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Becoming employable students and ‘ideal’ creative workers: exclusion and inequality in higher education work placements

K. Allen\(^a\)*, J. Quinn\(^b\), S. Hollingworth\(^a\) and A. Rose\(^a\)

\(^a\)Institute for Policy Studies in Education, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, London Metropolitan University, London, UK; \(^b\)School of Education, University of Plymouth, Plymouth, UK

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In this paper we explore how the ‘employable’ student and ‘ideal’ future creative worker is prefigured, constructed and experienced through higher education work placements in the creative sector, based on a recent small-scale qualitative study. Drawing on interview data with students, staff and employers, we identify the discourses and practices through which students are produced and produce themselves as neoliberal subjects. We are particularly concerned with which students are excluded in this process. We show how normative evaluations of what makes a ‘successful’ and ‘employable’ student and ‘ideal’ creative worker are implicitly classed, raced and gendered. We argue that work placements operate as a key domain in which inequalities within both higher education and the graduate labour market are (re)produced and sustained. The paper offers some thoughts about how these inequalities might be addressed.

**Keywords:** higher education; work placements; employability; inequality; creative industries; social mobility; extra-curricular activities; social class

**Introduction**

The creative industries have been highlighted as a key source of employment growth in the ‘knowledge economies’ of post-industrialised nations. The British Prime Minister highlighted the sector as an important growth area in ‘rebalancing’ the economy following the recent economic crisis (Cameron 2010). The government’s definition of the sector is expansive, including: advertising, architecture, the art and antiques market, crafts, design, designer fashion, film and video, interactive leisure software, music, the performing arts, publishing, software and computer services, and television and radio (Department for Culture, Media and Sport 2008). Higher education (HE) is identified as playing a crucial role in nurturing creative ‘talent’ (Department for Culture, Media and Sport 2008). ‘Employability’ – already of increasing importance to UK
Concurrently HE arts and creative disciplines have, as part of the Widen ing Participation agenda across HE, attempted to widen access to ‘non-traditional’ students (Dann, Ware, and Cass 2009) including working-class and black and minority ethnic students. However, the expansion of student numbers has not been matched by employer demand, with an oversupply of graduates competing for creative-sector jobs (Guile 2009). This reflects wider challenges related to the massification of HE and increasing global competition resulting in unstable education-to-labour market transitions (Brown, Lauder, and Ashton 2011). As Tomlinson (2008) shows, students feel increasing pressure to boost their academic credentials through extra-curricula activities that convey ‘added-value’ skills (see also Brooks and Everett 2009). Furthermore, with official figures revealing a rise in youth unemployment (Office for National Statistics 2011), those coming through HE face bleak prospects in the competition for jobs.

Work placements have become increasingly significant in this context, featuring centrally within HE employability strategies and agendas (Harvey 2003). Furthermore, “‘internships’ and working unpaid are an established [and] a common strategy for finding work or gaining experience’ within the creative sector (Ball, Pollard, and Stanley 2010, 2; see also Guile 2009). In the recent economic downturn, there have been calls for creative graduates to be even more ‘resourceful and willing to work unpaid’ (Ball, Pollard, and Stanley 2010, 11; emphasis added). Yet there are clear equality issues here. While increasing numbers of young people are investing in HE, its rewards are becoming more unevenly distributed as the relationship between education, jobs and entitlements is being reconfigured (Brown, Lauder, and Ashton 2011). In an over-flooded creative labour market, where (unpaid) work experience is a key strategy through which to gain positional advantage, we must ask which students are more likely to succeed? And how do these relate to wider inequalities in HE?

Indeed, while more students from non-traditional backgrounds have accessed HE, inequalities that remain at post-entry stage (Keane 2011). Scholarship within the sociology of education illustrates how non-traditional students often experience a disjuncture within institutions that privilege middle-class norms, values, dispositions and ways of being: the habitus (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977; Reay, Crozier, and Clayton 2009; Archer, Hutchings, and Ross 2003; Burke 2007; Keane 2011; Taylor 2007). There are also inequalities in outcomes, with non-traditional graduates earning less and taking longer to find permanent employment (Thomas 2005). Labour-market intelligence indicates that the creative workforce is characterised by a chronic lack of social, ethnic and (in some sub-sectors) gender diversity (Creative and Cultural Skills 2008), suggesting unequal entry into the sector. Engaging with HE students’ experiences of work placements provides the opportunity to reflect on the
presence of inequalities within HE practices – namely those oriented around preparation for employment – and connections to inequalities within the wider economic landscape.

In this paper we draw on a qualitative study of student work placements in the creative sector to present a critical account of HE employability practices. We contribute to scholarship within the sociology of education on inequalities in HE and to a growing body of work on creative labour. This paper offers an alternative to mechanistic views of work placements as simply a vehicle to help ‘ease the transition’ into the labour market (Ball, Pollard, and Stanley 2010). Our more critical perspective locates work placements as a realm in which inequalities are (re)produced. Work placements are not just about learning about the world of work, but a ‘filtering site’ in which students are evaluated through classifying practices that privilege middle-class ways of being.

Our intention is not to provide a fully representative account of HE work placement practices within the creative sector, but rather to use these qualitative data to generate interpretations that help us understand which subjects can be recognised as ‘fit’ for the sector, and how these relate to wider inequalities within the HE landscape. The creative sector is not entirely unique: some of the practices we identify are undoubtedly present in other sectors. However, it provides an interesting site for investigation, not least because the creative economy has been given such policy significance.

