

Uncertain transition: exploring the experience of recent graduates

Research report prepared for HECSU

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1. Summary

What is the transition from university student to being part of the workforce really like for graduates? How do they reflect upon this transition themselves and how do they tell their stories? Commentary on the graduate labour market comes from many sources; the media publish doom and gloom stories, government produces a raft of statistics about the variable return on a degree, employers bemoan the job-readiness of some graduates, and universities remain resolutely upbeat about their graduates' prospects. But what do recent graduates say about their lived experience of uncertain and competitive job markets? Graduates for whom the transition from university was not smooth were the priority group for this study, rather than those who tend to be eagerly picked up by university marketers as success stories.

Drawing upon a range of data sources including focus groups with students before the end of their degree courses, and a survey and interviews (16-20 months after graduation), this study targets for analysis graduates from Arts, Creative Arts and Humanities subjects¹; typically subjects that in mainstream reporting on the benefits of university study are considered to have a lower return in relation to a graduate premium. Data used is part of a larger data-set collected as part of a PhD research project which is still underway focusing on 2014 graduates from one northern, urban, Alliance group university and seeks to build a more nuanced narrative to that which emerges from debates about graduate destinations that are associated with the Destinations of Leavers of Higher Education (DLHE) survey.

The research discovers that some of the fears students have about the job market may not be borne out in reality. Tracing early trajectories shows that graduates experience considerable change in both career circumstances and ideas, with evidence of steady improvement overall. As such, this research supports critical voices which point out the limitations of the current timing of the DLHE survey. It also reveals the subjectivity of graduate responses to questions about the value of their degree for their career, but also shows that most are very proud of their academic achievements. There is a diminished confidence/understanding of the transferability of graduate skills and knowledge to areas of work not directly related to a degree subject. Graduates are not passive players in uncertain and precarious work environments and many are pro-actively responding to the challenges they face in seeking fulfilling work. A number of factors contribute to graduate resilience including the morale-boosting support from family and friends, living in a location where there are graduate opportunities and having people to turn to have career conversations. The ability to draw upon valuable resources in the guise of social, economic and cultural capital is significant in managing early challenges and differences in social background impact on this.

¹ This study broadly follows the categorisation of subjects used in What Do Graduates Do? (AGCAS/HECSU 2015).

Implications are drawn from findings for universities, the current generation of students and graduates and those who advise and employ them. The following are recommendations for universities based on project findings:

- To continue the appropriate embedding of career capital building activities which will specifically address unequal access to opportunities and networks experienced by those from a lower social background.
- To work to provide students a more nuanced narrative of graduate career pathways which makes them aware of both possible positive and negative experiences all of which add up to a typical career path.
- Within careers education activities, to address what career planning is really about, and seek out ways to improve knowledge of occupations and the job market.
- To routinely provide information to students and graduates about their rights at work, so that they can avoid potential exploitation.
- To seek out ways to enable career conversations that are timely and sensitive, e.g., via specialist career development support, as well as through activities such as personal tutoring.
- Educators to embrace discussions about careers with students that go beyond a narrow focus on such topics as skills and work experience (although important), e.g., addressing issues around the limitations and possibilities of individual endeavour.
- To develop more sophisticated approaches to staff development for the wider range of staff involved in employability, e.g., exploration of psychological and sociological issues inherent to careers.
- To develop appropriate strategies for supporting recent graduates as they begin their careers. This should include online support for those who cannot attend the university.
- Students and graduates need to be encouraged to build their community of supporters as those who have a stronger and wider network will be have more resources to draw upon. This is particularly the case in creative and media industries.
- The significance of location needs to be explicit for graduates when considering their careers. Increasingly where you live has influence on what choices are available; and the UK labour market is very varied in terms of opportunities.

2. Introduction

Uncertainty appears to be a feature of contemporary life. Whether in relation to financial markets, geo-politics or global terrorism, our society and economy is facing new questions for which there are no easy answers. The labour market and the careers that individuals can develop for themselves share this uncertainty as the nature of work is affected by factors such as globalisation and the development of new technology. Received wisdom tells us that graduates with their higher qualifications (and status as potential knowledge workers) are better positioned to navigate uncertainty. However, the advent of higher tuition fees has raised the stakes with regard to the economic return from a degree. In a marketised environment, universities do not dwell upon the complexity of labour markets and the challenges graduates may face when they sell their courses. However, for university staff including lecturers and careers service personnel whose role it is to support current students and graduates starting out, ignoring questions about the diverse range of experiences for graduates is not an option. A focus of attention in recent research on graduate transition has been directed towards what characterises graduates who make a “successful” transition (Pennington, Sinclair, and Mosley 2013). This project aims to consider those who may not be considered conventionally successful especially as defined by existing employability metrics based drawn from the Destinations of Leavers of Higher Education survey (DLHE) to evaluate graduate success.

Media commentary is preoccupied with graduate unemployment, but particularly underemployment. The latter generating controversially varying estimates of up to 47% underemployment by the ONS (2013), 58% by the CIPD (2015) and 25% by HESA (2016). In parallel to this is the popular idea that this generation of graduates has been adversely affected by public policy which means they are paying more for a degree, while graduating into a more precarious labour market (Howker and Malik 2010). Others are more pragmatic about the career benefits of doing a degree, arguing that adjustment on the economic return of a degree is a by-product of the expansion of higher education (Behle et al. 2015), whereas others are more optimistic and highly critical of the alarming data drawn upon by organisations such as the ONS and CIPD (Ball 2015).

Questions underpinning this report are: how do soon-to-be graduates view their prospects in the job market? What attitudes to careers do recent graduates have and what challenges do they experience in the job market? What contributes to their resilience in coping with such challenges? Answers are sought that go beyond statistics to explore what uncertainty such as unemployment/underemployment may mean for graduates themselves? Is it always a bad thing? Are graduates creating alternative pathways and measures of success? Are there wellbeing consequences for graduates in terms of frustrated ambitions? How do they view their own employability and prospects? And with hindsight, how do they view their university’s efforts to support them in the development of employability?

Within this context, the notion that Arts, Creative Arts and Humanities may face a more uncertain future than their peers is not a new one. I graduated in the late 80s with a degree in English and History and remember being taunted by the joke, “What do you say to an English graduate? Big Mac, please!” A former education secretary even recently pointed out that choosing to study the arts risks a diminution of career options (Paton 2014). Contemporary fiction and biography has foregrounded the prosaic challenge of finding fulfilling work for graduates from certain subjects (Killeen 2015, Nicholls 2009, Bissett 2011, Southwood 2011, Mercy 2015). And reflecting on how much easier it was for a previous generation who wanted to pursue more traditionally precarious careers, media coverage chronicles the stories of successful artists, who talk about the value of spending time on the dole for their productivity (Guardian 2015). Research historically supports the perception that Arts, Creative Arts and Humanities typically take longer than their peers to settle into a career (Purcell and Elias 2004, HECSU & AGCAS 1999), but with league tables and government performance measures focusing on graduate destinations 6 months after finishing a degree, and proposals to draw down data from the HMRC about earnings (cf Britton et al. 2016), these are subjects which are defensive under the spotlight of policy exchanges about higher education and the value of a degree. Such a debate privileges the economic benefits of having a degree over the social and cultural benefits individuals may get. A discussion of the latter seems to have been silenced in many debates, with the implication that these are a luxury.

In choosing to research this topic I was influenced by popular ideas that are sceptical of “positive thinking” as a solution to all problems and argue that it is wise to actually face the possibility of negative outcomes (Burkeman 2013, Cederström and Spicer 2015). For some time, I had been troubled by the statements that I had heard more than once at events designed to motivate individuals about their career such as “the only thing stopping you from achieving your dream job is yourself”. This notion appears to fly in the face of what we know about how social background can influence individual career trajectories (Burke 2015, Bathmaker, Ingram, and Waller 2013) as well as wider structural inequalities of society and the labour market (Standing 2014, Savage 2015, Wilkinson 2010). Hence I chose to research those for whom life post-graduation had not been plain sailing and by doing this I aim to discover more about the diverse experiences of graduates, and encourage a debate that allows universities to be more candid about how they present the ups and downs of graduate careers which does not have to compromise the value of doing a degree, and will benefit how students and graduates can anticipate and prepare for the future.

3. Background

Writing about careers draws from different disciplines including sociology, psychology, management, labour market studies and economics as well as the career guidance community (Hirsh 2016, Inkson, Dries, and Arnold 2015) and this study has selected just some of what has been written in order to situate this project into existing literature about the graduate transition experience. Where the emphasis lies in relation to structural constraints and individual agency varies across research in this area.

The predominately quantitative work of the Warwick Institute of Employment Research (Elias and Purcell 2013, Purcell et al. 2013, Behle et al. 2015) which is seminal in graduate labour market studies tends to have a more pragmatic interpretation of the job market arguing that unemployment is usually short-term for graduates, and that the nature of graduate jobs is evolving which means that classic definitions of a graduate versus non-graduate job do not always reflect new and niche graduate positions. Complementary to this analysis, recent work by Savage (2015) in developing a new typology of class in the UK identify specific new social class categories which are often populated by graduates, e.g., emerging service workers. They also argue that despite the poor economic situation that many recent graduates experience, their accumulated cultural and social capital gained during university can contribute to graduates rarely being present in the lowest social classes, e.g., the precariat. Other labour market reflects on the disparity of graduate outcomes; overqualification and subsequent job dissatisfaction amongst graduates is described and a modestly declining return on personal economic investment in higher education in recent years is observed (Green and Zhu 2010, Green and Henseke 2016). Green et al argue that although graduate earnings have held up for 'the average graduate' and have gone up significantly at the top end, the 'long tail' of those who do not get expected returns has increased and those who fall into that category may be more prone to getting trapped in lower quality employment. Thus they are sceptical of normative optimism about human capital finding its natural place in the economy, but do not argue that fewer individuals should get a degree but rather that a focus on economic benefits is overplayed, and wider societal value of having a more highly educated population should have greater attention. Other quantitative research focuses on regional differences in labour market structures and the structural factors that impact on students and graduates in relation to the labour market. Relevant to this study which focusses on graduates from a northern university, Rafferty et al (2013) explore considerable regional differences for both underemployment and unemployment. They argue that several of the sub-regions and cities of the north of England also suffer a fairly entrenched and comparatively high level of underemployment and over-education. The predominance of research and commentary that favours quantitative data has led some to argue that a more qualitative research approach would be valuable in understanding how individuals respond to varying labour market conditions. In their literature review of underemployment Scurry and Blenkinsopp

(2011) argue that analysis of the meaning making that individuals confer upon their own career situation has been under-researched.

In contrast to writing about labour market structural factors, other commentary discusses individual agency within such contexts. Employability of individuals as a concept appears to have grown as opportunities for employment seem to have lessened and become less clear. Universities are under the spotlight in relation to how they support their students' employability. McQuaid and Lindsay (2005) critique the evolution of employability into something that tends to be focused on individual employability rather than acknowledging the combination of individual factors, personal circumstances and external factors which influence an individual's likely success. The relationship that they write of between structural constraints and individual agency has been a recurrent theme in writing about graduate employability (Tomlinson 2012, Brown, Hesketh, and Williams 2004). Meanwhile popular ideas endure which prioritise individual effort and hard work and which have faith that success is meritocratic (Gladwell 2008, Sandberg 2013) and can come to anyone who puts in the required effort. An extrapolation of such individualism is extremely demonstrated in programmes such as "The Apprentice" which has been criticised for promoting a form of selfish individualism (Biressi and Nunn 2014, Biressi 2013, Mendick, Allen, and Harvey 2015). Such ideas of "the entrepreneurial self" risk ignoring structural constraints that limit career trajectories (Burke 2015, Bathmaker, Ingram, and Waller 2013) and de-value the infrastructure that can benefit the majority not just the lucky few.

Other writing on careers from both management and psychology also give emphasis to how individuals can have agency in uncertain environments. Protean career attitudes (Hall 2004, Baruch 2014) are associated with the extent to which an individual can manage a career in a proactive, self-directed way driven by personal values and subjective success criteria. This orientation is often associated with the idea of a boundaryless career which captures adapting to career paths that are less linear and structured (Briscoe et al. 2012, Arthur, Khapova, and Wilderom 2005). Writing for a career guidance audience, Savickas has developed the concept of career adaptability as a way to analyse individual career development with a focus on control, concern, confidence and curiosity (Savickas and Porfeli 2012). Krumboltz's work on "planned happenstance" (Krumboltz and Levin 2010) has also proved popular amongst career counsellors with its tangible focus on taking action in what may appear chaotic environments. Arguably, such perspectives still risk ignoring structural constraints upon individuals, although not to the same extent as ideas heavily criticised by cultural studies critics such as Biressi and Nunn (2014).

In summary then, labour market observers describe how work is changing and how this affects graduates. Those from a more sociological background focus on how social and economic structures constrain people's career paths, and writing from psychology and also management gives emphasis to how individuals can have more control over their own destinies. My research is mindful of the value of different schools of thought, and in giving

priority to a more qualitative approach seeks to consider how individuals view their own positioning in the labour market, as well as what scope they may believe they have for agency.

4. Project context

Data about graduate destinations is collected annually by universities and collated by HESA. An overview of national destinations for the majority of subjects, including those in this study are collated and published annually (AGCAS/HECSU 2015, 35-42) with the purpose of outlining career options from different subjects. Such data is also used by league tables and in information sources such as Unistats, with a particular focus on whether destinations are deemed graduate level. Typically, graduate level work is defined by standard occupational classifications (professional, managerial and associate professional roles). All non-graduate level work, as well as unemployment, and unavailability for work contribute negatively to the graduate prospects ranking of universities. The career status 6 months after graduating is therefore a high stakes one for universities, much more than just a census of its graduates' activity.

For the university at which this study was conducted, the following table (1) includes the destinations of all 2014 graduates of the subject areas under investigation. 1006 graduates responded to the DLHE census which represents 74.5% of the graduate population of the school (Universities aim to secure an 80% response return from UK-domiciled graduates) so this number is reasonable. The total population of graduates for the university in 2014 was 5345, of which Arts, Creative Arts, and Humanities students represent 25.7%. Given that there are 7 schools of study at the university, this is a high proportion of the university's graduates.

Table 1 – Destinations of 2013/2014 graduates

Activity on January 15, 2015 (6 months after graduating)	Arts, Creative Arts and Humanities
Working full-time	462 (45.92%)
Working part-time	253 (25.15%)
Unemployed	105 (10.44%)
Engaged in full-time further study, training or research	89 (8.85%)
Due to start a job in the next month	36 (3.58%)
Doing something else (e.g. retired, looking after home or family)	21 (2.09%)
Engaged in part-time further study, training or research	21 (2.09%)
Taking time out in order to travel	19 (1.89%)
Grand Total	1006 (100.00%)

Using standard occupational classifications, of the 715 graduates who were working 47.5% were analysed as being in graduate level work and 52.5% in non-graduate level work.

