CHAPTER 1

Introduction: Graduate Employability in Context: Charting a Complex, Contested and Multi-Faceted Policy and Research Field

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Introduction: The Political Economy of Graduate Employability

Very few issues have gained such attention and caught the imagination of those who have an interest in higher education as graduate employability. The debates over how 'work-ready' graduates are and what economic contribution they can make have been around for many decades, yet since the start of this century interest in this area has exploded. The very term 'graduate employability' has become synonymous with the ways in which the relationship between higher education and the economy is now understood. Across all counties there is a widespread concern that their higher education systems are attuned to the changing economic environment, shaped profoundly by the challenges of economic globalisation. In all cases, higher-education systems have evolved from a relatively loosely coupled relationship with both state and economy to one where their role

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is cast as highly integral to economic prosperity. Graduates have invariably been positioned as key players on the economic stage whose role and input in the labour market is of huge significance.

There is, of course, variance across countries in how widespread the discourse of employability has become. The concept has become very much established in so-called liberal economies such as the UK and Australia, but is now clearly a topic of much interest other parts of the world (Crossman and Clarke 2010; Mok and Wu 2016; Tran 2015; Cin and Neave 2014). In the UK, since the Dearing report in 1997, which explicitly called for higher education to actively enhance graduates' 'employability skills', there has been a plethora of initiatives within higher education geared towards improving how 'employable' graduates are upon graduation. Most major government reports in the UK on higher education have since made references to this, typically accompanied by strong allusions to the economic purpose of universities. Increasingly, university career services have reframed themselves as both careers and 'employability' units and are seeking to develop institutional strategies that enhance the employment outcomes of their graduates.

The issue of graduate employability is clearly a key theme, both in the changing political economy of higher education and on how the relationship between higher education and the economy has become articulated. At one level, graduate employability can be understood to have a strong economic dimension linked to the changing nature of work and movement towards a reportedly high-skilled, knowledge-driven economy. As recipients of higher-level knowledge and training, graduates are often depicted as 'knowledge workers' who will add considerable economic value through the application of their advanced skills and knowledge. But whilst the so-called knowledge-driven economy may offer new affordances and opportunities for well-qualified workers to trade off their talents and expertise, it also brings new risks and uncertainties. It is widely acknowledged that individual career paths have become less stable owing to a combination of organisational restructuring, company divestment to cheaper production locations and continued downsizing of professional core workers. Consequently, employees' career progression has been reframed in what have variously been termed 'protean', 'boundaryless' and 'portfolio' careers (Arthur 2008; Baruch 2014). The traditionally more stable pathways of managerial-level employees, often developed within a single workplace context, have given way to more variegated and fluid patterns of job movement whereby professionals are likely to work in a variety of

jobs over the course of their working lives. As a consequence of changing career patterns, the so-called 'psychological contract' people developed towards an organisation or a particular internal job market, built upon some degree of organisational affiliation and rootedness, has ruptured and given way to a more free-agent mind-set.

Changing labour market and career structures are further taking place at a time of growing geo-political competition as new economic players, particularly in East Asia, evolve their higher education and the indigenous skills base of their economies. More and more graduates, it appears, are competing for the prizes of fulfilling and high-reward employment, but have to work harder in negotiating the many challenges along the way.

At another level, graduate employability has a strong political dimension as growing emphasis is placed on policies which can enhance the economic value of graduates and the degree-level qualifications they hold. As the political narrative continues to present higher education as a catalyst for economic growth and central to nation states' skills formation strategies, higher education institutions (HEIs) have been placed under scrutiny over what they do to maximise graduates' economic potential upon leaving university. Policy-level approaches are influenced heavily by the logic of the economically-centred *human capital theory* which is predicated on the notion that educational systems effectively drive the economy. The more governments and individuals 'invest' in higher education, and approach it as an economic utility, the more they stand to gain. The knowledge and skills graduates acquire from higher education are seen as productive resources which can be traded-off in return for highly paid, high skill work.

The political and policy-level pre-occupation with graduate employability pays considerable attention towards what is often referred to as the 'supply side' of the labour market. As an institution which produces higher-level knowledge and expertise, higher education is often taken to be central to the supply of future human resources. Higher education has become viewed by policy makers, to use Keep and Meyhew's (2010) term, as a 'supply trigger' in boosting national economic growth and competiveness. This is reflected largely in three main policies' areas: the expansion of higher education into a mass system; a focus on skills-based and vocationally-aligned curricula and increasingly the shifting of financial costs on to individual graduates. These policy movements have had major impacts on the shaping and internal organisation of contemporary higher

education systems as they strive to adapt to the changing external context and become more economically competitive and efficient.

In many countries, especially in liberal economies, there has been a clear tendency towards governance principles of the 'managed market' (Palfreyman and Tapper 2014), informed largely by the policy mechanisms of New Public Management. Accordingly, universities have been subject to greater forms of performance management, audit, evaluation and comparison which are designed to ensure that their activities best serve the markets in which they operate. In this way, graduate employability has become associated with institutional performance metrics that seek to capture how effectively institutions are providing added value to graduates' formal experiences. In the UK, employability is strongly linked to the 'key information' pertaining to HEIs' relative performance in terms of the alleged success rate of graduates finding employment fairly soon after leaving university. Whilst there are inevitable problems in linking institutional activities to graduates' longer-term job market success, these policy approaches have clearly raised significant challenges for HEIs in formulating appropriate strategies to increase graduates' labour market success.

At another level, the political dimension of graduate employability drives a range of inter-related discourses around the value and purpose of higher education and students' and graduates' relationships to their institutions. In the spirit of human capital theory, it has become common to depict students and graduates as rational economic actors (a *Homo Economicus*) whose primary goals are optimising their future economic outcomes. As higher education becomes increasingly framed as a 'private good' – something which is privately funded, consumed and utilised for future economic return – students may inevitably internalise economically-driven discourses around getting a positive return on their investment. In the UK and in other national contexts, the costs of participating in HE has fallen increasingly on to individual graduates and their families. Consequently, many now perceive themselves as having higher stakeholder purchase in demanding that HEIs fulfil their market needs (Tomlinson 2016). The language of the 'student-as-consumer' appears to have fuelled these expectations, reinforced by a policy framework that protects students' service-level entitlements under consumer law (DBIS 2016). The expansion of market principles in higher education and their related drivers towards competition, consumerism and declining state expenditure have placed more pressures on individuals to do all they can to stay ahead in a less certain environment.

Taken together, the political economy of graduate employability is one of high stakes for graduates, universities and employers alike. The changing post-industrial economic context exists in parallel to a post-welfare settlement that accentuates an ethic of personal responsibility and ownership for one's educational and economic fortunes (Jessop 2003). Whilst utopian visions of the 'knowledge economy' invokes images of self-empowered human agents enjoying an Aristotelian economic good life where they are free to choose who they wish to become, the new economic context also carries discernible challenges and risks. If one side of the employability coin projects a vision of flexible opportunity and fluid mobility, the other side shows one of precariousness and uncertainty in a fast-changing and competitive labour market environment. The responsibility for employability increasingly rests on individuals' shoulders and has become a lifelong challenge beyond the point of leaving formal education. In the economic climate of the early decades of the twenty-first century, it is clear that prospective employees need to exercise increasing levels of self-responsibility and adaptability in navigating a less secure labour market and effectively manage the challenge of lifetime employment.

Locating the Problem of Graduate Employability

A recurring debate around employability has ensued over where the balance lies between the individual and labour market in determining labour market opportunities and outcomes. There are a number of definitional challenges to employability, not least concerning the precision and accuracy of the term. Such challenges are often compounded by the multiple perspectives in which employability can be approached, as well as the disciplinary angle adopted. Popular and well-cited definitions have tended to emphasise individual dimensions – for example, skills acquired, attributes possessed, attitudes formed and how these are presented and deployed in the labour market (see Hillage and Pollard 1998). An underlying theme to such approaches is the matching-up of individual-level features to job-related demands. The closer the matching, the more employable one is likely to be. Commonplace definitions which speak of individual-level capacities have taken on a somewhat tautological quality: it would be hard to argue that without some appropriate ability for employment, people stand much chance of getting far in the labour market. A more fundamental issue at stake is more to do with how this ability is converted into job market outcomes and how this is played out in the various contexts

that invariably shape the extent to which people's employability can be actualised.

