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‘The degree is not enough’: students’ perceptions of the role of higher education credentials for graduate work and employability

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The UK Government is calling upon higher education students to see their learning as an investment that will give them direct benefits in the labour market. At the same time, the relationship between educational credentials and their returns in labour market has been changing in recent times. Based on a qualitative study with 53 final-year undergraduate students in a pre-1992 university, this article examines the way higher education students understand the role of their educational credentials in relation to their future employability. It shows that students perceive their academic qualifications as having a declining role in shaping their employment outcomes in what is perceived to be a congested and competitive graduate labour market. While academic credentials are still seen as a significant dimension of their employability, students increasingly see the need to add value to them in order to gain an advantage in the labour market.

Keywords: mass higher education; graduate employability; human capital; credentials; positional competition

Introduction

The UK Government continues to emphasise the importance of higher education credentials, at both a social and individual level. Higher education credentials have been presented as crucial for economic development, particularly in meeting the changing needs of the knowledge-driven economy (Bell 1973; Castells 1994). They are also seen as a way of providing individuals with access to opportunities in the labour market (Department for Education and Skills [DfES] 2003). With the advent of course fees in the late 1990s and the more recent introduction of variable tuition fees following the 2004 Higher Education Act (DfES 2004), students are bearing significantly more costs towards their participation in higher education. These costs have typically been justified by policy-makers on the grounds that graduates experience significant financial and personal benefits from participating in higher education. Thus, in the words of the DfES White Paper:

Graduates and those who have ‘sub-degree’ qualifications earn, on average, around 50 per cent more than non-graduates … and, as a group they have enjoyed double the number of job promotions over the past five years. (DfES 2003, para 5.5, 59)

There are two main competing interpretations of the relationship between higher education credentials and labour market outcomes. The first is the human capital, or technocratic, interpretation. The second is the positional conflict, or credentialist, interpretation. Both posit markedly different understandings about the role of higher education credentials as a source of economic growth, and the role of credentials in individual employability and labour market outcomes.

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Higher education policy has been largely built around some of the main conceptual and empirical ideas of human capital theory (Shultz 1961; Becker 1993). Underpinning the human capital model is the idea of a clear, direct and linear relationship between the expansion of educational credentials and economic development. At a more detailed level, human capital theory views participation in education and training as an investment that yields both social and private returns (Ashton and Green 1996). The social benefits manifest themselves in the form of a highly skilled, flexible workforce as reflected in levels of national economic output (Organisation for Economic Development and Cooperation 2003). The private returns are reflected in higher individual earnings over time, as well as better career progression opportunities and wider labour market scope. Indeed, one of the primary justifications of the recent introduction of variable top-up fees has been the clear positional advantage that investment in higher education brings for individual graduates, as evidenced in the so-called ‘graduate premium’, which they can expect to receive when they enter the job market (DfES 2004). Higher education is therefore seen to be a shared investment between the individual graduates and the state, with both clearly benefiting from continued expansion.

The theory also stipulates that people’s decisions around participation in education and training operate at a micro and highly individualised level, based ultimately on the principles of rational choice (Abell 1991). Individuals, so the theory goes, make autonomous, careful and deliberate choices, weighing up the perceived benefits of participation against the perceived costs. Driving these decisions is a utilitarian and self-optimising pursuit towards maximising one’s labour market potential.

The assumptions that underlie the human capital and rational choice model are in direct contrast to the positional conflict and credentialist interpretation of the relationship between educational credentials and employment (Collins 1979; Hirsch 1977; Brown 2000). Positional conflict approaches have been influenced largely by Weberian notions of power and monopoly; in particular, the way in which social groups use credentials to mobilise cultural and economic advantage (Weber 1948). Exponents of the credentialist model argue that the rise in credentials in no way reflects a genuine economic demand for more highly qualified labour, so often presented in recent government policy. Authors such as Collins and Hirsch argue that the spread of educational credentials is adding little or no value to individuals’ human capital. They further argue that the expansion of higher education, and concordant growth in credentials, has corresponded with the expansion of the middle classes, generating growing pressures for individuals to acquire further credentials to access jobs. Instead of reflecting an increase in the skills and knowledge demands needed to do jobs, the upsurge in higher education credentials simply means that the stakes have been raised for what is needed to get jobs.

