‘You have to be well spoken’: Students’ views on employability within the Graduate Labour Market.

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Abstract: This study reports upon the perceptions of a sample of Education Studies undergraduates of their employability within three jobs: teaching, accountancy and marketing/sales management. The concept of employability is framed around two themes, analysed through a Bernsteinian conceptual analysis: transferable utility of an Education Studies degree for employment in the jobs; importance of class and gender to employment in the jobs. The question of how undergraduates, who would traditionally anticipate working in teaching-related employment, perceive jobs within different occupational areas has acquired particular interest following on-going public sector cuts in the U.K with consequent implications for employment within teaching. In focus group interviews students identified class and gender barriers in relation to all three jobs, thus demonstrating a wider sensitivity to the classed and gendered nature of the graduate labour market. While the students did not, generally, see either of the two business/finance jobs as completely closed to them in terms of class and gender-related constraints, there was a clear perception that their degree did not provide them with the necessary skills for employment within these jobs. This represents a rejection of dominant discourses regarding transferable graduate skills and challenges assumptions of graduate occupational mobility.

Keywords: Graduate employability; Skills; Social class; Gender

Introduction

This paper reports upon the results of a small-scale qualitative investigation into undergraduates’ perceptions of the graduate labour market. The study sample was a group of final-year undergraduates on an Education Studies degree at a post-1992 university in South-East Wales. The students were asked to consider their employability within three graduate-level jobs: teaching, accountancy and marketing/sales management. The three jobs acted as
cases-in-point for an examination of two issues relevant to the wider graduate labour market: the potential for transferability of degree subject knowledge across employment areas, and the influence of social class and gender as determinants of career success. These two themes have been analysed through a Bernsteinian analytical framework.

The issue of undergraduates’ perceptions of the graduate labour market is important because of the ways in which the recent expansion of higher education (H.E.) in the U.K has been so closely tied in with political promises of a labour market based upon a knowledge-based economy (Tomlinson, 2010). The development of the H.E sector in the U.K has been premised upon the reward to young people of highly-skilled, well-paid employment (BIS 2009). In consequence, young people have been attracted in considerable numbers to higher education, with participation now at ‘mass’ levels, standing at just over 40% (DIUS 2009). Indeed, it could be argued that the future viability of the H.E sector in the U.K is contingent on young people continuing to believe in the value of H.E as a means of occupational and social mobility (Souto-Otero, 2010). This article is concerned with three aspects of the U.K’s graduate labour market which may ultimately challenge undergraduates’ faith in H.E as a vehicle for occupational and social mobility. These three factors form both the context and rationale for this present paper.

The first of these factors relates to the evidence for a graduate labour market demarcated by gender and social class. Female graduates earn an average of ten percent less than their male counterparts (Purcell and Elias 2004, 12) while graduates from disadvantaged backgrounds do less well than their middle-class peers in future earnings (Pollard, Pearson and Willison, 2004; Furlong and Cartmel, 2005). Furthermore, an increasingly credentialed workforce means that social class—or, more specifically, an individual’s level of cultural and social capital and their capacity to convert these into labour market advantage—now appears to be becoming more important, not less, as a determinant of future career success, a fact now at
least acknowledged within governmental policy circles (Cabinet Office 2011). A graduate labour market which appears to be demonstrably unfair and becoming yet more unfair runs the risk of alienating large numbers of young people from participating in H.E (Souto-Otero, 2010).

A second factor is the policy of cuts to public sector employment in the U.K, and the possible implications of these for undergraduates’ perceptions of an increasingly classed and gendered graduate labour market. 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). Clearly, therefore, graduates will be hit particularly hard by retrenchment within the public sector, the effects of which are contributing to increasingly bleak employment prospects. Unemployment in the U.K. has remained stubbornly high since the first convulsions of the 2008 international banking crisis, remaining at an average of nearly 8% between 2009 and 2011 (O.N.S. 2011). Significantly, however, jobless rates for the South East Wales region are considerably higher, totalling 9.4 percent in the year to September 2010 (WAG 2011: 4). This may be explained, in part, by the relatively weak private sector base within the region (Brown and Smetherham 2005) and the consequently heavy reliance upon public sector employment. To replace lost public sector jobs, the Welsh Government has placed its faith in the dynamism of the private sector (WAG 2010), a policy direction to which the UK government has also strongly committed itself (Cameron 2010).