The University characterises itself as one that has many non-traditional students, especially in terms of socio-economic background and age. Of its young undergraduates, it estimates it has 44% from a lower socio-economic background and 20.4% of its students are mature. One of its goals is to transform the lives of its students with reference to the increased life chances that education can offer to students from less advantaged backgrounds

There were slightly more women (51.9%) than men (48.1%) graduating from Arts, Creative Arts and Humanities. There were just 13.1% of Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) graduates from the school and 19.1% of graduates were identified as having a disability (the highest percentage of any school at the university), dyslexia being the most common disability.

2014 graduates were the last cohort to pay tuition fees that did not exceed £3,000 per year, so although graduating with debt, this will have been smaller than subsequent cohorts.

5. Methods

Methods in this project were mixed and included focus groups, a survey and interviews, which allowed for a rich set of data for analysis. For each stage of the research full ethical consent was obtained, and anonymity guaranteed. Pseudonyms are used and any identifying characteristics such as location, employer name or degree title are presented in a way to protect any identification. In the analysis of qualitative data, a thematic approach was used using NVIVO 10/11 (Braun and Clarke 2008). Analysis of quantitative data from the survey was alert to sample sizes, which led to a focus on gender and social background rather than other characteristics such as ethnicity and age, where participant numbers were small. A full statistical testing was not undertaken of quantitative data collected, but patterns across the data were traced.

5.1 Focus groups

The first and smallest set of data discussed in this report is from exploratory focus groups undertaken with students from the school in March 2014 a few months before they were set to graduate. Volunteers were secured mainly from student representatives. It is therefore possible that those who volunteered are more proactive generally than their peers; however, as student representatives they are expected to have an understanding of the concerns of the wider cohort, so this would lead to perspectives not being based on their personal experiences alone. Ten individuals attended so the small numbers involved mean that the outcomes cannot be viewed as representative but do serve to raise questions about the topic. There were three parallel focus groups constituted on the day. Participants were from the following subject areas; Media Technology, Journalism, Performance, Graphic design, English & Creative writing, Visual Arts, and Fashion design. There were 3 men and 7 women, and included in the 10 were 2 MA students.

Analysis of the focus group data was alert to the limitations and possibilities of the method. An approach was followed which sought to seek out what comes out of the interaction between individuals and the significance of issues that generate disagreement and/or consensus. All groups had notes taken, were audio-taped and transcribed, allowing for more in depth analysis

5.2 Survey

As many of the 2014 graduates who had responded to the DLHE survey were contacted by email in order to invite participation in this research project. Contact details were accessed from data from those who had replied to the DLHE survey (primarily a telephone and postal survey) indicating they were still happy to be contacted by the university. On writing to invite participation in the research, only 836 email addresses were

deliverable to. Effectively this meant 83% of those who had responded to DLHE could be contacted.

In summary, 112 from Arts, Creative Arts and Humanities responded to the survey, which represents a 13.5% response from graduates who could be contacted. Of this total, 28.6% were from Art and Design, 21.4% from Media Production and Journalism, 20.5% from Music and Performance and 29.4% from the Humanities (see table 2 for subject details).

Table 2 – Subjects studied of survey respondents

Art and Design subjects include: Advertising Design; Animation; Art & Design; Computer and Video Games; Design for Digital Media; Fashion Design, Fashion Image-making and styling; Graphic Design; Interior Design; Photography; Product Design; Visual Arts
Media Production and Journalism subjects include: Professional Broadcast Techniques; Television and Radio; Media Technology; Journalism
Music and Performance subjects include: Music - Popular Musicology; Popular Music and Recording; Interactive Music & Studio Production; Musical Arts; Drama and Theatre, Comedy, Dance, Contemporary Practices; Media and Performance.
Humanities subjects include: Contemporary Military and International History; Contemporary History and Politics; English and Creative Writing; Drama and Creative Writing; English and Drama; English Language and Linguistics; English Literature, English Literature with English Language; Film Studies; English and Film Studies; International Relations and Politics; Politics; Politics and Arabic; Modern Languages

More women responded to the survey (67%) relative to the original proportion of the population of the subject areas (51.9%). Response to the survey from BME graduates was 9.8% which is slightly lower than the 13.1% of the original population (see table 3). The majority of respondents to the survey were 21-24 (see table 4).

Table 3 - Ethnicity of survey respondents

Ethnicity	Arts, Creative Arts and Humanities	Collapsed categories BME and non-BME
White	101 (90.2%)	Non-BME (90.2%)
Asian	3 (2.7%)	BME (9.8%)
Black	3 (2.7%)	
Chinese	1 (0.9%)	
Other	4 (3.6%)	

Table 4 - Age of survey respondents

Age	Arts, Creative Arts and Humanities
21-24	85 (75.9%)
25-29	14 (12.5%)
30 -39	10 (8.9%)
40 and over	3 (2.7%)

The occupational background of the highest earner in the home that an individual grew up in was used as a way to differentiate social class background (based on Registrar General's Social class classification) Categorising social class is complex but this was the category I chose to use which seemed appropriate as the study is about careers and occupations. Respondents were asked to categorise themselves into one of 6 categories, and for analytical purposes, these were also collapsed into two groups representing higher class background (professional and managerial/technical) and lower class background (skilled non-manual, skilled manual, partly skilled, unskilled). Just over half of the graduates categorised themselves into a higher class background, a small number did not know (see table 5). This broadly follows the pattern of the university as a whole. The vast majority of the respondents were from a UK national background (see table 6).

Table 5 - Social background/class of participants

Occupational background	Arts, Creative Arts and Humanities	Collapsed social class categories (higher and lower)
Professional	47 (42.0%)	58 (51.8%)
Managerial/ technical	11 (9.8%)	
Skilled non-manual	6 (5.4%)	47 (42.0%)
Skilled manual	21 (18.8%)	
Partly Skilled	7 (6.3%)	
Unskilled	12 (10.7%)	
Disabled cannot work	1 (0.9%)	
Don't know	7 (6.3%)	7 (6.3%)

Table 6 - Student status of participants

Student status	Arts, Creative Arts and Humanities
EU student	9 (8.0%)
International student	0.0%
UK student	103 (92.0%)
Grand Total	112

The survey was designed having reviewed existing relevant questionnaires. The same kind of categories were used as the DLHE survey to ask about career activity. Some questions were also adapted from the AGCAS Graduate Success project survey (Pennington, Sinclair, and Mosley 2013), and the attitudinal statements were influenced by both the Career Futures inventory (Rottinghaus et al. 2012) and the Career Adaptability questionnaire (Savickas and Porfeli 2012).

The relatively small return to the survey means representativeness cannot be claimed for. However, a sufficiently diverse return to the survey allows for questions and themes to be

raised from the data collected. Collection of demographic data allowed for comparison of different groups to sets of questions. The use of an initial survey to secure volunteer interview participants also allowed for a mixed sample to be sourced for interviews.

5.3 Interviews

Survey participants were asked to indicate if they were willing to participate in a research interview, and 14 individuals were selected based on creating a sample across a number of factors. All interview participants were 21-24, and were of UK nationality. These shared characteristics were sought in order to allow for comparison. 7 men and 7 women were selected; 3 BME and 11 non-BME. Selection was deliberately skewed to lower social class participants (11) compared to higher social class (3), although within this 14 there was representation from all 6 occupational class social backgrounds. This choice of sampling was made as existing research tends to suggest that those from a lower social class background have greater barriers in entering the job market post-university. Selection of participants was also influenced by how the survey was completed and individuals were targeted who demonstrated an engagement with the topic but also demonstrated that they had experienced some challenges since graduating (see table 7 for participant details).

Table 7 – Interview participants

Discipline	Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Ethnicity	Parental background
Music	Harry	M	21-24	White British	Professional
Media production	Alice	F	21-24	White British	Skilled manual
Performance	Charlie	M	21-24	White British	Unskilled
Film	Robert	M	21-24	White British	Disabled cannot work
Media Production	Bridget	F	21-24	White British	Skilled manual
Media Production	Rosie	F	21-24	White British	Managerial/technical
Computer Games Design	Joe	M	21-24	White British	Unskilled
History	Dylan	M	21-24	White British	Partly skilled
Journalism and English	Daniel	M	21-24	White British	Managerial/technical
Fashion	Anna	F	21-24	Black Caribbean	Skilled non-manual
English	Ibrahim	M	21-24	Asian	Skilled non-manual
Visual Arts	Ruby	F	21-24	White British	Don't know
Graphic design	Isabelle	F	21-24	White British	Skilled non-manual
Performance	Sophia	F	21-24	Mixed other	Skilled manual

Notably all interview participants had achieved a good degree qualification (i.e., a 1st class or 2.1). This was not something that was asked about in the survey, but the fact that individuals with a good degree are more likely to volunteer to engage with a university research project after they have graduated could be expected. On investigation of the original population, it was discovered that there was a high number of graduates achieving a good degree at the university. In the subject areas of Arts, Creative Arts and Humanities this was 70.6%, which is in line with the national average. It is clear that the majority of completing graduates achieve a good degree classification. Therefore the population interviewed is sourced from that majority.

Interviews were conducted either face-to-face, by skype or Facetime depending on the preference of participants. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. The ability to be flexible about mode of interview proved valuable as participants included individuals located in Canada, New Zealand and France. Interview questions were piloted and tested and sought to capture life history (Roberts 2002) information as well data about attitudes and influences. A semi-structured approach was utilised.

6. Findings

6.1 Focus group findings

The focus groups sought to capture student perspectives about employability and their futures a few months before they graduated, at a point in time where they were finishing high stakes final projects and preparing for exams. The following quote from one participant is an indicator of some of the anxiety expressed.

“I know someone who got a first last year and they still don’t have a job.” (female, Drama and Creative writing)

6.1.2 Student perspectives of employability

There was a fairly strong awareness of employability amongst participants. The concept that originated from a policy environment now appears to be familiar to participants and influential in how they think about themselves and their futures. They could readily list desirable skills, experience, knowledge, and attributes. Many were aware that they have chosen a career path which is not going to be linear due to the nature of creative and media sectors. Their approach to talking about what enhances employability tended towards the things they do that ‘add value’. There was very little mention of their studies although this was perhaps implicit, and postgraduate study was mentioned as a way to improve employability. Getting work experience was sometimes referred to as the answer to all employability problems, although some negative experiences of work experience were mentioned. In summary, there was evidence in participant responses of the diminished credentials of a degree and the rising importance of what adds value. Associated with this for some in this group was the concern that you can do everything, follow all the employability advice, have all the skills and experience and still not get the job you want.

“That’s all I’ve done is get experience, that’s what everyone says to do, so I’ve done everything,” (female, Performance)

In general, students felt confident of their own abilities but concerned about the lack of potential opportunities and competition in the job market; and there were varying levels of confidence expressed about the future. Tough-talking about facing the world head-on was contrasted with a much more down-beat outlook from others. There were indicators of what could contribute to confidence, notably the value placed on the support of lecturers was mentioned and self-belief gained by having built up a good CV in terms of experience, skills and qualifications.

They were alert to structural barriers in the creative industry job market and anxious about this. Some expressed disheartenment by what they hear from peers who have already

graduated about the geographical bias of creative sector, and overall uncertainty of their fields. Individuals mentioned applying for advertised jobs but also 'setting up on my own' or 'freelancing' and not just going for the 'big names'. They did seem to be able to critically reflect on employability and that getting a job was not all down to them but about available opportunities in the market place. They were unclear about how they would tackle the uncertainty of the sector they are in, and found it frustrating that however good you are, there are no guarantees of getting the job you want.

"Even if you're good - then maybe there's a dozen other people who are good too and it isn't enough you know..." (female, Fashion Design)

Structural factors they mentioned were limited to nature of creative sector, and how geography and family background may confer advantages. There was no explicit mention about how some individuals advantaged by social class, ethnicity, gender, or nature of institution attended. Perhaps it is a sign of their optimism that they did not mention deeper social mobility imbalances in the job market. They also demonstrated knowledge of how the creative sector is different from more traditional graduate employment sectors which may offer clearer pathways. They demonstrated a belief in themselves to do a good job if they had the opportunity although they had less confidence about how to overcome the obstacles they may face in job seeking.

There were divided opinions about whose responsibility employability is. There was an overwhelming feeling amongst most participants that individuals are responsible for their own destiny but residual notion among others that the university needed to do more.

"You are not going to get spoon-fed when you get into the job market so you can't be spoon-fed here." (female, MA Journalism)

There was not a consensus on this, although most felt a partnership between the individual and the university was the way forward, although what this looks like in practice is debatable. The tensions integral to our marketised landscape of higher education emerged in discussion of where responsibility for employability lies. With students beginning to see themselves as consumers, some will not be happy with what the university does (rightfully or wrongfully). Either way, this trend is potentially damaging to both university and students. Whatever it does to support employability, the university cannot control the opportunities that are in the job market; and for students to believe that somehow their university experience should give them guarantees can contribute to an inhibited ability to develop the pro-active personality that is positively associated with employability in the creative sector. On the other hand, for those who think responsibility is all about the individual, there are potentially damaging consequences if they blame themselves if their aspirations fail to flourish.

Participants expressed both considerable hopes for the future while also describing how fearful and disheartened they sometimes feel. There were some remarkably positive and optimistic comments in places, reflecting a determination to be flexible and proactive. However, they also expressed their concern about potential knock-backs, some of which they have already started to experience. This relates to the interplay between inner confidence and facing up to challenging job market. Employability and how this connects to future career prospects is an emotional journey for some students. In discussions of hopes and fears, the diminished credentials of a degree are evident again. A meritocratic approach to career prospects emerged and some students do seem to have faith that all will be well in the end if they persevere and are good enough. However, this conviction was unevenly distributed amongst participants.

“It can take time you might not get a job straight away but you have to stick at it, and keep going and the opportunity might come...” (male, Graphic design)

Many participants expressed views about wanting to be true to self, perhaps a feature for creative students who may have chosen something to study based on a personal passion rather than because of a hope of high earnings and strong career prospects. This may well be a positive choice for them, but also presents challenges for them if that passion cannot readily earn them a living. Some expressed a faith in merit, that if they are good enough they will succeed. A strong desire to act in line with values and principles surfaced.

“It’s not all about the money it might be worth earning 5k less to be doing something that you love that you really want to do.” (male, Graphic design)

In summary, the focus groups reveal a group of students who are grappling with how to understand what the future might look like with mixed hopes and fears. Their university education appears to have instilled confidence in their own abilities but they worry about the job market and the competition therein, even though some of them have already gained additional “added value” experiences. They appear to invest a lot in the scope to have a rewarding career; they don’t just want a job, even though for some they are not clear what they want that job to be.