Recent research has brought into question the link between graduate supply and economic growth, and has challenged the supply-side focus of much policy thinking on higher education expansion (Mason 2002; Keep and Mayhew 2004). This research has questioned the economic demand for the increasing supply of graduates and the capacity of the labour market to accommodate the upsurge in graduate credentials. There is further evidence to suggest that an increasing amount of graduates are overqualified for the types of employment they attain (Battu, Belfield and Sloane 2000; Brynin 2002). One conclusion to be drawn from these studies is that growing numbers of graduates are increasingly colonising areas of the labour market that were once occupied by non-graduates, leading to a potential mismatch between their level of qualification and its market utility. Such evidence therefore brings into question the importance of a university degree for the skill requirements of many graduate-level jobs.

The credentialist model further highlights the conflict, power play and positional differences among individuals, both between and within the middle classes. A key issue here is the way in which individuals use, or attempt to use, various cultural resources and mobilise forms of
capital – economic, social and cultural – for the return of labour market outcomes (Schuller, Baron and Field 2000). As Brown (2000) argues, the middle classes have traditionally been able to establish a positional advantage in the labour market, largely through the use of wider educational and cultural resources. Historically, higher education credentials, particularly those that denoted elite status, have been used to reproduce class advantage and provide access to labour market outcomes. The *graduateness* associated with higher education credentials has traditionally served as a ‘status confirmation’ for the middle (and aspiring middle) classes, legitimising educational and occupational advantage. However, with the expansion of the middle classes, the shift towards mass higher education as well as changing notions of graduate skills and competence, there has been a decline and status of these credentials. This is consequently bringing about tension and anxiety amongst the middle classes who have to find new ways of winning a positional advantage in an increasingly competitive labour market.

Recent evidence has shown that these types of tensions are being played out in graduates’ early experiences of the job market. In their study of graduate recruitment, Brown and Hesketh (2004) have shown the declining importance employers are attaching to academic credentials, and the increasing importance instead given to personal attributes and skills. Graduates may be valued for their cognitive abilities and academic knowledge, yet the discourse of graduate employability appears to be moving away from credentials that are merely a ‘tick in the box’. Their study shows that employers are increasingly defining employability more around notions of ‘behavioural competence’ and the capacity for graduates to demonstrate and deploy a wider range of range of personal, performative and organisational abilities. While this in part may reflect the changing organisational demands of many graduate employers, it may also be a means of legitimising recruitment decisions when large numbers of graduates with similar educational profiles are competing for highly sought-after employment. Ultimately, the stakes for graduate employment appear to have risen and the markers changed. This may be leading to tensions and challenges for graduates seeking to capitalise upon their participation in higher education, and the credentials they achieve from it, for their future work and employability.

**Focus of study and methods**

This research focuses on the way higher education students understand and interpret the role of their higher education credentials in shaping their future outcomes in the labour market in the context of these wider changes. This article draws upon research that has examined the way in which higher education students, on the verge of making the transition into the labour market, understand their future work and employability. One particular focus was on higher education students’ perceptions of the utility of their higher education credentials, as well as its perceived and anticipated role in opening up opportunities in the labour market. This focus is based principally around the main research question: How do higher education students view the role of their degree credentials in shaping future employment prospects? In addressing this question, we not only seek to explore students’ constructions of changes in higher education and the graduate labour market, but also how they come to rationalise the role of their higher education credentials for future labour market return. Moreover, we will be able to examine the various theoretical positions outlined in the introduction to this article that have aimed to explain the relationship between educational credentials and labour market returns. Thus, to what extent do students view their higher education credential as crucial a development in their human capital that will yield clear and financially rewarding returns? To what extent do they view their pursuit for labour market returns as involving a positional competition between graduates?