Thus, the labour market opportunity structures which the Education Studies undergraduates of this present study, and indeed all undergraduates, will have to negotiate are rapidly shifting. However, in addition to these UK-wide trends, other long-term developments in Wales are affecting the availability of the teaching and related forms of employment that Education Studies undergraduates have traditionally anticipated entering, and these
developments form the third factor that frames this present study. In response to an overall demographic decline in school-age children, the Welsh Government has pursued a policy of cuts in ITT (Initial Teacher Training) places and a controversial programme of school closures (WGLA 2010). The shrinking of education-related employment opportunities raises the question of how Education Studies undergraduates perceive the nature of employment in industrial sectors not obviously linked to their degree subject. The next section of this article will review existing literature related to (under)graduates and the graduate labour market.

Undergraduates, Graduates and the Graduate Labour Market

There is a growing body of research which has examined processes of class and gender reproduction in undergraduates’ and graduates’ occupational orientations. Two important contributions are studies conducted by Ainley (1994) and Brown and Scase (1994). Ainley’s (1994) comparison of students from a prestigious pre-1992 university with those from a less prestigious post-1992 institution found clear class differences in orientations and levels of social confidence with which students approached the labour market, with the middle-class students from the pre-1992 institution exhibiting a much greater sense of self-confidence and entitlement than their working-class counterparts at the post-1992 university (Ainley 1994, 81-2). Similarly, Brown and Scase (1994) found that undergraduates who enjoyed substantial familial cultural and material resources were much more likely to adopt a ‘flexible’ portfolio approach to career development than their working-class peers, who exhibited a ‘traditional bureaucratic’ orientation which placed a premium on security through a visible career ladder in ‘safe’ professions such as teaching and nursing.

The 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 have recorded a
qualitative shift in student orientations towards a ‘flexible’ perspective (Tomlinson 2007a; Brooks and Everett 2009). Nevertheless, material circumstances continue to be highly influential in shaping a graduate’s career orientations. Thus, some of the working-class graduates studied by Furlong, and Cartmel (2005) were forced, by financial need, to accept readily available sources of employment which were not commensurate with their qualifications, while the more privileged middle-class graduate cohort tracked by Power et al. (2003) were able to contemplate a more leisurely and multiple set of career moves based upon a desire for career self-actualisation.

Successive studies have also found that graduates with relatively low levels of cultural and material inheritance tend to operate within more limited spatial horizons than their more privileged counterparts in their job searching (Power et al. 2003; Perryman et al. 2003; Furlong and Cartmel 2005). While for many such graduates the desire to ‘stay local’ is a matter of choice as much as of exigency (Perryman et al. 2003; Greenbank and Hepworth 2008), this form of localism—particularly where it occurs in areas of relatively high economic deprivation—appears to feed into wider graduate class and gender-based inequalities. Thus, while many of the more spatially mobile among the middle-class graduates researched by Power et al. (2003, 133) exhibited high salary expectations, the working-class cohort based more locally within the west of Scotland tracked by Furlong and Cartmel tended to have salary expectations that were actually some way below national average starting salaries (Furlong and Cartmel 2005, 23). Additionally, there is consistent evidence for a cross-cutting effect of gender with class, whereby working-class women graduates and undergraduates have particularly low salary expectations (Furlong and Cartmel 2005, 23; Perryman et al. 2003, 59).

While the available data point clearly to class and gender-based inequalities within the graduate labour market, the evidence for graduates’ awareness of these structural imbalances
is mixed. Furlong and Cartmel (2005, 17) report that although their participants tended not to attribute potential disadvantage to their class or gender, they identified discrimination with more concrete signifiers of class such as accent or area of residence. Similarly, a study by Brown and Hesketh (2004) into the career strategies of applicants for ‘fast-track’ graduate positions found that accent was accepted as an important indicator of ‘social fit’ with colleagues and clients, although gender was largely treated as irrelevant by female applicants (Brown and Hesketh 2004, 121). However, candidates were clear that social class background remained an important factor in an individual’s future success (Brown and Hesketh 2004, 123). In contrast, later studies conducted with undergraduates (Moreau and Leathwood 2006; Tomlinson 2007b; Greenbank and Hepworth 2008) found a clear emphasis upon personal agency and a belief in the meritocratic functioning of the workplace which downplayed the influence of structural factors such as ‘race’, class and gender.