An alternative approach therefore is to see employability as not simply a measure of an individuals' potential for employment, but also the social and economic context which enables this potential to be realised or otherwise (McQuaid and Lyndsey 2005; Forrier and Sels 2003). Thus, not to consider the wider context, including prevailing opportunity structures, supply and demand equilibrium, inter-group (and, increasingly, intra-group) competition for high demand jobs, means that understandings of employability become somewhat reducible to the level of individuals. As the above introduction has outlined, employability needs to be seen in its wider political and economic context, not only linked to conditions of national labour markets, but also the dynamics of mass higher education. As more graduates compete for jobs, issues about how 'employable' they are take on a new dimension compared to the situation in previous generations.

In the same way that there is no neat dichotomy between those who are 'employable' and those who are 'unemployable', employability is not simply either absolute or relative in the sense of being determined either principally by individuals' potential *or* conditions of the labour market. Instead, these dimensions interact in a way that makes employability a highly contingent problem. To this extent, employability captures the enduring interaction between individuals' agency on one hand and social structure on the other (Tholen 2015; Tomlinson 2010). It concerns individuals' relationship to a wider context beyond their immediate control, but one on which they have variable capacity to act upon and exercise relative degrees of choice and intentionality. The inner dialogues individuals form, including their labour market hopes, desires or indeed anxieties, provide a framework for action (or otherwise) that shapes how they approach their involvement in the economy. Without agential capacities, individuals' scope for realising their labour market potential is minimal, including the ability to exercise any meaningful level of volition and personal goal-setting. Yet some fundamental social structures anchor these and shape how individuals position themselves, and are positioned, within the economy.

When looking at social structure in relation to graduate employment, we can identify a number of key structural elements, all of which in some ways inter-relate. The economic context linked to the nature of late capitalist modes of production and organisational forms is clearly a significant

frame of reference, as well as an enabler or constrainer in how far individuals can realise their employability. Furthermore, the fact that there are variations across national contexts in the ways labour markets are organised (Hall and Soskice 2001) shapes not only opportunities, but the specific ways in which higher education systems regulate future job allocation. This is an important dimension as it crucially impacts on the ways in which graduates' higher education qualifications shapes subsequent outcomes in the market. In so-called 'regulated' labour markets, there is more in the way of 'occupational-specificity' between what a graduate has studied and what they do subsequently, compared to more open, flexible economies such as the UK and Australia. If national labour-market contexts are more flexible and competitive as they are in these countries, this will impact greatly on how graduates understand the meaning of their employability, how their credentials can be exchanged in the labour market and what they need to do to enhance them.

Another key structural dimension is the changing nature of higher education systems. The movement towards mass higher education is a structural shift of major significance as this also shapes the ways in which the relationship between formal educational experience and subsequent returns are regulated. The massification of higher education has not only resulted in greater diversity amongst graduates, the modes of provision they experience and types of institution they graduate from, but also the social meanings attached to being a graduate. If an individual's so-called *graduateness* in elite higher education was reflective of their relatively distinctive status as high-achieving future members of the managerial classes, mass higher education has very much ruptured this identity (Scott 2009).

Mass higher education has clearly pluralised the student experience, and in ways that make the simple warrant of being a graduate who can easily slot into appropriate future employment harder to sustain. There is a paradox at work in the student condition in mass higher education which relates to what Beck and Beck-Germsheim (2002) refer to as the 'individualisation amongst equals'. As more people acquire similar credentials, in a pluralised mass higher education context, additional work is required to demonstrate one's unique employment value. Furthermore, in mass higher education the value of someone's graduateness may also be derived from other spaces outside formal higher education, including life projects and interests that have minimal connection to any formal learning experience (Brennan et al. 2010).

Another salient structural dimension that continues to exercise a considerable influence in the ways in which individuals' experiences of education and the labour market is mediated is socio-cultural; linked to class, gender and ethnicity. We have seen how dominant policy discourses have tended to frame employability as the relatively rational matching up of individuals' employment-related assets to job market demands. A related policy motif used in relation to people's relative chances in the labour market is *meritocracy* and the notion that future outcomes are principally determined by their personal achievements, abilities and personal endeavors. This is to some extent superficially appealing as it downplays any form of structural barriers in mitigating people's relative labour market outcomes, whilst at the same time depicting the allocation of labour market rewards as fair and rational. It is the individual and their achievements which shapes employment fortunes, rather than any contingent features of their cultural profiles and identities.

However, it is clear that socio-cultural dimensions, particularly social class, have a considerable influence in shaping individual's formative experiences, which in turn shape subsequent educational experiences and beyond. This process has been shown to have occurred over a considerable period of time (Halsey et al. 1980; Reay 2001, 2013). Even though there has been more recent analysis in sociological literature on the changing constitutions of social class, as well as more nuanced distinctions between and within class groups, it is clear that higher education continues to reinforce class divisions (Savage 2015; Archer et al. 2003). This has been shown to be very much the case in liberal economies where persistent class-cultural hierarchies map strongly onto higher education systems. In such contexts, class shapes educational experiences and outcomes, mediating to a large degree the time-honoured relationship between social origins and economic destinations.

A number of insightful government-commissioned reports from the Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission in the UK (SMCPC 2013) have highlighted the continued inequalities in accessing various forms of higher education and subsequent occupations amongst people from lower socio-economic groups. Some key findings in these reviews emerge: that the composition of students accessing prestigious, high-ranked universities is disproportionately linked to higher socio-economic status and ethnicity; that access to high-ranked universities and elite professions remains an enduring challenge for lower socio-economic students; and that students' differential resources in terms of networks and wider social opportunities

significantly impacts decision-making, experiences and future outcomes in relation to both higher education and future employment. In terms of gender, whilst there is an overall higher participation rate of females in higher education, continued wage and career outcome differentials continue to exist amongst male and female graduates (Future Track 2013). Differences remain in subject choice, extra curricula activities and job choice areas which appear to impact on future orientation and early careers strategies (Stevenson and Clegg 2012).

The socio-cultural perspective on employability clearly reveals much about the relative distribution of opportunity and its relationship to subsequent outcomes. At the same time, when applied to graduate employability it also presents what Holmes (2013) has termed a 'counsel of despair': individuals are simply 'positioned' within a prevailing social order which they and others (sometimes unwittingly) reproduce. At its extreme, this approach presents a situation where people's economic fates are determined almost exclusively by pre-given cultural arrangements, around which they have limited scope for making any real difference. This renders any chance of absolute social mobility barely achievable if enduring cultural barriers ensure that the best opportunities are unequally distributed to those with existing advantages and resources. These issues aside, the influence of class, gender and ethnicity remains an important structural mediator of graduate outcomes and is clearly in need of policy attention and action.

Level of Analysis in Graduate Employability

In summary, we would argue that there are three main levels through which graduate employability can be understood:

- Macro level: at this level, employability is located in wider structural, system-level shifts in capitalism and how educational systems are co-ordinated within that framework.

As we have already observed, employability is fundamentally located in wider economic and educational changes and these crucially frame people's relationship to, and within, labour markets. The ways changes in the economy intersect with structural changes in the educational system and class structure provide a highly significant frame for understanding future job-market opportunities. This is also differentially experienced across

national and local political-economics context often providing a collective interpretative frame for how people understand and manage their employability and career progression.

Second, graduate employability can also be explored at the:

- Meso level: at this level, employability and people's work-related activities are mediated by institutional-level processes located within both educational and organisational domains.

This middle-range level is clearly important as it reflects processes occurring at an institutional level and through different modes of practice and provision, all of which can influence to some degree the shaping of graduates' labour market experience and outcomes. Institutions, and the activities occurring within, bridge broader macro-level shifts and individual experience. Two key institutions are central to the regulation of graduate employability: higher education institutions and those of the workplace. Both of these interact to some degree, although there are also many apparent disconnects between them.

