Public v Private Sectors: undergraduates’ constructions of employment in teaching, accountancy and marketing/sales management

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Abstract: This paper reports upon the results of an investigation into the constructions placed upon traditional public sector employment (teaching) and predominantly private sector employment (accountancy and marketing/sales management) by final-year undergraduates on an Education Studies degree at a post-1992 university in South Wales. The purpose of the study was to examine the students’ perceptions of the extent to which entry to these occupations is influenced by factors such as gender and social class and thus, by implication, the extent to which their own employability in these occupational areas might be constrained or assisted. The question of how undergraduates, who would traditionally anticipate working in teaching-related employment, perceive employment in the private sector has acquired particular interest following recent public sector cuts in the U.K. It was found that, while the students did not perceive social class and gender to present barriers to employment in accountancy or marketing/sales management, it was also strongly felt that the skills from their degree would be irrelevant to work in these jobs. This represents a rejection of dominant discourses regarding the transferability of graduate skills and challenges assumptions of graduate occupational mobility.

Keywords: Graduate employability; Skills; Social class; Gender

Introduction

This paper reports upon the results of the first stage of an investigation into the constructions placed upon teaching and a graduate-level position within the finance sector (accountant) and the business sector (marketing/sales manager) by final year undergraduates on an Education Studies degree at a post-1992 university in South Wales. The purpose of the study is to examine the students’ perceptions of the extent to which entry to these occupations is influenced by social factors such as gender and social class and thus, by implication, the extent to which their own employability in these occupational areas would be constrained or assisted. The study employed a three-stage multi-methods approach, using a questionnaire and focus group interviews with final year Education Studies undergraduates, and individual

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interviews with Education Studies lecturers. This paper will report upon findings from the initial stage of research—the student questionnaire.

The issue of student employability—and, particularly, of students’ perceptions of their own employability—is important because it is so closely tied in with the recent expansion of higher education (H.E) in the U.K and with political promises of a labour market based upon a knowledge based economy. As, Brown and Hesketh (2004, 1) note critically, the discourse of a knowledge economy has been seen as a ‘historic solution’ to the struggle for wealth creation and one which governments can meet through enhancing the employability of the workforce. Under the previous New Labour administration this challenge was addressed through expansion of both the further and higher education sectors, and came with a clear promise to young people (and their parents) of highly skilled, well remunerated employment (BIS 2009). Young people have, in turn, responded in considerable numbers to the prevailing discourse. Participation had already reached ‘mass’ levels (defined as a 20% threshold) by the early 1990s (Parry 2006, 394), and among the 18—30 age group it currently stands at 43% (DIUS 2009). While the recent ‘golden age’ of H.E expansion is now over, it is nonetheless clear that both government and individual young people have invested much in the promise of employment within a knowledge economy through the acquisition of H.E credentials. Indeed, it may not be going too far to argue that the future of higher education in the U.K depends on the continued belief of young people and their parents in the value of H.E as a tool for occupational and social mobility (Ainley and Allen 2010).

The question of young people’s subjective understandings of their own employability has recently acquired additional potency in the current climate of severe public sector spending cuts, and with the implications of these for public sector employment for graduates. While it is notoriously difficult to agree a precise definition of what we mean by ‘public sector’, two authoritative sources both estimate that 40% of all employed graduates work within the sector (Elias and Purcell, 2004, 6; Ball 2010). Estimates of the scale of public sector job losses which will be caused as a result of central and local government cuts vary widely, but even the coalition government’s own figures point to losses of around half a million jobs by 2014-15 (OBR 2010). Moreover, although the Welsh Assembly government (WAG) has devolved powers over a range of public services, such as health and education, the UK government’s Budget and Spending Review will mean a reduction in the WAG budget of £1.8 billion in the period 2010—2014 (WAG 2011, 2), with obvious implications for job losses. Clearly, therefore, graduates will be hit particularly hard by public sector cuts, although the exact scale of job losses within teaching is not clear in light of UK and Welsh Assembly government pledges to protect the jobs of ‘front-line’ professionals within the sector. To replace lost public sector jobs, the UK government has put its faith in the dynamism of the private sector as an engine for jobs’ growth (Cameron 2010). This, however, raises the question of how undergraduates (such as those on an Education Studies degree), who would traditionally anticipate working in teaching and related activities within the public sector, perceive the nature of employment in the private sector.

This question, therefore, forms the context and rationale for this present paper. The aim of this study is to compare students’ perceptions of the social factors that surround employment.
within traditional public sector employment (teaching) with predominantly private sector employment (accountancy and marketing/sales management). The next section of this article will review existing literature related to undergraduates and graduates and employability. Following this, the author will give details of the research survey from which the findings of this present paper are drawn and then, finally, the findings will be presented and discussed.