This study aims to further the existing body of research into (under)graduates’ understandings of the labour market through the focus it has adopted: undergraduates’ perceptions of the importance of social class, gender and choice of degree subject in relation to three particular areas of employment. The three job areas serve as cases-in-point for a wider analysis of the students’ orientations towards the graduate labour market. The next section will discuss in more detail the rationale for the particular choice of accountancy and marketing/sales management as example professions with which to compare against teaching.

**Accountancy and Marketing/Sales Management: ‘Graduateness’ and Jobs Growth**

Accountancy and marketing/sales management are linked to teaching by the concept of ‘graduateness’ (Elias and Purcell 2003). As Furlong and Cartmel (2005, 11) note, in many respects the term ‘graduate labour market’ may itself be regarded as something of an
anachronism since it is increasingly segmented into zones of greater or lesser security with differing levels of correspondence to graduate-level skills. Traditional narrow bifurcations between graduate and non-graduate work will no longer suffice, and thus Elias and Purcell’s (2003) four-fold typology of ‘traditional’, ‘modern’, ‘new’ and ‘niche’ jobs is an attempt to offer a more expansive definition of graduate employment.

Following Elias and Purcell’s (2003) widely accepted four-fold typology, accountancy is a ‘modern’ graduate type of occupation, which refers to newer professions, particularly within management, which have become increasingly graduate-only entry; marketing/sales management is a ‘new’ type of graduate occupation, a category which encompasses new administrative, caring and technical occupations to which graduates have increasingly been recruited (Elias and Purcell 2003, 7). Thus, following Elias and Purcell (2003, 7) these two occupations, along with teaching, “…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”. Beyond this, however, there are two further reasons for choosing to compare accountancy and marketing/sales management against teaching.

The first relates to the continued belief within the UK central government and the Welsh Government in the growth potential of the business and finance sectors, of which accountancy and marketing/sales management are a part. Despite official rhetoric concerning the need to effect a sectoral ‘re-balancing’ of the UK economy away from financial services and towards manufacturing industry (BIS 2011), it is apparent that the coalition government is much more intent upon a re-balancing from public to private employment in line with macro-economic policy. It is within this context that the UK government continues to identify ‘business services’ (located predominantly in the private sector) as a key sector for post-recession recovery, with the claim that this area is expected to account for more than one third of total jobs growth (UKCES 2010, 19). ‘Financial and professional services’ is also one
of six priority sectors identified by the Welsh Government as an area for future jobs growth (WAG 2010, 39). However, governmental faith in the powers of the private sector to restore lost public sector jobs has been met with sharp criticism from economists who argue instead for the importance of a fiscal stimulus to promote growth (Bell and Blanchflower 2011). Furthermore, it may be that the very weakness of the existing private sector financial and business services base in areas such as South Wales makes future jobs growth problematic; as Pringle et al. (2011, iv) note, the private sector will find it very difficult to counterbalance a lack of growth in public sector employment in regions where the private sector has historically been underdeveloped.

**Accountancy and Marketing/Sales Management: Transferable skills and Employability**

The second reason relates to the extent to which employers within accountancy and marketing/sales management value applicants with ‘generic’ or ‘transferable’ skills, and of the ways in which this is reflected in their recruitment practices. Transferable skills refer to skills that may be transferable to contexts outside the academic discipline of study (Wingate 2006, 460). The 1997 Dearing Report, which made the first authoritative identification of transferable skills within the context of higher education, identified four such skills: communication, numeracy, information technology and learning how to learn. Since then, agreement appears to have coalesced among employers’ organisations and university representative bodies around the importance of Dearing’s original core of four skills. The emphasis placed upon generic or transferable skills within policy-related discourse is such that the CBI claims that two-thirds of all jobs that require graduate-level skills are open to students of all disciplines (CBI 2009, 12).
Evidence indicates that the discourse of transferable skills is reflected, to some extent, in the actual recruitment practices of employers within accountancy and marketing/sales management. Accountants require specialised knowledge and also strong numerical skills. However, as Annisette and Kirkham (2007, 2) observe, the education and training of accountants in England and Wales is somewhat anomalous when compared with similar high status professions in those two countries or with professional accountancy training regimes in other developed countries. Unlike the US, Canada or Australia where a specialised accountancy degree is a pre-condition of entry to a professional body, the same does not apply to entry to the Institute of Chartered Accountants in England and Wales (ICAEW—the largest body) which admits graduates from all disciplines. This situation has its roots in a nineteenth century preference for the ‘well-rounded’ Arts graduate as against the ‘narrow’ technical specialist (Napier 1996).