At one level, we can focus attention at the level of higher education and the activities which seemingly feed into the job market and which serve graduates' personal career development. The forms of knowledge and curricula which graduates experience, as well as the status of their degree-level credentials, clearly has a bearing on their ability to access desired future employment (Brennan et al. 1996). This can be extended to additional forms of supplementary learning that is more explicitly geared towards further improving graduate outcomes, typically under the remit of employability-based provision. Considerable institutional investment has been made towards initiatives that seek to additionally complement and build on graduates' subject-specific knowledge and skills.

At another level, graduate employability is further influenced by the work organisations that graduates enter. Work organisations clearly mediate the ways in which graduates' career progression and employability is played out in context, including the transfer of knowledge and skills and their further development. The supply-side of the job market, namely higher education, is one part of the equation and foundational to what will take place over a longer period of graduates' working lives. The other side of the equation is the 'demand-side' and the features of work organisation which may enable or constrain individuals' career progression; not least key aspects such as workplace design and culture, working conditions, the

regulation of learning opportunities and professional development and supervisory/management-level support (Keep and Mayhew 2010). The organisational context also gives rise to a range of other significant experiences that impact on career progression, not least graduates' interactions with significant others within the socially-rich environments of workplaces. Individuals' relationships with significant others such as colleagues, managers and supervisors, all set within the dynamics of organisational cultures, have been shown to have a potentially considerable impact on the shaping of employment trajectories (Felstead et al. 2009; Eraut 2007; Fuller and Unwin 2010). If employability is mainly about the actual 'practice' of skills and knowledge then the workplace is a key context where such practices are realised.

Employability can be seen:

- At a *micro level* the focus is more on how employability is constructed at a personal level and its relationship with a range of subjective, biographical and psycho-social dynamics, and which are also informed by individuals' cultural profiles and backgrounds

It is at the micro level where we get the strongest sense of what employability means to individuals, the personal relationships and experiences they form towards the job market and the bearing this had on their understandings and approaches towards their individual employability. This context centres on people's subjectivities and personal frames of reference by recourse to exploring motivations, emotions, values and emergent identities. Also significant here is the way in which individuals engage in the task of managing their transition from higher education to work, including their impetus for continuous learning and their engagement in learning during the early stages of their professional life. The so-called 'subjective' dimension of employability introduces another way of looking at the relationship between individuals and economic context in the shaping of employment trajectories.

Traditional individual-level approaches have couched graduate employability in largely technical terms, for instance the matching-up of specific skills to areas of employment. However, by adopting a broader perspective on individuals' relationships to paid employment, including their motivations, values and affective responses, we move employability beyond merely technicist issues and locate it instead more fully in people's social experiences. It may also be the case that individuals are more than suitably

employable for particular jobs but may makes choices that steer them away from these. In short, graduates not only develop subjective awareness of their own absolute employability and where this might take them, but also subjectively mediate the context in which this is played out, including how their relationship with others – employers and fellow competitor graduates – in the employment field.

Employment Versus Employability

Another key conceptual challenge is picking apart distinctions between employment and employability. This is where problems can arise when assessing how effective institutions are in enhancing employability. This interest has gathered new momentum under current UK government proposals to link teaching effectiveness to how successfully graduates attain employment soon after graduating (DBIS 2015). Relatedly, a higher responsibility is placed onto HEIs for ensuring graduates experience a return in the labour market. This largely follows the logic that graduate employability is proxy to the forms of institutional provision graduates have received. A clear causal link is therefore often suggested between modes of curricula, teaching and assessment and graduates' immediate and longer term prospects. However, whilst any link between educational experiences and employment outcomes may be mediated by factors outside formal provision, considerable significance is nonetheless attached to institutional provision for generating value-added to graduates' post-university outcomes. The more immediate these outcomes are, the better this is seen to reflect the quality of institutions' provision and practices.

One of the main challenges in equating employability with formal provision is working out specifically how this has impacted on graduates' outcomes. Even though there may be little doubt that good quality provision can significantly enrich student experience and provide valuable benefits to ways students engage with their institutions, explaining how this specifically enhances graduate employment outcomes is somewhat harder to ascertain. It is clear that policy makers and university managers continue to place continued faith in the role of institutions in generating better overall graduate employment outcomes. This institutional effect, or what Harvey (2001) has famously termed the 'magic bullet' formula, rests mainly on how effectively institutions coordinate activities that ultimately enhance students' future employment requirements. The success of these activities can be gleaned from how well graduates fare in employment as

measured by their initial job destinations, which in the UK is captured by Destination of Leavers from Higher Education (DLHE). Similar measures are used in other countries, for example in Australia.

Measurement tools such as DLHE also indicate a growing trend within modern HEIs; namely the increasing pressures most experience to market themselves and present a public account of their institutional quality and effectiveness. If one of the effects of attending a particular institution is to better enable graduates to get a sound return on a three-to-four year investment, this makes them more attractive to prospective students. Capturing graduates' reported employment success is clearly a strong feature of the new performance-driven higher education context and is increasingly used to indicate institutions' relative success.

The debate over HEIs' role in boosting graduate employability is now well-established and will continue for some time. However, it also feeds into a more challenging conceptual challenge, which is to unpack the distinctions between employment and employability. It is now widely recognised that they are not the same thing, even though they may be two sides of the same coin. In emphasising the importance of graduates' employment outcomes, inferences are likely to be drawn about how employable graduates are and how this may predict longer-term employment success. Yet if we view employability as simply an outcome that provides a fairly accurate picture of a graduate's employment strength, some further analysis is required on how they achieved such outcomes, as well as their overall sustainability. Attaining employment is clearly not the same as sustaining employment, and the actual attainment itself reveals limited information on the nature of that employment and what a graduate is actually doing that may reveal how employable they actually are.

Some useful distinctions can therefore be drawn when separating employment from employability. One of these is between short-term and longer-term labour market outcomes. The former can provide a snapshot of a graduate's outcomes at a particular, albeit fairly transient, point in time. They do not however tell us how they managed to achieve this outcome or where it will lead to over the longer-term course of their careers. It is therefore not particularly easy to infer whether outcomes achieved not too long after graduating will reflect those over a longer duration. This, in turn, leads to a wider distinction between what might be seen as outcome and process. Employment captures a recognised outcome but it is largely a formal status, often linked to fairly objective markers such as a formal job title, salary and assumed level of responsibility. We would argue

that it is more useful not to look at a graduate's formal outcomes, *prima facie*, as an end outcome in itself but as an unfolding event including, on-going processes of performance and activity and future processes of development and sustainability. The depiction of employability as a *social process*, one which is fundamentally recursive in its nature, helps us draw out the relationships individuals develop with the job market and how this is played out over time.

Invariably, discussion, debate and related research on employability is often divided between normative and critical approaches, or between that which takes the individual as the main unit of analysis and that which looks at the cultural and economic context. Normative research has tended to work from the more pragmatic pre-occupations with *what works*, which when applied to graduate employability concerns questions about what can be done to further enhance graduates' employability. Such approaches themselves raise a number of critical questions over why this might be necessary. Is this because there are genuine problems with the existing level of employability that graduates have when entering the labour market and does this genuinely reflect employer responses or related research? If this is the case, what specifically is the role of HEIs in producing better graduates, and to what extent does planned provision impact on graduates' subsequent employment outcomes? What is the actual role of employers in further enhancing graduates' early economic potential and, if there is one, how can the relationship between higher education and employer organisations be better understood and coordinated? Is it the case that all graduates' employability needs to be enhanced, or is this specific to some graduates and particular areas of the graduate labour market?

We can see how critical approaches emerge from a fairly basic drilling down into some of the main suppositions that underpin a common understanding of graduates' relationships to the labour market. A recurring critique in this debate is the way in which relationships between individuals, educational institutions and future employment have been depicted. At one level this can be seen in a relatively straightforward way. Individuals have limited employability until they participate in further education and/or training. The institutions they have attended provide the appropriate knowledge and skills which then make them employable. They then transfer this into the labour market in return for better overall returns and career prospects. Yet even policy discourses which encourage more people

to 'invest' in higher education raise questions over this logic as the continued call for further improving graduates' employability skills attests.

