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Graduate Market Trends

Winter 2017

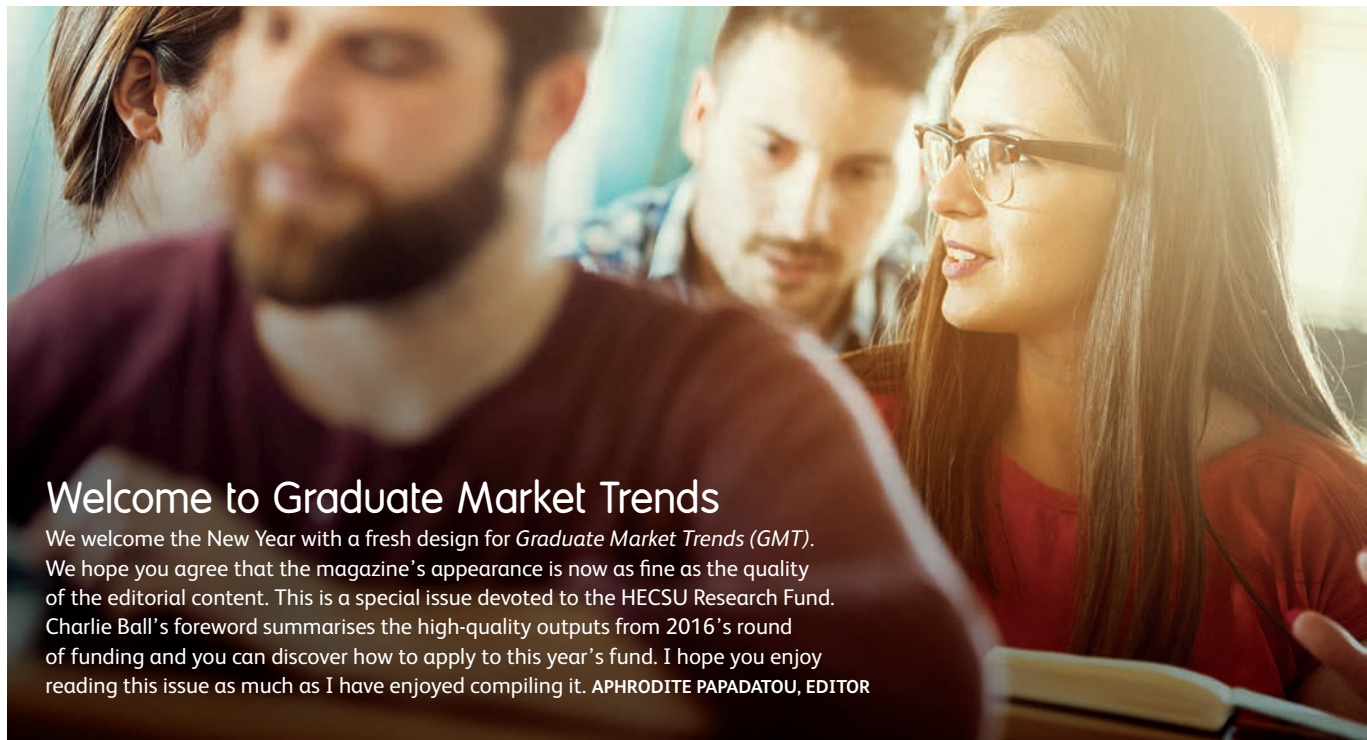
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The background of the cover is a photograph of a modern glass skyscraper in the foreground, with the Scottish Parliament building and its iconic dome visible in the background. The scene is bathed in the warm, golden light of a sunset or sunrise, creating a dramatic and high-contrast atmosphere.

HECSU RESEARCH FUND SPECIAL

Graduate employment / Higher and further education /
Careers and employability / Debate / Information / Research

PROSPECTS



Welcome to Graduate Market Trends

We welcome the New Year with a fresh design for *Graduate Market Trends (GMT)*. We hope you agree that the magazine's appearance is now as fine as the quality of the editorial content. This is a special issue devoted to the HECSU Research Fund. Charlie Ball's foreword summarises the high-quality outputs from 2016's round of funding and you can discover how to apply to this year's fund. I hope you enjoy reading this issue as much as I have enjoyed compiling it. APHRODITE PAPADATOU, EDITOR

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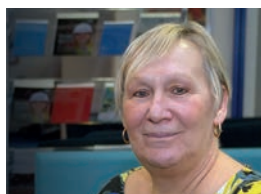
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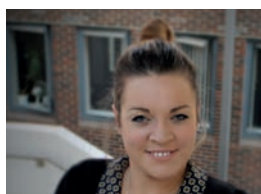
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The early career experiences of arts graduates

What is the transition from university to the workforce really like for arts graduates? How do they reflect on this and how do they tell their stories? Fiona Christie researched arts graduates' transitions at the University of Salford, where she is a careers consultant

Commentary on the graduate labour market comes from many sources. The media publish doom and gloom stories, the government produces a raft of statistics about the variable return on a degree, and employers bemoan the work-readiness of some graduates.

Academic analysis confirms that current graduates face considerable uncertainty in a labour market shaped by trends that include the expansion of higher education, economic changes following the 2008 recession, globalisation, and technological and organisational change in how work is structured (Tholen, 2014). But what do recent graduates, especially of subjects that have a tradition of less clear paths of entry into the labour market (for example in creative industries that have led the way in the notion of a boundary-

less career), say about their experience of uncertain and competitive job markets?

Drawing on a range of data sources including focus groups with students (10) before the end of their degree courses, and a survey (112) and interviews (14) conducted between 16 and 20 months after graduation, our research analysed graduates from arts, creative arts and humanities subjects – those that, in reporting on the benefits of university study, are considered to have a lower return in relation to a graduate premium. Graduates for whom the transition from university was not smooth were the priority target for this study.