Today’s large accountancy firms still place a high value on Arts and Humanities graduates (Scott 2010; Lister 2010) and the reasons for this seem similar to those of the nineteenth century. Thus, while context-specific technical knowledge and skills remain important, today’s accountancy practitioners require an increasingly broad range of skills and attributes, many of which could be seen as generic in nature, such as written and oral communication and teamwork (Morgan 1997) and analytical/problem solving skills (Kavanaugh and Drennan 2008). Scott (2010, 383), in particular, argues that Arts graduates have the ideal background in such skills, and that this fact is recognised by accountancy firms in their recruitment practices.

Marketing/sales management is a much broader and more diffuse occupational area than accountancy. It covers areas such as promotions, branding and market research. Employment within this area is open in principle to graduates of any discipline as evidence indicates that while employers in this area value applicants with vocationally-specific subject knowledge,
they place *greater* value on personal attributes and on generic skills such as written and oral communication and teamwork (Wilton 2008; Andrews and Higson 2008). In the light of this evidence, therefore, this study aims to consider the extent to which, if any, students are aware of the prevalent discourse of transferable skills within their degree studies and, if they are, how it frames their perceptions of their employability.

The following section will describe the research study from which the data for this present paper was drawn.

**The Research Study**

*Case-study institution*

The case-study institution is a post-1992 university in the South-East Wales area, recruiting substantially from within the local area. The overall majority of the students could be categorised as working-class in terms of parental occupation. In the 2010—11 academic year there were 103 students enrolled on the third-year of the B.A (Hons) Education Studies, of whom 89 (86.5%) were female and 14 (13.5%) were male.

**Education Studies**

Education Studies draws from sociology, philosophy, psychology and history with the aim of presenting a critical approach to education as a field of study. Although it has its origins in teacher training, it does not confer Qualified Teacher Status (QTS).
**The Student Focus Groups**

The population for the study was the third-year cohort of students on the B.A (Hons) in Education Studies. The purpose and nature of the study was explained, and students interested in participating in focus groups were asked to put their name on a list of volunteers. This produced a total of thirty-seven, 32 women and 5 men. The study then employed a random stratified sampling approach whereby students were randomly selected from the volunteer list in broad proportion to the gender composition of the wider third-year cohort. In the event, this produced a sample of 17 females and 4 males interviewed across four focus groups between 6th October 2010 and 21st January 2011 (see Table 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focus Group 1</th>
<th>Date of interview</th>
<th>Gender composition</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6.10.10</td>
<td>5 females</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus Group 2</td>
<td>7.10.10</td>
<td>4 males and 1 female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus Group 3</td>
<td>8.10.10</td>
<td>6 females</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus Group 4</td>
<td>21.1.11</td>
<td>5 females</td>
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Prior to the focus groups, all students were asked to complete a form indicating parental occupations. The purpose was to build up a picture of each student’s social class of origin, although the partiality and incompleteness of this information for such a purpose is recognised (Skeggs 1997, 80). Parental occupations were classified by use of the NS-SEC system (ONS 2005). As some of the information on parental occupations was incomplete or slightly vague—for example, in some cases it was not clear whether a parent was self-employed or what size of organisation they worked for—the study adopted the ‘simplified’ method of occupational class derivation (ONS 2005, 24). This method followed two stages. Firstly, parental occupations were assigned an ‘operational category’ from among the 14 functional categories; these categories were then collapsed into one of the eight ‘analytic’
classes into which occupations are aggregated and which function as descriptors for a range of employment relations (ONS 2005, 3).

Working on the basis of the highest individual parental occupation (i.e. mother or father), it was judged that the occupational backgrounds of most parents fell into NS-SEC analytic classes 3 to 6, that is, from ‘intermediate’ to ‘semi-routine’ forms of employment (ONS 2005, 9) In more directly sociological terms, the majority of the students were from semi-skilled/skilled working-class or ‘new’ middle-class (e.g. outside of the established professions) occupational backgrounds.

**Student perceptions of the graduate labour market**

As discussed previously, this study has examined the students’ perceptions of the graduate labour market, as particularised through the three jobs, through two themes:

- transferable utility of a degree in Education Studies
- the importance of class and gender—the structural framing of students’ perceptions.

Findings for each theme are presented in turn.