There are related critical angles. If higher education was to further develop the additional employability skills that their general education does not necessarily provide, would this then solve the supply problem and lead to whatever purported existing skills demand in the economy being fully matched? Human capital theory has often treated divisions of labour and the segmented nature of labour markets as a function of variable skills levels across the workforce. As such, inequities in career opportunity, pay and status are a reflection of the differential levels of education and training, people have acquired and are subsequently able to trade off in the labour market. At its extreme, it could explain different job market outcomes as a failure to invest in higher education and, increasingly, additional skills. Alternative perspectives to this approach have emphasised how economic inequities are not simply a reflection of individual deficits but also wider structural laws that reward individuals differentially.

Qualifications as Declining Currencies: Skills, Capabilities or Capitals

Many suitably qualified people continue to embark upon higher education and see it as a worthwhile pursuit. The reasons may be varied, including a genuine desire for further knowledge, fulfilling prevailing cultural expectations to participate or not knowing what else they might do in the immediate term. It is clear that one of the core underlying reasons for embarking on higher education is the chance of greatly improved job prospects on graduating. Whilst lots of students may not be entirely clear as to where their degrees will lead them, most are of the general understanding that it will be advantageous to hold higher education qualification. Higher education opens up the parameters of future choice and opportunity and this drives its continued demand amongst students and their families (Dyke et al. 2012). A widespread perception remains that higher education is a worthwhile investment, albeit one that is also a 'risk investment' (Ahola and Kivenen 1999; Tomlinson 2016), bringing with it added financial pressures and related pressures to succeed during and beyond the higher education.

The massification of higher education has nonetheless altered the currency of degree qualifications and how graduates perceive their role in

shaping future outcomes (Tomlinson 2008; Roulin and Bangater 2013). Massification in some ways has become associated with the notion of 'credential inflation' (Dore 1976): as more people climb the qualifications ladders and acquire higher-level credentials, the distinguishing value of these credentials declines. The very expression, 'the degree is not enough', captures a range of challenges at the heart of the current student and graduate experience. One is the limitations of personal merit: no matter how well graduates have worked towards successfully achieving desired educational outcomes, this will still not guarantee them a return on their investment. Graduates also face inevitable competition with others in congested markets for the highly qualified, bringing its own pressures to succeed when the odds for finding sought-after employment have risen. These challenges relate to a wider issue which is the paradox of opportunity itself: without a degree qualification, people's chances of acquiring desired jobs is limited, yet this very qualification (and its related costs and challenges) increasingly plays less of a role in determining employment outcomes. This process of 'running to stand still' is also self-perpetuating: withdrawing from the competition for higher level jobs by not pursuing higher qualification in the first place puts individuals at even greater disadvantages (Brown et al. 2011).

If degree qualifications no longer equate to employability, what else is needed on the part of graduates to succeed and what can higher education further do to facilitate this? One salient approach which has been popular amongst policy makers and within certain quarters of the higher education community has been the promotion of graduates' so-called 'employability skills'. The underlying assumption here is that whatever deficits graduates continue to have after acquiring technical or subject-specific knowledge can be plugged by the acquisition of additional sets of skills which add value to their profiles. The restricted role that formal subject-centred degree qualifications have in shaping graduate employability can therefore in part be solved by the formula of: higher education + degree qualification + employable skills = graduate employability.

Simplistic as such a formula appears, it is one which has informed considerable amounts of practice and provision in universities. Nearly all UK HEIs present lists of skills and attributes that they regard as central to the promotion of their graduates' employability. Skills and attributes such a 'teamworking' and 'problem solving' so prevalent in the 1990s and early 2000s have been recently been accompanied by newer ones such as 'global citizenship' and 'digital literacies'. The challenge facing

programme designers and careers educators is finding ways of embedding these into current curricula so that they can be readily acquired and deployed amongst the graduate population.

A number of authors have expressed some concerns with the ways in which the language of skills has been pursued within the university sector and the somewhat uncritical fashion in which these issues are framed (Hyland and Johnson 1998; Bridgstock 2009; Holmes 2013). Whether referred to as 'key', 'transferable or 'generic' skills a common concern is the conceptual vagueness and the lack of explanatory value as to how they specifically impact on graduate employability (Mason et al. 2009; Lowden et al. 2011). Thus, a key issue with 'generic' skills is precisely that: they are so generic as to have meaningful currency, or indeed firm application, in graduates' future work. Simply applying a notion such as 'team-working' and 'problem-solving' to what graduates need to be adept at when they enter the labour market tells us little about the nature of their work activities and how they have been able to transfer skills-sets from one domain to another. Neither does it particularly reveal much about the kinds of on-going work-related activities graduates undertake and the particular domains through which their professional learning and competencies are actually formed.

There may be some better alternatives to understanding what may shape graduates' transitional activities and early career experiences, even when leaving aside the role played by the labour market and/or organisational environment. Whilst graduates may have limited control over the state of the labour market, they can still indeed exercise some element of volition in how they approach it, including strategies and key decisions, all of which need to be developed in good advance of leaving university. If we are to continue to see employability as being about individuals' relations to the labour market and what they need to draw upon to succeed, as well as how universities may facilitate this, it might be better to utilise the concept of employability *capitals* rather than skills. Capitals can be understood as key resources, accumulated through graduates' educational, social and initial employment experiences, and which equip them favourably when transitioning to the job market. Some of these are clearly rooted in graduates' formal education and socio-cultural milieu and are converted into subsequent economic value (see Bourdieu 1986), although being aware of these and findings ways of further enriching them is significant.

Three dominant forms of capital are likely to exercise some significant influence in graduates' employability. One of these is the *human capital*

and relates to the hard skills and technical knowledge graduates have acquired through their degree, as well as other career-related awareness and skills, including knowledge of target employment. This is no doubt foundational and a first marker used by employers, but is clearly insufficient on its own and needs to be mobilised through the *social capital* have acquired through social relations and contacts. Social capital creates a bridge between graduates' educational, social and labour market experiences and helps broker their access to job openings. The networks and social ties graduates form are potentially enabling if they bring them closer to targeted employment. Once theses ties have been established, graduates have to demonstrate the valued forms of cultural knowledge, behaviours and awareness that make them attractive to employers: their *cultural capital*, exemplified in embodied and symbolic forms. The closer this is fashioned towards the cultures of their target employer organisation, the more advantageously it will equip the graduate.

Each of these salient forms of capital are differentially acquired and utilised across the graduate population, and their value will be largely contingent on the markets they enter (Burke 2015; Bathmaker et al. 2013). Two other important capitals also have relevance in the contemporary labour market and complement the other dominant ones which graduates have acquired. One of these, identity capital (Cote 2005), relates to the ways in which graduates invest in their future careers and harness their sense of personal identity around targeted employment(s). This also entails channelling existing life and extra-curricular experience towards future careers and packaging these in ways which align to wider identity profiles of a targeted employer organisation. The other capital, *psychological capital*, constitutes the levels of resilience and adaptability graduates are able to develop in the face of what has become an increasingly challenging labour market context, which also includes periods of unemployment. They need therefore to be able to withstand set-backs, endure and navigate an uncertain careers landscape that has perhaps never been more pertinent for contemporary graduates. Both these forms of capital may be significant if they enable graduates to approach the labour market proactively and align their goals and expectations to these challenges accordingly.

The issue of identity development and its related forms of identity capital are clearly significant if employability is to some degree shaped by the ways in which graduates approach their future careers. This is also a process that occurs not only before and during graduates' higher education

(which might itself play a role in mediating on-going identity and self-formation (Brennan et al. 2010)) but also during crucial periods after graduation. If we take the transitional process to be a social process which entails meaningful encounters and interactions with significant others in the field, then the maintenance of well-defined and cohesive modes of identity becomes crucial. Holmes' (2001, 2013 and 2015) model of 'graduate identity' offers some important insights into this process and its relationship to graduate identity formation, departing from more descriptive skills-based approaches.