Conceptual framework

In this paper we are concerned with the construction of student and future worker subjectivities within HE work placements, and how these are classed as well as gendered and raced. HE and the creative industries are understood as sites for subjectification, the processes through which individuals are rendered a subject through the discourses that circulate within these spaces (Foucault 1980). Specifically, HE work placements are located as a set of social relations and practices within which governing technologies are mobilised, and through which students are produced and produce themselves as intelligible subjects. Thus, the discourses that circulate within HE work placement practices in the creative sector are productive, ‘systematically form[ing] the objects of which they speak’ (Foucault 1972, 49).

We are concerned with the centrality of neoliberal discourses and practices within these processes. According to Apple, neoliberalism ‘creates policies and practices that embody the enterprising and constantly strategizing entrepreneur … [as] the ideal citizen’ (2001, 196), and its discourses – flexibility, self-sufficiency and individualism – are all-pervasive within HE (Hay and Kapitzke 2009; Olssen and Peters 2005). These discourses have also been associated with new conditions of work (for full accounts of transformations in work, see Bauman 2000; Beck 2000, Sennett 2006), and have been
identified as representing new forms of oppression and (self-)exploitation in late capitalism. For example, Rose (1999) discusses new efficacious forms of self-government operating through the production of worker subjectivities of the enterprising, flexible and self-responsible subject who is fulfilled in work (see also du Gay 1997). There is a rich body of work on precarity and technologies of self-governance within the creative industries (see Banks 2007; Gill 2010; McRobbie 2009). McRobbie (2004) describes the ‘passionate attachment’ creative workers have for their work as a disciplinary mechanism, where the pleasures of work (autonomy, creativity, freedom of expression) enable an intensification of labour and normalisation of exploitative working conditions. The ideal creative worker is willing to do anything for the ‘love’ of their work, including working overtime or for free. Such practices produce an ethic of self-reliance and personal culpability whereby those who do not – or cannot – ‘give everything’ risk being read as not committed enough, a vulnerable subject who allows factors to come between themselves and success. Consequently, issues of inequality remain ‘unspeakable’ (Gill 2010). In this paper we are interested in the technologies of governance operating within work placements that cultivate students as ‘ideal’, compliant and enterprising future workers.

More so, we are interested in how these subject positions privilege particular ways of being. Literature on student employability in the creative sector tends to focus on individual dispositions or personal attributes, a capacity to be enterprising, motivated and ‘resourceful’ (Ball, Pollard, and Stanley 2010, 11), reinscribing the idealisation of the creative worker as neoliberal subject par excellence. Yet the neoliberal self is not a universal subject position but highly exclusionary, modelled on a middle-class, masculinised ‘rational’ and strategising subject (Walkerdine 2003). As Skeggs states, this model of enterprising self-hood – the subject of value – is:

mainly redundant for the working-class who do not have access to the same starting point, the same approach to accrual, access to the knowledge of how to accrue effectively and access to the same sites for optimizing the[ir] cultural capital. (2004, 75)

Following Skeggs we suggest an alternative to asocial conceptualisations of ‘resourcefulness’ within literature on student employability. We propose that aspiring creative workers must be resource-ful: that is, the capacity to produce oneself and be recognised as an ‘employable’ student and ideal future creative worker is dependent on having access to a range of unequally distributed resources – or economic, social and cultural capitals (Bourdieu 1984) – and the knowledge of how to display these in ways that align with broader institutional and societal practices and relations.

In the rest of this paper we illuminate how students are unequally positioned within the fields of HE and the creative sector to produce themselves
and be recognised – as the ‘employable student’ and ‘ideal future creative worker’. In case studies offered at the end of this paper, we look closely at the accounts of four students. Digging deeper into students’ lived experiences of inclusion/exclusion within the creative sector, we illuminate how the capacity to embody these subject positions is informed by the specific permutations of students’ social class, ‘race’ and gender.

**Methods**

This paper draws on data collected in 2010 for a study commissioned by the Equality Challenge Unit. Its aim was to examine how HEIs support students from ‘equality groups’ into positive and inclusive work placement experiences in the creative sector. The Equality Challenge Unit defined these ‘equality groups’ as black and minority ethnic students, disabled students, and students seeking to enter sectors with significant gender imbalance. We recognised the significance of social class as a significant equality issue and therefore added working-class students as a fourth group. A total of 26 students from five HEIs across England and Wales participated in in-depth semi-structured interviews.

‘Work placements’ refer to both formal placements linked to a course and those ‘extrinsic’ to formal programmes of study. Ranging from ‘sandwich’ placements to internships and placements of several days, students had undertaken placements across the sector. Some sub-sectors were missing from the sample, including performing arts, craft and software and computer services. These were not intentionally excluded within the recruitment process, and their absence may indicate a variation in the importance placed on work placements by employers across different sub-sectors and by HE staff in associated disciplines. While we recognise this issue, there remain clear patterns in the equality issues encountered by students that demand attention. Details of student participants, providing demographic and placement information, is provided in Table 1.