Improving career circumstances

The research discovered that some of the fears students have about the job market may not be borne out in reality. One final-year focus

group participant said, 'I know someone who got a first last year and they still don't have a job', which reflects an anxiety that this project has shown to be wildly exaggerated.

Overall, the research showed a steady improvement in the career direction of participants. In the survey, reported unemployment halved between January and October 2015 and employment levels went up from 72.3% to 82.2%. In comparing participants with how they responded to the *Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education (DLHE)* survey, 21.3% had experienced an improvement of career status – for example moving from unemployment to work or from lower status to higher status work – with the rest staying in a similar status situation, either graduate or non-graduate level.



GRADUATES ARE NOT PASSIVE PLAYERS AND MANY ARE PRO-ACTIVELY RESPONDING TO THE CHALLENGES THEY FACE



DATA SHOWED HOW CAREER EXPERIENCES AND ATTITUDES ARE INFLUENCED BY SOCIAL BACKGROUND AND GENDER

The subjectivity of graduate perceptions of whether a degree is required for a job was clear: of 34 employed graduates who said they did not need their degree, 14 appeared to be in roles for which a degree may well have helped, such as a graphic design graduate working as a police officer, a journalism graduate employed as a PR account executive, or a performance graduate working as a media production researcher.

There was no doubt about the rapid changes individuals experience after graduating. Survey findings illustrated both a considerable evolution of circumstances and of ideas in the 16 months after graduating. Some 58.9% reported a change of career circumstances between 6 and 16 months post-graduation, and only 25.9% said that their career ideas were the same as when they graduated.

Social background and gender

Data from both survey and interviews showed how career experiences and attitudes are influenced by social background and gender. This supports recent qualitative work which has focused on social class and gender (Burke, 2015; Finn, 2015). Those from a lower social class background seem to consistently trail behind their peers in terms of what they were doing and in their confidence in coping with the challenges they face.

For example, unemployment was consistently higher for lower-class individuals and in responses to attitude statements, 91% of higher-class respondents reported confidence in talking about their skills and strengths and 85% were confident at interview, whereas just 68% of lower-class graduates agreed with these two statements. Men also seem to trail their female counterparts with regard to attitudes to their careers, being more downbeat overall, although this is counterbalanced by data showing that males from a higher social background report the lowest levels of unemployment and unavailability for work.

Findings from interviews revealed aspects that support the resilience of young people in navigating career challenges. The importance of family and friends, who provide personal morale-building support, was significant, for example, 'My mum's been my most influential person – she's a total rock star' (Ruby, visual arts). A prolonged economic dependence on family was evident, and graduates appear to have accepted this with good humour, perhaps normalised because it is an experience shared by many peers.

Geography

The significance of location emerged from research interviews. The life-affirming experience of living and working abroad, which has a long tradition among graduates of UK universities, continues. Three of the interview participants were travelling (New Zealand), studying (France) and working (Canada) overseas and were uniformly positive about this. Within the UK, the advantages that individuals perceive they have depending on where they live is important, with London and other large urban areas holding all the cards. This creates problems for those obliged to return to or stay in family homes in small towns with limited opportunities for graduates. A delayed departure from the family home was more common among those from a lower social background.

Employer culture

The value of quality opportunities for graduates starting out was also evident, illustrating that employers do not consistently rise to the responsibility of developing new graduates. Some graduates reported exploitative practices, though all who did so had eventually walked away from what they perceived as bad employers. For example, media production graduate Bridget felt ill-treated and subsequently sought out advice about her rights from a media career network, saying, 'I'd never ever work for that company again or work with them because of the way I was treated'. It would seem that some employers need to adjust practices that may have included a default reliance on insecure and unpaid work experience for new entrants, which does tend to be more common in creative and media industries.

Career conversations

The role of career conversations emerged. The importance of being able to talk about one's ideas and having people that can be trusted to do so was revealed. Those who had found suitable people to talk to about their hopes, fears and ambitions were much more positive about their prospects, and it appeared that those with more valuable social capital were more likely to make such career conversations happen. Ironically, although the 'what's your career plan?' question may be one that graduates dread to hear, it is one that they would love to be able to answer, so it does seem important that the supporters of students and graduates find suitable opportunities to have career conversations.

Discourses of employability

Data from the survey, but especially interviews, illustrated how individuals struggle to make sense of contemporary discourses that relate to employability, which sometimes promote behaviours and attitudes that appear contradictory. Consumerist ideas of a degree as a purchase meant statements were made that demonstrated some disappointment when a desired work outcome from a vocational degree has not emerged. In contrast, some comments were made that indicated an excessive faith in meritocracy and that talent would out; others revealed individuals claiming sole responsibility for their own career and employability, sometimes to the extent that they blamed themselves for poor success in the job market, even if they have shown considerable determination looking for work in a competitive field.

For example, media production graduate Alice is working in temporary jobs and wants to work in the music business. She held down a lifeguarding job throughout university, and also volunteered at music festivals during vacations, but feels a failure, saying, 'I just feel it's not satisfying and I feel like I see customers and they think I'm a failure'.

Conclusion

Finally, this research adds to critical voices of a reliance on quantitative metrics, for example used in DLHE, to capture graduate career pathways (Christie, 2016). A narrow focus on positive destinations as defined by league tables and also in the forthcoming Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) provides a limited notion of graduate success. Consideration of the stories of research interview participants, many of whom do not meet conventional notions of graduate career success, shows a group of graduates resolutely building their careers. Even in undesirable career situations, graduates are not passive players and many were pro-actively responding to the challenges they faced in seeking fulfilling work.

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