**Education Studies: transferable skills and subject socialisation**

In initial answers none of the students volunteered any mention of skills as they are understood within dominant policy discourses (CBI 2009). Instead, initial comments across all four groups reflected a belief that the degree provided specialist knowledge that was not necessarily transferable across different employment contexts.

*I know everyone says, ‘I’ve got a degree, that’s ok, you can get most jobs but I don’t think it is. Because if, like, someone’s got a management degree they’re obviously going to do better than with an education degree. But if it’s
like a teacher job working with children, they’d favour mine because mine’s based on children.

(‘Andrea’, Focus Group 4)

Following a Bernsteinian approach, we may interpret the students’ comments as the outcome of a form of subject-based socialisation. As a multi-disciplinary field of study, Education Studies is a good example of what Bernstein (2000, 52) terms a region, that is, a field of study constructed by the interface between different ‘singulars’, i.e, specialised disciplines. Bernstein (2000, 55) also notes that a region will typically draw identity and legitimacy from a ‘double position’ of facing inwards towards parent singulars (a process of introjection) and outwards towards the requirements of external fields of practice (a process of projection). As a relatively new region, Education Studies occupies an unstable and ambivalent position in this regard: it has its roots in teacher training yet does not offer QTS and thus does not technically have an external field of practice in the sense of the examples given by Bernstein (2000, 55), while Education Studies practitioners have attempted to position it as a distinct field of study away from teacher training (Griffin and McDougall 2009). In the case of the students of this present study, however, such attempts clearly appear to have had limited success as the students seem to have developed ‘projected identities’ (Bernstein 2000) facing outwards towards the external field of teaching.

However, while the students were clear in their initial comments that their degree was a teaching-related qualification that did not develop skills relevant to either accountancy or marketing/sales management, further questioning elicited some more nuanced opinions:

Derek  I think with marketing you could probably get away with it but with accountancy, obviously it’s specialist skills so...so they want someone who’s always done that, must be aware of what happens
Philip  Marketing you would have a half chance if you’ve got creative skills, I think. But accountancy, you’ve got no…we don’t come under that!

John  In marketing I think ‘cos you’re using social skills and stuff like that, so...in terms of, like, education I would say we’re kind of interactive now, within our classrooms, on our placements, we interact with the public as well. With accountancy, no. There’s no way. It’s nothing to do with Maths.

(Focus Group Two)

Bernstein’s (1971) conceptual tools of *classification* and *framing* offer us a valuable way of interpreting the students’ comments. It is apparent that the interviewees perceive accountancy (quite correctly) to be a strongly classified area of employment—the specialised nature of the profession means that there is a strong degree of ‘boundary maintenance’, or division, between the knowledge base of accountancy and that of other professions. This degree of specialisation means that accountancy is also a strongly framed profession, that is, there exists tight control over what constitutes the transmission of legitimate knowledge within the field; this control is exerted by the various professional bodies for accountancy which function as ‘boundary maintainers’ (Bernstein 1971, 51) by regulating membership to the profession. By contrast, it is clear that the students perceive (again, quite correctly) marketing/sales management to be a much more weakly classified and framed occupational area in its knowledge/skills demands.

The degree to which the professional knowledge related to a given area of employment is both classified and framed has important implications for the ways in which graduates may perceive the potential for skills transference and so, by extension, their own employability within that occupational area. Thus, we can see that accountancy is defined by the primacy of a highly specialised ‘knowing that’ (Bridges 2000, 46) form of knowledge thereby rendering it inaccessible to the students. Marketing/sales management, however, is thought to offer
greater latitude for a more generic ‘knowing how’ (Bridges 2000, 46) form of knowledge, thus making it at least potentially accessible.

The structural framing of the students’ constructions of the graduate labour market

This paper has discussed how the students’ beliefs about the knowledge and skills developed from their degree have shaped their perceptions regarding their employability within the three occupational areas. By further employing an analysis derived from the work of Bernstein, and additionally from the work of Bourdieu, it will be argued in this section that student perceptions are also framed by two other factors: firstly, how strongly classified and framed in terms of class and gender they perceive the employment areas to be—what Brown and Hesketh (2004) term the ‘social fit’; secondly, their own levels of cultural and social capital, mediated by their class and gender, in relation to such perceptions.

