition fees. In Finland, for example, influenced by the 2009 New University Act (University Act 558/2009), the traditional tasks of research and teaching were accompanied by a third task—an increased emphasis on societal interaction and utility, which has meant an increased focus on economic and professional goals (Laalo & Heinonen, 2016). Universities have started to offer courses and programmes that link vocational practice-based knowledge to the functional imperatives of the world of work (Siivonen & Filander, 2020).

Employability can be understood as a socially and culturally mediated phenomenon, a social process and an object of study. The term ‘employability’ implies the positional dimension of being employable, but not necessarily in employment (Brown et al., 2003). Employability has become a normative ideal that sets new kinds of demands for graduates, as they are in continual need of development, and ensuring their suitability and potential for future jobs. It is no longer enough to possess ‘hard currencies’ in the form of traditional academic qualifications (Tomlinson, 2012). Ideal graduates need to seek new challenges and signal their passion and dedication for work. They increasingly need to demonstrate personal qualities such as being accountable, agile, active, independent, self-responsible, risk-taking, creative, problem-solving, decision-making and enterprising (Laalo et al., 2019; Siivonen et al., in this book). These skills and attributes represent ‘soft currencies’ (Tomlinson, 2012) that are not based on formal expertise or university degrees as such (Brown et al., 2003), and that are supposed to be carried luggage-like from job to job (Payne,

2000), thereby enhancing graduates' successful navigation in competitive and unstable labour markets. Relatedly, the discourse of employability creates new standards for 'Homo Academicus' and challenges the traditional interpretations of what it means to be an HE student and a novice professional in working life (Komulainen & Korhonen, 2021; Laalo et al., 2019), simultaneously challenging the value of traditional academic credentials and qualifications (Mutanen et al., in this book).

Prior research on graduate employability has focused largely on the individual university student and their skills formation as an educational outcome. Whilst more recent approaches have emphasised the interaction of different forms of capital and resources with the wider structures of the labour market in a globalised world (Brown et al., 2003, 2011; Burke et al., 2017; Tholen, 2015; Tomlinson, 2017), the individualistic skills and attributes approach has remained dominant (Holmes, 2013; Holmes, in this book). Such an approach measures how well the individual has succeeded in matching their human capital profile to labour market demands. As a consequence, the individual becomes responsible for their own labour market position and success (e.g. Brown et al., 2011; Siivonen & Isopahkala-Bouret, 2016; Tholen, 2015). Viewed in this way, employability is understood as something that can be developed in absolute terms through enhancing employability-related personal qualities, skills and abilities that make one appealing to different employers (see e.g. Boden & Nedeva 2010; Brown et al., 2003; Siivonen & Isopahkala-Bouret, 2016; Tomlinson, 2010). Such a view presents a theoretically general link between education and the labour market, viewing HE as an investment that 'pays off' in subsequent employment opportunities and earnings.

This book challenges human capital assumptions and individualistic views of graduate employability. The book approaches graduate employability from positional and processual perspectives, taking into consideration both the structural dimensions of employability and the interactional nature of graduates' educational and working life trajectories (see Holmes, 2013). The positional approach views graduate employability as a structural issue that reflects social positioning and status related to the intersectionality of such social distinctions as gender, age and social class, and their interaction with labour market opportunities (e.g. Brown et al., 2003; Burke et al., 2017; Siivonen & Isopahkala-Bouret, 2016; Vuorinen-Lampila, 2016). Opportunities for graduates competing in the labour market do not depend only on their own skills, experience and abilities, but also on how other graduates act and the different forms of capital they

have acquired and can mobilise (Isopahkala-Bouret & Tholen, in this book; Siivonen & Isopahkala-Bouret, 2016; Tholen, 2015). Moreover, both the supply and the demand of graduates in the labour market determine the relative chances of acquiring and maintaining different kinds of employment (Brown et al., 2003; Brown et al., 2011; Siivonen & Isopahkala-Bouret, 2016; Tholen, 2015; Tomlinson, 2010, 2017).

The processual approach, on the other hand, emphasises the construction and negotiation of employability across time and in different contexts (Holmes, 2013). Considering temporality, there is no single end point in employability, such as having a set of skills, that could be measured as an HE outcome (Siivonen et al., in this book). Instead, employability is an ongoing process of social self-construction (Hall, 2020) in which the graduates negotiate their identity and value in different educational and labour market contexts. Higher education is only one stage, albeit an important one, within the educational and working life trajectories of students and graduates. Employability as a process involves the dynamic connection between the individuals and the social space and time also in terms of careers and organisational contexts, and their corresponding practices, norms and values (Komulainen & Korhonen, in this book; Korhonen et al., 2023). Thus, individual trajectories and graduate identities are likely to be diverse and multifaceted, but so far only a few studies have examined the identities and trajectories of graduates from a processual perspective, which is undertaken in this book in part III.

