

Graduates' transitions into university and into employment

**A Thesis submitted for the
degree of Doctorate in Education**

by

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Abstract

Graduates' transitions into university, their university preparation and transitions to employment are influenced by their contextual learning and experiences.

This thesis focuses on the preparation for and entry into work of the 1999 cohort of graduates at one higher education institution in West London. The research uses two research design methodologies to explore the graduates' ultimate entry into work.

The research study uses a quantitative employment destination data set to investigate the employment destinations of the graduates. The research also uses a qualitative approach, focusing on individual biographies using semi-structured interviews for data gathering, to investigate the impact of biographical and contextual variation on the 1999 cohort's preparation for employment.

The research study explores the impact of graduates' curricular antecedents on their preparation for employment by investigating the way they pass thorough periods of transition within education and into work. It seeks to understand and explain how these transition points interact with their experiences of higher education and how such interactions better shape their preparation for and transition into employment.

The results show that graduates' transitions into university, their university preparation and transitions to employment are influenced by a range of contextual and experiential variables.

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Chapter One- Introduction

Introduction

The purpose of chapter one is to present a description of the background to the concepts underpinning this particular thesis. It presents the rationale around which the research is based, the conviction that the transition of graduates from higher education to eventual employment is a complex process affected by a range of variables.

1. Government Policy Agenda

The relationship between higher education and industry is high on the policy agenda at present (White Paper, 2003) especially with respect to the role of universities in preparing their students for future work and careers. A number of reports from industry and Government have identified low levels of work preparation in higher education as a major problem that lowers productivity, economic growth and competition.

Even as early as the nineteen sixties, the Robbins Report on Higher Education (HMSO, 1963) recognised that an educated workforce is necessary for industry to progress in an increasingly competitive world. This was followed in the nineteen seventies by the then Prime Minister's Ruskin College speech (James Callaghan, 1976) which heralded a drive to create an education-employer interface where the focus was on preparing students to meet the needs of industry for a highly skilled workforce.

(i) The Challenge for Higher Education

The 1987 White Paper, *Higher Education: Meeting the Challenge*, also argued that higher education should meet the needs of the economy by achieving greater

commercial and industrial relevance in its curriculum. Shortly after that, the Enterprise into higher education programme was established (Training Agency, 1989b). Underpinning this initiative was the expectation that graduates who were quick to learn and who had experience of the world of work would be in tune with the enterprise culture and aware of the needs of industry. The enterprise programme created a partnership between higher education and employers to help students acquire and develop transferable skills, which would allow them to succeed in a wide range of different tasks and jobs.

(ii) The Skills Debate

In 1995 the Association of Graduate Recruiters (AGR, 1995) called for graduates to develop more relevant skills during their higher education experiences, skills that employers claimed were required if they were to compete effectively within a productive economy.

A common feature of all these exhortations was the emphasis on the importance of the individual's skills.

The White Paper 'The Future Of Higher Education' (DfEE, January 2003) presented to Parliament also set out a vision of higher education, which committed the higher education sector to respond to the needs of the economy and to provide people who were trained in the skills sought by employers.

In the context of these government inspired efforts, it is hardly surprising that research and development into graduates' preparation for employment has tended to concentrate

on key skills. This approach is designed to enhance preparation for employment through the development of key or transferable skills. A weakness of the approach is that it tends to stereotype student learning or lack of it, without addressing any other possible influences.

(iii) Graduate Identity

An alternative perspective to the human capital, skills-based view is provided by Holmes's (1998) graduate identity thesis. According to Holmes, students often face insurmountable difficulties when they attempt to use the skills learnt on skills-based courses to gain entry to career employment because they are unable to relate the skills they have learnt within the classroom to the world of work. Furthermore, education's concept of skills does not always match the employer's expectations. This, according to Holmes is often due to employers' inability to provide a clear description of what they look for from graduates. The idea of skills that are demonstrated through application in practical contexts only makes sense 'to those who have the same recognition and understanding of those contexts' (Holmes, 1998, p 4).

Holmes (1998) argues that the idea of skills is a concept framed by higher education and not by employers. It is neither clear nor applicable and the meanings applied to skills in higher education are not necessarily the same in the context of graduate work. Indeed he suggests that skills 'should not be taken necessarily to refer to some empirically real objects' but should be used as a theoretical construct in the context of education theory since:

in terms of explaining the relationship between education and graduates performance, 'transferable skills' not only do not exist, they cannot exist!

(pg 4-5)

Holmes (1998) and Maroy and Doray (2000) suggest that education aids in the development of a set of inner qualities and attributes that provide the tools for use in various situations. Their identity as graduates is then a product of students' inner qualities and their professional interactions within the social arena. Holmes (2000) proposes a reframing of the skills agenda, based on this notion of graduate identity.