Students were interviewed once, mainly in person. Lasting between 45 and 120 minutes, interviews were semi-structured, covering themes including: motivation for undertaking placements; experiences of finding placements and working in the sector; and future plans. Equality issues were approached carefully using different techniques, including probing on specific experiences and questions about potential equality issues, sometimes using press-cuttings to generate discussion. Students’ accounts often revealed inequalities even when not named as such. We suggest that the hesitancy to identify such issues is bound up with the centrality of neoliberal discourses to processes of subjectification where to position oneself through discourses of inequality invites the danger of being seen as inadequate. Interviews were also conducted with nine members of HEI staff and 11 employers. These focused on the management of work placements; perceptions of equality issues; and procedures for
Table 1. Student participants.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Demographics</th>
<th>Sub-sector placement undertaken</th>
<th>Placement type</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alena</td>
<td>Female; Eastern European; middle class</td>
<td>Fashion</td>
<td>Extrinsic six-week placement, travel expenses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amy</td>
<td>Female; White British; middle class</td>
<td>Advertising</td>
<td>Compulsory three-week placement, unpaid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andrea</td>
<td>Female; Black British; working class; deaf</td>
<td>Art</td>
<td>Extrinsically three-month placement, travel expenses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bel</td>
<td>Female; White British; middle class</td>
<td>Film</td>
<td>Compulsory, four-week placement plus two extrinsically shorter-term placements, unpaid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carlo</td>
<td>Male; Black Brazilian; working class; dyslexic</td>
<td>Fashion</td>
<td>Compulsory, three-month placement, unpaid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Claire</td>
<td>Female, White British; working class; dyslexic</td>
<td>Design</td>
<td>Ongoing extrinsic placement, one day a week, unpaid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ed</td>
<td>Male; British mixed-heritage; middle class; dyslexic</td>
<td>Television</td>
<td>Three short-term extrinsic placements, two unpaid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faheem</td>
<td>Male; British Asian; working class; dyslexic</td>
<td>Design; Art</td>
<td>Two short-term extrinsic placements; one unpaid, another travel expenses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faiza</td>
<td>Female; mixed heritage; middle class; dyslexic</td>
<td>Fashion</td>
<td>Compulsory, four placements of two weeks each, unpaid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jane</td>
<td>Female; British mixed heritage; middle class; dyslexic</td>
<td>Fashion</td>
<td>One-month extrinsic placement, unpaid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joan</td>
<td>Female; White British; middle class; physically impaired</td>
<td>Art</td>
<td>Compulsory week-long placement, unpaid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keiran</td>
<td>Male; White British; working class</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>No placement found</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lisa</td>
<td>Female; White British; middle class; partially deaf</td>
<td>Architecture</td>
<td>Extrinsic industry year placement, paid minimum wage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary</td>
<td>Female; White British; middle class; partially deaf</td>
<td>Architecture</td>
<td>One month extrinsic placement, unpaid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Masato</td>
<td>Male; mixed heritage; middle class</td>
<td>Architecture</td>
<td>Extrinsic industry year placement, unpaid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mel</td>
<td>Female; White British; working class</td>
<td>Design</td>
<td>Two extrinsically placements of three weeks, travel expenses only</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mya</td>
<td>Female; British Indian; working class</td>
<td>Media technology</td>
<td>Optional industry year, paid £15,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Continued)
addressing these. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. Data were anonymised, coded and analysed thematically to identify key issues. Student data were contextualised using biographical data.

‘You have to drive your career’: students as self-sufficient and enterprising selves

Discourses of employability and enterprise were integral to how work placements were constructed. While placements did not always form part of a programme of study, and some HEIs did not have dedicated facilities to support these, work placements were constructed as an essential and expected part of students’ preparation for employment within a sector characterised by unstructured pathways, intense competition and informal recruitment practices. Staff viewed placements positively as supporting students’ future employability through increasing their understanding of how to apply their learning in ‘real-world’ settings, developing entrepreneurialism, and providing access to industry contacts.

Students were acutely aware of the premium on work experience among future employers, and felt an imperative on them to be proactive and take responsibility for their future employability. Nada (mixed heritage, middle

<table>
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<th>Name</th>
<th>Demographics</th>
<th>Sub-sector placement undertaken</th>
<th>Placement type</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nada</td>
<td>Female; Mixed-heritage; middle class</td>
<td>Design</td>
<td>Extrinsic summer internship, minimum wage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natasha</td>
<td>Female; Black British; working class</td>
<td>Fashion</td>
<td>Two placements within optional industry year, one paid £150 per week and another only travel expenses.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nikki</td>
<td>Female; White British; working class; dyslexia</td>
<td>Fashion</td>
<td>Two compulsory four-week placements, one unpaid and another £120 per week</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peter</td>
<td>Male; White British; class unknown; dyslexic</td>
<td>Media technology</td>
<td>Optional industry year, paid £8000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Polly</td>
<td>Female; White British; working class; dyslexic</td>
<td>Television</td>
<td>Two-month extrinsic placement, unpaid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ruth</td>
<td>Female; White British; middle class</td>
<td>Fashion</td>
<td>Compulsory three-week placement, unpaid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Samantha</td>
<td>Female; White British; middle class; blind</td>
<td>Music</td>
<td>Compulsory three-month placement, unpaid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sophia</td>
<td>Female; British mixed heritage; middle class</td>
<td>Film</td>
<td>Multiple extrinsic short-term placements, unpaid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Susan</td>
<td>Female; White British; class unknown;</td>
<td>Media technology</td>
<td>Optional industry year, paid £6000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
class, Design) explained that ‘[the university] don’t force you but they do appreciate it when you find work experience’. There was a sense that students would damage their career prospects if they did not actively seek out placements, as Ed (middle class, mixed heritage, Media) explained:

They suggest that you get work experience … You have to make contact and you have to get out there. Doing a placement isn’t compulsory. It’s just a strong suggestion. You won’t fail the course but you probably will fail your career if you don’t.