6.2 Survey findings

6.2.1 Changing career circumstances and ideas (6-16 months after graduation)

Respondents to the survey report a high level of changing circumstances and career ideas in the early period after graduating. When asked to report on whether their career circumstances had changed between January 2015 and October 2015, a total of 58.9% of graduates reported that they had had a change. Response rates were similar for class and gender (table 8).

Table 8 – Change in career circumstances between January and October 2015

Arts, Creative Arts and Humanities graduates							
	Social class			Gender			Total
	Higher	Lower	N/A	Female	Male	Prefer not to say	
There have been changes to my career situation since January 2015.	34 (58.6%)	26 (55.3%)	6 (85.7%)	44 (58.7%)	21 (58.33%)	1 (100%)	66 (58.9%)
There have been NO changes in my career situation since January 2015.	24 (41.4%)	21 (44.7%)	1 (14.3%)	31 (41.3%)	15 (41.7%)	0%	46 (41.1%)
Grand Total	58	47	7	75	36	1	112 (100.0%)

Only 25.9% of the total indicated that they had had no change in ideas. Slightly more graduates from a higher class background reported having had change of career ideas. Similarly more women reported a change. However, when comparing just individuals who state they have not had a change of ideas, differences are slight. The largest number chose “partly changed” as the answer to this question (table 9).

Explanations offered in open-ended answers about why ideas had changed were mixed, but captured the significant life adjustment leaving behind the security of university and the associated identity of being a student and going into the job market.

Table 9 – Change in career ideas since graduating

Arts, Creative Arts and Humanities							
	Social class			Gender			
Change in career ideas	Higher	Lower	N/A	Female	Male	Prefer not to say	
No	15 (25.9%)	13 (27.7%)	1 (14.3%)	18 (24%)	10 (27.8%)	1(100%)	29 (25.9%)
Partly	30 (51.7%)	18 (38.3%)	3 (42.9%)	33 (44%)	18 (50%)		51 (45.5%)
Yes	13 (22.4%)	16 (34%)	3 (42.9%)	24 (32%)	8 (22.2%)		32 (28.6%)
Grand Total	58	47	7	75	36	1	112 (100%)

Reasons given for changing or partly changing career ideas were varied. For some it was positive awareness that something completely different may suit them better and offer more immediate career rewards; e.g., a graphic design graduate joining the police, a media graduate planning to train as a nurse, a music graduate working as a charity volunteering co-ordinator, a Visual Arts graduate teaching in a circus school, a music graduate working as a paralegal. For others it was a more gradual shift in direction away from an original career idea, e.g. a journalism graduate working in PR, a Languages graduate working in marketing, numerous graduates seeking to keep their creative practice going alongside a more stable job, e.g. working in university administration (Media Production graduate), training and/or working as a teacher (multiple reporting from Music, Performance, Visual Arts graduates).

For others a change of ideas had been triggered positively while still at university, e.g., the Politics graduate now working in public affairs:

“Through the Parliamentary Placement Scheme set up by the university, I realised what I needed to do to achieve my goals and it altered my way of thinking.”²

For others a change of life circumstances had altered their priorities:

“Since graduating my priorities have changed, when I look for a job I will now look for a job that fits around my family life, not a life that fits around a job.”³

One Journalism graduate mentions that after the disappointment of their degree result, it has been pleasantly reassuring that it has not been a barrier for getting a job:

² Politics, male, social background – professional

³ Fashion design, female, social background – skilled manual

“I thought you needed a top grade leaving uni to get a good job. Now I know it's a mix of your degree, personality, who you know and your experience within the field. Experience is key I think regarding PR.”⁴

Numerous graduates talk about changing ideas due to the competition to get jobs in their chosen field. One explicitly uses the phrase lowering expectations:

“I have lowered my expectations, realising I need to do lots of job experience because a degree on its own does not stand out for employers.”⁵

“Looking for acting work is not viable when paying rent so a career change was necessary.”⁶

For the smaller numbers who haven't changed their career ideas, there are some positive comments which demonstrate clarity of career goals, and a satisfaction with this. One graduate says she turned down a good offer which was unrelated to her career goal while travelling in Australia, in order to return to the UK to do the work she really wants to do.

“I worked for 3 months at the Interior Design company after graduating; this was amazing and such a good insight into the industry. I left the job to come travelling for a year. Whilst travelling I worked as a surveyor in ... Australia, this company offered me a sponsorship and I nearly accepted this offer until I had a moment in the city where my love for Interior Design truly struck me. I realised this is where my heart is and my passion so I declined the offer of a sponsorship in Australia and I'm now very much looking forward to coming home and ... going back to the company I initially worked for.”⁷

“I am very happy in my line of work and having spent the last year working in my chosen industry has only emphasized my passion for my career.”⁸

A Journalism graduate says she will even create her own company if she can't get the job she wants:

“My ultimate aim is the creation of my own company since I have found it very difficult to get a job, I thought I will do it for myself.”⁹

⁴ Journalism, female, social background – skilled manual

⁵ Interior design, female, social background – skilled manual

⁶ English and Drama, female, social background - professional

⁷ Interior design, female, social background - professional

⁸ Fashion design, female, social background – skilled manual

⁹ Female, social background – managerial/technical

However, for some sticking with an original career plan is difficult, e.g., the Performance graduate who has experienced some knock-backs:

“I keep getting work rejected for shows and nobody will take me seriously.”¹⁰

6.2.2 Career change status comparisons (6-16 months after graduation)

Survey responses allowed for exploration of what the change of circumstances so many graduates reported actually meant for them in practice. It was possible to compare status in January 2015 (6 months after graduating) and October 2015 (16 months after graduating). We know that the career status of graduates every January (6 months after graduating) is of high stakes for universities as this is the time of the destinations census, so it was of interest to discover what changes had taken place since that all-important date in January, which so often is reified as a measure of what graduates do.

Graduates had already been surveyed about their status in the DLHE census; however, the choice was made to effectively ask them this again. A standalone data-set about career status (comparing the 6 month and 16 month points of time) was sought on commencing the project as it was not possible to guarantee access to the DLHE statistics due to data protection regulations.¹¹

Table 10 reports what participants remembered they had been doing in January 2015, including details of social class and gender. Respondents were not balanced between these groups, however, it is notable that no men from a higher class background report being unemployed or unavailable for work, in contrast 26.6% of lower class females report being unemployed or unavailable for work. Unemployment for the sample is reported as slightly higher than in the DLHE survey.

Table 11 reports October 2015 status. A number of changes have occurred in 10 months since January 2015. Reported unemployment of the sample has halved from a total of 12.5% in January 2015 to 6.3% in October 2015. Overall employment (including being employed, self-employed and working and studying) has gone up from 72.3% to 82.2%. Higher class males continue to report no unemployment. A higher proportion of higher class females (75%) and males (70.6%) report that they are employed compared to their lower class peers.

¹⁰ Performance, male, social background – unskilled

¹¹ Subsequently DLHE data about some of my survey participants was made available which is explored in section 6.2.3.

Table 10 – Survey participants January 2015 activity

Arts, Creative Arts and Humanities graduates								
	Higher			Lower		N/A		Grand Total
	Female	Male	Prefer not to say	Female	Male	Female	Male	
Employed	22 (55%)	12 (70.5%)		22 (73.3%)	10 (58.8%)	3 (60.0%)		69 (61.6%)
Self-employed/freelancing	2 (5.0%)	1 (5.9%)			1 (5.9%)			4 (3.6%)
Working and studying	3 (7.5%)	2 (11.8%)			3 (17.6%)			8 (7.1%)
Studying only	3 (7.5%)	2 (11.8%)				1 (20.0%)	1 (50.0%)	7 (6.3%)
Other	5 (12.5%)				1 (5.9%)	1 (20.0%)		7 (6.3%)
Unavailable for work	1 (2.5%)			1 (3.3%)				2 (1.8%)
Unemployed	3 (7.5%)		1(100.0%)	7 (23.3%)	2 (11.8%)		1 (50.0%)	14 (12.5%)
Can't remember	1 (2.5%)							1 (0.9%)
Total	40	17	1	30	17	5	2	112 (100.0%)

Table 11 – Survey participants October 2015 activity

Arts, Creative Arts and Humanities graduates								
	Higher			Lower		N/A		Grand Total
	Female	Male	Prefer not to say	Female	Male	Female	Male	
Employed	30 (75%)	12 (70.6%)	1 (100%)	19 (63.3%)	11 (64.7%)	4 (80%)		77 (68.8%)
Self-employed/freelancing		2 (11.8%)		2 (6.7%)	2 (11.8%)			6 (5.4%)
Working and studying	3 (7.5%)	2 (11.8%)		2 (6.7%)	1 (5.9%)	1 (20%)		9 (8%)
Studying only	1 (2.5%)			1 (3.3%)			1(50%)	3 (2.7%)
Other	1 (2.5%)	1 (5.9%)		2 (6.7%)	2 (11.8%)			6 (5.4%)
Unavailable for work	3 (7.5%)			1 (3.3%)				4 (3.6%)
Unemployed	2 (5%)			3 (10%)	1 (5.9%)		1 (50%)	7 (6.3%)
Total	40	17	1	30	17	5	2	112 (100%)

6.2.3 Reflections on the Destinations of Leavers of Higher Education (DLHE) survey (improvement and decline)

The numbers in the previous section can only offer a limited indicator of employment/career status patterns and how they have altered in the early careers of graduates, eg., the fact that they are employed does not tell us what kind of employment they were in. Unexpectedly, I was able to gain access to some DLHE data from those participants who had given their details as part of my survey and compare to their DLHE return. Of 112 individuals only 5 participated anonymously which allowed for matching of 107 individuals with their DLHE response.

Of that 107, 23 (21.5%) individuals had had a clear improvement in status by October 2015, either moving from unemployment to work, lower status to higher status work, or a move into PG study. 3 (2.8%) individuals had had a decline in status between January 2015 and October 2015. All other respondents had stayed in a similar status role/situation even if in a different job (both graduate and non-graduate level). However, this specific comparison of 107 individuals does show the considerable movement early career and notably a significant number who had improved their situation between January 2015 (DLHE census) and October 2015.

The following table (12) illustrates the movement for individuals for whom there had been improvement (23 individuals) and decline (3 individuals) including specific details of career movement which helps to highlight the changes that individuals undergo.

Table 12¹² – Comparison of career status change January – October 2015

	Degree subject	Activity reported to DLHE survey (January 2015)	Activity reported in October 2015
Improved career status			
Art and design	Graphic Design	Unemployed	Digital Project Manager (IT project manager – 21340)
	Visual Arts	Store assistant (71110 Sales and retail assistants)	Trainee Project Manager – art gallery (Arts officer – 34160)
	Product design	Unemployed	Design and technical homologation engineer (Design engineers – 21260)
	Photography	Customer service assistant (customer service occupations n.e.c. 72190)	Photography Sales (Sales executives – 35420)

¹² Included in table are estimated SOCDLHE codings for jobs reported

	Advertising design	Check out assistant (71120 Retail cashiers and check-out operators)	Insurance Customer service advisor (Insurance clerks – 41320)
	Graphic Design	Taking time out in order to travel	html designer and developer (Web designers – 21370)
	Product Design	Due to start a job in the next month	Training coordinator and IT global support (IT support technicians – 31310)
Humanities	Modern Languages	Customer Service Associate (72190 Customer service occupations n.e.c.)	Social Media Marketing Junior (Marketing associate – 35430)
	Politics	Waitress (92730 Waiters and waitresses)	Recruitment Administrator (HR administration – 41380)
	English and Drama	Casual events supervisor (35460 Conference and exhibition managers and organisers)	Working and studying - Doing PGCE
Media Production and Journalism	Journalism	Due to start a job in the next month	Social media executive (Marketing associate – 35430)
	Media Production	Waitress/ Barista (92720 Kitchen and catering assistants)	Theatre box Office Assistant and catering assistant (Receptionist – 42160)
	Media Technology	Due to start work	Systems engineer (Engineering professionals – 21290)
Music and Performance	Music	Kitchen Associate (92720 Kitchen and catering assistants)	Working as kitchen team leader and studying full-time Management MSc
	Music	Team Secretary (42150 Personal assistants and other secretaries)	Working and studying - PT Graduate diploma Law and working as paralegal (Legal associate – 35200)
	Music	92510 Shelf fillers	Self-employed/freelancing - Music teacher (Teaching professionals – 23190)
	Music	Unemployed and looking for work	Charity Volunteering officer (Officers of NGOs – 41140)
	Music	Unemployed	Working and studying -Working in nuclear industry admin (Other administration – 41590)
	Music	Studying part-time Teaching	College Lecturer (FE teaching – 23120)

	Performance	Unemployed	Junior advertising account executive (Business and related associate – 35390)
	Performance	Digital media intern (41140 Officers of non-governmental organisations)	Digital Marketing Assistant (Marketing associate – 35430)
Decline in status			
	Computer and Video Games	Video game café manager (12590 Managers and proprietors in other services n.e.c.)	Unemployed
	Journalism and English	Teaching Assistant (61250 Teaching assistants)	Unavailable for work (I have a chronic illness)
	International Relations and Politics	Studying full-time	Unemployed

6.2.4 Perspectives on work that needs a degree

Debates about the under-employment of graduates often draw upon what graduates say in surveys (eg., Vasudeva and Barea 2016) about whether they need their degree in the job they are doing or not. Following this lead, my survey asked participants who said they were employed whether they considered that they needed their degree for the job they are doing. Participants were asked to explain their answer. Of 77 individuals who were employed and answered the question “Did you need your degree to get this job?” 50.6% replied yes, 44.2% replied no, and 5.2% said they were not sure.

The responses to this question (table 13), illustrate the clear potential for subjective answers to a question such as this. Comparing what jobs individuals said they were in with whether they think they needed a degree reveals that some graduates may take the question literally and might be in a fairly good job but if they consider that the job doesn’t relate to their degree specifically or that they could have hypothetically got it without their degree, then they may answer “No”, that they did not need their degree, although arguably their degree may have afforded them some more general skills and abilities that have equipped them to compete successfully for that job

Although many of the 34 employed graduates who said they were not using their degree were clearly in non-graduate work such as in bars and shops, 14 individuals were identified who said they did not need their degree, although based on what they said they

were doing, there is a likelihood their degree may have contributed to their application in a variety of ways. Included in this list is their rationale (edited) for why they think their degree was not necessary. Notably, some individuals say they did not need their degree for the job they are in although there is a very explicit link, e.g., Visual Arts graduate working in an Art gallery, a Journalism graduate working in PR, Media Production graduate working as a media teacher, and another working as a researcher. This is in contrast to the Graphic design graduate working as a police officer, the Music graduate in Occupational Health and safety, the Media Production graduate in university administration. The latter three have moved away from their discipline, but there is scope that the more general skills they have from their studies may have helped them (without asking their employers, we can only speculate).