(iv) Internship or sandwich programmes

In some universities yet another approach, the internship or sandwich programme, has been developed to prepare students for employment. This assumes that significant learning outcomes can be more readily achieved through the creation of communities of learning that emphasise the development of knowledge in applied settings (Mason, 2001).

2. A professional perspective

It was within this context that I began work at one southwest London Higher Education College in 1991, as a careers adviser. At the time the College consisted of two campuses. During 1995-1997 the College was merged with its accrediting University. In 1995, seven hundred and seventy students graduated from College courses in Education, Social Work, Health Studies, Sport Sciences, Arts, Humanities and Business Studies. The annual survey of graduates showed that 75% of them were successful in obtaining employment.

I took over the final destination survey of the whole merged University in 2000. The

final destination survey forms part of a much wider survey of all national universities that undertake data collection for the Higher Education Statistical Agency (HESA), a government department specifically established to undertake data collection and analysis about higher education. HESA was formed to provide consistent information about higher education throughout the United Kingdom and to enable universities and colleges and the Funding Council to meet their obligations under relevant legislation (HESA 2002).

Until 2003, data collection for the final destination survey of graduates began at the start of September and ended at the end of January of each graduating year. From the year 2004, the survey will be known as the Destination of Higher Education Leavers (DLHE) and the survey will begin in December, with a 10th March closing date. The new survey questionnaire will be longer, the intention being to collect more robust information on graduates' individual destinations.

The University with which the College was merged operated a successful sandwich course scheme, which emphasised the importance of a community of learning approach and therefore provided a different context for work preparation to that employed in College courses. This approach to student learning yielded high graduate employability figures for the University and some concern was expressed at the potential impact of College courses on the University's employability record. As a member of the College's, and subsequently, the merged University's careers department, I was keen to explore this area further.

3. Rationale for this study

This thesis reports on the resulting study of the 1999 cohort of graduates in the merged University and how they prepared for and entered work from a variety of curricular contexts. The intention was to focus on the impact of factors such as identity and contextual variation on the effectiveness of graduates' preparation for employment.

To date, research and development on graduates' preparation for employment has tended to concentrate on key skills on the assumption that skills deficits exist. A weakness of the approach is that it tends to stereotype student lacking or lack of it, without addressing complex contextual and biographical influences.

This study explores the impact of such influences by investigating the way graduates pass through the periods of transition within education and into work. It seeks to understand how these transition points interact with graduates' differing experiences of higher education and their developing identity and how such interaction shapes preparation for employment.

The following are specific research questions:

What is the impact of choice of higher education institution?

What is the effect of choice of subject area?

What is the effect of the choice of three-year degree non-sandwich and four-year degree sandwich courses?

What is the impact of the experience of the internship context in sandwich courses?

What is the impact of the passage from higher education to employment?

4. Outline of Chapters

Chapter two reviews the literature on the main approaches to preparation for employment in higher education and provides the theoretical foundation for this research study. The development of employment knowledge in the context of biographical and contextual variation is of some significance in understanding the problems and possible solutions to what is seen as a miss-match between graduates' and employers' expectations on entry into employment (Holmes 2000). It has direct relevance to higher education and industry.

Chapter three describes the study's methodology. It presents an appreciation of the quantitative approach used for the Institutional Focused Study that uses employment datasets to inquire into the employment destination of the 1999 graduate cohort according to their wider curricular contexts. It focuses on the interpretive biological approach of the 1999 graduate cohort's contextual learning and experiences of their different transitions into higher education, their university preparation of employment and their eventual entry into employment

Chapter four presents the quantitative study and its results.

Chapter five presents the results of the biographical study, undertaken at points of transition to determine the effects of context, identity and experience on preparation for employment.

Chapter six discusses the results and chapter seven presents the conclusions, together with an evaluation of the study and its implications for further work.

Chapter Two

Literature Review

Introduction

The purpose of the research study is to explore the biographical and contextual experience as opposed to the skills of graduates from the 1999-graduating cohort of a West London Higher Education Institution as they confront points of transitions into higher education and ultimately into employment. To this end, this chapter will review the relevant literature that surrounds the debate concerning whether and how higher education effectively prepares graduates for work.

This literature review considers the long history of government concerns and inducements that focus mainly on skills acquisition and the impact of choice on higher education. It describes the responses within higher education to the changes demanded by government. It explores the different arguments relating to skills-based curriculum programmes and the effect of the choice of three-year and sandwich courses. It examines the literature on the impact of relationships between different individuals and provides explanations of undergraduate's entry into employment.

1. Government concerns and inducements

As early as the 1960's, The Robbins Report on Higher Education (HMSO, 1963) suggested that higher education was not effectively preparing undergraduates for the world of work. It recognised that a better-educated workforce was necessary for industry to progress in an increasingly competitive world. This was followed in the 1970s by the then Prime Minister Jim Callaghan's Ruskin College speech (Callaghan,

1976), which heralded a drive to create an education-employer interface where the focus was on preparing students to meet the needs of industry. He said,

There are complaints from industry that new recruits do not have the basic tools to do the job (pg 3).