This imperative to undertake placements and take responsibility for organising these was informed by a deficit discourse that constructed students as ‘lacking’, irresponsible and not engaged with their future if they ‘failed’ to undertake a placement. This only operates to discipline students to become self-managing subjects, it also inculcates an ethic of personal culpability for future labour-market success and failure. Students were conscious of omnipresent mechanisms of surveillance that judged and directed their choices. Bel (White, middle class, Media) explained the pressure to undertake placements at every given opportunity:

It’s a mixture of expected and encouraged. They [university staff] would question why you were bothering to do the course if you had three months spare time and you didn’t go and make a film or get involved in a production company.

Bel articulates the neoliberal imperative to maximise time (Davies and Bansel 2005) and the guilt that plagues subjects when they ‘fail’ to do so. Students must not be idle but utilise every opportunity to do something ‘worthwhile’. These unwritten expectations assume a particular kind of student who has the time to undertake placements, negating the presence of other responsibilities (such as part-time work or childcare) that constrain this capacity.

The onus on students to be responsible for their own employability was most evident in the premium placed on ‘self-directed’ and ‘extrinsic’ placements, where students were encouraged to locate placement opportunities themselves and undertake these in their ‘spare time’ – rather than as a requirement of their course. Encouraging independence from the university was seen to prepare students for the harsh realities of the labour market:

Well [it’s] absolutely our philosophy that if we give them something now then they won’t know what to do when there isn’t anybody to give it to them later so we’d much prefer to make them understand why it’s important and to teach them the skills they need to get it.

This reflects a normative discourse of employability circulating within government policy that emphasises an individual’s ‘employability assets’. A
report for the UK Government defines employability as the individual capability ‘to move self-sufficiently within the labour market to realise potential through sustainable employment’ (Hillage and Pollard 1998, 11; emphasis added). Discourses of self-sufficiency reproduce a common notion that (particular) students are over-dependent within HE (Leathwood 2006), inculcating an enterprising subject with the drive to ‘put themselves out there’ in the market place (Walkerdine 2003, 240).

So far we have drawn mainly on the interviews with middle-class students. Working-class students were also aware of this imperative to seek work placements. However, as we show in the later sections, working-class students experienced greater challenges in securing ‘good’ placements because of restricted access to requisite resources including time, money and industry contacts. Further, the study found differences in the ways in which students oriented themselves towards this employability imperative. While working-class students experienced this as a burden they could not easily carry, middle-class students were more likely to embrace this subject position of the entrepreneurial, ever-strategising ‘go-getter’. The onus to find and secure placements independently and undertake these out of ‘choice’ provided middle-class students with an opportunity to generate value, enabling them to display their motivation and commitment to potential employers. This quote from Lisa (White, middle class, Architecture) perfectly illustrates this classed orientation: ‘You have to drive your career … I have taken control of my own career path in that way and so the fact that my placement wasn’t organised for me … could only be an advantage’. Lisa was producing herself as an ideal subject, committed to taking responsibility for her future.

A head of department in one HEI discussed how their students commonly undertook placements on their own ‘initiative’ and reflected that there was no need to provide assisted placements: ‘We’ve a much more middle-class student body here. It’s much easier for them to obtain placements: they have contacts, confidence and they know how the world works a bit better. We can rely much more on their self-motivation’. This is an interesting quote: while the advantages middle-class students have in finding placements are recognised by this interviewee – such as greater access to industry contacts (discussed in the next section) – in a key discursive movement, these additional resources are collapsed into individualised dispositions and personal values of ‘self-motivation’, willingness and initiative. Likewise, employers took up classificatory judgements of the ‘good’ work placement candidate that privileged middle-class students, commonly listing individual ‘qualities’ including commitment, autonomy and ‘get up and go’. One employer said that students who undertook placements outside their studies, as a matter of ‘choice’, were more ‘motivated’ and thus more employable, while those who undertook placements as a requirement of their course were ‘a bit slack’.
In research into admissions practices for art and design courses in HE, Burke and McManus (2009) show how admissions tutors’ construction of ‘having potential’ and ‘being creative’ are informed by value judgements which privilege White middle-class subjectivities and exclude non-traditional students. They argue that assessments of students’ answers to questions such as ‘who is your favourite artist’ were shaped by ‘implicit, institutionalized, disciplinary and racialised perspectives of what counts as legitimate forms of experience and knowledge’ (2009, 42). Our claim is that work placement practices represent similarly powerful but tacit mechanisms of exclusion. The discursive construction of the employable student and future creative worker is located within systems of classification that work in the interests of the privileged. Orientations to, and ‘choice’ of, placements is neutralised and relocated as a result of individual motivation and commitment – a capacity for resourcefulness – rather than a student’s unequal positioning within wider socio-economic structures. As we now show in greater detail, students’ capacity to produce themselves as employable students and ideal future creative workers was shaped by their access to a range of unequally available resources.