**Undergraduates, Graduates and Employability**

Despite the currency of employability as a concept within policy-related discourse, there is surprisingly little research into undergraduates’ and graduates’ subjective understandings of it, and even less that directly examines their representations of the socially-based nature of the graduate labour market. There are exceptions to this, however. In two studies conducted in the mid-1990s, Ainley (1994) and Brown and Scase (1994) examined undergraduates’ perceptions of the graduate labour market and their orientations towards it, and how these were mediated by structural factors such as their ‘race’, class and gender. Ainley (1994) compared the perspectives of students from a prestigious pre-1992 university—a predominantly middle-class, young and White cohort—against the perspectives of students from a less prestigious post-1992 institution—a much more working-class, older and ethnically mixed student body. Differences in social class were found to map out onto the sense of confidence and entitlement with which the students viewed future job prospects. Thus, the students of the pre-1992 institution demonstrated a much greater sense of entrepreneurial self-confidence than their peers at the post-1992 university, who tended to feel more marginalised and insecure in relation to the post-graduate labour market (Ainley 1994, 81-2). Interestingly, students at both universities acknowledged the continuing importance of social class, ‘race’ and gender as determinants of career success (Ainley 1994, 83).

Brown and Scase (1994) researched undergraduates from across the U.K’s H.E hierarchy: Oxbridge, an established pre-1992 university, and a post-1992 institution. Most of their samples fell into one of two ideal type orientations: the ‘traditional bureaucratic’ view, and the ‘flexible’ view (Brown and Scase 1994, 89). Of these, the majority of students held the traditional bureaucratic orientation, whereby they expected to make a long term commitment to an organisation in return for incremental career progression and predictable increases in salary and status (Brown and Scase 1994, 93). By contrast, students of the flexible outlook saw occupational careers in terms of frequent changes of job, and of the construction of a career portfolio, rather than through movement up a bureaucratic hierarchy (Brown and Scase 1994, 99).

The crucial point is that, as with the Ainley (1994) study, student perspectives were not randomly determined but, instead, clearly aligned with systematic differences in the students’ material circumstances as they were mediated by such factors as ‘race’, class and gender. Thus, students who exhibited the traditional bureaucratic orientation tended to be predominantly women, or from working-class or minority ethnic backgrounds (Brown and
Scase 1994, 95). For such students, a traditional bureaucratic career was seen to offer a ‘safe’ route into ‘professional’ middle-class society, and to ease their sense of social dislocation in moving from their working-class origins (Brown and Scase 1994, 95). Similarly, there was a strong link between students with flexible orientations and attendance at private schools and/or elite universities, particularly Oxbridge. These students benefitted from sufficient levels of dominant cultural capital and ‘social confidence’ to enable them to forego the psychological security associated with a traditional bureaucratic career, in favour of the risks involved in building up a portfolio career (Brown and Scase 1994, 103-4).

The research studies by Ainley (1994) and Brown and Scase (1994) were, of course, conducted over a decade and a half ago, and it is noteworthy that more recent investigations into this area have recorded a qualitative shift in student orientations towards the graduate labour market. In particular, there appears to have been a very marked decline in the ‘traditional bureaucratic’ outlook, and a correspondingly greater tendency towards a ‘flexible’ perspective. This is evident in a recent study by Tomlinson (2007a), which examined the perceptions of fifty-three final year undergraduates at a pre-1992 university regarding the role of educational credentials in relation to future employability. The study found that the undergraduates perceived their degrees per se to be of increasingly limited value in the face of a highly competitive and congested graduate labour market. Instead, a heavy emphasis was placed upon the need to develop ‘soft credentials’—experiences and achievements that fell outside of their degree—and, in so doing, develop a ‘narrative of employability’ (Tomlinson, 2007a, 57). These findings were echoed in a later study by Brooks and Everett (2009) which drew on evidence from ninety graduates from a wide range of different higher education institutions, and which found that many participants believed the degree was only a ‘basic minimum’ which had to be supplemented with evidence of appropriate ‘soft skills’ (Brooks and Everett 2009, 338).