In the last decades of the twentieth century, the emphasis on the importance of skills development within higher education increased (UGC, 1984; White Paper, 1987;) especially with respect to the role of universities in preparing their students for future work and careers. The underlying intellectual, scientific and technological principles and personal skills of the undergraduates were emphasised as elements that needed to keep pace with Industry (UGC, 1984).

(i) Enterprise in Higher Education

To achieve this, the government set up the Enterprise into Higher Education (EHE) initiative, launched in 1987 by the Manpower Services Commission (MSC) (Whitley 1995). This aimed to encourage the ‘development and qualities of enterprise’ in undergraduates. Its cornerstone was its encouragement of employers to have more involvement in higher education through their contribution to the curriculum. Its main purpose was to prepare students for employment by incorporating work-relevant and work-based learning in the skills curriculum, thus encouraging the development of transferable skills (Training Agency, 1989b) and increasing graduates’ potential entry into a range of jobs.

The impact of this government initiative was reflected in a ‘Quality in Higher Education Project’ (Harvey & Green, 1994). Harvey and Green stated that despite

these government changes, a survey of employers' views at the time showed that they continued to be dissatisfied with the level of skills graduates were displaying in employment.

In supporting this view, Harvey & Green (1994) drew on a survey conducted on 258 managers and recent graduates, which found that employers wanted adaptive, adaptable and transformable people to help them maintain, develop and transform their organization in response to and in anticipation of change. In the light of this continued dissatisfaction regarding graduates entering employment, the skills debate was given more emphasis. The government set up an inquiry headed by Sir Ron Dearing (1997) to address these concerns.

(ii) The Dearing Committee

The Dearing Committee (1997) supported the fact that changes in the economy were affecting the higher education curriculum. It also recognised that these economic changes impacted upon higher education's role in preparing undergraduates for employment. The report stated:

Powerful forces, technological and political, are driving the economies of the world towards greater integration.... The new economic power will place an increasing premium on education and knowledge, which in turn makes national economies more dependent on higher education's development of people with high level skills, knowledge and understanding... (Chapt 6, pg 34).

Dearing (1997) identified a 'plethora' of skills that existed within the curriculum with no one quite knowing what skills they were meant to be developing. Four generic skills were proposed as 'key skills' (NICHE, 1997 p 17), which the committee considered universities should adopt in the higher education curriculum. These skills included

Communication, Teamwork, Problem Solving and Leadership. They were considered to be the core 'employability skills' that would be most relevant in the relationship between the higher education curriculum and employment.

The Dearing Committee (1997) also recommended embedding employability skills programmes in the higher education curriculum, rather than providing them as bolted-on skills development programmes. Members of the committee argued that bolted-on skills development programmes would be seen as optional and would therefore be unlikely to attract undergraduates' full attendance.

Furthermore, they argued that, substantial benefits would be gained if skills development were embedded within the curriculum. They would have comparable value to subject-based elements of the degree (Dearing, 1997).

Dearing (1997) extended the discussion by making a case for life-long learning and its realization through partnerships involving higher education, employment and other relevant institutions.

The Dearing Committee (1997) went some way towards understanding what was acquired from graduates' skills capacities. Through a pilot project commissioned to examine employers' perceptions about the skills developed in higher education, mismatches in perceptions and understanding between higher education and employment were identified.

Flexibility and clearer learning frameworks within the higher education curriculum were issues put forward as the yardstick for a skills-based curriculum that would match employers' requirements (Dearing, 1997). However, the views that were subscribed comprised the defining characteristics of the traditional curriculum, which included a commitment to rational debate and open argument.

Dearing (1997) therefore recommended that all higher education institutions should:

identify over the medium term opportunities to increase the extent to which programmes help student to become familiar with work and help to reflect on such work (Recommendation 18).

The Committee also suggested that higher education should put into place the necessary framework for determining the work experiences of undergraduates.

The Dearing Report (1997) also placed an emphasis on work experience in higher education. They concluded that a framework based around students acquiring work experience in many different settings, structured and informal, paid and unpaid could be to their benefit. It argued that,

Higher Education is fundamental to the social, economic and cultural health of the nation. It will contribute not only through the intellectual development of students and by equipping them for work, but also by adding to the world's store of knowledge and understanding... students' academic experience should help them understand how that experience relates to their personal and future development' (1997, para.9.30)

Dearing (1997) showed that employers had a low awareness of the work going on in higher education to help students develop employability skills. National benchmark

statements were identified as indicators that focused only on skills development plans and policies within subject departments in individual institutions.