The study drew upon semi-structured interviews with 53 final-year undergraduates in a pre-1992 UK university, and the sample included a roughly equal gender mix (28 females and
25 males). Students were drawn equally from a range of subject disciplines under the four main categories of social sciences (sociology, education, social policy), arts/humanities (English literature and history), physical sciences (biological sciences and chemistry) and vocational (engineering, law business studies, media studies). Owing to the social composition of the university from where these students were drawn, the overwhelming majority were from middle-class professional backgrounds. Only three students could be classed as coming from occupational groups v–vi, whereby both parents were in low-skilled, manual work, and only two students were from ethnic minority backgrounds. Although this sample is limited to one particular institution, the experiences of ‘traditional’ students have been largely under-investigated, and so these data add to recent research on students and graduates from less traditional backgrounds in newer higher education institutions (Moreau and Leathwood 2006; Reay, David and Ball 2006). Moreover, while the absolute growth in participation of non-traditional students has risen, students from professional middle-class backgrounds continue to be the most representative participants (and potential beneficiaries) of higher education (DfES 2003).

Relating higher education credentials to future labour market outcomes

The first clear finding to emerge from the data was the importance students ascribe to their higher education credentials for their future labour market outcomes. It was clear from their responses that they viewed the acquisition of higher education qualifications as a significant boost to their level of human capital, which would provide them with advantages in the labour market. To this extent, their higher education credentials were seen as positional goods and a key dimension of their future employability. Strongly implicit in students’ views was the sense that higher education qualifications would open up a wider range of economic, occupational and social opportunities that might otherwise be limited. In many ways, students were quick to differentiate between graduate and non-graduate credentials and the different opportunity structures associated with both – as was anticipated by this economics student:

I think graduates get a lot more special treatment compared to the rest of people looking for jobs. If you go to these firms’ websites there’s nearly always a section there for graduates, other than that there’s just a general section… from what I understand at the moment firms are recruiting less graduates than in previous years, but with the larger firms a lot of the focus is definitely placed on graduates. (Oliver, male)

Indeed, the students in this study appeared to have internalised the wider discourse of the ‘graduate as higher earner’ so dominant in much of the policy discourse on higher education funding and expansion. There was a tendency, therefore, to make a distinction between those who possessed formal higher education credentials and those who did not in terms their ability to access various opportunity structures in the labour market. These perceptions are typified in the views of the following biological sciences student who anticipated that:

In terms of getting a job it’s very much a case of those who have got a degree and those who haven’t. I think the days where people started off in a company and worked their way up are very much a thing of the past … it’s definitely worth doing a degree to make yourself more employable. (Gareth, male)

It appears that much of the value students attach to their degree credentials is derived from their anticipated role in opening up labour market opportunities and providing them with positional advantages. The data in this study point to a widespread perception among students that their higher education credentials are vital commodities in the pursuit of relatively well-paid, high-status and rewarding forms of graduate employment. Indeed, as one social science student anticipated, such opportunities might not otherwise be available had she chosen not to participate in higher education:
I think that if you don’t have a degree you get to a certain point where you can’t get any higher because everybody above you has a degree, so I guess you have to be unique to do that without one, but it would be very difficult. So I mean, that was very much with me when I was applying to university … like what would I end up without a degree? (Christine, female)

The notion of the higher education credential as a positional good clearly resonates with these students. It is clear that they have anticipated what they perceive to be substantial opportunity costs associated with non-participation. However, reading between students’ accounts, it is also clear that their perceptions of their credentials do not necessarily conform to the human capital and rational choice framework outlined earlier. It would appear that the notion of higher education as an ‘investment’ does not adequately capture students’ own sense of why they are participating in higher education. A distinction has been outlined by Fevre, Rees and Gorard (1999) between participation in post-compulsory education based on crude investment and that based on the perceived positional and consumptive value of credentials. They argue that young people’s decisions around participating in further levels of education are based on the latter, in terms of what they call instrumental credentialism. Educational credentials are primarily pursued because of their perceived positional value and advantages in providing access to employment. This is likely to be the case even though they might not have any direct, immediate or transferable value in the labour market. For students who had a limited sense of how they might be able to apply their credentials, this gave rise to little more than a vague sense that it would ‘lead to something’. As the following history student remarked:

One of the main reasons I chose to enter university was because of the degree and what it can offer me for the future. You do hear of all these horror stories of graduate working in Burger King or whatever … but I do think that it will help in the long run, like it will benefit me and give me an edge over someone who didn’t go to university. (Alison, female)

Such views further relate to what was a widespread perception of external pressures placed upon young people to invest in higher education in order to maximise their chances in the competition for jobs. There was a strong sense amongst the students in the study of being caught up in inflation of credentials that would increasingly be needed as a means for ‘staying ahead’ in the job market. It was evident that students were just as likely to view their participation in higher education as a ‘defensive expenditure’ (Thurow 1977) and a way of avoiding the otherwise negative labour market consequences of not possessing them. There was strong evidence of students’ sense of the limitations of not acquiring higher education qualification and of potentially negating future opportunities. This is reflected in the views of Tony and Kate, both of whom were clearly aware that their decisions around participating in higher education were heavily bounded by wider educational and labour market milieu that framed what they saw as being appropriate choices. Even though Tony had a clear set of aims for his career prior to embarking upon higher education, these were offset by concerns about the limited alternative labour market options:

Well there was very little choice other than to come to university quite frankly. It seemed the only thing to do. I also had a sense that I would probably end up stacking shelves otherwise … so I always knew that if I wanted to do something worthwhile I would need a degree. (Tony, male, engineering student)

In Kate’s case, her views on higher education and its potential relationship with future labour market trajectory appeared to be informed by a strong sense of restricted alternative options to participating in higher education:

It was either to come to university or work in some random office job for the rest of my life. It does seem to have changed a bit, like previously you might have been able to get a decent job on leaving school … now you have to do a degree to get anywhere. (Kate, female, history student)
Such sentiments are further reflected in what was ultimately viewed as being an inevitable and anticipated trajectory based on their existing cultural and educational biographies. All these students, including those from less traditional backgrounds, talked about entering higher education ‘as being the next step’ and following a natural progression in their own learning trajectories. It was clear that these trajectories were informed by what Hodkinson, Sparkes and Hodkinson (1996) refer to as ‘pragmatically rational choices’: young people’s decisions around participation are largely informed by what are perceived to be available and immediate options and are closely bound up in their own learning biographies:

Coming to university just seemed the right thing to do, like I had achieved well up until that point and so you know that you are able to go … it was a case that at school it was fairly easy to go to A-levels rather than look for a job, and then I was a good student so I was encouraged to go to University. (Robert, male, engineering student)

It [going to university] was what everyone was doing at the time … like you go to school and then to sixth form and then on to university. You don’t really question it … it’s a sort of natural progression, and for a lot of people there are few reasons why you couldn’t go, apart from having to find a job or being put off by debt. (Ellen, female, media studies student)

It is clear that this group of higher education students have internalised the dominant human capital theory discourse. Such perceptions are likely to be reinforced by the inevitable financial costs and risks attached with higher education study. At the same time, these students were embarking upon what they saw as an anticipated trajectory from school to university; one based not so much on the raw acquisition of additional human capital that had a clear return value, but instead a socially patterned set of aspirations that frame what they come to view as appropriate pathways.

Positional competition and the weakening currency of higher education credentials
As the above evidence shows, higher education students view their credentials as positional goods that provide advantages in the labour market; however, there was also widespread concern about their limitations. Students view the relationship between their higher education credentials and their utility in the market as being far from straightforward. Accessing the types of employment and labour market returns they were seeking was therefore viewed as not being reducible to their higher education credentials. Such concerns were derived from students’ perception of being in an intense competition for graduate forms of employment in what was perceived to be an increasingly tough-entry and congested graduate market: the labour market rewards that they hoped to access were seen to be in limited supply. A dominant concern amongst these students was that the supply of graduates leaving mass higher education is exceeding the actual demand for graduate talent. Consequently, all the students in the study took the view that they would not seamlessly enter graduate jobs on the basis of simply possessing graduate-level credentials. While this varied somewhat between students on the basis of the types of labour markets they were orientating towards, all expressed concerns about what they interpreted as the increasingly competitive and ‘cut-throat’ market for graduate credentials:

It’s just all looks so competitive … like you hear about hundreds of applicants applying for one job. The impression I get is that there are too many people leaving university looking for too few jobs. It’s quite depressing… like you’ve done a degree and you should be able to get the job you want, but everyone is applying for the same things and competition is intense. (Jane, female, history student)

It’s strange when you think of it … like you’ve done your GCSEs, your A-levels and then your degree and you kind of expect to go into a job. But I just know that there is so much competition for places, and especially from the experiences I’ve heard from my friends. It’s made me realise that it isn’t as easy as you’d like … it’s all become very competitive and cut-throat. (Ryan, male, economics student)
This sense of positional competition was especially keenly felt by students in highly subscribed and popular subjects where there was a large-scale supply of similarly qualified graduates seeking to enter high demand markets. As was anticipated by the following media studies student:

It's slowly getting less and less [available graduate jobs] … I mean there are more and more graduates and less and less available jobs. I’d say that an area like Media and Journalism is one of the most competitive markets for graduates. (Lyndsey, female)

Such views, so prevalent in this study, appear to derive from students’ sense that, as graduates, they would be positioned in relative terms against other graduates with similar educational credentials and profiles. It was apparent that students do not view their employability as being determined simply their by absolute level of credentials and the skills and knowledge engendered by these. The evidence here instead points to students’ perception that the markers of their employability have changed, driven mainly by what they view as being an over-supply in graduate talent leaving higher education. This situation left students with a somewhat confused sense of the value and worth of their credentials; in particular, the relationship between their merits in education and its reward in the labour market. As one biology student observed:

There are still people out there who think that because they have a degree that will enable them to do what they want, like they’ve got a degree and they will be set up for life … but from what I’ve experienced and seen through my brother and friends it’s not quite as simple as that … employers are becoming ever more cut-throat about who they wish to recruit. (Oliver, male)

Such concerns further framed how students came to view the value and currency of their higher education credentials for their future employability. Mass higher education was seen as bringing about an inflationary rise in formal credentials that had the ultimate effect of lowering their status and exchange value in the labour market. With the growth in graduates leaving university, these credentials were seen to be commonplace and easier to attain. As a result of this, the students in this study were concerned with what they saw as a lowering of their symbolic value. These credentials were no longer seen as providing a ‘badge of distinction’ or conferring upon graduates elite or honorific status that marked them out as distinct. These views were further reinforced by a growing sense that employers not able to distinguish between vast amounts of similarly qualified students. The views of the following business studies student reflect students’ concerns with the lack of distinction and status of higher education credentials in mass higher education.

There are so many people with degrees now that it is becoming difficult for employers to tell them apart … with so many people with degrees it means far less than it used to, like you are another person who has gone through the conveyor belt. I’d say you were at advantage having one but it won’t be enough on its own to get you a job. (Hugh, male)

Even amongst these high-achieving students, who were aware that they were at the elite end of the higher education market, there was still a sense that there would be similar competition for highly sough-after graduate jobs. This sense of positional conflict is giving rise to genuine concerns and anxieties around the limitations of so-called hard credentials in shaping labour market outcomes.

The perceived need to add value and distinction to credentials

The perceived importance of grades and institutional profile

In light of students’ concerns about positional competition, credential inflation and the declining currency of their hard credentials, the data also revealed a concern amongst students about the need to add value and distinction to these credentials, mainly as a way of ‘standing apart’ from other graduates with similar profiles and achievements. Significantly, it is students’ perceived
need for credential distinction that appears to be influencing the types of rationalities they are developing around learning. There was a growing sense amongst students that they had to ‘do all they could’ to give themselves a positional advantage in the labour market. This was typically expressed in the importance they attached to grades, the profile of their institution and, in some cases, the extra human capital of postgraduate credentials, all of which were seen as a potential means of achieving a positional advantage in the labour market.

The issue of degree classification featured strongly in the way students looked to gain positional advantage in the labour market. Indeed, there was a tendency for them to see it as being potentially significant in shaping future labour market potential and outcomes. While there was a tendency for students to view degree classification as a reflection of their future labour market potential, it was largely seen in terms of providing a positional advantage in the graduate market. Underpinning this was a perception that employers would use degree classification as a means of discriminating between increasingly large numbers of graduates with similar academic credentials.