A central issue in the development and presentation of employability is the warranting and active affirmation of the emergent identities graduates take to the jobs market. It is this process which enables graduates to cross the boundary point between being a potential graduate and one who is legitimised and integrated into a chosen field. A potentially competent graduate simply remains such until such competence is performed and demonstrated, and then recognised and affirmed by employers. Similarly, a graduate may lay claim to being a potentially employable management consultant or civil servant, but until this is warranted in practice, for instance in an assessment centre or job trial period, their identity in this domain remains largely indeterminate. The sense of oneself as a prospective employee within an employment domain is significant in orientating an individual to a job area. Maintaining this through the course of significant interactions and episodes is what enables individuals to build identities and related forms of identity capital which carry them through their early careers.

What We Know About the Graduate Labour Market

Much of the wider picture on graduates' employment outcomes is based on large-scale survey data, such as the cross-national survey European REFLEX (Reflexive Professional in the Knowledge Economy Survey (see REFLEX 2008) and the Future Track (2013) survey in the UK. These have provided a very comprehensive overview of graduate employment outcomes, based upon longitudinal surveys which begin with students in university and tracking their progression up to five to seven years into graduation. The time-scale of these surveys provide a fairly robust basis to understanding outcomes and the ways in which, higher education experience and credentials, have served to shape these.

A number of key features emerge from this data, mainly that:

- Graduates continue to enjoy an earning premium over non-graduates, i.e. the so-called 'graduate premium';
- Graduates experience more favourable job-market outcomes, including better working conditions, greater job quality and opportunities for professional development;
- Graduates generally draw upon particular skills pertaining to their higher education and perceive higher education to have provided a positive platform to seek out and undertake graduate-level work;
- Graduates see the relationships between their higher education and the current work as a worthwhile investment in their futures;
- Graduates' values around employment encompass more than merely extrinsic and economic concerns such as pay and status, and instead include rewarding and satisfying work, making a difference and having some professional autonomy and creativity;

Similarly, this large-scale data also indicates that:

- The diversity of graduate employment is very wide, encompassing a vast range of employment sectors;
- Graduate outcomes vary across a number of areas, including gender, social background, ethnicity, subject of study and area of employment;
- The problem of graduate under-employment, or graduates in non-graduate occupations has risen over the past decade.

The above outcomes indicate a largely positive picture for graduates and their scope within the labour market; yet, whilst graduates clearly enjoy a 'graduate premium' this is dispersed across the graduate population and there is a marked variation in terms of rates of return (see Green and Zu 2010). The diversity of graduate jobs is well-established and has led to classification of graduates into different occupational schemas (see Elias and Purcell 2004). This highlights at one level that the graduate labour market is a segmented one, reflecting variegated career trajectories and outcomes. An interpretation of the diversity of occupations within the graduate labour market is that it parallels the diverse educational and social profile range in the graduate population. Graduates of a vocational programme from one particular type of university may well not pursue similar

occupational pathways to someone graduating in a traditional academic programme at another institution. But this of course might not necessarily be construed as an inequality of opportunity if occupational outcomes match expectations, or indeed educational and training profiles. The nursing graduate has enrolled on a specific programme so that he/she can subsequently embark upon a fairly modern graduate career, in the same way as someone who chose a medicine degree did with the intention of entering a well-established 'traditional' graduate career. Thus, the diversity of graduate employment is a realistic representation of the modern graduate labour market, including a range of occupational growth areas which have emerged from the expansion of service and technology-based labour markets. The diverse graduate labour market has led many to the conclusion that, with the exception of graduates in 'non-graduate' jobs, the overall majority of graduates are drawing upon graduate-level skills, including communicative, decision-making and specialist technical capacities gained through higher education.

A more critical analysis of these relative outcomes might interpret the segmented nature of graduate employment as representing a tiered labour market structure for the highly qualified, also engendering different structures of opportunity, return and overall career prospects. Dual labour-market theories (Doeringer and Piore 1971) postulate that well-qualified segments of the labour force such as graduates are located within the privileged primary core of fairly stable and rewarding jobs, whereas those less qualified are more contingent, precarious and subject to continuous displacement. This does not leave room for the possibility that dual processes may occur at similar levels, including amongst those with seemingly equal educational profiles. This interpretation therefore would take divisions into graduate market as indicating, at one level, strongly positioned, well-resourced and mobile graduates, and at other levels, those in transitory, precarious or 'sub-graduate' jobs, or even disenfranchised from the labour market altogether. Modern labour market conditions have potentially reinforced this pattern. As Lauder (2011) discusses, the rise in Digital Taylorism (i.e. the automisation and standardisation of skilled work through digitalisation) means that, even within knowledge-centred employment, increasing segments of the labour process has seen a standardisation of what might once have been seen as skilled and discretionary work. The 'grunt workers' of the modern economy are no longer manual workers, but growing numbers of well-qualified staff who are performing not particularly skills-intensive work activities.

One of the themes which has gained continued attention is that of *graduate under-employment* and the extent to which graduates are utilising their level of education and essentially realising their potential as graduates (Scurry and Bleckinscopp 2011). Whilst this phenomenon may not be widespread, it has been growing and it is reported that more graduates perceive some disconnect between their education level and the types of jobs they have attained (ONS 2013). The Future Track survey in the UK also revealed that up to thirty per cent of graduates are in non-graduate occupations, sometimes referred to as a GRINGOs, and that the issue has risen over time, coinciding, somewhat paradoxically, with the introduction of higher tuition fees.

The problem of graduate under-employment relates to the recurring debate about supply and demand and whether the occupational structure has been sufficiently upgraded to accommodate the increasing amount of highly qualified individuals. If it has, then under-employment might be seen as less a structural issue and more to do with issues such as the application of graduates' skills and their career management strategies. If there are, however, structural mis-matches in supply and demand, then more graduates may be forced to 'trade down' their qualification in the search for more loosely matched job openings. Trading down is clearly a compromise, but one which a graduate may be prepared to make if it allows entry to a targeted sector, even though the job itself is not commensurate to their qualification level. A related issue concerns time-scale and how transitory or longer-term is the experience of under-employment. Shorter-term underemployment may function as either a 'stop-gap' until more sustainable opportunities arrive, or even a developmental early career phase that provides graduates with some level of experience that can serve them for a future role where their graduate-level skills come to the fore. In an internal labour-market setting, a graduate may be horizontally under-employed – being in the right job market but wrong job – but might transit within good time to one where there is a better fit to their profile. Graduates' perceptions of job quality and relative opportunities for development are also clearly important (Okay-Somerville and Scholarios 2013).

There are also potential differences therefore between what might be seen as objective and subjective aspects of under-employment. The former can be measured fairly directly in terms of pay, status, level of responsibility and actual skill utilisation. Subjective dimensions of under-employment, on the other hand, capture the overall perceptions graduates have of their job circumstances. This again may be relative given that there are various

mediating factors involved when evaluating the scale and impact of under-employment. The graduate who enters an elite legal firm as a trainee barrister is clearly experiencing a different level of objective opportunity and early career outcomes to one who has spent the past year working as a barista in a local multinational coffee shop. However, we would need to further explore their actual experiences and perceptions to make a firmer inference about what these different outcomes means to each.

Whilst the latter job situation indicates vertical under-employment – being in a job area below one's qualification level – the differences in early career outcomes may not reveal a full picture of their early career experiences and how these shape their career perspectives and longer-term trajectories. Perceptions of job quality, how much it concords with initial expectations and its role in establishing credible career identities can significantly frame the meaning of how suitably employed or under-employed one may be. The barrister's early career outcomes may appear more favourable but only to the extent to which his/her expectations are aligned to his/her actual experiences. If the barista's actual experiences surpass expectations and are accompanied by perceptions of job satisfaction, intrinsic reward and future career opportunity then the meaning of under-employment becomes substantially altered.

Employers and Graduates

One of the major stakeholders in the area of graduate employability are the employers. There are a number of important issues when addressing the role of employers and their relationship to graduate employability. These have dominated the discussion of employers in this area. One relates to the views employers have about graduates and universities, the extent to which they meet the demands of their organisations, as well as their involvement in higher education institutions. The second is their role in selecting graduates to their organisations, including the means by which they do so and how effective and equitable these are. The final main issue concerns their role in subsequently regulating graduate labour, including facilitating career development. These are all pertinent and each raises wider sets of issues, although the first two appear to have gained most attention in this area.