Dearing (1997) also realised there was ultimate significance in the emphasis placed on skills development as a necessary part of the wider learning process. The committee suggested that a combination of skills, attributes and experiences which were interrelated, both structured and informal and which matched the skills and attributes employers were seeking from graduates was what higher education required. However, it was unable to resolve the concern that higher education could not quite measure when a student had achieved the skills competences required from employer.

This message was echoed in the White Paper, 'Our Competitive Future: Building the Knowledge Driven Economy' (16th December, 1998), in which the government pledged twenty million pounds per year to a new Higher Education Reach Out (HERO) fund to encourage universities to develop a framework so they could work more effectively with business.

This funding boost and other further resources injected into the higher education curriculum captured the essence of changes occurring in higher education. This caused the White Paper (2003) to emphasise that higher education was becoming increasingly under pressure to form even stronger links with business and the economy and, in particular, to bridge the skills gap that was seen to be occurring in some subject contexts.

A call for more resources continued to be identified as important and necessary for the development of employability skills so that all subject areas could be on a skills-development level playing field.

Additional resources will be needed if they are to meet the long-term challenge to maintain and improve high standards, expand and widen access, strengthen links with business and compete globally.” (pg 2”).

Summary

The Dearing Committee (1997), the Learning Age Green Paper and subsequent report (DfEE, 1998), as well as the Government White Paper, (DfEE, 1999, 2003) concluded that to meet the needs of Industry through the skills match, higher education would have to change both its culture and approach to the wider learning skills process. This change would ensure a more appropriate match to industry’s requirements, through relevant learning and the development of these key skills identified by Dearing (1999). By providing a focus on these key skills through students’ assignments, higher education would be keeping pace with the economic changes occurring in industry,

to make better progress in harnessing our relevant knowledge to the process of creating wealth (pg 1).

2. The Responses of and Challenges for Higher Education

Introduction

There was considerable resistance to a skills-based curriculum, as this implied a different philosophical direction from the more traditional academic curriculum (Barnett, 1997).

Barnett (1997) stated that the Dearing Report (1997) did nothing to clarify how higher education was going to take on the task of responding effectively to delivering the key skills. This position articulated by Dearing had been influenced by the 20 year time-line adopted, which did not give sufficient time for universities to gradually accept the new compact between the key stakeholders in realising the new vision for universities and employers (Barnett, 1997).

Arising issues suggested that universities were arriving at judgements about the breadth of changes expected, which would not adhere to the traditional academic curriculum. It was suggested that the curriculum would become 'diluted' by the 'operational' values of skills-based programmes (Barnett, 1997).

Higher education tutors viewed themselves as not being sufficiently qualified to teach undergraduates skills development, neither was it their role to provide the degree of employment links being demanded by government policy (Barnett, 1997).

These initial attitudes of higher education did nothing towards moving the skills-debate forward in the curriculum (Perkins and Salomon, 1994). The notion was suggested that the traditional higher education curriculum was remote in its delivery to the wider

world context. Much of what the undergraduates were learning was only related to the graduates' academic study and nothing more.

Perkins and Salomon (1994) further stated that learning and performance observed in higher education and employment could not exist harmoniously, unless higher education prepared undergraduates to learn the rules, habits and knowledge appropriate to employment.

The interpretation of the problem from this point of view is that the search is not for how knowledge or skills are transported whole from one setting to another, but for how learning and performance in one setting prepares one to learn the rules and habits and knowledge appropriate to a new setting (pg 28).

Bridges (2000) stated that universities had to determine whether they saw some or all of these skills as most effectively taught or developed as part of an integrated subject programme or as something apart from the curricular subject teaching. For example if skills programmes were to become more embedded within the curriculum, would this place a new emphasis on a different type of knowledge that focused more on social context? In response, Bridges (2000) stated that this shift allowed the language of competence and capability to permeate the traditional higher education curriculum

To this end, the Committee of Vice Chancellors reported in 1998 that,

...there was no concrete proof as to whether students were acquiring these particular skills necessary for Industry...the relevant acquisition of employability skills is a necessity both for the careers of graduates and for the wider prosperity of the UK economy (pg2).

The CVCP (1998) implied that the challenges set for higher education were for changes to be implemented to the academic curriculum so that workplace learning could be embedded within the curriculum. This in its own way raised questions

concerning the structure and organisation of knowledge around these skills based programmes, which involved deconstructing the existing curriculum structure so that it became more relevant to employment, to allow openness for the curriculum to be more fairly assessed.

Fallows and Steven (2000) affirmed that a sector-wide debate led to some universities tabulating a detailed skills expectation for each level of undergraduate provision. Learning outcomes for skills areas were identified and fitted into broad areas such as information retrieval and handling, communication and presentation, planning and problem solving, social development and interaction. The universities also recognised that

students should take responsibility for their own learning, and should possess the need to recognise ethical frameworks for actions, and the essential requirement for analysis, synthesis and creativity in all academic activity (pg 77).