In their earlier work on studentship in elite French universities, Bourdieu and Passeron (1979) developed the notion of the ‘cult of the grade’ to describe the leisurely competition amongst privileged students to pass their academic time. For the students in the present study, grades were seen in a far more instrumental light; largely in terms of their positional value in the labour market – as the following views highlight:

It is extremely important [degree classification], just because you need to get a 2.1 to get a decent job and if you don’t you can’t apply for too many firms. I guess employers judge you by your exam results and I think the fact they look at it like that is important. It is important for the type of contract you get, which types of firms you apply for and what type of salary you get. (Yasmin, female, law student)

I think a 2.1 is okay and I generally think if I got lower than that I’d have failed. I do know people who graduated last year with not great results and they are now experiencing problems. (Ellen, female, history student)

Such instrumental concerns over grade classification took clear primacy over more intrinsic values around self-development and ‘learning for its own sake’. The data revealed a dominant concern among students around the ‘end outcome’ of their studies. This concern was perhaps reinforced by their sense that the disciplinary knowledge they acquired would have little, if no, direct transferability in the labour market, even for student in more ‘vocational’ subjects. Students’ strong emphasis on the explicit and tangible outcomes of their study reflects the increasing instrumental rationality in their values around higher education. This appeared to frame how students appraised the value and, in many ways, the purpose of their learning. Such perceptions are likely to be reinforced by the growing marketisation and changing financial landscape of higher education (Naidoo 2003), generated by new fee arrangements, as much as growing competitive pressures in the graduate market. As one law student bluntly observed:

I really can’t see why people bother coming to university if they don’t get a 2.1 or above. Anything below that is not going to get you anywhere … like what sort of employer is going to even both considering a student with a Third. (Frances, female)

Such views are further echoed in the views of one male history student who, at the time of the interview, was approaching his final-year examinations. It was clear from his accounts that he was equating the value of his higher education credential, and the wider experience around it, with its end outcome as measured by the grade:

My main motivation has really been to get the best grades I can. Yes, I’ve enjoyed the experience and everything, but now it’s a case of doing all I can to achieve my main goal which is a good grade. I will be totally gutted if I got lower than a 2.1. (Ralph, male, business studies student)
The salient issue of fees is likely to reinforce students’ concern about positioning their higher education learning towards discreet ends, namely that of the labour market. Further, it was clear from students’ responses that they were keen to capitalise upon the institutional profile and status of their university as a way of gaining a positional advantage in the labour market. The students in this study expressed a keen awareness of what they saw as being different levels of cultural capital and field positioning of higher education institutions in the context of mass higher education. They anticipated that the institutional capital (Bourdieu 1988) associated with graduating from a more elite university would position them more favourably when attempting to enter the elite end of the market. Clearly reflected in their views was a sense of inequality between graduates leaving universities: the move towards mass higher education was seen to reinforce rather than neutralised positional difference between groups of graduates. The notion of the ‘right’ or ‘good’ type of university was seen as having a significant bearing upon future labour market outcomes, even in higher demand areas such as Engineering:

I do think it is important that you attend the ‘right’ university. I know that for many high-level jobs there is going to be intense competition … so that is why I think it is important to come to a good university like this because employers will know you’ve got a good degree. (Jon, male, engineering student)

As in the case of degree classification, students viewed employers as discriminating between different types of graduates leaving mass higher education. While these students acknowledged that the learning experiences of graduates from ‘new’ institutions might actually been more relevant to the world of work, this was off-set by a clear sense that employers harboured a deep-seated bias towards students with traditional academic profiles. This was anticipated as a reality that would advantage (or disadvantage) different groups of graduates.