There is no shortage of literature on employers' views on graduate employability and perceptions of universities. This has been presented in academic research and popular policy documentations, often through a

discussion of employer survey responses (AGR 2013). There is no particular uniformity in these responses: different employers, or indeed employer surveys, appear to reveal different perceptions. When employer surveys started to appear, signs of discontent emerged with typical charges of graduates not being sufficiently 'oven ready' and universities not pursuing the appropriate curricula. The recurring supply-side logic rears up once again in such charges: universities have to supply employers with skills to meet their needs and fill their skills gaps. The debates have become somewhat more nuanced in recent years. Employer reports often reveal a largely positive appraisal of what graduates can offer, including social, problem-solving and communicative competencies but with some areas of concern, including business acumen and adaptability. But it appears overall that employers in the main are satisfied with what graduates can offer (Keep 2012; AGR 2013; Mann et al. 2014). The potential moral panic over universities failing to meet the needs of industry has, for now at least, been kept at bay.

The second issue concerns the ways in which employers recruit graduates. This raises important questions about the nature of the recruitment itself, what function it has, how fair and rigorous it is and what wider social and cultural processes underpin this process. In any labour market, recruitment is a necessary function to ascertain the most appropriate candidate for a job (Sackett and Lievens 2008). The two main selection criteria in this process have largely been job-specific and person-specific matching – that is, the extent to which candidates meet the technical requirements of employment, as well as have the behavioural and personal qualities deemed necessary. The extent to which recruitment is fair rests largely on the efficacy of recruitment techniques in assessing these criteria, and from which the appropriate candidates are then hired.

Recruitment has also been seen to have a largely 'screening' function that utilises both elementary and more sophisticated criteria to filter large applicant pools (Bills 2003). The status of 'graduate' or 'non-graduate' is one such screening strategy as it provides a marker of one's qualification level upon which job criteria may be based. But in the likely situation that the qualification level of the candidate is a pre-given, employers will look for more information to see how well candidates match job criteria and how to set apart those with fairly similar profiles. In order to undertake a detailed screening, employers use more specific recruitment techniques to establish which candidates to recruit. For graduates, particularly those seeking to enter competitive and higher entry jobs with supply-demand

ratios of 50 plus graduates per vacancy, the importance of 'signalling' very soon comes into play. The concept of signalling (Spence 1973) refers to the job market information candidates provide that makes them more attractive and distinct from other candidates and which conveys their relative potential. Signaling processes therefore provides salient information about a candidate's profile from which employers can infer future organisational value, even if not directly how their profile will translate into actual performance.

In openly competitive markets this clearly has a significant impact and can work both ways. Prospective employees can also provide 'warning signals' (experience gaps, time away from work, a poorly composed CV and covering letter!) that employers use to discard their application. Conversely, they can provide advantageous signals in the form of additional experiences and qualifications that mark them out as potentially attractive future employees. It is not surprising that the CV has become a major tool and it appears that students and graduates are aware of engaging in extra-curricula activities in order to project more favourable signals of 'marketability' to an organisation. These wider social experiences in turn may enable candidates to depict broader personal qualities and dispositions which can be extrapolated to potential future job roles and performances. Once candidates have got to the stage of recruitment, they have to increasingly demonstrate this in terms of behaviours and self-presentations that embody what employers have inferred from a formal application.

The nature of the recruitment process itself has also gained attention in terms of the ways in which employers make decisions to hire or not different applicants and the criteria, formal or otherwise, upon which these are based. The evidence indicates that graduate recruiters are increasingly making use of assessment centres on which to base their hiring decisions (Williams et al. 2015). A dominant rationale for the use of assessment centres is that they provide more holistic means of appraising a graduate's profile. They are effectively live processes whereby candidates have some scope to demonstrate their employability in action, be that through the way they talk about their abilities and experiences, the way they interact with the recruiters, or the way they perform in activities that have relevance to a future role. This process entails a suite of activities, ranging from an in-tray activity, a group exercise and presentation through to technical and 'personal' interviews. Even the seemingly casual coffee break is a good opportunity for employers to infer whether a prospective candidate exudes the right kinds of 'chemistry' and conveys potential organisational fit.

A good body of research has brought into question the efficacy and equity to recruitment (Garavan and Morley 1997; Thornton and Gibbons 2009) not only in terms of how equitable it is, but also how well it predicts future employment performance and outcomes. Nearly all relevant studies on graduate recruitment over the past few decades have shown that one of the salient criteria is 'social fit' between applicant and employer (see Brown et al. 2011; Morley 2007; Bolander and Sandberg 2013). This refers to the extent to which graduates are able to convey the appropriate cultural signals about how well they will fit into the cultural milieu of an organisation, or at least be readily mouldable into the type of employee who is valued in a specific job context. Thus, whilst technical or job-specific ability is clearly of importance in framing hiring decisions, person-specific criteria related to the behavioural and cultural codes of an organisation are even more salient. Hincliffe and Jolly's (2011) research linked this to broader dimensions, including values, social engagement and general intellect – all of which convey aspects of graduates' identities. The challenge for graduates is to be able to capture these in the form of convincing personal narratives and self-presentations that give them advantages over others.

The graduate recruitment research clearly raises wider equity challenges and these have been intensified in exclusive and competitive labour markets which have traditionally been accessed by a relatively limited cadre of graduates. The growing stringency of employers' hiring decisions has further been legitimised by what has been seen as an ideological discourse of the 'war for talent' (Micheals et al. 2001). This is predicated on the notion that talent is a rare commodity, the preserve of the few and usually possessed by those who have enjoyed relatively elite forms of education. This has meant that, in elite occupations at least, the decision to recruit certain types of graduates, often from elite universities and with stronger cultural and social resources and networks, has been given renewed legitimacy. Consequently, the talents of a large corpus of suitably qualified and able graduates may not be being properly recognised (Ashley et al. 2015). Whilst firms may be starting to acknowledge this and adapt recruitment criteria to reach a wider graduate body, there appears to be some way to go before the process becomes more equitable and efficient. These issues in turn raise significant issues – at a time when more graduates have made a significant investment towards their higher education and have been primed by governments and their wider societies for economic and social success, the problem of equitable entry and return could not be more salient.

Organisation of This Book

The wider overall aim of this book is to offer novel and alternative ways of thinking about the problem of the graduate employability agenda. This book provides no particular answers or solutions to the employability challenge and does not set out to do so. It provides no how-to-do formulas, or definitive and ready-made tool-kits that assist us in making our graduates more employable. Instead, chapters within the book open up original and thought-provoking conceptual and research-based discussion and invite reader to think more broadly about the issue of employability. The first section of the book is concerned with the conceptual debates in this area and pays particular attention to the wider socio-economic and policy context. The main part of this section also places the issue in context and offer some rich conceptual insights, but has a stronger leaning towards the more applied and empirically-focussed research findings.

The first two chapters of this book place the graduate employability agenda in the wider political and economic context and explore it through different levels of analysis. As the first two chapters by Andrew and Frances Rothwell and Staffan Nillsons discuss, there are multiple levels of analysis and foci to the employability agenda, encompassing multiple stakeholders. The analysis developed by Andrew and Frances Rothwell locates graduate employability in four dominant contexts, the first two of which are at the level of national policy and human resource development strategy, and the latter two are at the level of higher education policy and curricula and then at the level of individual graduates' career perspectives. In examining the concept against wider policy and political developments, Rothwell and Rothwell are able to chart the politico-economic trajectory of the concept from its fairly functional manpower job-matching labour market function through to more recent policy and Human Resource approaches which are focused on enhancing individual employees' proclivities towards lifetime employability. The post-welfare neoliberal framework which the authors critically engage with has put the emphasis on individuals, rather than states or employers, as being the key agents of job creation and opportunity. By extension, the actual role played by human resource development in work organisations in formally structuring lifetime employment is all too *ad hoc* and subject to very localised modes of provision.

In the context of employment precariousness, diminishing training resources and the erosion of strong internal labour market structures through competitive outsourcing, there remain critical questions over the

extent to which companies are incentivised to 'train their own'. In relating discussions to more graduate-level issues, they conclude with a focus on their concept of 'self-perceived' employability which is based on graduates' own perceptions of their employability and it links to both 'internal' perspectives (including self-efficacy and motivation) and external (the state of the labour market and the value of their particular degree programme).