This book was edited as part of the consortium project ‘Higher Education Graduates’ Employability and Social Positioning in the Labour Market’ (HighEmploy, 2018–2022), funded by the Academy of Finland. The main objectives of the project were (1) to provide an in-depth investigation of HE graduates’ social positioning in the labour market; (2) to formulate a contextualised, cross-sectional and longitudinal account of how the positionality of higher education and employability delineates employment prospects as well as HE graduates’ labour market trajectories and (3) to provide an elaborated analysis of how gender, social class and age contribute to and intersect with the social positioning of HE graduates in relation to employability, and the ways in which HE graduates perceive and manage their employability. Around a third of the chapters in this book were written as part of the HighEmploy research project.

The book is divided into three parts that examine graduate employability from both conceptual and empirical perspectives. The first part of the book presents theoretical approaches that address employability discourse

from critical perspectives, recognising the wider social and economic structures and power relations of the employability discourse. The second part focuses on graduate employability in different national contexts as well as inequalities within these contexts. Finally, the third part addresses employability as a contextual process of identity construction and negotiation, and introduces novel methodological approaches to investigate employability as a process.

## PART I: CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON THE THEORY OF EMPLOYABILITY

The first section of the book presents theoretical approaches that address employability from a critical perspective. It is claimed that the research field of ‘graduate employability’ has thus far not been established on strong theoretical grounds. The majority of studies have been policy-oriented and have tended to provide an individualistic and descriptive account of employability and its related outcomes. The authors in this section take multiple avenues to question the individualistic assumptions and the neoliberal rationales underlining the mainstream graduate employability discourse and policy. They scrutinise the term ‘employability’ and locate its origin and further developments in the literature. Furthermore, they show the changing relationship between HE, society and the labour market. Finally, some authors put their critical theories into practice and outline new policy and research agendas for graduate employability (Holmes; Isopahkala-Bouret & Tholen; Kahn & Lundgren-Resenterra, in this book).

To advance scholarly discussions on graduate employability, sociological conflict theorists have addressed the wider social and economic structures, such as the dynamics of labour market supply and demand, HE systems and social inequalities. This understands graduates to be fundamentally involved in positional job competition and conflict, on macro, meso and micro levels (Brown et al., 2003, 2004; Isopahkala-Bouret & Tholen, in this book). Professional status groups exercise power through ‘social closure’, that is, using degrees for exclusionary purposes in the job competition (Collins, 1979; Dore, 1976; Weber, 1978), and individual degree holders are positioned in relative terms based on what they can offer to the labour market ahead of similarly qualified individuals.

The sociological theorisations regarding graduate employability also address the agency/structure dilemma. Following the theory of Pierre Bourdieu (1984), a growing number of scholars have pointed out graduates' unequal social positioning in the labour market due to the accumulation of economic, cultural and social capital, that is, the resources that shape and mobilise graduates' job searches, early transitions and subsequent career outcomes. Prior research recognises that the impact of social origins can be traced back to classed socialisation, expectations and preparedness (Bathmaker et al., 2013; Bonnard, 2020; Burke et al., 2020).

Alternatively, in governmentality research (Foucault, 1991; Miller & Rose, 2008; Rose, 1992), governance refers to an exercise of political power that subtly aims to guide and shape the subjects' self-understanding and behaviour and conduct towards broader political objectives that are considered important in society and in specific contexts. Accordingly, governmentality theorists have argued that the employability discourse entangles with neoliberal governance practices and constitutes idealised graduate subjectivities within wider socio-economic or institutional landscapes (Fejes, 2010; Handley, 2018; Handley & Millar, in this book; Hartmann & Komljenovic, 2021; Laalo et al., 2019; Laalo et al., in this book). This challenges the understanding of employability as a value-neutral and self-evidently positive response to labour market requirements (e.g. Korhonen et al., 2023).