The perceived importance of soft credentials

Whilst, as the above evidence clearly suggests, adding value to formal credentials is seen as an important issue of their employability, there was also a very strong sense among these students for the need to develop and deploy credentials that fell outside their formal learning. A strong emphasis was placed upon what can be termed soft credentials. This was built upon a prevalent view that their graduateness, or potential as graduates, was no longer represented through their formal achievements in higher education. A heavy emphasis instead was placed upon the need to develop a narrative of employability that encompassed experiences and achievement outside of their degrees. The evidence suggests that higher education students are using the discourse of experience or, what Brown and Hesketh (2004) term the ‘economy of experience’, in understanding their future employability and labour market outcomes. Such narratives therefore not only involve formal educational achievements, but also the development of extra-curricula activities and skills. These were further viewed as having potential utility value in the graduate market.

A dominant concern among the students in this study was that of trying to package these soft credentials in ways that conveyed the potential calibre of them as individual graduates. In line with their concerns about the growing homogenisation of hard credentials, students looked upon the Curriculum Vitae as an important tool for projecting a narrative of individual potential, competence and skill. This was seen as being particularly important during early stages of labour market entry such as the application and recruitment process. As the following male engineering and English students argue, the anticipated need to project individualised attributes and achievement is typically seen as a way for graduates to distinguish themselves in a congested market:

I think it’s now becoming based upon simply what you have done outside your degree and what your experiences are. I think this is because everyone now seems to have a degree it doesn’t say a lot about the individual. (Wayne, male, engineering student)
I think employers attempt to engage with the person, like in terms of what they have done. Employers will want to get a much bigger picture of the student other than their degree. This is meaning less and less these days. (Adrian, male, English student)

The students interviewed in this study were therefore concerned with teasing out the potential market value of these experiences. Whilst these activities often formed a part of students’ lifestyle activities, they were also seen as potentially adding to their ‘marketability’ as graduates. They were viewed as a means of conveying added-value skills and competences. This again relates back to students’ understanding of the degree in itself being a blunt instrument in the labour market. As the views of the following female engineering student suggest, students appear aware of employers’ growing emphasis on personal and behavioural attributes of graduates, and not just skills and knowledge contained within what she views as the rigid structure of the degree:

I think the degree tells half the story – a lot more of it is to do with what you have done outside your degree, like what sport you’re in to and what societies you are involved in. I think the degree is a very forced structure whereby people are forced to go along with the system. So I think employers are looking for evidence of initiative and motivation in what graduates have done aside from their degrees. (Lisa, female, engineering student)

These more personal, social and behavioural credentials were seen as being particularly important in the recruitment stage where employers would be assessing graduates’ ‘live attributes’. Crucially, students increasingly viewed their employability as matter of ‘what they are about’ as individuals, as much as their technical know-how and cognitive skills. In the case of highly competitive and tough-entry jobs, the issue of ‘social fit’ between individual graduates and employers was seen to be significant in shaping their outcomes. Such perceptions again reinforce students’ concerns about the limitation of hard educational credentials in accessing desired forms of employment, as the views of two female business and economics students highlight:

I think you’ve got to show that you have a good personality – basically that you’re an all rounder who doesn’t focus one area … a lot of it is how you come across as a person and what sort of personality you project, as well as things like appearance and dress. Much of it depends on how well they feel you fit into the company and so a lot of it is about the impression you make. (Julie, female, business student)

The personality of the candidate is definitely going to make a difference because people who are hiring you will be interested to see if you will be able to fit into the firm and that you can work to the particular culture they have … a lot of it is about marketing yourself. (Marie, female, economics student)

Discussion and conclusion

The present study has highlighted the various tensions and concerns experienced by higher education students around the role and utility of their higher education credentials in shaping their future labour market outcomes. It has also shown some of the contradictions in students’ understanding of the potential currency of their university qualifications. It is clear that students still view higher education credentials as positioning them favourably in what is seen as a hierarchical labour market. These credentials are seen as providing added human and cultural capital to open up employment opportunities that would otherwise be limited. To this extent, students appear to have internalised the dominant view of ‘education as a return’ so prevalent in current higher education policy.