In a similar vein, Staffan Nillson's chapter develops an analysis which explores the complexities in the relationship between higher education and the labour market, making an explicit connection between the supply of graduates to their demand in the labour market. He uses many examples from his own research context of Sweden to develop his discussions. On the former issue, he points out that the international massification of HE has both intensified the competition for jobs and dislocated the traditionally reciprocal interplay between HE and the labour market. The supply-demand dynamic is made more complicated by the variety of provisions and related skills and competences which higher education offers, including vocational and academic pathways, as well as the variegated skills-sets different graduate occupations requires. Nillson discusses the differences between potential and realised employability, arguing that whatever competencies and potential graduates have must be given flight in working life. Here, the actual 'operationalisation' of a graduate's employability becomes paramount both in terms of negotiating access to jobs and sustaining them over time. Nilsonn's argues that: "*A central aspect of being employable is the ability to obtain a job and one important aspect of employability, especially in areas with high competition for jobs, is the ability to market oneself, to negotiate and to accentuate the appropriate forms of individual competence, personal capital, social capital and cultural capital to a recruiter*".

Sociological concepts clearly have value in understanding graduate employability as the earlier discussions reveal, largely because they capture the relational nature of graduates' experiences and place them into the context – educational, socio-cultural and labour market –of the way through which graduates transit from HE to working life. Moreover, they connect structural dimensions with graduates lived experiences and how the former shapes personal frames of reference. The chapter by Burke, Scurry, Bleckinsopp and Graley offers an explicitly structural analytical lens, drawing upon two key social theorists, Pierre Bourdieu and Margaret Archer. The theme of employability as a social process, but one which is further located in the socio-cultural context of graduates' wider cultural

milieus, frames their discussion. Their chapter presents some illuminating discussions on the ways in which Bourdieu's key conceptual tools of capital, habitus and field can be applied to graduates' transitions and early experiences in the labour market. These raise further critical questions about dominant economic paradigms on employability, namely human capital and skills biases approaches, given that they do not particularly acknowledge way of these becoming socialised or at least socially mediated in graduates' transitional and job-search activities.

As Burke et al discuss, Bourdieu's theorising is potentially helpful in showing the ways in which different graduates (often via their class, gender and race) are positioned within the wider labour market field. The habitus they form through their wider socio-cultural and educational experiences shapes perceptions and subjective opportunity structures, which in turn clearly anchor decisions and outlooks. The 'unthinkability' some individuals have about participating in university, or at least certain 'types' of university, clearly precludes them from even applying to certain institutions. Yet in many instances this extends to post-graduation decisions; and in the case of graduates from lower socio-economic home background who self-select from job markets which are seen as beyond their own socio-cultural milieu, this appears to be very real.

The application of the Critical Realism theoretical lens informs the chapter by Paul Cashian. This offers an original and potentially very insightful way of understanding graduate employability. Cashian makes a case for an alternative understanding to the dominant 'causal' accounts of employability which are highly implicit in many skills-based and metrics approaches which link specific provision to alleged employment 'outcomes'. Critical realism posits that any complex problem, such as graduate employability, exists in a 'deep social structure' of reality rather than being based on linear and one-dimensional sets of events and occurrences which lead to very specific and predictive outcomes. Social structures have multiple dimensions, including students' home background, their university and their target workplace, but these are also further mediated, and are also partly constitutive of, other structural or 'indirect' variables, including students' age, gender, social background, subject area and degree type. Cashian therefore argues that: *"Under the critical realist lens employability becomes a multifaceted phenomenon at the heart of which are individual students/ graduates consciously, and unconsciously, creating and developing their employability in response to the surrounding social structure*". Central to the employability process is the acting, agential graduate trying to

negotiate the parameters of a pre-existing social reality called the graduate labour market, and their outcomes are constrained or enabled by factors closer to home which may influence the extent to which they are realized.

The chapter by Donald, Baruch and Ashleigh explores highly pertinent conceptual themes relating to career flexibility and mobility in the context of the new 'protean' career settlement that the current graduate body are likely to experience over their working lives. Drawing upon UK and international research in this field, they discuss how for younger cohorts of employees the average movement between jobs appears to be every four years. As these authors discuss, there are multiple forces behind the movement towards career mobility, not least economic globalisation and the more fluid geo-economic flow of labour towards new and cheaper production locations. They also extend to social changes linked to changing family structures, dual-wage households and an aging workforce. In their chapter, Donald, Baruch and Ashleigh outline the different dimensions and meanings of the protean career as well as its variant, the 'boundaryless' career. Their chapter discusses the implications this movement has for graduates who, at one level have embarked upon a programme of study that sets them on a potential career pathway and, at another, have increasingly become socialised towards greater flexibility. The old 'bounded' graduate careers of yesteryear have given way to the boundaryless trajectory of the modern job market. This may now also be born of choice and preference than necessity as the old image of 'corporate man' appears to carry less appeal.

In a thought-provoking chapter, Phil McCash explores graduate employability from a number of focal points, including 'accounts', 'formulas', 'typologies' and 'metaphors'. Each of these in some ways act as organising heuristics for understanding the issue but also, perhaps more significantly, they reflect different intellectual approaches and traditions. Yet even within each category there are some marked differences in approach, reinforcing the notion that a common, agreeable employability definition or approach may be eternally elusive. In the 'accounts' heuristic, human capital accounts present a very different explanatory and analytical account of graduates' career decisions and subsequent outcomes than, for example, accounts of careership. Similarly, metaphors are never far away in employability discourse; and as with other areas of social and economic life their appeal is often based on spatial and visual images which convey salient details about the phenomena they depict. Metaphors around 'competition', and their related images of 'playing games' in labour market

'fields' may not explicitly speak to other metaphors relating to 'drama' and their associated images of 'stages' and 'audiences'. But there are shared points of references in each – not least the key players and actors who are the centre of the metaphors. In exploring the many focal angles to employability and careers, McCash opens up a wide body of literature. Drawing upon the traditions of depth psychology, his chapter considers how much of the current employability discourse often works at meta-level, often subliminally channelling unconscious signifiers of how we feel we should relate to ourselves and the world at large.

The relationship between graduate employability and professional development and formation is highly relevant to the current discussion, not least because we need to pick apart the difference between professional development taking place in formal educational settings and those in the actual professional context itself. Mariana Gaio Alves presents an outline of the meaning of professional learning and how this has taken increased prominence in discussion of career development in the flexible modern labour market context. As Alves points out, *"the trajectories of higher education graduates within this context have become marked by a growing number of situations in which students work while studying, as well as by the increasing number of adults who engage in learning in its various forms while being employed or when unemployed"*. Her chapter develops some important themes in the area of professional learning, in particular the awareness most graduates have of needing to embark on lifelong learning and the ways in which this is both formally and informally achieved. If graduates embark upon formal learning, which may include gaining further qualifications, they will wish to see how well this equips them for future employability. This in turn carries implications at a time when more graduates feel the need to invest further in their education to acquire more credentials (including post-graduate study). If lifelong learning becomes instrumentally orientated then the intrinsic value of learning for its own sake – which may be very beneficial and stimulate further learning – becomes marginalised. Alves' chapter develops some important themes on the role of informal learning, including the various dimensions (including time, spaces) through which they occur and relates these to recent graduate employability discourses.

The impacts of internationalisation and the global mobility of graduates is a highly pertinent issue and is addressed in Zhen Li's chapter. Much has clearly been made of the global skills race, the increased movement of highly qualified graduates across geo-political borders and the

development of emerging economies' skills bases. In this context, further attention needs to be given to the experiences of international students, what they learn and acquire when studying abroad and how this is then used in their transitions to their own or other countries' labour markets. As Li discusses, the evidence on international students is variable with some data indicating that repatriated graduates enjoy better prospects and returns in the labour market, others perceiving that the currency of an international degree is starting to decline. Her chapter outlines the cultural-specific modes of capital which enhance graduates' access to jobs, using the Chinese example of the concept *suzhi* to illustrate the qualities pertaining to whole-person development and capabilities formation which adds value to Chinese graduates' experiences and future outcomes.