Table 13 – Answers to question about whether current role requires degree

Degree subject	Rationale for why respondent says degree not required	Job title
1. Graphic design	My graphic design degree has helped me to get this job but I could have also done management courses	Digital Project Manager
2. Visual Arts	I think my degree helped, but I had no experience of project managing. But I was enthusiastic to learn and was also a member of the gallery collective, and I knew people.	Trainee Project Manager (Art gallery)
3. Media Production	I studied a degree in Media, which bears no relevance to my job in Planning.	PA and General Administrator (Higher education)
4. Journalism	I began working full time in my chosen field a few months before handing in my final project - my degree grade didn't matter as much as the extra-curricular work experience I undertook	Senior Account Executive (PR)
5. Music	My job is in health and safety; I did not need a degree, just a willingness to learn.	Occupational Safety and Health Expert
6. Media and Performance	They did not require me to have a degree. But I am gaining experience in order to go into teaching.	School Educational Assistant
7. Modern Languages	I was approached for this job by a recruitment consultant straight after graduating.	Account Manager (Advertising)
8. Media Production	I am doing 2 jobs after my degree in Media.	Sales Assistant and media and performance teacher
9. Media and Performance	With the type of job I am doing, it's all about experience. So I've expanded beyond my degree.	Production Researcher
10. Product design	I sense my degree is neither a requirement nor even a tool to get me through the door.	Design and technical homologation engineer

11. Graphic design	Graphic design wasn't for me, I wanted a more active job	Police constable
12. Media production	The skills I learnt on my degree helped me achieve the job and prove my worth; but I initially got the job based on the experience/results I'd built up and demonstrated whilst on work experience.	Network Producer
13. Performance	I already had the job before I graduated and want to go into teaching.	Teaching assistant
14. Media production	I'm fairly satisfied but am changing direction from Media Production	Retail Supervisor

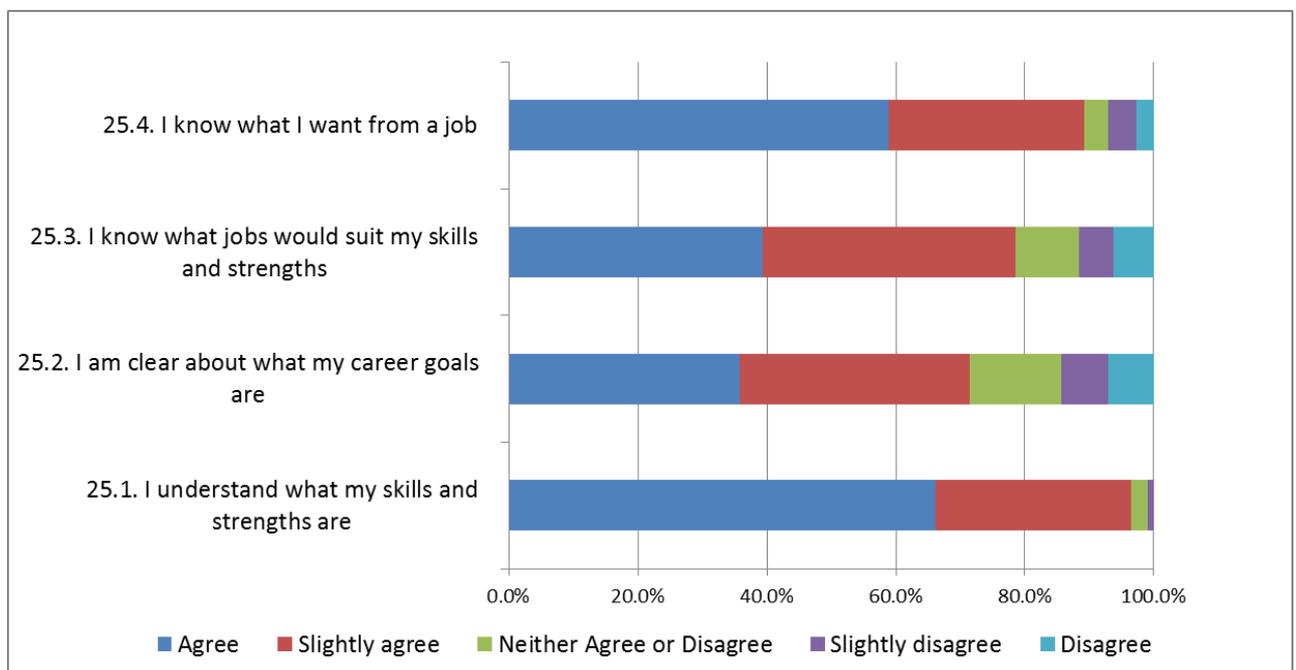
6.2.5 Attitudes to Careers

The purpose of the attitudinal statement questions was to capture how individuals viewed aspects of career-related issues. Statements were categorised into thematic groups; self-awareness and career identity, employer and occupational awareness, support, job-hunting and career planning, confidence (in selection processes) and general outlook about careers. A caveat in analysing responses is the inclusion of “neither agree or disagree” respondent numbers, which cannot be interpreted either negatively or positively. In addition to overall reflections on the survey, responses to the attitudinal statements were compared between participants depending on gender and social class background and contrasts are highlighted.

Self-awareness and career identity

The statement which scored the highest level of agreement was “I understand what my skills and strengths are” at 96%, the lowest was “I am clear about what my career goals are” at 72%. Scores indicate a higher awareness of individual understanding of skills and interests, in comparison to a lower knowledge of how this may translate into a suitable job or career.

Figure 1 – self-awareness and career identity (all respondents)

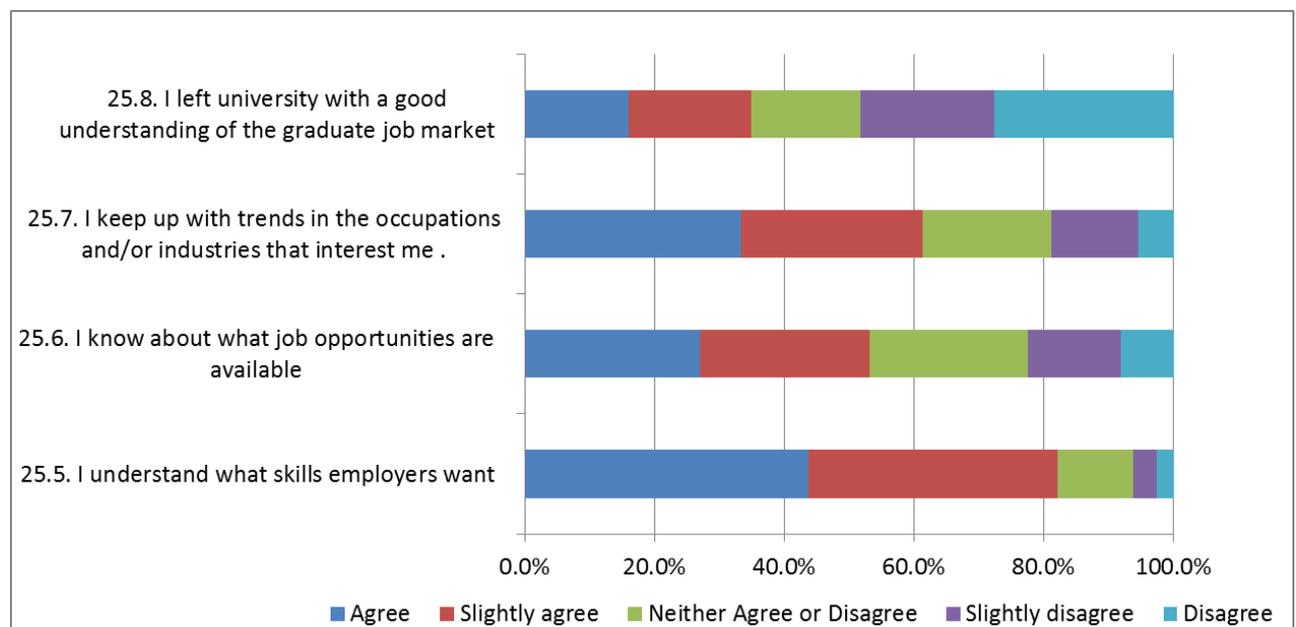


Difference was observed in relation to clarity of career goals and social background. Those from a lower social class background scored slightly more highly for clarity about clear goals, 75% agreeing with this statement compared to 69% from a higher class.

Employer/occupational awareness (all respondents)

82% of respondents agreed that they understood what employers wanted. 61% said they kept up with occupations/industries that interested them and only 35% agreed they had left university with a good understanding of the graduate job market. The latter point may be an indicator of the challenge graduates face when first entering the job market and the learning curve experienced especially in what may be competitive career paths, perhaps some of which can only be understood through actual experience. A question is raised, to what extent can universities work to give graduates a greater understanding of the job market before they leave university?

Figure 2 – employer/occupational awareness (all respondents)



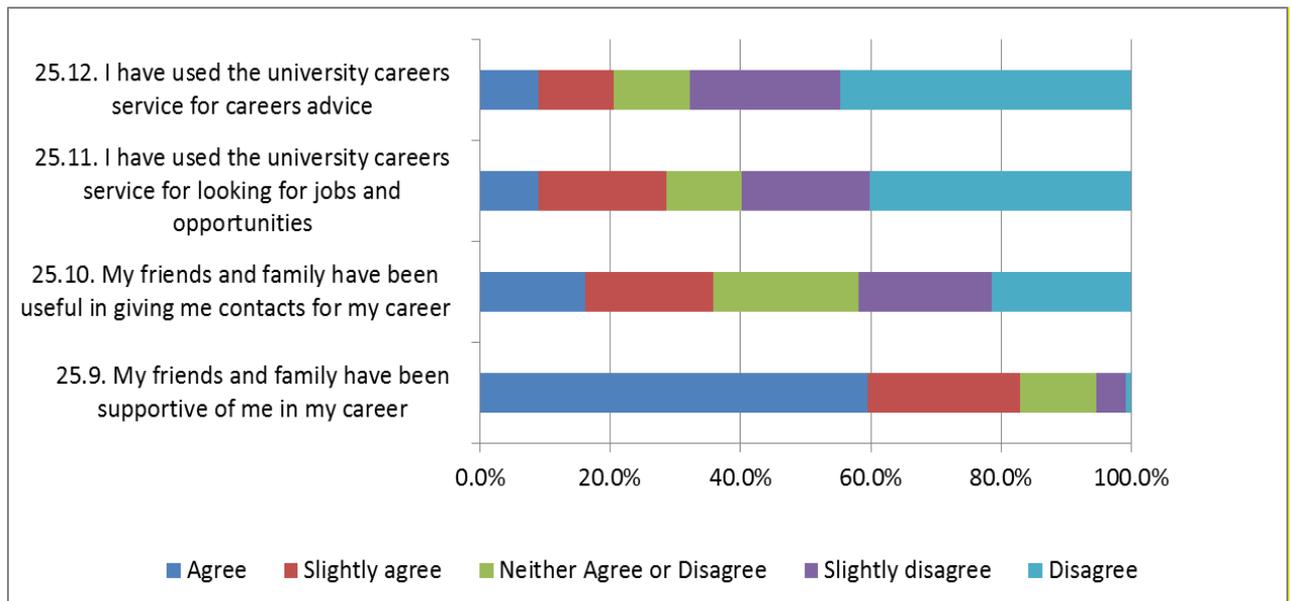
Contrasts emerged in relation to both class and gender; 61% of women said they knew what job opportunities were available, only 36% of men said the same, 22% of men said they left university without a good idea about the graduate job market compared to 41% of women. 40% of those from a higher class report leaving university with a good understanding of the graduate job market compared to 26% of their lower class peers, and 58% of higher class respondents report knowing what job opportunities are available compared to 47% of lower class.

Support

82% of graduates agreed that their family and friends had been supportive of their career, but only 36% said they had got useful contacts through their family and friends. Just 29% said they had used the university careers service for support. This latter score is an indicator of the limited reach that a small central careers may have across a large university. Although

the phrase “university careers service” was used in the survey (following similar surveys elsewhere), this is not the department title that tends to be used at the university at which the research was conducted, which may have added to a lack of recognition of the term by respondees.

Figure 3 – support (all respondents)

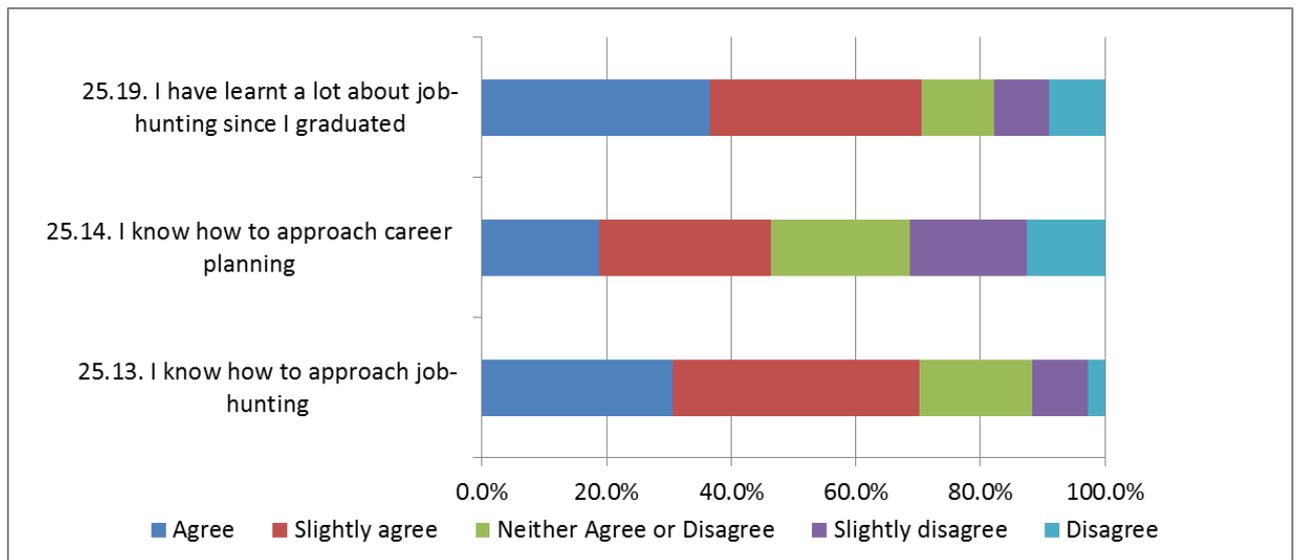


Differences emerged in responses depending on social background. 47% of higher class respondents report that family and friends had been useful in providing contacts for their career compared to just 21% of the lower class respondents. In contrast, 32% of lower class individuals used the university careers service for jobs compared to 28% from a higher class.