The initial question asked the students, quite directly, how important they thought social class was in relation to a career within the three occupational areas. Across all four focus groups, the students were clear that they thought class did not matter: In some respects, these responses are not very surprising since we know that processes of individualization have tended to weaken people’s sense of overt class consciousness; nevertheless, there is evidence that people do retain a keen relational sense of class—of ‘us’ and ‘them’—when presented with it within certain contexts, such as accent, dress and cultural tastes (Savage, 2000). In view of this, it was decided to further gauge the students’ attitudes to the importance of class through the use of two concrete proxy characteristics: importance of accent and of H.E institution attended. Language and speech carry a powerful imprimatur of class (Hey, 1997) while the relationship between social class and type of university attended is well established (Blanden and Machin, 2004)
i) Accent and social fit

Accent was felt to be important within teaching among all the students. The extract below is representative:

Deborah: ...I would never talk like this in an interview. When I go for my PGCE interview I will not talk like this.

Marion: [Laughing] How will you talk?

Deborah: Well, I wouldn’t talk really posh. I would just, you know, make sure that I pronounce my words [affects a more deliberately enunciated accent] properly.

Marion: [Nodding in agreement] Hmm properly, especially with children because they pick up more than, like, in a high school. They know that’s an accent but they’re not trying to understand that but maybe the children will go back with a bit of a twang and the mothers will be, like, ooh! [General laughter].

(Focus Group Four)

Here teaching is seen to require a ‘proper’ accent, that is, one which quite literally de-accentuates the first speaker’s natural South Wales’ speech. It is apparent that in their conflation of accent and moral responsibility, the students perceive teaching to be a strongly framed profession: there are clear boundaries between what may be transmitted and what may not. This perception does not make the job appear unattainable; rather it could be said to give the profession a particular appeal. Teaching has historically been considered a ‘respectable’ destination for working-class women, holding out the promise of social mobility in exchange for ‘gentrification’ (Maguire 2005, 12). In Bourdieu’s (1997) terms, as working-class women the students occupy an inherited social space with relatively low levels of legitimated cultural capital; thus, their perception of the need to modify their accents represents a desire to acquire legitimacy (i.e symbolic capital) within the field of teaching.
The contrast with accountancy is revealing. Accountancy too was perceived to be a profession strongly framed by class in that a legitimate professional was seen to be defined by a ‘posh’ accent (and appearance). This was regarded as an important mark of social fit with the company and its clients (as the comment below indicates) and clearly reflects similar beliefs held by the fast-track applicants studied by Brown and Hesketh (2004). These beliefs are not without foundation as previous research (Jacobs 2003) has indicated that the recruitment procedures of the big accountancy firms are indeed weighted in favour of an ideal type middle-class recruit who fits with the predominant social background of the company’s employees and clients.

*Because you have to be well spoken and presentable to manage someone’s money. It’s like, if someone comes in and he’s not very well spoken and, like, ‘you’re organising my money’, you want someone who’s very well spoken.*

(‘Samantha’, Focus Group One)

However, while processes of subject-based socialisation have contributed to making teaching a potentially realisable career prospect, accountancy did not feature in the students’ habitus as their levels of cultural and social capital in this respect were limited: very few knew of anybody who worked in the profession. As a result, unlike with teaching, the necessity for a ‘posh’ accent did not connote potential social mobility (and was therefore acceptable) but, instead, represented a barrier to employment.

Finally, Marketing/Sales Management was not seen to be such a ‘posh’ job as accountancy, and a regional and/or working-class accent was not necessarily seen as a disadvantage.
Generally, in terms of accent, the social fit required for a career in marketing/sales management was seen to be less circumscribed than for either teaching or accountancy. This perception aligns closely with the students’ earlier comments about the relative knowledge/skills demands of this occupational area, and coheres with their perception of marketing/sales management as the most weakly classified and framed (Bernstein 1971) job. In fact, there is evidence that certain regional accents within the U.K. engender a greater sense of public trust which has led to greater use of employees with such accents in customer-facing marketing or sales roles (Crystal 2010). This does not necessarily mean, of course, that this greater social latitude is reflected in the more senior management positions within the marketing and sales industries.

ii) H.E institution and reputational capital

The hierarchical nature of the higher education institutional landscape in the UK means that different institutions enjoy different, and unequal, public reputations (Boden and Nedeva 2010). However, the ‘reputational capital’ (Strathdee 2009, 92) of an institution is a complex phenomenon, the effects of which will vary across different fields and impact differently upon different sub-groups of students. This complexity is apparent in the students’ comments about teaching. Here, it was argued that the case-study institution’s history as a specialist provider of teacher training courses (although, of course, Education Studies does not confer
QTS) meant that its degrees would be considered at least as marketable within the field of education as those of the local Russell Group institution:

**Carol:** I’ve always thought [case-study institution] has had a good name

**April:** …for teaching

**Mary:** They don’t do teaching, for teaching they don’t do that sort of thing in a university, they do it in a Met [i.e metropolitan university].