While those two studies did not directly address (under)graduates’ perceptions of the importance of social factors in relation to the graduate labour market, two earlier studies have addressed that question with interesting results. Brown and Hesketh (2004) conducted a large scale qualitative investigation into the employability strategies of sixty graduate applicants for ‘fast-track’ positions within fifteen leading private and public sector organisations. Similarly, they also found that their interviewees recognised that a degree in itself, even one from a top ranking university, would no longer be enough to secure them the elite professional and managerial employment they were seeking; rather, certain ‘personal qualities and experiences’ would play a pivotal role in employers’ judgements (Brown and Hesketh 2004, 119). However, the graduates appeared to be aware of the socially-based nature of such ‘personal qualities’. For example, an attractive appearance was recognised as an asset while accent functioned as an important indicator of ‘social fit’ with colleagues and clients (Brown and Hesketh 2004, 119). Gender appeared to be regarded largely as a ‘dead’ issue by female applicants but interviewees were ambivalent concerning the effects of ‘race’ and ethnicity on recruitment, recognising discrimination but believing that organisations are more institutionally open than previously (Brown and Hesketh 2004, 122). However, there
was a clear perception that social class background did continue to function as an important determinant of an individual’s chances of success (Brown and Hesketh 2004, 123).

A later survey by Moreau and Leathwood (2006) with graduates of a post-1992 inner-city university in England investigated the graduates’ representations of the labour market, and the factors they perceived to facilitate or hinder their access to post-graduate employment. As with the other recent studies discussed, there was a marked tendency for the interviewees to highlight personal qualities and attributes, reflecting a prevalent perception of a degree as increasingly just a ‘threshold’ credential (Moreau and Leathwood 2006, 315). The emphasis upon personal attributes was also a reflection of the interviewees’ meritocratic perceptions of the graduate labour market: the workplace was seen as a place offering plenty of opportunities for those willing to make the effort (Moreau and Leathwood 2006, 317). In this respect, therefore, the findings differ somewhat from those of Brown and Hesketh (2004). Success or failure were ascribed largely to the individual, while structural factors such as gender or ethnicity were not spontaneously identified by the participants and, when raised, were assumed to be adequately addressed by equal opportunities legislation (Moreau and Leathwood 2006, 317). Such a discourse of meritocracy was also voiced by the interviewees in a study by Tomlinson (2007b), in which undergraduates tended to view the jobs market in very individualistic terms, often to the extent of overlooking the influence of structural factors such as ‘race’, class and gender (Tomlinson 2007b, 290).

There is, thus, relatively little research into (under)graduates’ representations of the labour market. Moreover, there are few studies conducted specifically within a post-1992 context and, it is believed, none which have purposely examined students’ constructions of the socially-based nature of particular areas of employment. This represents an important gap in employability-related research, with significant implications for our understanding of students’ perceptions of the relationship between higher education and occupational and social mobility. This article aims to address this gap. The next section will discuss in more detail the rationale for comparing students’ constructions of teaching, accountancy and marketing/sales management. Following that, the paper will describe the research study and then present and discuss the findings of the investigation.

Teaching, Accountancy and Marketing/Sales Management and ‘Graduateness’

The decision to compare undergraduates’ constructions of the three occupational areas of teaching, accountancy and marketing/sales management was made to compare students’ perceptions of careers that are associated, generally, with either the public or private sectors. Importantly, however, they are also linked by the concept of ‘graduateness’, that is, they are now seen principally or exclusively as graduate-only occupations. Following Elias and Purcell’s (2003) widely accepted four-fold typology of graduate-level occupations, accountancy falls under the ‘modern’ graduate type of occupation which refers to newer professions, particularly within management, which graduates have been entering in increasing numbers and marketing/sales management is a ‘new’ type of graduate occupation,
referring to new administrative, caring and technical occupations to which graduates have increasingly been recruited in large numbers (Elias and Purcell 2003, 7).

Teaching is a ‘traditional’ graduate occupation within the Elias and Purcell (2003) typology for which, historically, the normal route has been via an undergraduate degree. Teaching was also chosen in light of its popularity as a career among the Education Studies undergraduates at the case study institution, over 60% of whom applied for a place on a Post-Graduate Certificate of Education (PGCE) teacher training course in the 2009-10 academic year.

The three occupations thus “...represent areas of work in which there is a strong probability that a graduate employed in these areas will be making use of their degree skills and knowledge” (Elias and Purcell 2003, 7). In this sense, therefore, the study is able to examine students’ constructions of, and by implication their sense of their own employability in, jobs that meet with the description of ‘knowledge workers’ and this offers a basis to reflect upon students’ attitudes to their position within the knowledge economy. Beyond this, however, there are two further reasons why this study decided to compare students’ constructions of accountancy and marketing/sales management in particular against teaching. Firstly, as modern and new graduate professions respectively, accountancy and marketing/sales management are occupations within the fastest growing areas of graduate employment between 1975 and 2000 (Elias and Purcell 2003, 14). They are, thus, dynamic areas for graduate jobs’ growth.