Governmentality studies show how graduates are turned into objectives of knowledge, who learn to constitute themselves as 'employable' subjects in particular ways (Hall, 2020; Hartmann & Komljenovic, 2021). The ideal subject is an enterprising self who takes responsibility for capitalising on their own potential, capacities and desires through market-oriented self-optimisation (Rose, 1992; Vallas & Christin, 2018). Moreover, ideal graduate subjects make appropriate choices to protect against various risks, such as unemployment (Laalo et al., in this book). A growing number of scholars have focused on the micro-level of governance, that is, the perspectives of graduates as governed subjects (Breathnach, 2014; Komulainen & Korhonen, 2021; in this book; Laalo & Heinonen, 2016; Oinonen, 2018; Varman et al., 2011).

The critical theories commonly investigate social problems in an in-depth way and reveal unintentional consequences of the prevailing policy. For example, the theoretical concepts of Bourdieu have been used to demonstrate the social reproduction of elites, partly through the attainment of HE within specific institutional contexts. Bourdieu has also offered a

theory of social transformation, which offers some insights on how current institutional practices can be transformed to minimise inequalities, although this part of his work is the least known (Fowler, 2020). The governmentality theory has been instrumental in showing how powerful discourses are both oppressive and productive in making the subjects who they are (Foucault, 1991). Along these lines, the governmentality approach points out that the possibility of resisting unfavourable courses of policy and action remains within the discursive power.

As another example, in Archer's (2000) realist social theory, the interplay between agency and social structures entails potential for social transformation. Social structures condition agency, but they also provide conditions for human agency to act upon structures and to change them. Graduates have agency in terms of 'reflexive space', that is, the capacity to make sense and mediate the influence of social structures on their agency in employment: a process of morphogenesis (Archer, 2003). Critical reflexivity can contribute to building up collective identities and emancipatory agendas that tackle major societal problems such as social injustice and sustainability (Kahn & Lundgren-Resentera, in this book).

The first section of this book begins with a chapter written by Leonard Holmes. In his text, Holmes provides a policy critique and a conceptual analysis of the 'origin' of the dominant graduate employability approach (or the 'skills and attributes perspective' as he calls it here). The chapter starts with the problems of terminology and methodology. There are many synonymous terms used in this field and, more often than not, the terms are not constant or theoretically sound. What then is the object of study, if the conceptual frame is not clear? The chapter develops its argument upon C. B. Macpherson's political philosophy of 'possessive individualism' from the 1960s, and the contemporary critique of global capitalism and psychological ideals that support self-contained individualism. The chapter concludes with the thought that we need to re-conceptualise graduate employability and skills as social, contextual and interactional endeavours; they cannot simply reside in the individual.

The chapter written by Ulpukka Isopahkala-Bouret and Gerbrand Tholen is a conceptual analysis of the relative dimension of graduate employability. By applying the insights of a critical sociological tradition, graduate employability is understood as entailing positional competition and conflict between different social groups and individuals who strategise to create advantage over others in the labour market. After reviewing the existing theories, the chapter presents a conceptual mapping that

synthesises the key elements of relative employability. The mapping draws attention to three types of positioning that set up graduates' relative chances in employment: labour market positioning, educational positioning and graduates' social positioning. Furthermore, the chapter assesses the current trends in relative employability and offers a new agenda for policy and research on graduate employability.

In their chapter, Hanna Laalo, Heikki Kinnari, Heikki Silvennoinen and Nina Haltia study the discourse on employability produced by the European Union (EU). The authors note that the power exercised by the EU is soft power, which is grounded in forms of persuasion and normative pressures. Thus, they take a governmentality perspective to employability and pursue a critical discourse analysis on EU policy documents. They study these documents as governing artefacts that set the guidelines for European nations and HEIs, but also for individuals. In EU language, employability is strongly connected to the idea of entrepreneurship. The authors identify three problems for which entrepreneurship education is constructed as a solution: the lack of entrepreneurial skills among graduates, obsolete HE that is not able to meet the needs of the knowledge economy, and the risk society together with risky labour markets that the graduates need to manage. Although employability is seemingly 'taken care' of by policy, the authors argue that uncertain labour markets are constructed as a deterrent, and a structural fact to which the individuals need to adapt. Individuals are being made responsible for developing their own skills and the right kind of entrepreneurial mindset.