(i) How can Universities provide work ready students?

The outcomes of implementation programmes are evident in a recent Higher Education Funded Council (HEFCE) study of graduates (Pitar, 2002) which explored graduates' perceptions of their skills on graduation. The study also explored the skills used in the workplace. The study focused on skills deficits and surplus, by comparing skills on graduation with those used in the workplace.

The study (Pitar, 2002) suggested consistency within the findings of the academic area. 81% of students felt their analytical skills had developed. In the personal development area, being able to use their initiative was highly prized, and 69% of students said their

communication skills were developed in the enterprise skills section. The subjects the students studied influenced their assessment of their numeric, computing and writing skills. This is most telling in terms of the success of the employability initiatives delivered by the higher education institution, which is then measured against the national annual survey of the employability of graduates published by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (2002).

The study also showed that the skills used most in the workplace are time management, oral communication and managing different tasks and obligations at the same time. These skills it was discovered, were not addressed by higher education in their preparation of students for employment (Pitar, 2002).

This Pitar study (2002) illustrates the need to inquire into the opinion of graduates regarding their preparation by the university for employment. From this point of view, higher education's continuous effort to develop programmes that can reach out to all the students is reflected in the use of high technology that is now subsuming universities.

In taking advantage of the widespread use of technology by undergraduates, universities have adopted a new on-line development programme aimed at all undergraduates in higher education, to help develop undergraduates' learning and employment skills.

(ii) Graduate identity

Holmes (2000) believes that higher education is not fully equipped to prepare undergraduates for employment. Holmes further states that higher education is able to say that a person has acquired the ability to develop a particular skill, but it bears no relevance to the processes involved, which are attached to the students' learning points. Higher education needs to refer to the wider social processes in which skills learning is grounded and affirmed by the world of employment.

Skills do not exist in and of themselves: rather, the term 'skills' is an attribution made in the context of the social processes by which membership of an arena of practical action is gained and maintained (pg 1).

The implication of this statement is that higher education needs to attempt to understand the nature of the world of work and its management structures. This understanding can act as a basis for developing alternative methods of teaching skills development within the curriculum, which are more specific to employer requirements.

Holmes (2000) explains that higher education presents an invisible unexpressed expectation to students of what employers want from graduates. These concealed expressions provide the mismatch between the core skills of what the universities are teaching their students and what the employers want from the graduating force.

Holmes (2000) refers to meta-skills, which is a process that can only be judged as having developed within the given employment context in which the skills are related. It is only through this process that entry to or performance within occupation areas can be facilitated or inhibited. This would involve an awareness of skills learning and the acquisition of relevant competences through the social relationships and interactions

that students develop within education as well as first hand knowledge of professional and managerial occupations.

Holmes (2000) refers to the effect of formal work experience that provides the students with actual knowledge of what it is like to apply for graduate employment. This first hand experience means that students begin a social process that involves interacting with others within the employment situation. In understanding this social process, students begin interpreting the activities and interactions that take place within the given workplace. From this interpretation the emergent identity of the student then has to be interpreted and taken into consideration by the employer.

The student is subsequently judged to be fulfilling a given graduate employment role. It is only by occupying this employment role that the performance of the graduate can be observed and interpreted by the employer in keeping with the expectations of the employing organisation. It is only then that the graduate could be identified as performing a graduate job and deem themselves to have acquired a graduate identity.

...if we are attempting to analyse the work of graduates in employment and what counts as competent performance or the exhibition of skills in such work performance, then it is necessary to establish how that performance is construed, and how the persons undertaking that task are accepted as having a distinctive identity as graduates relevant to such work performance (pg 7)

Similarly, Holmes (2000) further stated that in terms of the recruitment process, a graduate could not just enter a graduate job merely because he or she makes a claim to having graduate status based upon having just completed a degree. The graduate status of the person would initially need to be appraised and affirmed by employers through the formal recruitment processes and interactions involved in getting the graduate job. These inferences would help to predict future performance of the graduate, so that a

judgement on the degree of skills and competences learnt at university could be made. This judgement would determine whether the employer would recruit the graduate. If the employer did so, he or she would be able to anticipate the graduates' performance and progression over a period of time.

Confidence and trust in the students' ability to do the job can thus be built up in the skills-based delivery processes involved in the interactions between higher education and employment. This confidence could lead to the employer rewarding the candidate with a job (Holmes, 2000).

From this point of view, universities could not independently prepare all graduates for graduate employment, unless the individual degree course contexts provided the element of preparation expected by employers and this invisible employability factor was addressed.

(iii) The four-year degree

This preparation for employment is highlighted most effectively in the four -year degree courses. Higher education had a history of delivering sandwich courses, since the 1950s (Harvey, Moon & Geall, 1997). The four-year degree programme consists of sandwich placements where students are employed full-time on a placement for a year in industry. Sandwich placements are recognised by employers as valuable in terms of the commercial awareness and other employability skills, they allow students to develop (IDS, 1999, Mason, 1999).