The potential dynamism of the business and finance sectors, of which accountancy and marketing/sales management are a part, has been recognised by both U.K central government and the Welsh Assembly Government (WAG). In a 2009 paper written just after the ‘credit crunch’, the U.K government continued to identify ‘professional and financial services’ as some of the ‘core strengths’ of the U.K (BERR 2009, 32). A later report by the advisory body to the U.K government, the U.K Commission for Employment and Skills (UKCES), also identified ‘business services’ as a key sector for post-recession recovery, with the claim that this area was expected to account for more than one third of total jobs’ growth (UKCES 2010, 19). Finally, ‘financial and professional services’ is one of six priority sectors identified by the WAG as areas for future jobs’ growth in Wales (WAG 2010, 39). Jobs’ growth in this sector may, in fact, be especially important for the area of Wales in which the case study institution is located and in which many of the Education Studies graduates surveyed for this research will be seeking employment. While the average proportion of employees located in the public sector is 21.1% for the UK as a whole, in Wales it is 26.6% (Mellows-Facer 2010, 3) and in certain areas within the South Wales region, such as Swansea and Merthyr Tydfil, more than a third of all jobs are in the public sector (WAG 2009, 3).

**Employability and Transferability**

The business and finance sectors are, therefore, important to future jobs’ growth in the UK in general and in Wales in particular. Moreover, official discourse surrounding graduate employability insists upon the potential for graduate mobility between occupational areas,
and this represents the second reason for comparing students’ constructions of accountancy and marketing/sales management with teaching. The employers’ representative body, the Confederation of British Industry (CBI), has identified nine graduate ‘employability skills’ at least six of which are, arguably, generic in nature including ‘teamworking’, ‘problem solving’ and a ‘positive attitude’ (CBI/UUK 2009, 8). Employability is, thus, positioned as a largely technocratic affair involving the acquisition of the appropriate attitude and attributes. For this reason, the CBI claims that two-thirds of all jobs that require graduate-level skills are open to students of all disciplines (CBI 2009, 12). From this perspective, therefore, accountancy and marketing/sales management are, in principal, open to graduates of an Education Studies degree (albeit with the proviso of further specialist training, particularly in the case of accountancy).

Nevertheless, despite the rhetoric of a level playing field, there remains substantial evidence of a graduate labour market that is divided along lines of gender and social class. Female graduates are considerably more likely than male graduates to work in the public rather than the private sector, and as public sector jobs typically pay less than equivalent private sector posts, this has a significant impact upon annual earnings accounting for an average ten percent negative pay gap between male and female earnings (Purcell and Elias 2004, 12). Social class also plays an important role in the graduate labour market. A large scale study by Pollard, Pearson, and Willison (2004) of 1,500 graduates found that students from families with no experience of university do least well after graduating in terms of income. A smaller study by Furlong and Cartmel (2005) conducted among graduates from disadvantaged backgrounds in Scotland reached very similar findings and also concluded that the female graduates among their sample were achieving lower earnings than the male graduates. Thus, by comparing students’ constructions of teaching with accountancy and marketing/sales management the study aims to consider the extent to which the Education Studies undergraduates concur with official discourses regarding the transferability of employability skills, and the extent to which they view these occupational areas as ‘classed’ or ‘gendered’.

The Research Study

Case study institution

The case study institution is a post-1992 university in the South-East Wales area. The university recruits substantial numbers of students from within the South Wales and South West England area. The social background of the students varies considerably between courses, however, an overall majority of the in-take could be categorised as from broadly working-class backgrounds and are mostly the first generation in their families to experience H.E. Such students represent a crucial ‘market’ for post-1992 institutions such as the case study university. Moreover, it is these ‘non-traditional’ students who have also been the targets of the widening participation agenda and it is their participation that has, in part, fuelled the expansion in H.E student numbers over the last two decades. In this respect, therefore, the case study institution represents a valuable test-bed for student representations.
of the labour market and of their own employability and, by implication, their continued faith in the potential for social mobility through higher education.

**B.A (Hons) in Education Studies**

The growth of Education Studies as a multi-disciplinary critical study of the field of education is a relatively recent one, emerging from the decline of the sociological and psychological elements within Initial Teacher Training (ITT) programmes in the 1980s and developing with the expansion of the H.E sector in the 1990s (Bartlett and Burton 2007, 3). Education Studies has been a fast growing degree at the case study institution. At present, there are six ‘pathways’, that is, choice of subject that can be studied in 50-50 combination with Education Studies. With regard to career potential, the institution’s website first highlights the possibility of teaching and then goes on to identify educational administration, publishing, the media and personnel management as possible careers.