The chapter written by Karen Handley and Jill Millar re-examines employability and neoliberal practices that shape the subjectivities of university students. The particular focus is on the thus-far underexplored dimension of employability—namely the affective life of neoliberal employability discourse. The chapter provides a theoretical discussion about the affective governance of neoliberal subjects and then applies an affective lens to explore final-year students' affective responses to recruitment practices. The analysis reveals some interesting paradoxes and tensions: while many job-seeking graduates internalise the neoliberal language and 'psychological register' of enterprise, enthusiasm and happiness, at the same time some express deep anxiety about needing to do more, not being 'good enough' and wanting more advice, guidance and coaching. The authors conclude that in the context of graduate recruitment, the affective life of neoliberalism is opening up a space for new online 'advice' applications, whose seductive promise is to help job candidates become the



successes they want to be. Such advice effectively helps graduates to manage the recruitment process by displaying the qualities that they believe employers expect of them.

The chapter written by Peter Kahn and Mariangela Lundgren-Resenterra is an original conceptual analysis based on empirical and theoretical studies on graduate employability. The chapter rethinks graduate employability in relation to key social concerns (e.g. decent work, sustainability, equity) and develops critical realist theorising drawing on Margaret Archer's work. In this chapter, employability is re-conceptualised as a capacity for collective agency, and collective (work) identity is emphasised against the prevailing individualistic approach. If graduate employability was understood as the capacity to exercise agency in ways that contribute to collective agendas at work, graduates could potentially address global and societal challenges. As a practical implication for universities, the authors suggest bringing in collective agency and reflexivity into study programmes. This would enhance learning that promotes shared interests and concerns over narrow economic agendas.

## PART II: GRADUATE EMPLOYABILITY AND SOCIAL INEQUALITIES IN DIFFERENT NATIONAL CONTEXTS

Chapters in this part analyse employability in different national contexts and focus on social practices at societal and institutional levels. Moreover, it focuses on how employability relates to social differences and inequalities within these different national contexts. Research on social differences relating to employability have been scarce, and we need a better understanding of how class, gender, age and ethnicity, among other differences, intertwine with graduate employability (see, e.g., Bathmaker et al., 2013; Siivonen & Isopahkala-Bouret, 2016; Stevenson & Clegg, 2012; Vesterberg, 2016).

Higher education institutions (HEIs) and graduates are situated in regional, national and transnational contexts. As Laalo et al. (in this book) in part I show, transnational actors like the EU set the framework and are interconnected to national policies. They construct the ideals that steer the actions of policymakers. Policies, however, translate to the national level and manifest differently in various contexts (Lange & Alexiadou, 2010). The country contexts that are looked at in this part include Portugal (Suleman, da Conceição Figueiredo & Henriques Guimarães),

the United Kingdom (Merrill & Revers), France (Bonnard) and the United States (Hora). In addition, one chapter takes a look at the transnational context and graduate mobility between China and Finland (Cai).

Social justice in HE is often understood as equal access (McCowan, 2016), but it is also vital to look at the processes and practices within HEIs as well as differences in outcomes and the longer-term effects of HE (Waller et al., 2018). National HE landscapes have diverse forms of institutions that vary in terms of academic orientation, selectivity and prestige. The steeper the stratification in the system, the greater the differences in occupational outcomes tend to be (Boliver, 2017; Marginson, 2016; Triventi, 2013). HEIs become sites of reproduction of class differences, and those coming from more privileged backgrounds gain more advantages from their degrees (Bathmaker et al., 2013). They know how to navigate within the systems and are able to make the right kinds of choices. Even the same kind of education functions differently between students from different social classes (Reay et al., 2010). Parents who have the forms of beneficial capital are able to provide their offspring with appropriate knowledge (Burke et al., 2020; Lehmann, 2019), economic resources (Hurst, 2018) and social contacts (Abrahams, 2017) to help them mobilise the right kinds of resources that are valuable in the labour market. Conversely, graduates with less capital face more difficulties in securing high-status and high-paying jobs.

For example, Finland is a Nordic welfare state with a high rate of participation in HE but a relatively low level of stratification within the system (Välilä & Muhonen, 2018). According to prior research, family background and forms of inherited capital do have an effect on graduates' labour market entry in Finland, but this effect is only moderate (Haltia et al., *under review*; Isopahkala-Bouret & Nori, 2021). HEIs play a role in equalising and/or enforcing positional differences in graduate employability. Previous studies have also shown that activities related to enhancing employability, like internships and extracurricular activities, do not function equally, but benefit those who have more inherited capital (Bathmaker et al., 2013; Isopahkala-Bouret et al., 2022; Wright & Mulvey, 2021). Chapters in this part examine the positioning of different social groups in the labour market. The shared argument is that the emphasis on employability tends to lead to growing inequalities.