Job-hunting and career planning

71% agreed they had learnt a lot about job-hunting since they graduated, 70% said they knew how to approach job-hunting and 47% agreed they knew how to approach career planning. Although the majority were positive about job-hunting, there is still a minority for whom approaching job-hunting is something they may not be sure of. The lower score for “career planning” is interesting. It is possible that such terminology is not routinely used by graduates, although they may effectively be engaged in career planning. However, arguably, having an understanding of the concept more generally could contribute positively to graduates sense of personal control in thinking about their careers.

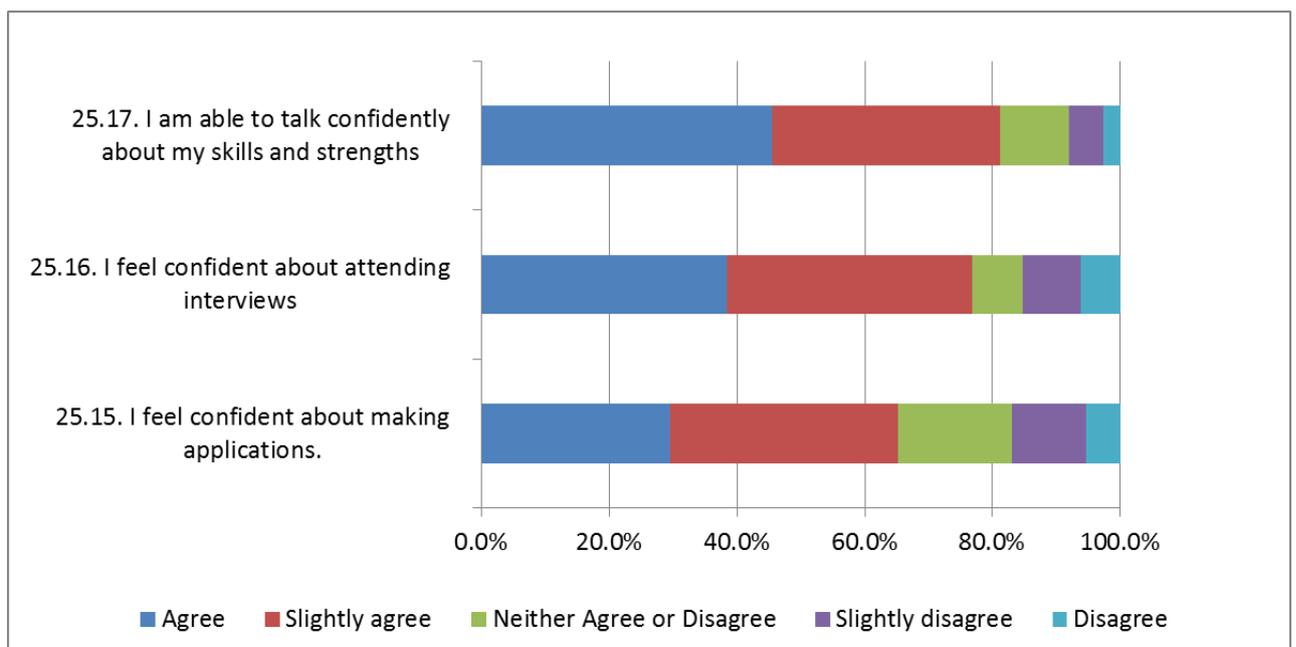
Figure 4 – job-hunting and career planning (all respondents)



Confidence in selection processes

In relation to confidence, 81% said they were able to talk confidently about their skills and strengths, 77% felt confident about attending interviews and 65% were confident about applications. These figures suggest on average a good level of personal confidence, although this is reduced when faced with some of the hurdles of job selection, more especially written applications rather than verbal interviews.

Figure 5 – confidence in selection processes (all respondents)

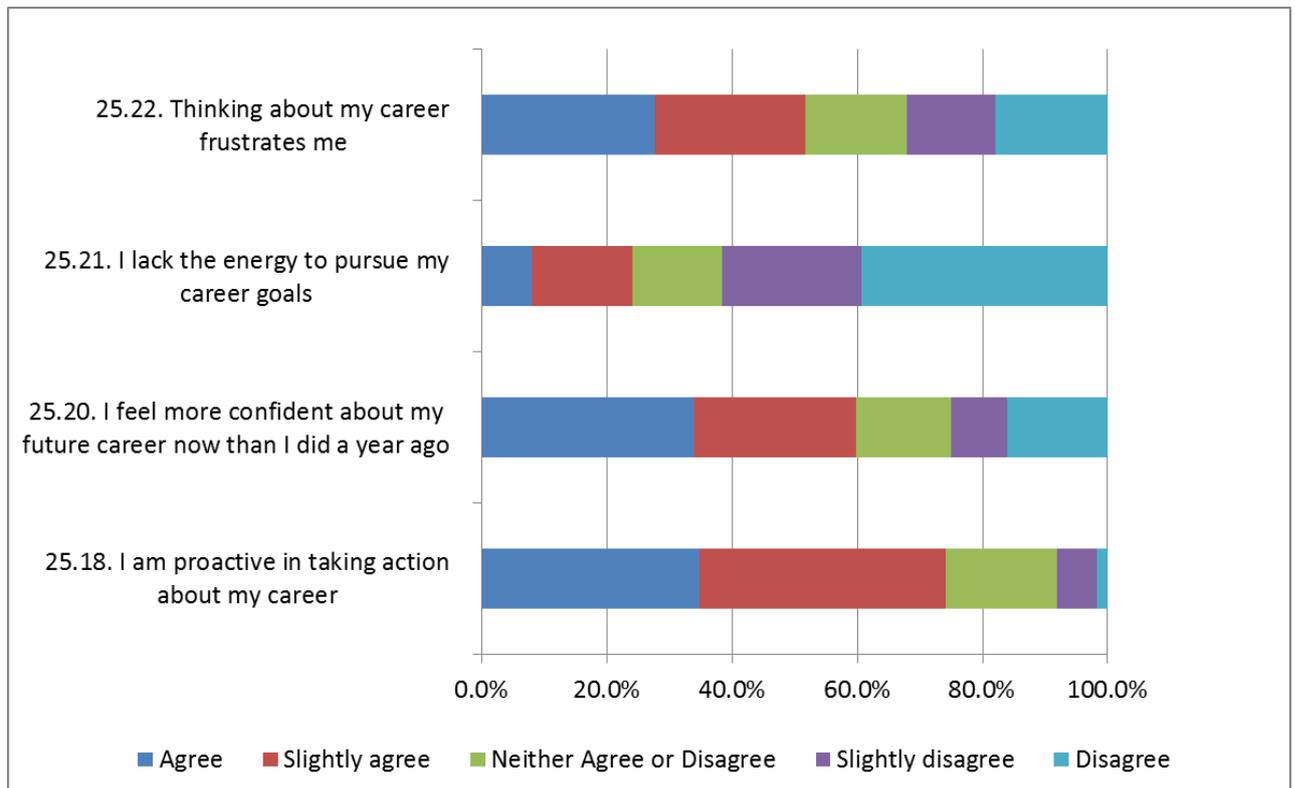


Of all statements in the survey, only in response to the statement about confidence going to interviews did men (81%) score more highly than women (75%). There were also contrasts in relation to social background; 91% of higher class respondents reported confidence in talking about their skills and strengths and 85% were confident at interview, whereas just 68% of lower class graduates agreed with these two statements.

Outlook

74% of respondents agreed that they were pro-active in taking action about their career, and 60% were more confident about their career than a year ago. Just over half at 52% said thinking about their career frustrated them and 24% said they lacked the energy to pursue their career goals. The latter point is of interest as although a minority, it does suggest that some graduates may have reduced morale in rising to challenge of carving out a career.

Figure 6 – outlook (all respondents)



With regard to gender and class; 83% of women said they were pro-active in taking action about their career in contrast to 56% of men, 63% of women said they were more confident about the future now than a year ago compared to 53% of men. Only 19% of lower class respondents said they lacked the energy to pursue their career goals, compared to 29% of those from a higher class. However, 67% of higher class respondents agreed they were more confident about the future than a year ago compared to 49% of those from a lower class.

Overall, the graduates who responded to the survey say that they are leaving university with a good understanding of their skills and strengths; notably the statement that generated the most agreement (96%) was about individual knowledge of skills and strengths, which illustrates a sense of inner self-confidence amongst respondents. The high number who say they are supported well by family and friends (82%) is encouraging. However, this positive self awareness and the support they receive does not appear to be matched by an awareness of the job market, eg., just 53% said they knew what job opportunities were available, or an understanding of how to plan a career (47%). If more individuals accessed specialist career development support (only 29% used the university careers service) would their understanding of available job opportunities and career planning be enhanced? The survey also raises some wellbeing concerns, eg. what can be done for the 24% who say they lack the energy to pursue their career goals?

In summary, it does appear that attitudes to careers are affected by gender and social class. In response to many categories of attitude statement, men are less positive than their female peers. Exceptions were self-awareness and career identity statements, statements about family support and what they had learnt about the job market since graduating, which were closely matched. In comparing higher and lower social class background, there were also differences. However, responses to many statements (though not all) tend to position higher class respondents more favourably. This does complement existing writing about class and careers, e.g., greater access to useful contacts and the social capital this affords, contributing to a greater awareness of how the job market operates as well as more confidence. Writing on gender has also suggested that young men may lack some of the social skills which can contribute to resilience in the job market; however, the notion that men's attitudes are less positive is counter-balanced by their slightly better performance in how they are reporting on their activity in both January and October 2015 (see section 6.2.2).

6.2.6 Early career challenges for graduates

Participants were invited to make comments about their experiences of going into the job market which generated some themes about early experiences including common challenges, inherent to job-hunting and career-seeking, as well as reflections on how graduates of certain subjects are perceived by employers, and interestingly although not explicitly asked for, some useful commentary on what participants felt the university can do to prepare students.

Challenges of starting a career

A number of graduates described the bewilderment and frustrations of starting a career. However, graduates are not passively complaining, but describe the difficulties they face while working out how to respond to such challenges. The inter-relationship between their

own qualifications, skills and experience and competition in the job market and the behaviour of employers emerged with varying emphasis in answers given by respondents. Some blame their own lack of experience or question the value of their degree as reasons for not securing a job/career they want, though others are more critical of employers, the opportunities they provide and the selection processes they use.

“Catch 22 - you need experience yet everything requires you to have experience. Often this will be the make or break of you getting a job. A lot of jobs make you feel that you did not need a degree...”¹³

Another graduate is more sanguine about how to respond to this competitive environment:

“I have widened my career aims, and am applying for jobs in a number of different fields so hope to reap fruit before too long. I am conscious of how crowded the application processes for graduate jobs are.”¹⁴

Arguing against a notion that graduates struggle to get a job due to their own deficiencies, one graduate stresses that this is not the case:

“It is not the understanding or skills young graduates are lacking, but the lack of good jobs in the job market. Nothing can prepare you unless you know someone.”¹⁵

A lack of suitable paid opportunities is referred to:

“There are little to no jobs available in this field - especially paid jobs.”¹⁶

A number of graduates criticise poor practice on the part of employers who do not reply to applications or offer feedback after interviews:

“It has been very difficult for me and I have applied for probably almost a hundred roles, a lot of which I know I should have at least interviewed for, but unfortunately I have learnt that it is all about who you know and business connections. I have always done well in interviews and 9/10 got the job, but it's disheartening when you don't even get a reply from the initial application.”¹⁷

Comments are also made about specific barriers around age, disability, gender and race which show a clear understanding about potential discrimination:

¹³ Media and Performance, female, social background – skilled manual

¹⁴ Music, male, social background - professional

¹⁵ Interior design, female, social background – skilled manual

¹⁶ Fashion, female, social background – skilled non-manual

¹⁷ Media and Performance, female, social background - professional

“I knew the job market was difficult before I left university. It's even harder being a mature student.”

¹⁸“My degree in Music and MSc in Project Management did not prepare me for...for the sexism and ageism I was about to experience”.¹⁹

“As a black woman I found it very challenging to find anything at first especially in the media. This prompted to start thinking of creating something myself.”²⁰

“Going into the job market after graduating has been incredibly difficult, especially as my grade wasn't as high as expected and no employer of the many I have been interviewed by wants to take a chronically ill young person”.²¹

The role of the university

Public policy has positioned students as customers in higher education, and it is in this context that graduates consider with hindsight what their university experience could have offered them in order to maximise their chances in the job market. Their expectations are high and resonate with issues around whose responsibility employability really is which emerged in the focus groups. A fundamental issue emerges around what is compulsory and what is optional in relation to careers and employability; and if activity is optional, how students and graduates who are besieged with competing priorities in their daily lives actually work out what they should be doing or not to help themselves.

A number of graduates comment that they would have liked more help with how to approach the job market: ideas mentioned include, individual careers advice and guidance from tutors, teachers and careers advisers; more sessions about careers; compulsory work experience; a module about careers; embedded professional qualification within degree; learning about paying your own tax; pitching for business as a freelancer; more industry live projects; ongoing support for graduates who are not local. Interestingly, some of what graduates ask for already does exist, though access to it is not compulsory. There is a challenge for universities in encouraging take-up of such activity in a timely way, and there are issues about whether optional activities are appropriate given how time-poor many students are.

Some graduates speak positively of the particular support that have received or accessed, e.g., access to job vacancies via the careers service online is highly valued:

“Thankfully Northcity's Advantage site (careers portal) is very good”²²

¹⁸ Visual Arts, female, social background – managerial/technical

¹⁹ Music and Project Management, female, social background - professional

²⁰ Journalism, female, social background – managerial/technical

²¹ Journalism and English, female, social background - professional

The role of lecturers in brokering relationships with employers is appreciated:

“I was lucky enough for my university tutor to put my name and portfolio forward to a very well established Interior Design company in Northcity. From here, an interview was issued and I instantly got the job.”²³

One graduate comments on her experience of using the central careers advisory team for help. Although positive about the help she received, her response is perhaps illustrative of a mistaken notion that such help is a last resort rather than a routine activity available to all:

“When I left University I was aware of how competitive the job market is, but I did not know to what extent and how disheartening it can be. I appreciate the support given to me by the careers advice service provided by NorthCity, but I believe I should have left University without having to take advantage of said service”.²⁴

Scepticism is expressed about the limitations of some advice given to students which skirts over the reality of the importance of gaining real CV-building experiences such as work placements, e.g.:

“...talk about CVs and tactics and letters and catchy resumes and all of this literature which is meant to prove how good you are...”²⁵

Others especially from more academic subjects are more pragmatic about the reasons that they didn't do more themselves to prepare for life after graduating, referring to the demands of working hard for their studies:

“I was not prepared, whatsoever, for the 'real world'. At Uni, in third year, you are so focused on getting by on the course you have no time to think ahead.”²⁶

The identity of Arts graduates

There were indications that some respondents felt the subject of their degree was not valued by employers. The frustrations of this are alleviated when individuals have a personal pride in what they studied and by a sense that this is a shared burden amongst many Arts graduates, and that there are wider political reasons which cause the de-valuing of Arts degrees. There is also evidence that in this apparently hostile environment with regard to the Arts, some graduates have started to de-value studying an Arts subject themselves.