**The Questionnaire**

As indicated previously, the student questionnaire formed the first stage in a multi-methods research project. The questionnaire was divided into two principal sections to be self-completed by the respondent. The first section aimed to elicit students’ perceptions of the relative positions of the occupations within the labour market (in terms of competitiveness of entry) and of the usefulness of their degree for the three jobs. This section also asked students to rate the importance of social factors such as social class, gender or accent for each job. The second section aimed to elicit the students’ perceptions of the attributes of each job in areas such as pay, security and promotion prospects. The questions in both sections were of the ‘semantic differential’ type and were used for their flexibility in measuring the evaluative strength (i.e ‘useful’—‘useless’ etc) of participants’ responses (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison 2000, 253).

In September 2010 the questionnaire was distributed to all 103 students from the six pathways of the third year of the Education Studies degree at the case study institution to be completed and returned a few days later. 89 fully completed questionnaires were returned, representing a response rate of 86.4% of the cohort which may be regarded as a very high response rate for a self-completed questionnaire (Denscombe 2005, 8). Both the wider third year Education Studies cohort and the questionnaire sample are overwhelmingly female as indicated in the table below. The proportion of males to females within the questionnaire sample almost exactly matches that of the wider cohort and, thus, it was felt that the questionnaire sample was a fair representation of the overall gender composition of the undergraduate group.
Table 1. Gender composition of the third year Education Studies cohort and questionnaire sample

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year 3 Education Studies Cohort</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Males</td>
<td>Females</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14 (13.5%)</td>
<td>89 (86.5%)</td>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th>Questionnaire Sample</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Males</td>
<td>Females</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 (14%)</td>
<td>77 (86%)</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Students were asked to indicate if they intended to do a Post-Graduate Certificate of Education (PGCE) teacher training course after they had finished their degree. A large proportion indicated either that they intended to do a PGCE (41% n=37) or that they were ‘not sure’ (28% n=25), and thus perhaps were still considering it. Only a relatively small proportion (30% n=27) said that they definitely did not intend to do PGCE. Teaching therefore clearly remains a popular choice of career among Education Studies undergraduates. The next section of this paper will discuss the questionnaire findings in detail.

i) Social factors and the three occupations

Perceptions of the competitiveness of entry to the three occupations

Teaching was overwhelmingly perceived to be a difficult career to enter, with 36% (n=32) saying it was ‘very competitive’, and 55% (n=49) identifying it as ‘extremely competitive’. Accountancy was seen as rather less competitive than teaching, with a majority of respondents identifying it as either ‘competitive’ (33% n=29) or ‘very competitive’ (28% n=25). Marketing/sales management was seen as the least competitive of the three jobs, with a majority seeing it only as ‘quite competitive’ (25% n=22) or ‘competitive’ (37% n=33).

Perceptions of the usefulness of degree for the three occupations

Respondents were overwhelmingly positive about the value of the degree for teaching, with 27% (n=24) identifying it as ‘very useful’ and 59% (n=53) identifying it as ‘extremely useful’. Figures for accountancy were almost the reverse of those for teaching. Respondents were very clear that they did not think their degree was useful for accountancy, with 45% (n=40) indicating it was ‘not at all useful’ and 26% (n=23) indicating that it was only ‘slightly useful’. The degree was perceived to be only slightly more useful for a career in
Marketing/ sales management than for accountancy. A majority described it as ‘not at all useful’ (31.5% n=28) or as just ‘slightly useful’ (38% n=34).

**Perceptions of importance of accent in the three occupations**

A significant majority (59.5% n=53) disagreed with the statement that accent would affect a person’s chances in a teaching career, and of those who disagreed, the majority either indicated ‘quite strongly disagree’ (26% n=23) or ‘strongly disagree’ (23% n=21). However, there was an even stronger perception that accent did not matter in accountancy with a majority (66.3% n=59) indicating disagreement. Results were rather more mixed for Marketing/ sales management. A smaller majority (56% n=50) indicated disagreement while a significant number of respondents (37% n=33) indicated agreement or strong agreement.

**Perceptions of importance of social skills in the three occupations**

There was a clear perception of the importance of good social skills to teaching, with 79% (n=71) of respondents expressing agreement with the statement that they mattered to career success, and a large majority (66.3% n=59) indicating strong agreement. There was also a general, if lesser, perception that social skills were important to accountancy, with 64% (n=72) expressing agreement, although a significant proportion (28% n=25) also indicated various shades of disagreement with the statement. As with teaching, there was a very strong perception that social skills were very important to Marketing/sales management, with 77.6% (n=69) indicating different shades of agreement.