The chapters in this part can be reflected against the concept of relative employability, which Isopahkala-Bouret and Tholen (in this book) apply and develop further in their chapter in part I. They identify three types of

aspects or sources of positioning: positionings that stem from (1) the labour market, (2) the education system and (3) social differences. Labour markets vary in different country contexts, depending on the supply and demand of the workforce. In the following chapters, Suleman et al. and Cai in particular study positionings from the labour market perspective.

Education systems vary in terms of how large, diversified and stratified they are. HEIs also respond to the ideals of employability differently, and Bonnard's and Hora's chapters in particular raise issues from this viewpoint. Social differences are inherent in all positionings, but among the chapters in this part, Merrill and Revers' chapter particularly focuses on how class, but also gender and age, affects the positioning of graduates in the labour market.

In their chapter, Fátima Suleman, Maria da Conceição Figueiredo and Rita Henriques Guimarães study the Portuguese labour market. Compared to other developed countries, the educational attainment level in Portugal has been relatively low, but, recently, efforts have been made to upgrade the educational attainment of the population. The authors contextualise their study temporally to HE reform, which implemented the Bologna Process, and the economic crisis that coincided with it. The study looks at the differences between bachelor's and master's degree holders and, by drawing on linked employer-employee data, examines which types of occupations were assigned to young bachelor's and master's graduates. The expansion of HE has led to a generation gap in educational attainment levels, but the authors note that the wage level of young people has declined. They show a growing gap between bachelor's and master's degree holders on their positions and wages, and, further, inequalities in the labour market between males and females. The argument in this chapter is that employers are increasing their hiring criteria, and due to credential inflation, there are doubts about the role of bachelor's degrees. It seems that employers value master's degrees in such a way that it has become the new basic HE diploma.

Yuzhuo Cai's chapter develops and empirically tests a conceptual model that combines Tomlinson's model of employability capital and Cai's conceptualisation of employers' beliefs about graduate employability. The context of the empirical study is in international HE, more specifically Finnish-educated Chinese graduates and how they are perceived from the perspective of China-based Finnish employers. The author starts from the premise that it is important to study how employers view the graduates' employability capital. Employers' views develop in a process where private

and public learning intertwine, as employers learn from publicly shared views and their own recruitment. Employability capital is a relative term, and views concerning it are generated through information exchange between employers and graduates in context. An important question is whether employers are able to see the relevant competencies and resources that graduates have. The chapter raises the issue especially in the context of international students. Since the study relies on empirical data from employers, the author states that it needs further empirical testing with data from graduates.

Claire Bonnard's chapter studies employability in the French context. HE enrolment in France has increased in recent decades, which has led to diversification and segmentation of the HE system. As new student groups have gained entry to HE, more emphasis has been placed on the employability of the students. The chapter builds on the argument that the emphasis on students' employability has resulted in a trend that the author refers to as vocational drift in HEIs. It manifests itself in the creation of vocational HE diplomas and the development of work-related study modules within the university curriculum. These measures rely on human capital and individualistic views of employability, ignoring the differences related to the age, gender and social background of the graduates. The chapter reviews empirical studies on the vocational drift in French HE and argues that such trend mainly benefits students from more privileged backgrounds and certain HE programmes. The author suggests that more research that takes structural inequalities into account is needed to better understand the employability of graduates.

Matthew T. Hora focuses on reframing employability as a problem of perceived opportunities that emphasises students' perspectives, and a multidimensional understanding of employability. Empirically, the chapter studies internship experiences of Latinx students in one US college. Hora introduces the Student Perceptions of Employment Opportunities (SPEO) framework, which builds on the theory of intersectionality and multidimensional models that shape educational and career opportunities. By analysing qualitative data from a larger project, it is visualised through affiliation graphing techniques how different interrelated factors (e.g. identity, structural features in the labour market) play a critical role in shaping opportunity structures related to employability. The chapter criticises the view that students simply need to acquire skills and experience to enhance their employability, and argues that a critical perspective needs to be considered to show that access to these opportunities is not equal. The

chapter also argues that the problem of accessibility to such programmes as internships is not only a structural issue related to the labour market, but also that students' social categories and identities shape their perceptions of what is possible.

Barbara Merrill and Scott Revers focus on working-class adult students in the UK context. They start from the premise that universities have become more interwoven with the economy and the labour market, and that the main concern of universities today is to enhance human capital. The argument of the chapter is that the emphasis on employability has resulted in increasing inequalities between traditional and non-traditional students. As the framework of their study, they give a profound discussion on the concept of class and its relatedness to education and the labour market. They note that class intersects with age, gender and race, which they also show in their empirical analysis. Using a biographical method, they look at how non-traditional students experience the transition to the labour market and what kinds of inequalities they face. As the authors vividly describe, for adult working-class graduates, even getting the highest-level degrees at top universities does not guarantee a graduate-level job.