However, this study has also highlighted serious limitations in the human capital framework that continues to exert much influence on current higher education policy (DfES 2003, 2004). The framework has been exposed as an unreliable tool for understanding the concept of employability, as well as the relationship between educational credentials and labour market outcomes. The
evidence clearly shows that students understand their future labour market outcomes as being more complex than simply possessing extra credentials and technical knowledge from higher education. Ultimately, higher education students view themselves to be in a positional competition amongst a growing supply of graduates entering the labour market with similar profiles and aspirations. The task facing students is that of gaining a positional advantage in a competitive labour market where employers are placing increasingly less emphasis on academic credentials (Brown and Hesketh 2004). This study has highlighted how higher education students are rationalising this problem and some of the strategies they are adopting as a response. The increasingly instrumental values and attitudes highlighted in this study appear to be a response to anticipated competitive pressures in the labour market, as well as growing financial burdens experienced during and after graduation. It is clear that higher education students see the need to add value to their credentials in light of their weakening currency. Increasingly, students are attaching growing importance to so-called ‘soft’ currencies; they appear to be increasingly couching their employability around personal and social credentials, and are attempting to make these fit into the changing demands of employers.

A limitation of this study is its limited sample of students, confined to a high-status university comprising relatively privileged, middle-class, high-achieving young people. However, the tensions explicit in their views highlight many significant tensions being played out by these young people in pursuit of labour market rewards. They may be further mirroring wider cultural tensions among the expanding middle class who are finding it increasingly difficult to subscribe to traditional notions of merit as a way of winning positional advantage (Ball 2002; Brown and Hesketh 2004). The study also raises some serious issues around equality and social exclusion in the graduate labour market. The expansion of higher education has been welcomed in many quarters. The advantages of mass higher education have been framed in terms of both economic efficiency and social justice. The students in the present study were clearly aware that the role of universities in reproducing occupational rewards is changing. It is clear that, even among students with similar educational and cultural profiles, not all will achieve equal labour market returns (Power et al. 2003). At the same time, these students are able to draw upon various cultural and educational advantages. Moreover, they are more able to access the types of ‘experiences’ that add value to their credentials, as well as the social and personal skills increasingly being valued by employers in the elite end of the market.

A further issue relates to the changing role of universities in terms of processes of wider social and economic reproduction, a role that has continued to change shape since the time of Bourdieu and Passeron’s study into studentship (Boudieu and Passeron 1979). The expanded and unified system of higher education may, at one level, be blurring social divisions in the acquisition of symbolic and economic goods used to maximise individuals’ positions in the economic field. However, this may mask the fact that elite and mass higher education often co-exist (Scott 1995), and that this co-existence is likely to intensify positional difference and the levels of symbolic capital amongst different graduates. Inequalities in symbolic power and capital rest uneasily with not only policy-makers’ attempts to couch the expansion of higher education in neutral, meritocratic terms, but also with more optimistic visions of the universities as potential sites of personal and cognitive transformation which transcend learners’ pre-existing cultural habitus (Barnett 1996).

Mass higher education encompasses an increasingly larger body of students who have traditionally been positioned outside the graduate labour market. The views, experiences and cultural tensions of these types of students are now well documented (Leathwood and O’Connell 2003; Reay, David and Ball 2006). While higher education might offer some of these students an emancipating hand – both culturally and economically – many continue to be excluded from labour market opportunity structures. The associated risks of participating in higher education for
these students are also considerably higher than for those positioned more strongly in the higher education and labour market field (Archer and Hutchings 2000). The evidence clearly shows that employers play an active role in reinforcing patterns of labour market inequality amongst different graduates (Harvey, Moon and Geall 1997; Brown and Hesketh 2004). The expansion of mass higher education, together with the corresponding decline in the value of academic credentials for labour market returns, is likely to reinforce these inequalities.

Note
1. The majority of UK bachelors’ degrees are divided into firsts, upper seconds (2.1), lower seconds (2.2), thirds and passes without honours. Figures from the UK’s Higher Education Statistics Agency show that in 2006 the percentage of UK first-degree graduates attaining a 2.1 classification was 45%, compared with 30% gaining 2.2 degrees, 11% with firsts and 7% with thirds or passes. Many UK graduate employers specify a 2.1 (or above) as a desirable, sometimes pre-requisite, entry requirement.

References