One of the enduring challenges for graduates is not such their ability to simply 'transfer' their knowledge, but also to reflect on what they have learned and then articulate it in compelling ways to employers. Much of what is implicit in students' learning could be made explicit, and it is perfectly legitimate for students to conceive their learning through an employability 'lens' if they are able to see the value in extrapolating this more widely to future lives. Hinchliffe and Walkington's chapter explores these issues, focussing on a significant area which they argue as key to graduates' employability: judgement-making. This is also constitutive of other important capabilities, including decision-making and argumentation. In most graduate jobs, these are drawn upon fairly routinely and across most levels of graduate occupations. As these authors argue: "Making and defending judgements helps students to learn how to become *responsible for those judgements"*. Hinchliffe and Walkington's chapter draws upon several case studies, exploring a number of problem-based learning activities designed to encourage student reflection. In the cases they outline, students are involved in research dissemination and evaluation and real-world scenario planning. Significantly, judgment formation and the appraisal of complex and multiple levels of information are exercised at length. These authors make a convincing case for the cultivation of judgement formation and continued *reflection on learning*; and far from these capabilities being at the softer end of the soft skills spectrum, they are integral to the kinds of choices and judgments graduates make. This is not only applicable to specific job tasks, but also to career decision process and judgments and values about jobs they wish to pursue.

The chapter by Paul Greenbank reveals some interesting tensions in the ways in which many graduates plan and think about their careers and

their management: whilst getting on the graduate 'career ladder' is a key rationale for entering HE, students do not always engage in strategies and planning that enables them to do so. One of the challenges is that students may be inclined to adopt present-focused rather than future-focused orientations, partly based on an anticipated serendipity that the future will, somehow, work out. Drawing upon the decision-making concepts of System 1 and System 2 thinking, Greenbank discusses how, in the research he conducted in his own English institution, there was greater evidence of students' career outlooks being guided by systems 1 modes (i.e. intuitive, instinctive and impressionistic) rather than system 2 one (i.e. rational, deliberative, objectively based). His chapter shows therefore that there are still many challenges for both graduates and careers counsellors in encouraging students to develop more flexible and goal-driven post-university decision and planning. His chapter points to some potentially valuable action-orientated approaches which may help graduates in this area, ranging from important 'unfreezing' techniques through to formulating personal and career objectives and developing reflective approaches to dealing with potential career challenges.

The chapter by Paivi Sivvonen presents findings from biographical case studies with mature graduates. The focus of this study is all the more relevant given that this group of graduates has often been neglected in employability research. Moreover, if the workforce is ageing and employers are adopting more flexible approaches to recruitment workforce development, then we might expect more successful integration amongst older graduates. There is much rich biographical material in Sivvonen's study, based on longitudinal material that engages with graduates' educational biographies and early career experiences and the interplay of both. There are overlaps here with some of the themes developed by Burke *et al* in that mature graduates are often 'positioned'; and in ways that do not always allow them to be sufficiently 'match' employers' preferences. Sivvonen's data further reveals that there is often a critical intersection between age, social class and gender-all of which are played out, affirmed or challenged in these graduates' early career stages. Perhaps most importantly, as her rich biographical case material shows, there is no clear homogeneity amongst particular 'types' of graduates such as those of more mature age. Whilst mature graduates face common challenges and potential barriers, and look to draw on their agency to negotiate them, there are still differences in how each are positioned. This is often influenced not only by specifics of their biographies but also crucial events and interactions within their early careers.

We have discussed throughout this introduction how analysis is often weighted towards 'supply-side' discussions which typically focus on the skills and knowledge provided by HEIS which is then matched in the labour market. Rather mysteriously, the 'demand side' appears to take care of itself and the skills actually acquired in the labour market which are ultimately of longer-term career value are given less attention. Lindberg and Rantatalo's chapter addresses this issue and explores the 'practice' dimensions of graduate employability. Drawing upon fieldwork within the medical and police professions, their research focuses on two key demand-side issues: selection and early career integration. Both are important areas where judgements of 'competence' come to the fore and where the symbolic and affective levels of communication and interactions between graduates and significant others is paramount. In this conceptual vein, it is harder to view the notion of competence as merely about meeting objective criteria of job-specific demands, and instead is referenced against the symbolic and affective institutional constitution of a workplace. The more graduates can practice these and execute them through desired behaviours, the more favourably their employability is likely to be judged. Lindberg and Rantatalo provide a compelling illustration of how this works in organisational contexts such as medicine and the police services, both of which are steeped in behavioural codes and where judgments about employee calibre is often pervasive. As these authors show, employability is not simply performance-orientated but also socially-orientated in the sense of being located in the socially-rich occupational environs in which professional competencies are acquired, developed and deployed. The social make-up of graduates is important in the appraisal of appropriate competences, employees' integration and adjustment. It clearly plays an important role in any process of occupational socialisation.

As we discussed earlier in this chapter, employability also needs to be analysed at the micro level and how graduates individually perceive and manage their career development. In her chapter Lorraine Dacre-Pool applies her and her colleagues' CareerEdge model which has clearly been influential in the UK and many other national contexts in working through more practical aspects of employability and careers provision. In her chapter, she focuses chiefly on two of the model's most significant dimensions, which she argues have become crucial in graduate post-university transitions: emotional intelligence and self-efficacy. In the post-industrial context, it is widely believed that many of the people-orientated, customer-facing and communication-driven forms of work necessitate the

skills of empathy, reacting effective to situations and projecting one-self convincingly – all of which are clearly important in the recruitment process. As Dacre-Pool writes: *"developing emotional competence is something of vital importance to future graduates who, let us not forget, are our potential future leaders, both in workplaces and society in general…*" In terms of self-efficacy, graduates clearly need to carry forward positive beliefs about themselves around their abilities and what they can offer- more so in tough environments where early set-backs may be inevitable.

The chapter by Melinde Coetzee is also very much in the psycho-social mould of linking employability to graduates' own self-evaluations of their employability. The career 'pre-occupations' involved in graduates' development, entails some key components pertaining to attitudes, motivations and emerging identities, all of which can explain how well graduate adapt to the challenging employment context they enter. A key issue here, as Coetzee explores, is that of career adaptability. Without such a resource it becomes harder to sustain an employability narrative beyond fairly limited domains. Most significantly, this gives rise to further capacities, including the ability to move jobs, make work-life adjustments, cope with change and engage in continued professional learning. The need for a more proactive and open mind-set has perhaps never been more important and Coetzee's chapter provides clear evidence on the relationship between graduates' levels of career adaptability and career-related psycho-social orientations; and again, the issue of self-efficacious beliefs and attitudes that graduates have formed is shown to be a key influence in how graduates approach their career development more broadly. Such findings clearly have relevance for career guidance and helping graduates understanding their own pre-occupations and dispositions, including the areas they need to work on. As Coetzee discusses, *"well-developed employability capacities help graduates to function successfully within a rapidly changing work environment and to contribute to a range of employer requirements over the course of their working lives*".

Graduate employability raises significant issues for not only curriculum development but also how we think more widely about the future of university provision as we move through this century, and this does not appear to be lost on policy makers and university managers. Ruth Bridgstock's chapter brings together some major themes in a timely discussion of curricula innovation and the changing nature of knowledge (co)production and application. Her chapter places this in the context of highly pertinent discourses on the changing nature of professional work

in the digital economy, most of which she argues is based on the creative and knowledge capital a graduate can harvest. This is also played out in a boundaryless careers landscape where the importance of knowledge networks and relationships becomes paramount. In this context, the challenge of aligning university curricula to future employment takes on a new dimension, requiring innovative thinking which challenges status quo ideas about skills provisions. As Bridgstock argues, "…*there is limited value, and possible danger, in providing decontextualised and genericised lists of desired individual skills and capabilities. While very difficult to avoid, this practice encourages a superficial 'tick box' approach to curriculum, and promotes a lack of specificity and depth in conceptualisation and teaching*". Her chapter puts forwards a new model of university learning which in its nature is social, experiential, situated and, significantly, trans-disciplinary. This, she discusses, has relevance across all disciplinary domains, including those whose pedagogies have been largely anchored around traditional disciplinary knowledge.

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