In his study of the steel industry, Mason (1995) reported that managers in all sizes of plants commented favourably on the increasing number of sandwich degree courses involving work placement which enable employers to get

“a good look at prospective recruits while the students simultaneously gain industrial experience and knowledge” (pg 13).

Employers are able to acquire first hand information about the graduate's activity and performance within the workplace and may or may not offer or encourage the undergraduate to apply for a graduate post at the company upon graduation (Harvey and Moon, 1997).

One other main advantage of sandwich courses, as Mason (1995) points out, is that they provide benefits for some graduates who may otherwise be at a disadvantage in some areas of work, for example women who are studying a degree course such as engineering. Some employers within areas of work traditionally regarded to be mainly male preserves are not always aware of what women offer in the workplace. The sandwich courses provide women with an opportunity to get their feet inside a company's door and the employer to measure the effectiveness of the individual (Mason, 1995).

In a study undertaken by Martin (2000) on graduates' perceptions of their experiences as students, it was found that events such as employment internships influenced the skills development of students and supported the skills programmes that were delivered in the academic curriculum whilst bridging the skills-gap.

Internships were viewed as beneficial for developing the awareness of workplace culture within undergraduates, providing them with an appreciation of the fluidity of the rapidly changing world of work. Internships additionally provided the necessary higher education employment links for the student to develop their skills whilst giving the undergraduate an insight into how the theory they learnt can actually be applied within the world of work (Martin, 2000).

Martin (2000) also proposed that internships acted as an alternative two-way process, by providing students with access to a lot of equipment that they would otherwise not have access to at university. Conversely, the student could help the employer by bringing ideas and information on new technology learnt at university and to take these forward within the organisation, thus adding commercial awareness value to the employing organisation.

In a survey conducted by the Times Higher Education Supplement (17th October, 2003) on the consistency of Degree subject disciplines between 1997 and 2002, the courses that enjoyed the most consistency were mainly subjects that were vocational, that is where a long internship is a vital component to the subject. This was shown, despite the changes in the economic market.

A careers service unit survey (CSU) (2003) showed that, in February and March (2003), one in five sandwich course students (18%) had secured a graduate level job, compared with the 11% who had secured one in 2001. Engineering students who studied on the sandwich courses were shown to be most likely to obtain a job early (14%). By contrast, those who had no work experience or short periods of work

experience whilst at university were significantly less likely to have found a graduate job. Around half (46%) of finalists who had obtained graduate jobs or postgraduate places started looking for these in the first term of their final year. Some began early, with two in five (40%) saying they started looking before their final year, including 17% who began to look for jobs before the start of their last academic year.

Harvey, Moon and Geall (1997) saw the combinations of work-experience, placements and internships as the missing ingredient in undergraduate education and skills acquisition. They argued that the degree to which work experience impacts upon student learning and employment skills development is dependent upon the length and quality of the work experience.

Harvey, Moon and Geall (1997) regarded sandwich courses as providing the undergraduate with 'authentic simulations' of the work place. In emphasising the success of the sandwich programme, they proposed that all undergraduates should experience work-placements, which would provide the depth and breadth to their higher education experiences and experiences for relating those experiences to the world of work.

Harvey, Moon & Geall (1997) also stated that from the human capital skills perspective, the length of the work placements would enable the students to develop the skills and knowledge required to enter graduate employment and to relate these skills and knowledge to other areas of their lives.

Harvey, Moon and Geall (1997) stated that because of the advantages engendered in longer employment placements, the long-term benefits gained for the employer, student and university, were preferable to short placements.

The well-established traditional year-long, single-block, sandwich placements are particularly valued by employers...universities and students (pg 96).

This was because sandwich courses, which brought together employers and the university to prepare students for employment, encouraged a community of learners, with both looking for a return on their investment. Universities will expect graduates to enter graduate employment and employers will expect graduates to possess the necessary skills required to enter the workplace as self-sufficient graduates who could quickly fit in to move the organisation forward (Ayas and Zenuick, 2001).

Ayas and Zenuick (2001) further stated that this system of learning in communities, presented advantages to students because of the type of skills-based learning it presents to students. By being exposed to unique employment resources they would not otherwise be confronted with in the classroom, they are able to take this knowledge of the workplace and apply it to their academic studies.

This interaction involving the student, higher education and industry narrows the gap between education and what the undergraduates are learning in industry. It develops their knowledge base, together with their skills, making their degree courses more relevant to the world of work. The undergraduates are given the scope to witness at first hand how industry and higher education work together so that information

feedback occurs. They are also able to make choices that will provide them with a way forward to realizing further individual academic and employment opportunities plus skills transfer for goals to be achieved (Ayas and Zenuick, 2001).