²²Journalism, male, social background – partly skilled

²³ Interior design, female, social background -professional

²⁴Journalism, female, social background - professional

²⁵Product design, female, social background - professional

²⁶ English, male, social background – skilled non-manual

“My initial job search was one of the most frustrating and humiliating experiences of my life, being on benefits whilst working a 5/hour a week job that I was over qualified for before then getting a job with more hours that I am also over qualified has been a massive stress on me and just horrible in general. But this appears to be the normal experience for anyone who graduates with a BA in Arts.”²⁷

“Generally how much more prepared can you be? Leaving university with a performing arts degree can sometimes feel like you shouldn't have done it at all. Performing Arts degrees have a bad rep for being doss degrees, and, of course, this stems from the governments lack of interest in Arts and Culture. Overall I've learnt a lot from being at university, academically and personally (cliché I know), but the people at Northcity inspired me, and you don't always come across that in every university.”²⁸

“My course provided zero preparation for any real life situation after university. It was a fantastic music course but was completely detached from... real life.”²⁹

²⁷ English, prefer not to say, social background - professional

²⁸ Performance, female, social background – skilled manual

²⁹ Music, male, social background - professional

6.3 Interview findings

Interviews allowed for a deeper exploration of some of the issues that had already emerged in the focus groups and survey findings and were conducted 18-20 months after graduation. My focus in conducting interviews was to understand better how individuals understood their situation and what narratives they draw upon. The balance of contextual factors and individual agency serve as useful framework for this. The following section will focus on the factors that appeared in interviews that contribute to individuals' resilience to the turbulence of early careers post-university.

Although experiences were contrasting across the group of interview participants, arguably they share a common landscape. These include people and organisations that feature in how they narrate themselves, e.g. their former university, lecturers and student peers, family, friends, mentors, the job centre and good and bad employers, and things such as social media, the internet, job selection processes. How they reflect on their own background, geographical location, subject of study, university studied at and quality of degree are topics that are significant to them all. Self-reflection and self-scrutiny in relation to their own ability, skills, talent, hard work and personal sacrifice are all topics for consideration as they consider their future career prospects.

The space individuals can create for themselves to find a position in this landscape appears to have significance in how satisfied or not they are with their current trajectory. The ability to draw positively on resources available to them associate with positively navigating early career challenges. However, the interviews reveal that some individuals have more resources to draw upon than others.

6.3.1 Networks – the value of a good team of supporters

Returning and/or remaining at home with family are very common experiences for the graduates interviewed. Although those that felt stuck expressed frustration at the lack of independence they had and even interference from their parents, the support of family was a significant anchor for many. Many graduates (e.g. Ruby³⁰, Harry³¹, Robert³²) spoke effusively about their parents.

“My mum’s been my most influential person – she’s a total rock star” (Ruby³³)

³⁰ Visual Arts, social background – not specified

³¹ Music, social background – professional

³² Film Studies, social background – disabled cannot work

³³ Visual Arts, social background – not specified

“So with my parents especially, any decision I make, or anything I say to them, they’re totally on board with, they just always want me to be doing what I want to be doing. So it’s been really nice to just go, even when things seem crazy and I go, ‘oh I’m moving to London’, you know a week before I’m actually moving and things like that, ‘oh I’m moving to Canada’. As much as they’ll miss me, they’re always saying, ‘whatever is right for you just go and do it’.” (Robert³⁴)

The role of parents for these young people was also evident for one graduate, for whom the death of her father had been a serious setback resulting in an interruption of her degree course for a year (Sophia³⁵). All participants felt fairly dependent on their parents but were good-humoured about this and fortunately had forged good relationships with them (though some better than others). The role of parents and other family members as cheerleaders and supporters is apparent too. For example, Anna³⁶ talks about her grandmothers who were both seamstresses and how they inspired her passion in fashion and her uncle who is acting as a supportive mentor for her new business idea.

Friends are also important. Robert’s³⁷ move to Canada, a year after he graduated was spurred by his friendship group, some of whom were doing the same. Similarly, Isabelle³⁸ planned to travel with a friend to Asia and Australasia, having earned enough money in the year after finishing her degree. It is through reciprocal arrangements with friends in her industry that Bridget³⁹ has been able to find places to stay as she moves around the country as a production runner. Rosie⁴⁰ is involved with organising spoken word nights outside of her day job in university administration in partnership with her boyfriend.

Some graduates had ongoing relationships with university staff and former teachers. Sophia⁴¹ talks about opportunities staff have sent to her even since graduating, Daniel⁴² was informed of a valuable internship with professional training by a lecturer. Ruby⁴³ has kept in touch with her old Art school teacher who is an informal mentor for her and is “just interested in me and how my career develops”.

In contrast others such as Joe⁴⁴ seem to lack a supportive network, and describes a peer group that are as lost as him; and Alice⁴⁵ refers to peers who she compares herself to

³⁴ Film Studies, social background – disabled cannot work

³⁵ Performance, social background – skilled manual

³⁶ Fashion, social background skilled non-manual

³⁷ Film Studies, social background – disabled cannot work

³⁸ Graphic design, social background – skilled non-manual

³⁹ Media Production, social background – skilled manual

⁴⁰ Media production, social background – managerial/technical

⁴¹ Performance, social background – skilled manual

⁴² Journalism and English, social background – managerial/technical

⁴³ Visual Arts, social background – not specified

⁴⁴ Computer Video Games, social background – unskilled

⁴⁵ Media Production, social background – skilled manual

negatively and is frustrated by her mum's ambivalence towards the careers that she is interested in. Her mum favours the police as a more secure career for her daughter and Alice has to position herself against this, while living at home and thus being economically dependent on her mum. This contributes to her self-doubt:

“...she's a bit against it all the time. She doesn't like me travelling to all these places for interviews.” (Alice⁴⁶)

The value of family and friends complements survey responses which indicated that the majority felt supported by family and friends. Although different from whether they could provide useful career contacts, this support is important for maintenance of morale. Having a good group of supporters/ cheerleaders irrespective of whether these are well-connected, is important in helping graduates surf early career challenges. Having a supportive family is critical when economic independence is much tougher, so it does seem fortunate that the young people interviewed do say they generally get on well with their parents, and thus may experience less impetus to get away from home than previous generations.

6.3.2 Employers – the value of quality opportunities

Relationships with employers are mixed. Those who have had good experiences have grown in confidence, whereas those who have experienced the opposite have struggled with how to manage this. However, for some the negative experience has helped to clarify a sense of what is right or wrong and a determination not to be exploited but others who are stuck seem to drift in an undesirable work environment. The scope for employers of new graduates to contribute to how young graduates start their working lives is significant.

Some graduates had experienced very productive relationships with employers. Ruby had a great experience as a project management trainee for 8 months, for an art gallery, with whom she has been associated with for a long time. She has also managed to negotiate a workable relationship with the retailer she works for so that she can work for them while also having time to be continuing her involvement in the art gallery collective.

“It was an incredible experience, my line manager... she's the programme community manager. She's also visually impaired so I kind of, it felt like I was supporting her but she was supporting me in delivering this project.” (Ruby⁴⁷)

Both Ibrahim and Rosie⁴⁸ are working for their former university. In addition to an administrative internship, Ibrahim⁴⁹ is doing a PhD and some hourly paid lecturing, for which

⁴⁶ Media Production, social background – skilled manual

⁴⁷ Visual Arts, social background – not specified

⁴⁸ Media production, social background – managerial/technical

⁴⁹ English, social background – skilled non-manual

he says lecturing staff have been really supportive. Rosie⁵⁰ is doing an administrative job which isn't what she wants to do long term, but she really values the security and she identifies with her employer. The job security has allowed her to plan to move in with her boyfriend and to pursue her creative interests outside work.

“...where I was general office admin and PA to the head of marketing... so it was a very varied job and quite unusual, you know for someone of that sort of grade to have so much responsibility. And I really enjoyed that... (Rosie⁵¹)

Others have had much more negative experience. Joe⁵² felt exploited in a job centre internship which went wrong as the business went bust, and he feels he got caught up in the firing line of internal recriminations with some online hostility. Dylan⁵³ has remained with the same market research business for 5 years working part time (which was fine while studying) but is still on a zero hours contract, however, he is volunteering with the police, which he finds very interesting, and applying for other jobs so is looking at a way out. Bridget⁵⁴ says that she observed sexist and nepotistic practices in the post-production company she worked for a year after graduation, and is suspicious of the legality of how her contract was ended. However, this has made her alert to poor employment practices and she joined an online network to support workers in the media, which she has found very useful in the freelance production work she has been doing subsequently. Harry⁵⁵ took a kitchen job at a large pub chain when he graduated which was a physically demanding and long hours' job; however, he got promoted to being a team leader and has since negotiated his hours to part-time as he returned to university to study full-time for an MSc in Management. Isabelle⁵⁶ reflected back on a prolonged unpaid internship she had done while at university for an online magazine, that with hindsight she realised she should have left much earlier as the employer did not want to move her to a paid role, even though they used a lot of her work.

“I'd never ever work for that company again or work with them because of the way I was treated. (Bridget⁵⁷)

“It was unpaid, I think, it was only supposed to be a short term thing but I ended up staying there for nine months and it was unpaid the whole time apart from when the

⁵⁰ Media Production, social background – managerial/technical

⁵¹ Media production, social background – managerial/technical

⁵² Computer Video Games, social background – unskilled

⁵³ History, social background – partly skilled

⁵⁴ Media Production, social background – skilled manual

⁵⁵ Music, social background – professional

⁵⁶ Graphic design, social background – skilled non-manual

⁵⁷ Media Production, social background – skilled manual

head designer was on holiday, then they would get me in for extra time and they'd pay me minimum wage. (Isabelle⁵⁸)

6.3.3 The university - the value of a degree

The theme of the diminished value of a degree which had emerged from survey responses came up again in the interviews. There was a tension between individuals being happy with their achievement but doubting its currency in the job market.

"I feel like to an employer in this sector, six months to a year of experience is more useful than three years of a degree. So I feel like if I'd have took the three years and just worked from the ground up and just got to know other things, I might be in a better place now." (Anna⁵⁹)

All of the graduates interviewed had got a 1st or 2.1 degree and expressed a pride in that achievement. In general, the university experience had been a self-affirming one (albeit with some retrospective regrets/complaints). They described the hard work that had been required, and for virtually all of the lower class participants, they had been one of, if not the first of their family to go to university (for 2 participants, a parent had completed a degree as a mature student shortly before their son/daughter). For many they had worked alongside their studies for economic reasons which had reduced their chance to take advantage of wider university life and extra-curricular opportunities. Only two (Harry and Ibrahim) had not had a regular term-time job while studying.

Some graduates said that having a degree had been a pre-requisite for getting a certain role. Others thought that the having the degree was of definite value for their chosen field.

"... [the degree] certainly landed me that internship. I think, and you know a few weeks in starting in I got speaking to the editor who interviewed me and eventually hired me over other candidates and it was in that instance essentially down to my degree. That gave me the upper hand on some of the other people who had applied. So I certainly had the degree to thank for that opportunity." (Daniel⁶⁰)

I: "Do you think your degree has enhanced your career prospects?"

A: "Definitely yeh, if I didn't have a degree I would probably just be seen as somebody who goes, oh this film's good, I want to make films now." (Robert⁶¹)

⁵⁸ Graphic design, social background – skilled non-manual

⁵⁹ Fashion, social background skilled non-manual

⁶⁰ Journalism and English, social background – managerial/technical

⁶¹ Film Studies, social background – disabled cannot work

It was those graduates who were finding it hardest to settle into a direction in the job market they were satisfied with, that tended to de-value what their degree added to their career prospects. The notion that a degree actually might put employers off is mentioned by one participant. Even some of those who were happier with their career direction commented that in certain creative career sectors, the degree wasn't a compulsory requirement.

I: "Do you think that you having the degree adds value to your career prospects?"

A: "I'll be honest, it's a 50 50 on that. If I didn't have the degree I wouldn't know the things I know now, I wouldn't be half as well trained as I am now but when it comes to actually doing it, there's people I know that didn't even go to college and work for You Tube and these are the type of guys now that are 23 and they're having their own houses built." (Charlie⁶²)

A: "It seems like... a lot of companies for their entry level positions keep turning me down because I have this degree and it's a bit like, it sounds a bit childish but I kind of feel like it's not fair that I go through all this work to get this degree and it's then turned down for the job because I have when I was kind of promised the opposite in a way." (Joe⁶³)

There was another challenge for those who had done a vocational degree and regretted that choice as they now wanted to change direction; as it was difficult to work out how to present this shift convincingly when applying for jobs unrelated to their degree.

"I'd maybe go into more something...like a broader sort of course cos I think that would benefit me a little bit more, just because it's so specific, I feel people don't really know what it is, whereas if I did English or Media or a more broader one then you could go down different routes for it. But because this is quite production based and very TV media, the technical side of it, that's only what it's good for I feel." (Alice⁶⁴)

Participants commented on what the university could have done in addition to support their career development and this generally accorded with survey reflections on this. A marketised environment in which a university degree is a product that you can review is evident. Participants were happy to identify improvements that could be made to their degree programmes, as well as reflect on the optional activities/services that they wished they had used more while at university, e.g. numerous participants said they did not use the university careers service because it was in a different building to theirs.

⁶² Performance, social background - unskilled

⁶³ Computer Video Games, social background – unskilled

⁶⁴ Media Production, social background – skilled manual

It does appear that the work that universities do to build individual confidence and skills and subsequent employability through the degree experience, is not routinely complemented by how the labour market is structured and some employers do not consistently prioritise quality opportunities for new young graduates into the labour market. Creative and media sectors seem to particularly lack structured pathways, which contributes to uncertainty for new graduates. The power that quality opportunities for new graduates can offer to both those individuals but the organisations that employ them is clear, and similarly the damage done by poor quality opportunities to young graduates coming through. However, it is also notable, that the graduates who experience poor quality opportunities are not passively accepting this, but are seeking out solutions and better alternatives.