**Perceptions of the importance of a private school education and/or elite university degree for a career in the three occupations**

There was a strong tendency to see a private school education and/or elite university degree as an advantage for teaching (63.6% n=59), with a significant number (43% n=38) indicating either strong or quite strong agreement. This tendency was even more marked with regard to accountancy where 72.5% (n=64) also indicated agreement, of whom 47.5% (n=42) also indicated either strong or quite strong agreement. Figures for Marketing/sales management are rather more mixed. As with teaching and accountancy, there was a general tendency to agree with the statement at 65% (n=58), however, fewer respondents indicated strong or quite strong agreement at 37% (n=33).

**Perceptions of the importance of social class in the three occupations**

There was a strong tendency to agree with the statement that social class does not matter in relation to the three professions. 68.6% (n=61) of respondents indicated various shades of
agreement with the statement in regard to teaching, while the tendency was even more marked in relation to accountancy, where 70% (n=62) of respondents indicated different shades of agreement with the statement. The overall results described above were basically repeated for Marketing/sales management where 71% (n=63) of respondents also agreed to differing extents with the statement.

**Perceptions of the importance of gender in the three occupations**

There was quite a marked tendency to agree with the statement that gender was an influence on career success in teaching, with 66% (n=59) expressing agreement, and 41.6% (n=37) indicating either strong or quite strong agreement. There was a much less marked tendency to see gender as an influence in accountancy, where 55% (n=49) agreed with the statement, and of those the largest proportion (32.6% n=29) only indicated ‘agree’. The figures for Marketing/sales management were exactly the same as for accountancy, that is, only 55% (n=49) agreed with the statement.

**ii) Attributes of the three occupations**

**Perceptions of the level of pay in the three occupations**

Teaching was perceived to be the lowest paid of the three job areas, with a large majority (71% n=63) identifying the pay as either ‘quite poor’ or only ‘reasonable’. Accountancy was seen to be the best paid job, with a large majority (65.2% n=58) perceiving the pay to be either ‘good’ or ‘excellent’. Marketing/sales management fell roughly in between the other two job areas: a majority of respondents (56% n=50) identified the pay as either ‘quite poor’ or as only ‘reasonable’, although a significant number (29% n=25) also identified the pay in this area as either ‘good’ or ‘excellent’.

**Perceptions of the security of the three occupations**

Teaching was clearly seen to offer the most security of the three areas. A large majority of respondents (65% n=58) rated it positively, while just under half of all respondents (47% n=42) rated job security as either ‘good’ or ‘excellent’. Accountancy was perceived to be the second most secure job area, although it fell some considerable way short of teaching. 50% (n=44) of respondents rated it positively but only 25% (n=22) of them identified security as ‘good’ or ‘excellent’. Marketing/sales management was seen to be the least secure of the three areas, with only 26% (n=23) rating security positively and only 4.5% (n=4) of respondents identifying it as either ‘good’ or ‘excellent’.

**Perceptions of promotion prospects in the three job areas**

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Teaching was perceived to offer the fewest prospects for job promotion. Just under half of all respondents (44% n=39) rated it negatively as either ‘poor’ or ‘quite poor’, while only 18% (n=16) rated it as ‘good’ or ‘excellent’. Respondents who did not intend to pursue a PGCE were proportionately more likely to rate teaching unfavourably in this area than those who did intend to do a PGCE, with 15 of 27 of the former group identifying prospects as either ‘poor’ or ‘quite poor’ against 17 of 37 of the latter group. Scores for accountancy were rather more ambivalent: on the one hand it scored considerably better for promotion prospects than teaching, as over a third of respondents (37% n=33) rated it as either ‘good or excellent’, but on the other hand a third of respondents (32.5% n=29) also rated it as either ‘poor’ or ‘quite poor’.

Marketing/sales management was clearly seen to offer the best promotion prospects: just over half (50.5% n=45) of all respondents rated prospects as ‘good’ or ‘excellent’. Here, however, there was a marked contrast between respondents who did not intend to do a PGCE and those who did, with respondents who did not intend to do a PGCE being much more likely to rate promotion prospects favourably: 25 of 27 of this group rated prospects positively, while only 24 of 37 of the intended PGCE applicants did the same. Similarly, while 13 of 37 of the intended PGCE applicants rated prospects negatively, while only 2 of the 27 respondents who did not intend to do a PGCE did the same.