### PART III: GRADUATE EMPLOYABILITY AS A CAREER AND IDENTITY PROCESS

Part III is devoted to a discussion on graduate employability as a process in which graduates formulate and negotiate their identities, and navigate their labour market trajectories and careers in relation to the cultural and social surroundings and educational and labour market contexts in which they are located (see also Holmes, 2013; Finn, 2017; Siivonen & Isopahkala-Bouret, 2016; Tomlinson, 2017). Chapters in part III present qualitative bottom-up approaches that enable us to capture the different magnitudes of biography and social, institutional and organisational contexts of employability and related identity formations and negotiations.

Graduate employability as a descriptive, static and possessive notion referring to graduate skills and attributes has tended to be the dominant discursive frame that influences policy and institutional formulations around how to effectively supply the graduate labour market with suitably skilled graduates who can make a direct economic impact (Bridgstock & Jackson, 2019; Suleman, 2018). The alternative identity-based approach,

however, shifts attention towards how graduates perceive themselves in relation to future work, construct notions of their future selves, form values and goals and identify with different areas of the labour market. In viewing employability as relational, dynamic and socially mediated process, greater consideration is given to the formation of graduate identities and how these work in shaping people's employment experiences and outcomes.

There is no unified way of approaching the concept of identity, and this is partly shaped by the disciplinary approach in which it is conceived. Whilst the conceptual terrain on identity is broad, including identities formed towards and within working life, a number of common themes underscore this area. Firstly, at a fundamental level identity has been conceived as a reflexively organising dimension of human experience that involves a high degree of self-conceptualisation about who one is and what place they occupy in the world (Gergen & Gergen, 1997; Giddens, 1991). Secondly, identities are fluid rather than static in that they move through time and space, through context and social milieus, and are also mediated by individuals' wider life circumstances, including their contingent social characteristics. Third, and related, identities have a public dimension: whatever self-concepts individuals form are played out in a social sphere and entail some kind of negotiated ordering between the holder of an identity and those who may socially validate it (Goffman, 1959).

In the field of employability and career development, more sociological and socio-psychological approaches have been adopted, largely because they situate an individual's lived experience within a wider education, social and labour market context. As Fugate et al. (2004) discuss, identities in relation to work and career can be understood as having a longitudinal dimension that forms a trajectory connecting people's past, present and future selves. It provides a 'compass' that enables people to sense-make about the future, which forms the basis for their choices and behaviours and how they present different types of employability narratives to potential audiences. This process involves a continual process of negotiation, formation and reformation, all within the socially interactive spaces of labour market environments. This is not always harmoniously developed, especially when there is dissonance between one's publicly held occupational role and private identity struggles. For instance, many professionals may achieve an established public professional role, but this may be in tension with the lived private challenges it engenders—for example

values conflict, work pressures, a lack of fulfilment that prevents the formation of more authentic self-expression (Ashforth & Schinoff, 2016).

One of the most explicit identity approaches to graduate employability has been Holmes's (2013, 2015) work on graduate identity, which conceives employability as a processual dynamic that entails a graduate moving through different modalities of identity over time and across different contexts. By highlighting the continuity and change in a graduate's lived experience, rather than the fixed attainment of an employment outcome at the point of labour market entry, this approach conceives employability as a process that is actively realised and enacted by the interactional spaces that graduates move through when they enter the labour market. The most significant transitional movement is between formal study and employment, whereby a graduate transitions between student and graduate identities. During formal study or work experience, students develop emergent identities, relating to either a specific role or a wider place in the labour market, which they carry forward following graduation. The strength of this identity may depend on how much they have invested in this or have been able to develop appropriate narratives that enable it to be aligned to a chosen area of employment. Crucially, these identities need to be realised and actively warranted through lived interaction between graduates and significant others in the labour market, not least the employers. This works recursively as graduates move between educational and work-related episodes such as work placements or recruitment, where they present themselves and related achievements as warranting an employable identity.