The employable student and future creative worker as a ‘resource-full’ subject

Word-of-mouth recruitment via social networks is predominant in the creative sector. However, networking as a ‘mandatory practice’ (Lee 2011) operates as a mechanism of social closure to the creative sector, favouring those with high levels of social and cultural capital. Students were acutely aware of the importance of social networks to finding ‘good’ placements. While some HEIs posted opportunities on notice-boards, these vacancies were perceived (particularly by middle-class students) as less valuable than those found through personal contacts: as Alena (Eastern European, middle class, Fashion) explained: ‘really good companies don’t need to advertise’. There was evidence that some students from professional middle-class backgrounds accessed their placements through friends or family members who worked in the sector. For example, Bel (White, middle class, Media) located her placement on a film set through a family friend; Lisa (White, middle class, Architecture) undertook a placement at her step-father’s architecture firm; and Masato (mixed heritage, middle class, Architecture) secured his placement through a friend of his architect father.

Working-class students lacked access to informal networks through which they could locate placements, with the exception of Nikki (White, working class, Fashion) who undertook a placement in the art department of her secondary school through her previous art teacher. However, this placement, clearly outside the creative sector, is unlikely to hold currency on her CV among fashion employers. Nikki, like others, discussed the frustration of ‘cold-calling’ employers or anonymously responding to adverts: ‘You’re
more likely to get a job if you know someone in that sector … it’s very undermining’.

Successfully accessing and operationalising industry networks also depends on the possession of cultural capital: the confidence and know-how to market yourself to employers. As Nada (mixed heritage, middle class, Design) explained: ‘it’s also about confidence … go out there and sell yourself’. Students reported the persistence and ‘creativity’ required to get noticed in a sector that celebrates uniqueness. Alena, a model, located her placement after a modelling shoot when she approached a ‘top’ fashion photographer: ‘I pushed for it myself … bombarded him for nine months … it took a long time to persuade him that I’m going to do it, that I can be a really hard worker’. Presenting oneself to a renowned photographer as ‘a hard worker’ and not be intimidated by his status or ‘entourage’ requires a certain entrepreneurial savvy-ness and a feeling of entitlement that privileges the middle class.

Just as with the ideal student in HE, the ideal future creative worker is constructed as an autonomous individual, not just free from economic hardship (Leathwood and O’Connell 2003) but with plentiful financial resources. Unpaid placements featured predominantly across students’ accounts. As Table 1 indicates, students who undertook ‘sandwich’ placements received payment although this was generally low; for example, £150 per working week (Natasha) or £6000 a year (Susan) for full-time posts. Most worked for free or with minimal expenses, apart from two students: Nada was paid national minimum wage for a summer internship, and Nikki was paid £120 per week for a full-time placement.

Unpaid placements were typically described by participants as ‘industry standard’. As we discuss in much greater detail elsewhere (Allen et al. 2012), while HEI staff and employers did not present a homogeneous account of work placements, with a few exceptions, their views were very normative. Most spoke positively about their work placement arrangements and were unaware of any equality issues (with some enquiring as to the ‘point’ of the research project). However, the issue that did engender discussion among HEI staff and some employers was the prevalence of unpaid work placements. Some HEI staff felt unpaid placements were unfair but felt restricted in their capacity to challenge this norm, as this quote exemplifies:

I don’t know what happens in reality and we slightly turn a blind eye to it. It’s a tricky one because I think it’s wrong that the creative industries don’t pay people, but I don’t want to sacrifice this kind of cohort of graduates. We could say to employers ‘we won’t post your vacancy unless you pay’ but then we’d lose lots of vacancies. (Careers manager, HEI)

Other HEI staff and employers did not view unpaid placements as a major problem, and some argued that students should pay for the opportunities to work with ‘top’ employers:
You could argue that students should be paying the company. ... a company might come across somebody who is very good who they want to employ. But the chances are that that’s not the case and it’s very altruistic. To have somebody in your studio has all kinds of risks attached to it. (Enterprise manager, HEI)

Employers reported varied arrangements in regards to paying students. Larger employers were more likely than sole-employers and small to medium enterprises to pay students or cover expenses as a minimum. Some large broadcasters only offered shorter-term unpaid placements on the grounds that these were more ‘financially viable’ and thus ‘levelled the playing field’ for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Sole employers and small to medium enterprises tended to have more ‘ad hoc’ procedures for paying students. One explained that whether and how much students were paid depended on the length of commitment and how ‘engaged’ they were. Evidently there are equality issues here in how motivation gets evaluated and read by particular bodies, as pointed to earlier. Another host organisation emphasised the importance of placement students earning their pay: ‘I can’t afford to have someone sitting there to just do nothing, just being “an overhead”, so he has to earn [his] time, at least cover his salary plus a little bit more’.

The normalisation of unpaid placements led working-class students to self-select how many and what kinds of placements they undertook on the basis of their financial situation. This included taking shorter-term placements, choosing placements near home, or only undertaking one placement. Carlo, a black working-class Fashion student, worked part-time alongside his studies. He lived with his unemployed mother who was ambivalent about his career choice. Carlo undertook an unpaid placement at a men’s tailor, located via his university placement office:

They could have at least paid for transport, but there was nothing... If I didn’t have [part-time] work, then I don’t think I would have managed ... I don’t have the time or the energy to do [another] placement, work and study as well, it’s just too much.

This pressure of juggling placements with part-time work was typical of many of the working-class students in the study. Natasha (Black, working class, Fashion), who worked in a bar at weekends, explained of her full-time placements: ‘it’s too much to work five days a week and then weekends too’ – while Faheem (Asian, working class, Design) described ‘literally working one after another, finish at the placement at 6pm then start my [bar] shift at 7pm’. Working-class students can experience a viscous cycle of compounding disadvantages in relation to securing graduate employment. A lack of social capital to source graduate employment makes them even more reliant on work experience as a means to develop industry contacts. Yet a lack of economic capital makes them more dependent on part-time employment, which hinders their capacity to undertake meaningful CV-building activities including work place-
ments (especially unpaid placements), thereby limiting opportunities for acquiring relevant social capital.