6.3.4 Location – the value of a place where you can grow

Location was a significant issue that emerged during the interviews and those that had been able to have more geographical mobility or at least choice in relation to where they lived, demonstrated greater levels of confidence.

Leaving the UK was an option that 4 of the 14 interviewees had taken. Sophia⁶⁵ had moved to France to continue her acting education (albeit with an anxiety that she was using up a valuable inheritance in the process), Daniel⁶⁶ was about to embark on a 3 month development volunteering project in Africa. Robert was working and travelling in Canada and said he had been determined to get out of the small town he had grown up in:

“So two of my friends lived in Canada already, I don’t know how I came across it, I kind of was just browsing the different things cos I was contemplating moving to America and seeing how that worked and just all these different things.” (Robert⁶⁷)

Isabelle had worked since she graduated in order to travel and was now in New Zealand and says she is the happiest she has ever been:

“I’m really happy at the moment. I mean obviously I’m looking for a job, it is taking me a bit longer than I thought it would but obviously I’m limited to the time that I’ve got here... But I think I’m probably the happiest that I’ve been in a long time being here and I don’t know, I just like, I just really enjoyed travelling and stuff and it just, like I said, it just made me feel like a weight’s been lifted off my shoulders and I’m really enjoying it. So I’d say that I’m really happy with my situation at the moment even though I don’t actually have a job [LAUGHS]. (Isabelle⁶⁸)

⁶⁵ Performance, social background – skilled manual

⁶⁶ Journalism and English, social background – managerial/technical

⁶⁷ Film Studies, social background – disabled cannot work

⁶⁸ Graphic design, social background – skilled non-manual

It is not just mobility to go overseas that is significant, participants repeatedly referred to opportunities being better in specific urban areas, which created a barrier for those who did not live in such areas. Some graduates felt stuck in terms of their location and this contributed to a reduced level of confidence. Alice⁶⁹ had returned home to a small Yorkshire town after graduating, and felt limited in terms of her options, although she had applied for jobs in the big cities, including London. Dylan⁷⁰ had never left home as he had commuted from a nearby small town to Northcity throughout his studies; for him lack of public transport options meant even the volunteering he was doing (with the police) required a car, which consumed a considerable amount of his earnings, from the part-time work he did.

Joe has not ventured out of Northcity where he was born and brought up, for his education or work so far, and his instinct seems to be to stay locally. Joe does talk about the scope for applying for jobs elsewhere but this is hazy. His confidence to tackle geographical mobility is constrained. A reason he had originally liked a graphic design placement that subsequently broke down was its proximity to him:

“It was a really good job because it was just round the corner from my house... and an old friend of mine from school started working there too which was good.” (Joe⁷¹)

Similar to Joe, Bridget⁷² and Rosie⁷³ have also studied in and remained to work in the same city they were brought up in the suburbs of. However, they both see career benefits in the urban area they come from. Bridget is living with her dad while freelancing which means that she doesn't have to worry about paying too much rent. Rosie has no desire to move away, is about to move in with her boyfriend and is enjoys being part of a creative network in the city.

Only 2 of the graduates neither stayed at home for university nor returned home after. Harry has not returned home after university, because he comes from a small town with very few opportunities. He describes his choice to stay in Northcity:

“There was more opportunity for jobs, more opportunities for involvement in music. The friends I made from university were still around.” (Harry⁷⁴)

Although not in work related to his career choice, the ease in which he got work in the catering sector (and has been promoted in) after graduation has its origins in his pre-university and vacation work in pubs and restaurants, one of the few places to get a job in

⁶⁹ Media Production, social background – skilled manual

⁷⁰ History, social background – partly skilled

⁷¹ Computer Video Games, social background – unskilled

⁷² Media Production, social background – skilled manual

⁷³ Media Production, social background – managerial/technical

⁷⁴ Music, social background – professional

his home town. Staying in Northcity to work and to resume his studies, has contributed to his sense of independence, and ability to maintain his university network. The pull of an urban location in trying to develop any kind of career for him as a new graduate is evident.

Similarly, for Daniel returning to his home town was not an option, he had stayed in Northcity for 18 months after graduating, was now going abroad and was flexible about where he might work when he returned:

“I mean there was, I’d always had it in my head there was no option for me of returning back to Eastcounty. Well I suppose partly because just the thought of being back at home for me, I’d gone past that point, valued my independence as well jobs wise there was no opportunity at all to get into the sector I wanted to get into. I was comfortable as well in Northcity.” (Daniel⁷⁵)

6.3.5 Selection processes – the value of reflection and feedback

Some graduates had had more experience of job selection processes than others, and it does appear that making many applications doesn’t guarantee success. All graduates had experiences of applying for job unsuccessfully. The frustration of applying and getting no feedback was keenly felt. Those who did manage to get feedback sometimes felt it didn’t help (e.g., being told someone with more experience got the job etc.), although occasionally individuals had got feedback they could act upon. Others were more able to reflect on their own lack of success and review their approach. Not knowing why you are unsuccessful was disempowering for individuals as they have to engage in a guessing game about why they didn’t get a job, so questions are raised about how employers more generally can give feedback that is meaningful for individuals.

Some report having applied for many jobs and recall the demoralisation of rejection. This seemed particularly the case for Joe⁷⁶, Dylan⁷⁷ and Alice⁷⁸ who were applying for lots of jobs in what they admitted was not always a particularly focused way which made doing a convincing interview or application harder. Anna⁷⁹ described demanding assessment centres attended in the fashion industry and expressed a scepticism that sometimes jobs were given to the favoured few who may know one of the recruiters.

The dispiriting necessity for her of applying for jobs and the potential rejection that might follow is described by Alice⁸⁰.

⁷⁵ Journalism and English, social background – managerial/technical

⁷⁶ Computer Video Games, social background – unskilled

⁷⁷ History, social background – partly skilled

⁷⁸ Media Production, social background – skilled manual

⁷⁹ Fashion, social background skilled non-manual

⁸⁰ Media Production, social background – skilled manual

A: "So I found the interview stage hard and it's very frustrating doing an application cos it takes you days, weeks even sometimes to get it perfect and then you don't hear back from them and that's frustrating. It's all frustrating [LAUGHS]."

I: "How many jobs do you think you might have applied for?"

A: "Oh, 70, 80, not sure maybe even 100. I'm not sure cos I should write them all down and I do but they're just all randomly in my notepad. Um, yeh, it's very, I've thought I got close to one called, it was a festival internship in Northeast city. Again, just got the interview and that was it, they chose someone else... "

Anna also described having to pick herself up after interviews and the emotional experience this is:

A: "I would say the most challenging is the rejection after an interview. I think that's the hardest thing to deal with, having to pick yourself back up and then when someone's said you've not got the job but they've not really given you a reason why and it's like, you don't know what you can improve on and it's just not getting the stuffing knocked out of you and not being disheartened and applying for something else again and again. It's happened so much now, that's why now I'm just going to do it for myself cos obviously it's not working out [LAUGHS]." (Anna⁸¹)

Daniel describes applying for lots of jobs but 18 months after graduating, he thinks his performance at interview is improving. He reflects back on early interviews very soon after finishing his degree:

A: Much more confident now. At the time I was massively underqualified and hugely inexperienced and I think it quite clearly came across instantly... I mean I feel like I've never struggled with the confidence in order to speak in interviews but in order to have the experience to back up the points that I'm making, I didn't have it at all. Whereas now at this point in time I feel like I've got a much better kind of breadth of experience that I can draw upon in interviews. So much better at this point in time than a year ago. (Daniel⁸²)

Harry also applied for graduate jobs unsuccessfully in the early period after graduating. However, on reflection he thinks his approach was a bit scattergun, which led him to retuning to do postgraduate study in Management, as a way to re-direct his career into a business direction, hopefully related to the Music industry. His confidence is growing in relation to applications he is making for internships as part of his course:

⁸¹ Fashion, social background skilled non-manual

⁸² Journalism and English, social background – managerial/technical

“I’ve applied for an internship in various places, there’s one that I had an interview for last week that I’m hopeful about getting. It would be related to my course but it’s not in music but it is a kind of creative industries kind of job”. (Harry⁸³)

Rosie has applied for very few jobs, as she has effectively been with the same employer since the day after graduation, albeit different roles. She is confident about getting over the application form hurdle in order to get an interview:

A: “Um, I think I can write an incredibly good application, um but when I feel under pressure, I generally don’t like talking to people who I don’t know particularly...” (Rosie⁸⁴)

6.3.6 Unemployment and Job Centre experiences – the value of endurance

Unemployment did not really figure in the world of graduates interviewed apart from as a temporary experience. This does complement the survey responses which showed reported unemployment halving between January and October 2015 (see section 6.2.2). For nearly all interviewees getting a job was fairly easy but the challenge was to begin a career. Only one graduate Joe⁸⁵ had been unemployed for any length of time. Joe is the least confident of the graduates interviewed, and he worries about his speech impediment which may have contributed to the struggle he has faced in getting settled into the job market. Charlie⁸⁶ had been unemployed for slightly longer too, initially as a result of an accident which had meant he had to leave the job he had been doing as a charity fundraiser when he graduated. Robert⁸⁷ and Sophia⁸⁸ also talked about periods of unemployment.

However, for Joe, Charlie, Sophia and Robert experience of unemployment is unpleasant and epitomised by having to go to the Job Centre; of which they all report negatively, though to different extents. There is a shared sense of humiliation tempered by humour associated with having to use the Job Centre; and they express a sense of knowing that they are not alone in this experience; with an implied awareness that as graduates this is not a place they belong or should be.

Sophia talks about how she managed to strike up a reasonably positive relationship with her mentor at the job centre who was tolerant of the erratic acting work that she had managed to secure.

⁸³ Music, social background – professional

⁸⁴ Media Production, social background – managerial/technical

⁸⁵ Computer Video Games, social background – unskilled

⁸⁶ Performance, social background - unskilled

⁸⁷ Film Studies, social background – disabled cannot work

⁸⁸ Performance, social background – skilled manual

“...like it was very difficult for the Job Centre to see acting as a job, you know they’d say, shall we just put you down for administration work and it was like, no I’m an actor, this is my career, I’ve studied for four years and you know I’m going to get acting gigs and luckily I persuaded my sort of mentor at the Job Centre to really take it seriously and she really did and you know she was really happy for me when I got you know the BBC gig.” (Sophia⁸⁹)

Charlie and Robert talk of going to the Job Centre as a last resort to be avoided. Robert refers to job centre advisers not being able to help him pursue the career he is really interested in but rather wanting to slot him into any job as quickly as possible.

“Dreadful [LAUGHS], I can’t express how much of a gruelling process it is and how undermining it is as well sometimes, especially like I can’t specifically say to them that I want to work within the creative industry because they want me to be working.”(Charlie⁹⁰)

Joe is the one graduate who has got embroiled in the Job Centre procedures and he has become expert in his critique of the hurdles to jump in order to secure benefits. He describes how jobseekers have to prove they are job seeking for a certain number of hours, and he has even done a short placement at the Job Centre which has made him more familiar with the details of how the system works. This experience allows him to distance himself from more ordinary jobseekers that do not have the inside track on how the Job Centre operates. He is critical of what he perceives as “stitch up” between some employers who exploit the system and take people on unpaid placements via the job centre.

“...the Job Centre had been sending people there and it’s like, everyone who’s like looking for work they say, do you want a placement at the Company and it seems like the Company was just hiring anyone who needs a work placement for four weeks, getting rid of them, getting another one so they didn’t have to pay staff. So it seems like people are being exploited by the businesses and also the Job Centre itself just seemed to be sending people on these placements just to tick boxes.” (Joe⁹¹)

6.3.7 Individual endeavour – limitations and possibilities

All research interviewees have achieved a good degree. Supported by this, they have all to a greater or lesser extent done a blend of work during and after their studies, that included part-time work, career-related work experience, and volunteering, as well as pursuing their own creative practices without being paid. Doing all of this reflects that they

⁸⁹ Performance, social background – skilled manual

⁹⁰ Performance, social background - unskilled

⁹¹ Computer Video Games, social background – unskilled

have played the game that young people are encouraged to in relation to employability, in relation to collecting work and study achievements for their CVs. This resonates with what the students in their final year spoke of in the focus groups about working hard and accumulating experiences in the hope of being more employable.

The importance of individual endeavour did emerge from the interviews. How this is manifested varies and there are echoes of protean career attitudes, a more selfish individualism, as well as faith in meritocracy which can lead individuals to blame themselves for any lack of success. Many expressed the idea that they were in charge of their own life and could re-count evidence of their own merits, sometimes favourably compared to others. Hard work, personal sacrifice and conquering adversity were all mentioned. Variably, individuals would pay credit to how others had supported them, or had got on in spite of their environment.

Reflections on the role of individual endeavour go to the core of employability discourses which emphasise the agency that individuals may have in varied contexts. However, to what extent individuals can be responsible for their own employability is debatable, and an over-emphasis on individual agency may have the potential to cause individuals to blame themselves for their own lack of success rather than considering wider social and economic constraints. It can also lead individuals to fail to recognise advantages they may have had in their belief that success is all down to them. Joe and Alice, risk blaming themselves, despite the efforts they have made, and barriers they face, they are inclined to look for some inadequacy in themselves to explain their situation. Alice feels like a failure and is self-critical about many things (e.g., she doesn't have the voice for radio, she thinks she is less intelligent than others) and worries what people think of her:

“I just feel I'm going from the job in the box office ... then I'm travelling to... my café job so I'm not even in the same area. I just feel it's not satisfying and I feel like I see customers and they think I'm a failure. (Alice⁹²)

Joe reflects on how he would advise his younger self, focusing on where his behaviour has been deficit:

“Like, get off the computer or get off the social network and get onto the job sites straight away, don't dilly dally, otherwise you're going to get caught behind everyone else, so.” (Joe⁹³)

In contrast, others stress the good things they have done. Even though he probably had the least regular work experience of any of the interviewees, Ibrahim is very proud of his achievements, and in particular a play that he wrote, directed, produced and toured while

⁹² Media Production, social background – skilled manual

⁹³ Computer Video Games, social background – unskilled

studying. He is very happy with its “five star review”. He also talks about how he managed to get onto a PhD programme (albeit self-funded), which effectively bypassed doing a Masters, and is already doing some teaching of undergraduates.