A graduate's employability can therefore only be realised as the agential and purposive movement towards an agreed and accepted identity position as someone who can lay claim to being employable for a given job. This is often validated through the effective practices, presentation and performance of this identity. Conversely, a graduate's emergent identity may be spoiled if their claim to an identity is disaffirmed by others, and they may have to reformulate a new identity (for example, moving to a different occupational role). Given that many graduates are likely to shift occupational roles and positions throughout their working lives, the process of identity claim and negotiation is likely to occur at different points over their careers.

A more recent approach has been to view graduate identity as a form of resource that graduates can use to enhance their position in the labour market and develop employability-enhanced dispositions and behaviours.

One of these concerns the ways in which graduates might invest themselves in their employment futures and build up a career narrative that informs strategic choices and provides a framework for action. The construction of aligned, purposive and goal-directed identities becomes a form of ‘identity capital’ (Coté, 2016), which enables a graduate to make agential and purposive decisions whilst negotiating structural challenges within certain delimitations. Related approaches have conceptualised this kind of identity as constituting ‘future work selves’ (Strauss et al., 2012) and ‘possible selves’ (Papafilipou & Bathmaker, 2018) whereby individuals construct imaginative, ideational notions of how their future lives will play out, including professional roles, achievements and desired career outcomes. More recent research has explored the construction of professional identities (Jackson, 2016; Tomlinson & Jackson, 2021) through forms of professional acculturation that graduates engage in before and during graduation, and which enables them to align their emerging self-identity with anticipated occupational roles and experiences.

In analysing identity and career as processes, the chapters in part III seek to expand the methodological field of employability research by introducing novel, qualitative study designs and methodological perspectives on various phenomena related to employability. Much of the recent graduate employability research has adopted a quantitative perspective, which has proven to be useful in building macro pictures of phenomena linked to employability (Suleman, 2018). Qualitative research, utilising questionnaires and semi-structured interviews, has tended to focus on individuals’ attitudes and experiences and their ability to develop, adapt or repack their capabilities when entering the labour market (Finch et al., 2016).

In this book, specifically, narrative and discursive methods are developed to illustrate graduates’ construction of employable identities as they move in time, space and different contexts. Narrative and discursive approaches permit us to look beyond the dominant ‘possession’ as well as ‘positional’ approaches to employability (Holmes, 2013) and to challenge the hegemonic assumptions of graduate employability. This is possible by viewing graduate employability as an interactional and relational process through a magnifying glass, whereby graduates make sense of, negotiate and interact with the ideals around employability and the world of work (see also Komulainen & Korhonen, 2021). This interaction is itself constitutive of the types of labour market identities and dispositions they are developing. For example, positioning analysis (see Bamberg, 1997; De



Fina, 2015; Depperman, 2013) is a fruitful yet very rarely used methodological tool for examining how graduates strive to achieve, contest or reaffirm specific versions of their past, present and future selves in their discursive and narrative meaning-making (Mutanen et al., in this book; Siivonen et al., in this book; Korhonen et al., 2023).

By offering new bottom-up perspectives on graduates' identities and careers, the chapters in part III also show that graduates are called on to utilise new and intimate dimensions of their selves—personal identities, relational styles and affective experiences such as happiness and enthusiasm—in their work and career (Handley & Millar, in this book; Korhonen et al., 2023). In today's working life, the person's self is at the core of employability and the related demands and expectations. For example, health and well-being are increasingly perceived as employability and career potential to be invested in (Komulainen & Korhonen, in this book), and self-branding has become an essential skill and practice in the labour market and job search games for graduates (Mutanen et al., in this book). In this respect, the cultivation of an employable identity goes beyond skills and qualifications to encompass a wide range of mentalities, activities and practices not usually regarded as productive (Farrugia, 2019).

Although employability research is centrally concerned with graduates' education-work transitions and trajectories, that is, processes, many of the studies are retrospective in nature, providing a snapshot of a phenomenon at the time of the research. Research designs that are attentive to temporal and durational processes need to be further developed, especially from a qualitative point of view. In this book we seek to contribute to qualitative longitudinal research (QLR) methods, more specifically narrative ones, for analysing graduate employability as a temporally evolving identity process (Siivonen et al., in this book). QLR tends to explore change and temporality in various aspects of people's lives, focusing on what kinds of meanings and interpretations are given to changes by individuals themselves (Neale, 2020; Thomson & McLeod, 2015). QLR has caught the imagination of researchers internationally, but it has not been developed in the field of employability research. The narrative approach for QLR represented in this book allows nuanced analyses of the continuities and changes of graduates' meaning-making of employability in specific contexts.