(iv) Work experience in three-year degrees

Three-year degrees do not have a compulsory placement module. Undergraduates studying on three-year non-sandwich degree courses might experience an optional short work experience module, which would be part of integrated or on skills-based programmes that are delivered in the curriculum. In most cases these are optional programmes, whose quality is dependent upon the quality of the teaching and the accompanying work experience (CIHE 1997, AGR 1995, CSU, 2003).

A study undertaken by the Council of Deans of Arts and Humanities and the Council for Industry and Higher Education (CIHE, 1997) challenged the view that some graduates from three year Arts and Humanities courses did not enter graduate employment.

“Employment prospects are good for Arts and Humanities, graduates. This is because they so often have the intellectual rigour, breadth of perspective and key people skills which employers value” (p1)

The CIHE (1997) further stated that graduates on these particular courses were more likely to develop creative skills which they would use to successfully employ their search for graduate jobs. Referring to a longitudinal study undertaken on graduates’ destinations over a period of four years, the study showed that on the surface, there were lower employment rates from graduates studying on Arts and Humanities

courses. When the numbers were combined with the percentage entering further study or training, Humanities courses fell short by 2.2% of the national average of 84.5%.

A similar survey undertaken by the DFEE (1999) found that 65% of Arts graduates entered employment directly from university in comparison with 70% from Maths and Computing, while 76% of Arts graduates and 78% of Humanities graduates considered their degree had enabled them to become a more widely educated person. This was in contrast to 58% of graduates from Maths and Computing courses.

A national survey conducted on 1040 final year full-time undergraduates (CSU 2003) who studied on Humanities and Arts courses found that these graduates were unlikely to enter graduate jobs unless they achieved substantial quality work experience. They were also less likely to have entered higher education with the knowledge and skills of the jobs they wanted to enter after leaving university. Therefore, they were also less likely to use their opportunities within university to work towards achieving any particular employment goal (AGR 1995, CSU 2003).

In their survey, Harvey, Moon and Geall (1997) found that those who studied on the non-sandwich courses did not know what they wanted to do after graduation. This lack of knowledge may be the reason that graduates studying on the three- year courses were less likely to enter graduate employment. Experiencing a profound work experience could be one explanation.

“If I had known what I wanted to do... I would have done a relevant placement” (pg 97).

Summary

In attempting to understand and interpret the responses and challenges facing higher education, it was suggested that higher education had to find its own way of clarifying the implementation of the skills based programmes. This in itself presented a challenge to universities, which involved a shift of focus from the formal knowledge production dominated by closed academic departments to a more contextually applied knowledge where employment experience-based knowledge became the issue. An indication of the success of curriculum skills-based programmes was demonstrated in a Pitar study (2002) undertaken in three participating university. The literature also revealed that the internship on the four-year degree course programmes were important because they prepared the students for graduate employment. The three-year degree courses did not have an internship programme, with a formal preparation for work.

3. Transitions to university and Preparation for Employment:

Introduction

Changes and transitions are an occurring feature in everyone's life. The impact of these changes for students' individual transitions is dependent upon their preparation. This section will explore the significance of students' entry into higher education. It will focus on their personal, social and learning development and the strategies that assist with their later transition into employment. Their preparation for employment will depend on how they value the different cultures of the organisation and employers' expectations that they will enter employment with the qualities and skills expected by the employing organisation.

(i) Students' Entry to University

In a study undertaken by Peat, Dalziel and Grant (2000) it was found that the quality of students' initial induction into the university system played a key role in their adaptation to university life. Peat, Dalziel and Grant (2000) suggested that the entry of students to university required a mindset that allowed them to become independent and autonomous workers. They believed that it was important that students developed a supporting system that fostered a sense of achievement and a self-directed approach to learning.

Peat, Dalziel and Grant (2000) affirmed that this could only be done through the facilitation of social and study network workshops initially undertaken at the induction period, which would enable students to find out more about university culture and facilities. It would provide a head start for the students and would give them an initial advantage in forming relationships. These workshops would inform the students of the different social support networks available within a non-threatening environment, helping them to feel socially connected to the university.

Often an induction workshop is insufficient for some students to adapt to university, especially if they enter university through the clearing system. Baxter and Hatt (2000) suggest that most students who enter university through the clearing system are particularly predisposed to experiencing negative feelings of stress, anxiety and loneliness at not having made the entry requirement grades to get into their first choice university. They experience emotions of failure, which often affect their self-esteem and their motivation to take part in the full university experience. They are reluctant to form social and peer group relations and interactions and are unable to develop coping

strategies that will help them to adjust to university. They are not inclined to view their subject degree in a positive light and are usually not entirely committed to their programmes of study. In disassociating themselves from their university experiences, the students miss the larger university life experience that provides them with the necessary support required to develop strategies for coping.