**Perceptions of pension provision from the three occupations**

Teaching was perceived to offer the best pension provision of the three job areas. Just under half (45% n=40) of all respondents rated it as either ‘good’ or ‘excellent’, while only 26% (n=25) rated it negatively. Accountancy offered similar results to teaching, as a significant number of respondents (39% n=35) also rated pension provision as either ‘good’ or ‘excellent’, while only 25% (n=24) rated it negatively. Marketing/sales management was clearly seen to offer the least in the way of pension provision, as just over half (50.6% n=45) of all respondents rated it negatively while only 18% (n=16) rated it highly.

**Perceptions of amount of paid holiday from the three occupations**

Perhaps not surprisingly, teaching was overwhelmingly seen to offer the most paid holidays. A very large majority (82% n=73) rated it as either ‘good’ or ‘excellent’. Accountancy was the second highest rated job area, although it was scored some considerable distance below teaching. Just slightly over half (51.6% n=46) of respondents rated holiday provision positively, but only a small minority (19% n=17) rated it as either ‘good’ or excellent’. Marketing or Sales Management was clearly seen to offer the least amount of paid holidays of the three job areas. A large majority of respondents (64% n=57) rated it negatively, while only 8% (n=7) identified it to be either ‘good’ or ‘excellent’.
Discussion

To consider the implications of the findings, we must return to the research questions of the study: the constructions placed upon teaching and a graduate-level position within the finance sector (accountant) and the business sector (marketing/sales manager) by final year undergraduates on an Education Studies degree at a post-1992 university in South Wales. It is firstly noteworthy that accountancy and marketing/sales management were perceived to be no more competitive to enter than teaching, indeed less so. At first sight, this may seem surprising in view of the available evidence regarding the levels of competitive entry to graduate-level employment in these areas compared with teaching (High Fliers 2011). However, these perceptions may, perhaps, be explained by the fact that although the students (including those who do not intend to do a PGCE) will be well acquainted with how competitive it is to get on a PGCE, they may not necessarily be so well informed regarding the graduate labour markets for accountancy and marketing/sales management.

Secondly, it is of interest that social class was not thought to be an important factor by the students. These findings resonate with previous investigations into student employability, as discussed previously (Moreau and Leathwood 2006; Tomlinson 2007b), but also with a wider range of international studies in the area of youth ‘transitions’. As Furlong and Cartmel (2007, 9) argue in their overview of different aspects of young people’s lives in late modernity, the guiding narrative by which young people make sense of their experiences is an ideology which presents everything as a possibility. Research with young people across a range of developed countries seems to strongly confirm this. Thus, studies in the U.K context have encountered high levels of personal optimism and an espousal of meritocratic values (Rudd and Evans 1998, 50; Evans 2002, 261), findings which are reflected in Australia (Wyn and Woodman 2006) and in the Netherlands (du Bois Reymond 1998). Nevertheless, it may be significant that when class was given a more concrete dimension through a proxy characteristic—a private education and/or degree from an elite university—it was seen to be more important. This indicates the highly contextualised nature of contemporary understandings of class, whereby when class is presented as a global concept it is usually seen as too abstract to be of significance in people’s lives, but when located within particular circumstances it may take on significance (Savage 2000, 40). Even here, however, the respondents did not perceive any of the three professions to be more particularly ‘classed’ than the others. Thus, entry to a job in accountancy was seen to be only slightly more assisted by the advantage of a private education and/or a degree from an elite university than a job in teaching, while a career in marketing/sales management was less affected.

It is, perhaps, surprising that there was a belief that gender was important in regard to teaching, but was not seen to be an issue in relation to accountancy and marketing/sales management. At this stage of the data analysis, I can only speculate about why a predominantly female group of respondents should identify gender as an issue within a predominantly female profession (GTC 2010; GTCW 2010). It is possible that the respondents perceived males to be at an advantage if they were to apply for positions within the female-dominated primary school sector, which is overwhelmingly the sector of choice for PGCE applicants at the case study institution. If so, as with social class, it may be that the

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respondents are aware of the importance of structural factors in relation to specific contexts (primary school teaching), while lacking a broader consciousness of their social impact (Savage 2000). However, the questionnaire data gained from the student survey is limited in its explanatory power in this respect, and thus analysis of the focus group research will be needed in order to explore the students’ perceptions in this area.