In their chapter, Katri Komulainen and Maija Korhonen illustrate new forms and practices of employability and labour management among graduates. The chapter criticises employability research for detaching graduates from their careers and highlights the dynamic connection

between the individuals and the social space and time. Theoretically drawing on governmentality studies, career research and critical health studies, the chapter analyses how Finnish business graduates construct health as employability potential when they envisage and evaluate working life through ‘career imagination’. Thematic analysis of interviews shows that graduates imagine health as employability potential, firstly, in terms of day-to-day temporal rhythms of organisations and in the context of an intensive working life. Having constant physical and emotional energy and the ability to recognise health risks and self-manage these risks were essential virtues of an employee. Secondly, graduates displayed health in the context of flexible career in which health—as energy, vitality, happiness—was a driving force that guaranteed their top career performance. However, graduates saw their current situation just as one stage on the way to a better future career, which was associated with the ideals of work-life balance. The chapter concludes that health has become a moral duty and personal responsibility at work.

In their chapter, Inka Hirvonen, Päivi Siivonen and Katri Komulainen develop identity and process approaches to graduate employability. The study analyses how Finnish university students construct top-performing employable identities in their educational and working life trajectories. Narrative thematic analysis reveals that students perceive employability as a long-term process in which they invest before, during and after their studies. Students tend to present themselves in relation to the demands and ideals of the expertise in their own field, and seek to harness their personality to strengthen their employability by maximising efficiency at work and being passionate about what they do. As top-performing subjects, students actively create and develop their employability and skills, internalise an entrepreneurial way of thinking and take responsibility for their employability. Based on their results, the authors criticise the demands placed on students who are supposed to ‘have it all’—a degree, knowledge and skills and a certain kind of personality. They ask whether emphasising employability fails to acknowledge other aspects of students’ lives, such as academic growth, and what unwanted consequences this may have in the long term.

Adopting a processual perspective on employability, Thanh Pham’s chapter explores the development of international graduates’ employability over time, as they move from their role as HE students to recent graduates. Her chapter clearly illustrates the ways in which graduates from different cultural backgrounds and traditions negotiate their employability

and early career outcomes that evolve different perspectives over time. Her chapter documents changes in international graduates' personal constructions of employability from a more skills-based, meritocratic understanding during HE, where they are in 'possession' of the human capital and skills that they can trade in for employment, towards one where they must actively and agentially negotiate what is perceived to be a challenging labour market for migrant graduates. Whilst they are aware that they are 'positioned' by others as being a different and potentially excludable social group, they also learn that their employability can be enhanced by engaging in strategies that will improve their outcomes. One of these is building up forms of capital (networks, cultural knowledge, enhanced professional esteem) that empower them towards realising their employment goals.

In their chapter, Heli Mutanen, Maija Korhonen and Päivi Siivonen explore self-branding as a new practice for enhancing one's employability at the time of labour market entry. By approaching self-branding as situated identity performances, the study analyses how Finnish business degree graduates construct their employable identities in the framework of self-branding. Detailed interaction-oriented narrative analysis shows that the identity dilemma of difference and sameness in particular actualises in graduates' identity constructions in the context of job search. Graduates aim to solve this dilemma by presenting themselves as positively unique from and superior to other jobseekers in terms of their personal qualities. Moreover, they perform as 'same enough' compared to more experienced jobseekers and employees—as applicants who can bring equal value to the organisation through youthfulness and passion. In contrast, an academic degree and the skills and competencies associated with a business degree are not considered to differentiate graduates amongst equally qualified job candidates. Although the graduates rely on the topical language of self-branding when presenting themselves as credible labour market actors, they also strive to solve the moral dilemmas associated with self-branding—authenticity and fabrication—in the context of Finnish working life.

Päivi Siivonen, Maija Korhonen, Katri Komulainen, Heli Mutanen and Nina Haltia's methodological chapter uses a narrative positioning approach to document the change and continuity in graduate identity over time. Their research applies a 'small story' narrative research approach that enables researchers to chart key episodes in follow-up interview data, and presents how the past is made sense of in order to reconstruct a notion of a potential future position. For the purposes of employability research, this approach is particularly fruitful given that it gives researchers access to the

way in which individuals actively construct meaning in situated interaction and illustrates the movement of identities over time. Further, it can chart the intersection between the story world (what is being told), the telling of the story and societal master narratives. Using the case material of a recent graduate, the authors chart the trajectory of one mature graduate's early employment history and the change in perspective through shifting economic and social contexts, and how earlier constructions of their employability become ruptured through periods of unemployment that create a need to be accounted for.

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