(Focus Group Three)

The students’ faith in the reputational capital of their institution within the field of teacher training means that, in Bernstein’s (1971) terms, they perceive it to enjoy a strongly classified position in relation to competitor institutions, including those within the more prestigious pre-1992 sector. This, in turn, helps to construct teaching as a realisable career prospect. There are no specific data on the higher education origins of the teaching workforce by which we may judge how open the profession is to candidates from post-1992 universities. The nearest approximation is a study by Purcell et al. (2005) which found that graduates with a first degree with QTS for employment within the primary sector were more likely than their counterparts with a non-QTS first degree to have attended a post-1992 university (Purcell et al. 2005: viii). Of course, it should be noted that this only represents a particular route into a particular sector of the profession. The students’ perceptions of the reputational capital of their institution in relation to employment within accountancy and marketing/sales management were very different. Most participants believed a degree (in any subject) from the local Russell Group university would enjoy higher prestige within these professions than one from the case-study institution.
I think the university you go to does affect the job you’re going to apply for, but I’d say that, as an example if someone went for a job and it got down to, like, two of us and one went to [case-study university] and one to [local Russell Group university] and they were all the same, they’d probably go for the [local Russell Group university] person just because it’s a better univ...it’s classed as a better uni.

(‘Andrea’, Focus Group Four)

Following the Bernstein (1971) schema, this greater reputational capital serves to delineate a strong degree of boundary maintenance between the Russell Group university and the case-study institution, placing the Russell Group institution in a strongly classified (and more prestigious) position in relation to the case-study university. Data on the recruitment patterns of the leading corporate graduate recruiters (including within accountancy and marketing/sales management) clearly support the interviewees’ perceptions of an unequal graduate labour market: during the 2010—2011 recruitment round, no post-1992 university featured in the top twenty institutions (High Fliers 2011, 26).

Gender

Although all the female participants were very aware of the female-dominated composition of the teaching workforce, they also believed they would suffer from the effects of positive discrimination arising from official drives to recruit more male teachers.

If you’re faced up with a male and a female, so if I was going for a job up against a man they’d award the man because they want more male teachers. [General agreement]
Miller and Hayward (2006: 70) offer a useful distinction between gender segregation, defined as “...the extent to which the workforce within an occupation is actually segregated along gender lines” and sex-role stereotypes which are “...beliefs concerning which sex should perform certain jobs”. Following these definitions, teaching is a profession that is both strongly gender segregated and positioned by normalised sex-role stereotypes. Teaching (particularly within the Early Years) is commonly located as a female occupation through cultural assumptions that position women as more caring (Maguire 2005). Such stereotypes are reflected in the gender balance of the workforce where, for example, in Wales the proportion of male to female teachers is 25.4%--74.6% (GTCW 2010: 4). In applying Bernstein’s (1971) schema here, gendered social norms function as boundary maintainers, with the effect of making teaching a profession that is strongly classified by gender. Thus, despite the interviewees’ reservations about possible discrimination, it is clear that from the perspective of gender, the predominantly female students of this present study are seeking to enter a profession for which they clearly match the accepted social fit (Brown and Hesketh 2004).

Perceptions regarding accountancy and marketing/sales management were much more mixed. Some students believed firmly in a meritocratic labour market for both professions, something which stands in stark contrast to their perceptions regarding teaching. Others, however, recognised the historical gender imbalance in the business and finance sectors and argued that the discourse of equal opportunities was pure rhetoric, a perception that also chimed with beliefs held by some of the Brown and Hesketh (2004, 122) interviewees.
I think that’s still probably more male inclined. I think, like, nowadays they are employing more females. I think that’s just because they have to, not because they really want to. And I think that’s more to do with business not wanting women to go off for nine months and have children and take maternity leave and all the rest of it. So, I think for businesses, they prefer to employ a man because they’re not quite as time consuming with the time off.