Middle-class students also spoke about the inequity of the normalisation of unpaid placements, and indeed their experiences were not simply ‘problem-free’. However, while based on a small sample, we found that middle-class students enjoyed a greater choice of placements because they had greater resources to fall back on. For example, Ruth (White, middle class, Fashion) undertook an unpaid placement in a fashion agency and explained how her parents paid for three weeks accommodation in London to do this. Furthermore, for middle-class students, the normalisation of unpaid work could be used to their advantage, operating as a form of distinction. To work unpaid was perceived as a worthy form of self-investment, signifying their drive and passion to potential employers. Jane (mixed heritage, middle class, Fashion) told us about her unpaid placement with a fashion retailer: ‘No, it wasn’t paid. But it shows a bit of commitment’. As Skeggs’ (2004) asserts, class privilege works not just because the middle class have resources but, crucially, that they know how to display these in ways that accrue value. Working unpaid illustrates a willingness to self-sacrifice for the love of the job. Conversely, lack of financial resources becomes reconstituted as a lack of motivation, and working-class students risk being read as simply ‘not wanting it enough’. Class becomes a matter of personal deficits.

There is a hierarchy of value within student work placements: unpaid placements (especially with ‘famous’ companies) hold greater esteem than paid placements. As one HEI staff member explained: ‘some [students] want to work for [a high-end luxury fashion designer] and are happy to pay whatever its costs just to get it on their CVs’. Thus, as a result of having the financial resources to work unpaid, middle-class students are likely to have more currency among future employers, with well-known companies named on their CV operating as a form of capital.

The sector’s demand for flexible and committed subjects was also evident in students’ compliance to the sector’s culture of long hours. Around one-third of students claimed to have worked ‘normal’ office hours but described this as ‘an exception’ and felt ‘lucky’. The majority described working up to 12-hour to 15-hour days and sometimes weekends. The industry norms of being ‘always available’ appear to trickle down from the ‘regular’ employees to inform how students are judged and judge themselves, disciplining students to tolerate (self-)exploitative practice as part and parcel of ‘being creative’. For employers, being willing to work irregular and long hours appeared as an unwritten requirement of potential candidates:

I explain that there will be evenings and weekend working but that is the downside of the creative profession. I can’t candy coat it, that’s what it’s like and you’ll find it everywhere. And most people, because it’s creative people, are happy to do that. But it ain’t 9 to 5 … That’s a reality. It’s a bit like if
you’re a fireman [and saying] ‘I don’t like heat and smoke’. Well tough! That’s what it’s like. (Sole employer, Designer)

Self-exploitation is taken into the subjectivity of the ‘creative’ subject: ‘creative people are happy to do that’. Such statements do not simply describe but produce the subject position of the ideal creative worker. But who can self-exploit – or ‘stand the heat’ – in order to be seen as employable? The expectation on students to work long and unpredictable hours often conflicted with other responsibilities like part-time work and study, and several working-class and middle-class students described feeling they were judged as ‘slack’ for taking breaks or leaving work at 6:00 pm. As Mel (White, working class, Design) explained:

the hours were supposed to be 9am to 6pm. But you feel like you can’t be seen walking away from your desk or leaving early. Sometimes I didn’t go for lunch. … You have to look utterly 100 per cent committed otherwise you’re out.

Staying late was thus a ‘badge of honour’, indicating commitment and a readiness to adapt to the realities of creative work.

**Belonging and inclusion/exclusion in the creative sector**

So far we have identified key trends characterising work placement practices. We now turn to the accounts of four students, to look more closely at the lived experiences of inclusion/exclusion within the sector. In so doing we illuminate how students are differently located within/outside the discursive construction of the employable student and future creative worker through a complex interrelation of different identity positions and forms of inequality.

**Mel and Alena**

Mel was studying a master’s degree in Graphic Design. Her mother was a teaching assistant and her father and brother worked as refuse collectors. As the first in her family to go to university, Mel talked of the ambivalences and disjunctures inherent in first-generation entry to HE (Thomas and Quinn 2006): ‘my brother and my dad take the mick. They don’t like it … they think I’m a snob for going to uni[versity]’. Despite these accusations of pretentiousness (Bourdieu 1984), while Mel was on her work placement at a London design agency she felt fixed in a deficit class position. As she described her experience, we find an account suffused with condensed class signifiers (Skeggs 2004) and an uncomfortable sense of incongruity between her working-class self and the design agency staff:

I didn’t really enjoy it. The feelings I got from people didn’t settle me. You feel that you’re lower than them … Oh God, it’s funny, the [director’s] mum
used to phone every lunchtime, ‘is Rupert there?’ It was those kinds of names … it was even the way they talked. You know like really ‘proper’; obviously you should talk properly and all that but it just throws you off a little bit when you arrive. [It’s like] you’ve not got enough money and they have a totally different lifestyle … you know, the vibes you get off people.