Finally, with regard to the students’ constructions of the three professions, it was notable that the respondents perceived their degree to be of little use for work within either accountancy or marketing/sales management. Such a perception runs counter to governmental and official policy-related discourses, which argue for the employability of graduates from any discipline within the majority of industry areas (CBI 2009; CBI/Universities UK 2009). It would seem that the students perceive ‘usefulness’ to reside in specific vocational skills or knowledge, gained from a vocational degree in the area of accountancy or marketing/sales management, rather than in the transferrable skills promoted by official discourse. This perception may be a product of the long historical academic—vocational divide within post-compulsory education in the UK (Green 1997). Moreover, following Bernstein (1971), we can see that this divide has itself typically been characterised by very strong classification—a high degree of boundary maintenance between subject contents (Bernstein 1971, 49). While the promotion of transferrable or ‘generic’ skills within employability-related discourses may be seen, to some extent, as an attempt to pull higher education free of its nineteenth-century subject-based origins, and to develop a more ‘capability’ oriented approach to learning and assessment (O’Reilly, Cunningham, and Lester 1999), it seems that there may be some way to go before this discourse is assimilated by students.

In terms of the perceived attributes of the three jobs, it was not surprising that respondents perceived teaching to offer the lowest pay or promotion prospects, as this is reflected in findings from previous research (Kyriacou and Coulthard 2000). However, this perception would not necessarily deter those who intend to do a PGCE (or even those who stated that they do not) from entering the profession, since research indicates that teaching applicants are generally motivated by intrinsic factors rather than extrinsic ones (Bielby et al. 2007; Purcell and Wilton 2005). Finally, the perception that teaching offered the most security and greatest amount of paid holidays is also echoed in previous research, in which teaching is seen to score highly in these areas (Kyriacou and Coulthard 2000).

**Concluding remarks**

In general, the study offers reassurance for policy-makers with a vested interest in young people’s continued faith in the promises of a knowledge economy. It is clear that the Education Studies students do not see class, gender or accent as impediments to a career in accountancy or marketing/sales management. This would indicate a continued belief in a meritocratic labour market and, thus, a general belief in the possibility of social mobility through educational and occupational achievement. Nevertheless, as previously discussed, there is a great deal of evidence to suggest that the graduate labour market in the UK is, in
fact, quite strongly characterised by divisions of social class and gender (Purcell and Elias, 2004; Pollard, Pearson, and Willison 2004). Moreover, the stalling, and even reversal, of social mobility gained through access to the professions that has occurred over the last two decades or so, has been recognised at the highest levels of the previous New Labour administration (Cabinet Office 2009), and of the current Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition (Clegg 2010). However, unless real change is effected, the faith that young people and their parents have held in the meritocratic possibilities of higher education—a faith which has helped to fuel expansion of the sector—may well start to dwindle.

It is also of concern that the Education Studies students do not see their degree to be relevant for careers in marketing/sales management or accountancy. On one level, it is perhaps not surprising that the students should feel this given the nature of what is studied within the Education Studies degree, and the likely career prospects that are promoted within the related marketing literature. On another level, however, this perspective is a source of concern in light of the impact of the recession, and of the on-going cuts to the public sector being made by both the coalition government and by the Welsh Assembly government. A combination of fewer graduate-level jobs within the private sector, and of consequent increased graduate demand for public sector employment, will mean greater competition for increasingly fewer jobs within the public sector. On the basis of recent evidence from Scotland (www.bbc.co.uk/news), the unfortunate result may be that many of the students surveyed in this study who intend to do a PGCE are likely either to fail to secure a place on the course or, perhaps, fail to obtain a teaching position after completing the qualification. Despite official exhortations to students to be more ‘flexible’ in their thinking about their own skills and careers (Johnstone and Willis 2010), it appears that there is a large disjunction between official rhetoric and students’ perceptions in this area.

Finally, while the students’ perceptions that teaching offered a safer and more secure career than either accountancy or sales/marketing management may be generally true, they nevertheless raise questions regarding their knowledge of developments within teaching—developments which go to the heart of the public-private sector ‘divide’ on which this study is focused. In Ball’s (2008, 149) view, the growth of private sector involvement and practices in education (in combination with increased governmental control) has meant that teaching is shifting from being a ‘professional-ethical’ form of practice, and is moving towards a more ‘entrepreneurial-competitive’ regime. Teaching thus embodies an intentional blurring of what has traditionally been a clear public-private sector divide. Examples of how such a shift has affected teachers’ working lives may be seen in the introduction of performance-related pay, and in a more punitive attitude towards ‘failing’ schools whereby staff could be sacked for failing to meet targets for improvement (Ball 2008, 115). As educators of potential entrants to the teaching profession, it will be the duty of those who lecture in Education Studies to try to make their students cognisant of the realities of the more insecure modern profession.

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