(Jean, Focus Group One)

The more mixed perceptions in relation to accountancy and marketing/sales management may reflect the fact that these professional areas appear to be less strongly classified by gender than teaching. Accountancy is relatively evenly gender-balanced at 55% males and 45% females (Maher, 2009) while the marketing/sales industry is even more evenly balanced, if we accept membership of the Chartered Institute of Marketing (CIM) to be a reasonable indicator, at 50.5% female and 49.5% male (Mark Hedges, personal communication). Nevertheless, the concerns expressed by some of the students that being female did not match with the social fit of business and finance jobs are clearly based, to some extent, in the gendered realities of these professional areas. In fact, the gender composition of the accountancy workforce belies the traditional image of the profession which continues to be of a ‘hard’ masculinist type based around career-oriented individualism unfettered by domestic commitments (Jacobs 2003). Again, in marketing/sales management, bare statistics of gender-balance mask a sex-role stereotyped gendered division of labour, whereby women are perceived to excel in roles with a strong customer interface, but men still predominate in strategic management positions with real power and remuneration (Maclaran and Catterall, 2000, 638).
Discussion

This study has examined the perceptions of a sample of Education Studies undergraduates regarding their employability within three jobs: teaching, accountancy and marketing/sales management. The students identified class and gender constraints around their employability within all three jobs. Although they did not, in general, see either of the two business/finance jobs as completely closed to them through such constraints, there was a clear perception that their degree did not provide them with the necessary skills for employment within either job. It is a limitation of this study that it has not included the opinions of employers from within the three professional areas. As noted previously, large employers within the fields of accountancy and marketing/sales management recruit graduates from all disciplines including, for example, Education Studies graduates. It is quite possible, therefore, that the students’ views on the value of the skills gained from an Education Studies degree for careers in accountancy and marketing or sales management do not cohere with those of employers themselves. Future research, which compares the views of both employers and (under)graduates, is therefore required to build a more complete picture of the extent to which the discourse of transferable skills is reflected in real world practice—that is, within students’ career orientations and within employers’ perceptions and their patterns of recruitment and selection.

As discussed previously, the students’ comments regarding the transferable utility of their degree run counter to official rhetoric regarding transferable skills. While we must recognise the small sample size as a further limitation of this present study, if the views of the students surveyed for this research are more generally representative, they raise wider questions as to how undergraduates may be made cognisant of such skills, and of their application to different employment contexts. One answer may be to shift ‘delivery’ of transferable skills from the currently favoured embedded approach (Wingate 2006) to one in which they
constitute a discrete programme of study. However, such an approach may place a considerable burden upon resource allocation at a time of great financial strain within the U.K. higher education sector. Another answer may lie in improved careers guidance for undergraduates, with greater input from employers regarding their recruitment and selection strategies and their perceptions of the relevance of the skills to be gained from (for example) a degree in Education Studies to careers in accountancy and marketing/sales management.

Finally, however, an important cautionary note must be sounded about what is meant by transferable skills and how these relate to graduate employment opportunity structures which are themselves tied to issues of institutional reputation, social class and gender. Official rhetoric on transferable skills is based upon a human capital model which tends to view their development as a technocratic affair involving the simple acquisition of the appropriate functional skills and attitudes. For Tomlinson (2010, 78) this has the effect of divorcing individuals’ economic outcomes from the social and cultural factors that frame them. This is a point further elaborated on by Brown and Hesketh (2004) who argue that, with the expansion of H.E in the UK, employers are increasingly looking beyond paper credentials for certain ‘qualities’. Increasingly, the ‘presentation of self’ represents the embodiment of corporate value, and this involves a certain appearance, speech and level of social confidence. As a result, Brown and Hesketh (2004, 35) argue that it has become increasingly difficult to shield one’s ‘self’ and ‘cultural inheritance’ behind a screen of technical expertise: instead, an applicant’s social class, gender and ethnicity have become increasingly ‘visible’ and important factors in graduate employment.

On this view, the transferable skills that employers want—particularly the ‘soft’ skills—come heavily raced, classed and gendered. Further, it may be argued that graduates from the post-1992 sector, with its greater proportion of working-class and minority ethnic students, will be most disadvantaged within this prevalent paradigm of graduate employability. There is a
limited amount that universities can do to counter this but, while transferable skills remain on
the H.E agenda, teachers in higher education can help to foster a level of critical engagement
among students with what they mean and how they relate to their understandings of their own
employability.

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