Mel’s feelings of inferiority and a lack of entitlement within the workplace echo those identified within research on working-class students within particularly middle-class institutions (Archer, Hutchings, and Ross 2003; Keane 2011; Reay, Crozier, and Clayton 2009). In Taylor’s work on working-class women in HE she describes an ‘awkward working-class self which jars and grates’, for whom ‘at every turning there is the fear that the wrong route has been taken, a questioning of place and space rather than an affirmation of it, taking the form of an “actual physical” embodied process’ (2007, 41). Mel’s sense of not fitting within the creative sector was embodied: she felt her class difference in her body, unsettling her and throwing her off balance. Mel was also living what Keane identifies as a ‘between worlds’ existence (2011, 456). She was torn between the pressure to accept and attempt to assimilate to the middle-class practices of the design agency employees – an impossible task that will always engender anxiety (Skeggs 1997) – and her family’s resistance towards her possible social and spatial mobility into the creative sector: ‘For me it’s hard with my dad calling me a snob and then the other end where you’ve not got enough money and [the designers] had a totally different lifestyle’.

Mel’s classed experience of exclusion was further complicated by other anxieties Describing the male designers on her work placement, Mel positioned herself as too emotional and not strong enough to ‘cope’ with the high-pressured environment:

The [male] designers were tough and very ‘I’m getting on with my work’ … really moody. I don’t know if that’s just to do with the amount of pressure they’re under … I think [the director] preferred boys. I don’t know [why]. Stronger personality? Not as emotional? … it’s the intensity. I suppose they think guys are better to deal with it because women are too emotional … Women have to act harder [to get on]. There was another woman I found her crying once but when I saw her in the office she’d be really intense, cold, robotic.

Mel’s account reveals how the construction of the ideal creative worker is not only classed but also highly gendered. The ideal creative worker must be utterly committed, individualised and unemotional, reinscribing the masculinised model of the thrusting, ‘rational’ neoliberal subject.

Experiences of highly masculinised work cultures were present in the accounts of several other female students who undertook placements in male-dominated sectors. This included tolerating sexist jokes, being ‘mistakenly’ directed to the make-up department, and being questioned about their ability
to carry heavy equipment. Middle-class Fashion student Alena was a part-time model and freelance photographer. Recounting her experiences of being ‘tested’ by male colleagues while on placement with a famous fashion photographer, Alena equally evoked the creative sector as a hostile terrain for women:

There is a little bit of that inner ‘ah you’re trying to play on a boy’s playground, then you’re going to play hard.’ You have to play hard but you also use what you’ve learned as a woman [about] communication with men … So, one [male colleague] was very macho, one was a lady’s man, so you flatter them, find your way of communicat[ing] with them … For women who want to make it in this sector, I think you do have to turn on ‘alpha male’ behaviour.

Turning on ‘alpha-male’ behaviour in order to compete with male colleagues, but offsetting this by performing an ‘attractive’, ‘respectable’ and unthreatening heterosexual femininity, Alena strategically ‘worked around’ her male colleagues. Unlike Mel, Alena could confidently navigate the dominant gendered norms of the creative workplace (for further discussion of gender and creative worker subjectivities, see Allen 2013). For Mel, flirting with male colleagues would bring the risk of being located through the ‘slag’ category used to police and pathologise working-class women (Skeggs 1991). Unable to ‘play hard’, Mel concluded that she did not have ‘tough enough skin’. Here we see how practices of class exclusion become felt as a personal failure, individualised rather than understood as a consequence of systematic inequalities.

Faheem and Ed

Faheem was a working-class British Pakistani student from the West Midlands, studying a master’s degree in Design in London. Faheem’s mother was unemployed and his father was a taxi driver. Whilst juggling various part-time jobs, Faheem undertook two unpaid placements that he described as unsatisfactory and mundane experiences. However, it was the sector’s class and ethic homogeneity that was most unsettling for Faheem:

There was a very middle-class guy who owned [the gallery] and … I’d be thinking ‘I don’t know what he’s talking about’ … there was a lot of elaborate words and I was going ‘I need to remember that word to Google it later’ … I’d want to be able to use those words but I just couldn’t … I always kind of felt a little out placed [sic]… I was aware that I was the only Asian person there but after a while I was like ‘OK Faheem, just deal with it’. With the web design placement I didn’t see or feel any discrimination, I just noticed that it was this big white building and this big white box and these big white tables and big white computer … and they [the employees] were white.
Like Mel, Faheem was aware that he possessed the wrong habitus, describing here both the pressure to improve the self and a sense of failure at his attempts to do so. Faheem experienced his difference as deficit, and we want to argue that this was informed by the specific permutations of his classed and racialised identity. While Faheem experienced feelings of lack, another black and minority ethnic student – middle-class Ed – presented a different account. Ed’s mother was a teacher and his father owned a successful CCTV company, with links to the creative sector. Ed described himself as an ‘entrepreneur’, having set up a successful video production company with his father’s financial support. Unlike Faheem, Ed saw his ethnic difference as a valuable asset that could make him stand out from other students. Of Chinese and Native American heritage, Ed explained: ‘[ethnic difference] can also work in your favour if you are sensible. I use my diversity in my favour, it makes me unique, different’. Ed’s approach to exploiting his ethnic difference was, we suggest, enabled by his class advantage: being middle class protected Ed in some ways from feelings of racialised Otherness. His class confidence enabled him to sell his ‘difference’ as a marketable product. An enterprising and strategising subject, with capital and knowledge of how to optimise it, every aspect of Ed’s ‘self’ was an asset to be packaged and sold. His ‘unique’ ethnic identity was a novel product – or unique selling point – to be exploited for commercial benefit, adding to his marketability. Rather than feel out of place and lacking, Ed felt entitled and valuable, free to move easily through social space.