“I’m very good at sort of utilising what I’ve got. With the play and the things I’ve just discussed I had over 100 people that I’d sourced from knowing nobody, so I’m good at sort of getting things done and getting things together.”⁹⁴

Ruby is also proud of what she has done and she implies that there is something that marks her out as special, e.g. when she talks about leaving school aged 16 and securing a place on a competitive creative apprenticeship scheme which meant she had to travel from her small hometown to a bigger neighbouring city. Doing this apprenticeship also coincided with her coming out as a lesbian, and both demonstrate her unwillingness to follow the crowd and her ability to be her own person:

“Um, I don’t want to sound big headed, I just kind of felt like a big fish in a small pond and I just wanted to see what opportunities were out there for me. I think Portcity is a great city with all the museums and the art galleries... so to be involved in that scene and explore that, it was up my street and that’s also where...that’s when I discovered I was gay sort of thing.... Yeh it was a lot more to offer me in Portcity.” (Ruby⁹⁵)

Rosie compares herself favourably to others, partly due to being 2 years older than some of her undergraduate peers. Reflecting on how people have done in the job market after graduation, she suggests that there is a connection between how people were as students and how they are doing now, with an implication that those who are doing less well now are also those who were weaker students.

“...but when I went to uni, and I guess it was because people were away from home for the first time so they really did sort of just let themselves go and I expected it in the first year but not in the second and third, that’s when it started to really irritate me. ‘Concentrate and behave’ [ADMONISHING WITH HUMOUR], I felt like the mother of the group sometimes.” (Rosie⁹⁶)

Isabelle reflects positively about how she has picked herself up from adversity. She has got her degree the hard way. She originally dropped out of an architecture degree in the south of England, failing a module and its re-sit at the end of her first year, and was subsequently diagnosed with dyslexia. She then did a Foundation degree in Graphic design in her home town, before completing her final year to achieve an Honours degree at Northcity.

⁹⁴ English, social background – skilled non-manual

⁹⁵ Visual Arts, social background – not specified

⁹⁶ Media Production, social background – managerial/technical

“I’m a different person to when I started my degree... I failed it and then I picked myself back up and I went and started again from scratch and I think that’s one of my proudest things that I’ve done and I just think doing that and getting my degree and going from the point of failing a degree to getting one, I think it’s really boosted my confidence which has helped me I suppose get my other jobs...” (Isabelle⁹⁷)

Anna has set out to turn what has been a challenge for her into something that is positive in the creation of a fashion and lifestyle website which is a supportive resource for young women like her. In doing this she captures the tensions at play in some discourses of employability. She emphasises an individualist notion of “you can achieve your dream” while qualifying this by advocating practices in which a community can support individuals so they are not on their own.

“...girls exactly like me who struggle with anxiety, who struggle with panic attacks, struggle with fitting in, have maybe had a career, had a degree and don’t know what to do now...I want more like a community that has an onset of positive people that can show you that you can do anything as long as you put your mind to it and you don’t have to...have the negative mind-set that just cos you may not have succeeded and excelled in one thing, it doesn’t mean that you’ve failed, it just means that you haven’t found your thing yet and that’s ok. It’s ok that you’ve not figured it all out yet but you will...” (Anna⁹⁸)

6.3.8 Career conversations and moving in the right direction

What is notable about the individuals who were interviewed as part of this project was their energy in engaging with talking about their career to date. Although, very few may be in what is considered a standard graduate level opportunity, none are passively accepting the uncertain job market they face. Each in their own way is trying to carve a path for themselves, and despite mixed views about the value of a degree, it does appear that having a degree contributes to their own self-belief.

Anna⁹⁹, having outgrown her visual merchandising role for a large retailer, plans to set up her own online fashion and lifestyle website targeted at young women like herself who have experience of anxiety. Her uncle is mentoring her.

⁹⁷ Graphic design, social background – skilled non-manual

⁹⁸ Fashion, social background skilled non-manual

⁹⁹ Fashion, social background skilled non-manual

Bridget¹⁰⁰, having worked in post-production and now as a freelance production runner has developed a strong determination not to be exploited by poor employment conditions and is part of an online community which advises on rights at work.

Robert¹⁰¹ and Isabelle¹⁰² worked to earn money in the UK before going travelling and working abroad. Having been frustrated by not being able to land the kind of career job they might like and not being sure of their career direction anyway, they have both taken the opportunity supported by friends to travel and gain valuable life experience that way.

Ibrahim¹⁰³ after a difficult early period during which he felt he had been “mis-sold adulthood” is determinedly plugging away at further study and temporary work at his university, and has even secured a bursary to travel to the US. He has secured support from various university staff in doing this.

Dylan¹⁰⁴, although confused and feeling stuck in his part-time job with a market research firm is clawing his way out – he is volunteering for the police as a special constable, with an ambition of joining them, but with a critical eye on public sector funding cuts.

Rosie¹⁰⁵, enjoying the regular income and security of her administrative job at a university, is planning to move in with her boyfriend and pursuing creative and media projects (including organising spoken word nights) outside of her day job.

Daniel¹⁰⁶ has been working freelance in PR while also doing some journalistic writing and has turned down a more secure job with the PR company because he plans to go overseas on a 3 month development project, and then plans to return to try to find a job that combines his interests in journalism and international development.

Joe¹⁰⁷, despite miserable experiences with the Job Centre which have tested his morale and confidence, has actually built up work experience that is relevant to his career interests, and hopes to be better placed to get a more secure job. He is exercising his critical faculties in enduring Job Centre processes, well aware of a hostile political context regarding benefits.

¹⁰⁰ Media Production, social background – skilled manual

¹⁰¹ Film Studies, social background – disabled cannot work

¹⁰² Graphic design, social background – skilled non-manual

¹⁰³ English, social background – skilled non-manual

¹⁰⁴ History, social background – partly skilled

¹⁰⁵ Media Production, social background – managerial/technical

¹⁰⁶ Journalism and English, social background – managerial/technical

¹⁰⁷ Computer Video Games, social background – unskilled

Sophia¹⁰⁸ is having an intense learning experience at clown school near Paris. She is confident that what she gains from the school will be significant for her future acting career, and is learning French along the way.

Charlie¹⁰⁹ is pursuing creative film projects and growing his creative industry network, and has a strong community of friends who share his interests. He is applying for funding for his own creative projects, doing freelance film projects as well as working in short term jobs along the way just to earn money.

Harry¹¹⁰ is continuing to work in the pub chain while doing a Masters in Management and growing his music blog. His plan is to move into a more business-oriented role in the music industry.

Ruby¹¹¹ is still closely connected to the Art gallery and actively involved in their artists' collective, although her project management role has come to an end. She is back working in retail and working out how she can juggle work as an artist with earning a steady income. She is also saving in order to travel with her partner.

Alice¹¹² is working out ways to re-direct her career away from media. She is interested in events and music and her second part time job in a box office, puts her in a better position in relation to cultural events. She is exploring further study in events management to help her on this path.

What contributes to individuals' resilience and being able to take some control in carving out their next steps varies. However, a point of interest emerged in relation to this with regard to having career conversations and what this contributed to confidence in approaching the job market. The value of such conversations relates to what social capital individuals have access to (section 6.3.1). During the course of the research interviews it appeared that participants sometimes did not have an easy answer to questions about who they sought advice from and who they talked to about their career. It does seem that planning a career can feel a lonely exercise, and despite the very public nature of people's relationship with work, there can be a taboo about having career conversations which allow individuals to consider more deeply what their hopes and fears are. This resonates with popular ideas that individuals may actually dread being asked about their career plans (SFU Career Services 2012).

¹⁰⁸ Performance, social background – skilled manual

¹⁰⁹ Performance, social background - unskilled

¹¹⁰ Music, social background – professional

¹¹¹ Visual Arts, social background – not specified

¹¹² Media Production, social background – skilled manual

The very fact that individuals have volunteered to participate in a research interview for the project, indicates a willingness to talk about their career “out loud”, and by virtue of doing so they enact active reflection about their own present, past and futures. Analysis of interviews suggests that having trusted people available to talk to about careers is a powerful instrument in maintaining morale, which influences self-belief in taking action. Most participants said they would really value more chances to talk about their career, and just one expressed scepticism that anyone could offer advice or be worth talking to unless that person was in the specific job or industry sought.

Some participants appeared to have more meaningful career conversations than others. Harry¹¹³ had valued specialist university careers staff, Daniel¹¹⁴ and Sophia¹¹⁵ had both found university lecturers helpful, Ruby¹¹⁶ and Rosie¹¹⁷ turned to older friends, Dylan¹¹⁸ talked to police staff he met through volunteering, Anna¹¹⁹ was supported by her uncle, Robert¹²⁰ talked to his like-minded peers. Perhaps unsurprisingly, those who were struggling the hardest to find their feet, seemed to have had fewer people to turn to, e.g. Joe¹²¹, for whom Job Centre staff he interacted with were pre-occupied with getting him into a job rather than talking about careers. In contrast Alice¹²², said she talked to everyone she could about her career, but it appeared that she had almost had a surplus of advice from which the most significant threads eluded her.

¹¹³ Music, social background – professional

¹¹⁴ Journalism and English, social background – managerial/technical

¹¹⁵ Performance, social background – skilled manual

¹¹⁶ Visual Arts, social background – not specified

¹¹⁷ Media Production, social background – managerial/technical

¹¹⁸ History, social background – partly skilled

¹¹⁹ Fashion, social background skilled non-manual

¹²⁰ Film Studies, social background – disabled cannot work

¹²¹ Computer Video Games, social background – unskilled

¹²² Media Production, social background – skilled manual

7. Conclusions

In conclusion, this research project offers a more nuanced account of graduate transition for those from Arts, Creative Arts and Humanities subjects. The statement from one focus group participant (“I know someone who got a first last year and they still don’t have a job”) a few months before graduating, reflects an anxiety that this project has shown to be wildly exaggerated. However, many of the concerns of focus group participants have been borne out. The period after graduating (this project spans 6-20 months post-graduation) can certainly be challenging for many.

What the survey illustrates is the considerable change of circumstances and ideas early career. 58.9% change career circumstances between 6 and 16 months after graduating, and only 25.9% say that their career ideas are the same as when they graduated. The range of reasons for this are manifold, both positive and negative. Overall though, the research does show a steady improvement in the career direction of survey participants. Unemployment has halved between January and October 2015 and employment levels have gone up from 72.3% to 82.2%. In specific comparison of participants to how they responded to the DLHE survey, 21.3% have experienced an improvement of career status. The subjectivity of graduate perceptions of whether a degree is required for a job is revealed, with a significant number who say they didn’t need their degree, actually being in jobs for which having a degree may have advantaged their application.

Data from both survey and interviews shows how career experiences and attitudes are influenced by both social background and gender. Those from a lower social class background seem to consistently trail behind their peers in terms of what they are doing, but also their confidence and know-how in coping with the challenges they face. For example, unemployment is consistently higher for lower class individuals. In attitudinal responses 91% of higher class respondents reported confidence in talking about their skills and strengths and 85% were confident at interview, whereas just 68% of lower class graduates agreed with these two statements. Similarly, 67% of higher class respondents agreed they were more confident about the future than a year ago compared to 49% of those from a lower class. Men also seem to trail their female counterparts with regard to attitudes to career, although this is counter-balanced by data which shows that higher class males report the lowest levels of unemployment and unavailability for work.

For research participants across all stages there is a perceived sense of the diminished value of a degree, and especially an Arts degree. This is balanced by the considerable pride and confidence individuals have in their academic achievements. It does appear that current policy emphasis on the economic benefits of a degree, risks ignoring what else individuals gain from doing a degree which can be described as cultural and social capital development, which contributes to who they are as people. The manifold comments which critique the relationship between their degree and work is perhaps testament to their critical faculties,

which university education serves to foster. Universities are subject to public policy which privileges notions of the graduate premium and getting a degree as being a private investment. Based on findings from especially research interviews, I would argue that such public policy is too narrow in focus, and risks fundamental damage to ideas of what really is the value of a degree beyond potential lifetime earnings.

Findings from interviews reveal aspects which support the resilience of young people in navigating career challenges. The importance of valuable social networks, both which provide personal support but also useful contacts is evident. The value of quality opportunities for young graduates starting out is also revealed, supporting the notion that employers do not consistently rise to the responsibility of developing new graduates. In an environment, in which financial risk is being stacked up by students and graduates by virtue of the debt they have accrued, employer approaches need to adapt and shift away from assumptions that it is acceptable to rely on insecure and even unpaid work, which does tend to be more common in creative and media industries. Employers can also make a massive contribution to the morale of jobseekers by enacting good practices of selection and recruitment and providing good and timely feedback when possible.

The role of location emerged within the research as significant in early careers. The life-affirming experience of living and working abroad which has a long tradition amongst graduates of UK universities lives on. Within the UK, the considerable advantages that individuals perceive they have depending on where they live is important, with London and other large urban areas holding all the cards. This creates problems for those obliged to return to or stay in family homes which are in small towns with limited opportunities for graduates. Although many graduates have adapted to a more prolonged need to live at home with their parents than experienced by previous generations; a delayed departure from the family home, e.g., both living at home through university and thereafter, risks impeding personal independence, and confidence to rise to the challenge of potential geographic mobility. Such a delayed departure is more common amongst those from a lower social background.

Data from the survey but especially interviews illustrates how individuals struggle to make sense of contemporary individualist discourses, which promote behaviours and attitudes that can sometimes appear contradictory depending on what viewpoint is taken; these include consumerism, selfishness, a faith in meritocracy, a protean career orientation as well as a more pragmatic self-reflection. For example, it is possible to view a degree as a product that should guarantee a desired outcome, while also arguing that an individual has ultimate responsibility for their own career destiny. It is also possible to believe in meritocracy and that “talent will out” while also being well aware of the barriers of geography and social background that affect career paths. It is also possible to have considerable self-belief, to the extent where one is highly critical of others, while also being dependent on one’s own community of supporters. And finally, it is possible to be highly

self-reflective and/or self-critical while also blaming somebody and anybody else (e.g., the university, employers, the Job Centre) for an undesirable situation. The confusing nature of contemporary thinking about individual agency was evident during in-depth interviews in which participants voice many of these perspectives in ways that are not always consistent. An interesting challenge for educators is raised - to actually address such complexity about individual agency which is often just taken-for-granted.

The role of career conversations has emerged, and the contemporary taboo of actually talking about careers is challenged. The importance of being able to talk out loud about one's ideas and having people that can be trusted to do so is revealed. This experience can contribute to making individuals feel that they are being taken seriously and are worthy of the ambitions they may espouse. It does appear that those with more valuable social capital are more likely to make such career conversations happen. Though the careers question may be one that students and graduates dread to hear, it does seem important that those who are the supporters of students and graduates find suitable opportunities to have career conversations.

Finally, this research adds to critical voices of a reliance on quantitative metrics, e.g., used in DLHE, to capture graduate career pathways. A particular obsession with positive destinations as defined by league tables provides a narrow notion of graduate success. Consideration of the stories of research interview participants, many of whom do not meet conventional notions of graduate career success, shows a group of young graduates resolutely building their careers.

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