**Conclusion**

This paper has identified HE work placements as an important arena in which inequalities within HE and the graduate labour market are (re)produced. We have illuminated how judgements of the employable student and ideal future creative worker that privilege resource-rich middle-class students. Through the case studies we have suggested that social class works alongside gender and ethnicity to contribute to different experiences of exclusion/inclusion within the creative sector. In doing so, we contribute to wider literature on HE exclusions and the Widening Participation agenda, revealing the presence of deeply embedded inequalities within the HE experience post entry. Specifically we identify work placements as key ‘filtering site’ in which students are classified as being (or failing to be) the ‘right’ subjects demanded by neoliberalism. The paper calls attention to the strategies that students deploy to boost their employability and how these reproduce (dis)advantage, illustrating how working-class students were constrained and excluded from opportunities to partake in work placements that might support their future employability. Finally, the paper adds to scholarship on subjectivity and creative labour, illuminating the close synergy between disciplinary practices within the creative sector and HE.
While there are some limits to the generalisations that can be made from this relatively small-scale study, we have illuminated important patterns in students’ lived experiences of employability practices. In the face of growing graduate unemployment, credential inflation and increasingly instrumentalist discourses of ‘education for employability’ under the coalition government, the role of HE work placements in reproducing (dis)advantage demands greater attention. Indeed, work experience is likely to gain greater significance as a space for building and operationalising capital so as to ‘gain the edge’ and bolster their labour market position (Brooks and Everett 2009). We have shown how working-class students struggle to compete with their middle-class peers on this terrain. The inequalities inherent in these and other extra/off-curricular activities are thus worthy of further research (for interesting work in this area, see Ingram, Abrahams, and Beedell 2012). Identifying an ‘opportunity trap’ in the graduate labour market, Brown, Lauder, and Ashton (2011) suggest that while middle-class students use their resources to develop off-curriculum CV-enhancing activities, these practices do not necessarily secure positive returns for even for the most privileged students. Thus, a longitudinal study assessing how effectively these strategies ‘pay off’ and for whom would be particularly valuable.

There is a great paradox in the United Kingdom at present: despite rising numbers of young people from non-traditional backgrounds coming through the HE system, evidence suggests that we are living in an age of declining social mobility (Dorling 2011). The reasons for this are complex and structural yet policy responses remain superficial. As part of its commitment to increasing social mobility, the UK Government have announced a ‘crackdown’ on unpaid internships within the professions, including the creative sector (HM Government 2011). In addition, Sir Wilson’s review of business–education collaboration called for internships to be funded through Office of Fair Access money so they are not the preserve of the privileged (Wilson 2012). While these commitments are welcome, they only scratch the surface. Achieving more equitable education-to-labour market transitions requires a more substantial cultural shift in the tacit norms and values that govern access and movement within both HE and the creative sector.

Scholarship in the sociology of education has illuminated the various ways working-class students respond to processes of exclusion within HE. For example, Ball, Davies, David and Reay (2002) show how working-class students select particular institutions in terms of their ethnic and social ‘fit’; while Keane (2011) identifies how working-class students ‘clique’ together or ‘stick to their own’, as a self-protecting practice. This study revealed how such mechanisms occur in relation to students’ future work identities and labour market transitions. As a consequence of negative work placement experiences, some students will feel that the sector is simply not for ‘people like us’. Both Mel and Faheem had rethought their future career path fol-
lowing their placements. As Mel said: ‘You just realise where you fit in and where you don’t … which is why I’m going to look in different places’.

So what can be done to address this? As academics committed to social justice, it is our responsibility not simply to identify problems but to consider how these might be addressed. As part of the study, we produced toolkits for HEI staff and students. These provided practical recommendations for addressing inequalities, including: greater transparency when advertising placements; clearer guidance for students on their rights including national minimal wage legislation; collecting monitoring data to identify inequalities in work placements; and providing financial support for working-class students. An important set of recommendations related to the ‘unspeakability’ of inequality. Indeed, we found that inequalities within HE work placements were often ignored or tolerated, as drawing attention to inequalities is not recognised as legitimate resistance but as deficit weakness. The toolkits therefore provided suggestions for how HEIs can provide a vocabulary and space for students to share their experiences, helping them to understanding inequalities not as the outcome of individual failings but of wider systematic inequalities. One way to do this would be to develop a core module on equality and diversity issues in the creative sector.

Employers also play a role. As this and other research shows, employers discriminate against students from under-represented groups (Thomas 2005). Sector-wide commitment to address work placement inequalities is thus crucial if change is to occur. In this study there was some evidence of an appetite for diversity among employers that could help widen access. However, there is a risk that diversity agendas become collapsed into a celebratory business-led case that evades equality and leads to the recruitment of students or graduates who represent only commercially viable or attractive ‘difference’ (see Allen et al. 2012). Perhaps more encouraging signs come from below. Campaigns, involving or led by students and graduates, such as the Carrot Workers Collective’s ‘Counter Guide to Free Labour in the Arts’ indicate that resistance to inequalities is happening. The norms and values governing who can enter the sector are being called into question, and we offer this paper as our contribution to this process.

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Notes
1. Issues of disability are addressed elsewhere (Allen et al. 2012).
2. Social class was assigned using student’s self-definition and supplementary biographical data such as parental occupation and familial experience of HE.
References