Tao, Pratt, Pancer (2000) proposed that students who entered university with an optimistic outlook to their course tended to be more optimistic in their approach to realising the broad benefits of university. In this situation, the students are better prepared for university life and are better able to deal successfully with any problems that confront them while they are studying. They developed an open approach to their learning, relating what they learn to the outside world and employment. They formed and built on social relationships, which provided them with a support network during their life at university.

Côté and Levine (2000) agree that students who enter university with a sense of optimism including high expectations are taking with them valuable resources that will benefit their for university life as a whole.

In a longitudinal study on student development, Côté and Levine (2000) explored the processes and relationships occurring within the higher education setting. They focused on the factors that might be important in predicting the reasons for educational achievement. They were referring specifically to intellectual aptitudes, to their attitudes about education, which they regarded as being linked to the students' sense of fitting in

to university, and to their learning and skills development throughout their university experience.

Côté and Levine (2000) found that before entering university, students deliberately undertook a range of activities to prepare for university life, including researching into the university and its courses. The students considered that finding out more about the university and the courses they wanted to study were personal investments that gave them a head start in their learning and development, such as acquiring human skills capital.

Côté and Levine (2000) further suggested that while their university preparation was important for the students, some university environments did not always recognise this particular effort made by students to get into university. Neither did they demonstrate the same degree of readiness to further nurture and develop those areas of personal student growth that were essential in their preparation for employment.

It must be realised that despite the differences in university environments, no two students will experience the same degree of success at university because each student experience in responding to the university environment is different. Any response will to some extent depend on the students' attributes and behaviours and how they adopt and make use of the university's attempts to promote the necessary favourable employment processes to the develop students skills or knowledge

Berzonsky and Kuk (2000) confirm that these differences influence the attitudes of students to adjusting and adapting to their new environment. Using the Eriksonian

explanation of psychosocial development, Berzonsky and Kuk further state that students leave the comfort and security of their home to enter a new environment where they have to deal with new demands and rigorous academic challenges.

Students who developed their knowledge base through finding out information, evaluating this information and making it relevant to themselves, are considered to be self-exploring, self-reflecting individuals who are in possession of problem-focused coping strategies. They experience a sense of having achieved their own identity and because of this state of self-assuredness, are likely to achieve academic autonomy and success within the university. Students who are in possession of avoidant or diffuse behaviours, who do not want to be involved in the wider university experiences, are more inclined to be reluctant to face up to and confront personal problems and decisions (Berzonsky and Kuk, 2000).

Information-oriented individuals actively seek out, evaluate and use self-relevant information...they are characteristic of self-exploring individuals who are classified as identity achieved... Diffuse/avoidant oriented individuals are reluctant to face up to and confront personal problems and decisions.... (pg 83).

Erikson's (1968) life-span theory of psychosocial development, suggests that late adolescents face the challenge of forming a clear and stable sense of self-identity. He states that where students' home lives provide them with a clear and coherent well-integrated identity, this will provide the purpose and sense of direction that serves as a basis for the students to cope effectively and adapt to the demands of their new environments.

Some students enter university with expectation that their university experiences will prepare them for the world of work. In a study undertaken by Glover, Law and Youngman, (2002) involving 408 students in the Department of Secondary and Tertiary Education at one university, prospective students attending their first choice university were shown to be expecting their higher education course to lead to employment.

“I hope the degree, the university experience and being a graduate will help me in the career I want to go into..” (pg 300).

Glover, Law and Youngman (2000) also stated that the study showed 67% of students were influenced by the nature and content of the courses they decided to study and 58% were influenced by the university’s support for the development of skills related to future employment. Students’ comments indicated that they expected the general skills acquired at university to enhance their ability to cope in a changing world.

(ii.) Transition to Employment

In their research on the reactions of graduates to their employment transitions Nicholson and Arnold (1998) have shown that graduates do initially experience a culture shock on entry to work. This is because the ‘zone of stability’ that shelters most graduates from the nature of the competitive work environment is removed. Graduates have to demonstrate their knowledge and experience of working in a diverse employment environment and they often experience problems in doing so.

Nicholson and Arnold (1998) showed that the problems graduates experience in employment, are often a reflection of their university experiences. Students have choices in the way they study at university, which is not always applicable to the world of work. They suggested that at university, students study alone within a flexible environment. When they have to work in teams to complete projects, they are able to choose the members of the team with whom they want to work. Within the world of work, students do not have a choice. They work within teams and the expectation is that they use their initiative to get on with it. Some graduates experience difficulties in adapting to the different personalities within the team situation at work and suddenly realise that they cannot change members of the team in the same way that they did at university. Because of this, the initial transition into employment is a difficult experience for some graduates.

(iii.) Expectations of graduates and employers

Employers have high expectations of graduates. Graduates also have high expectations of the jobs they want to enter (Graham & McKenzie 1995).

Expectations play an important part in the graduates' actual performance, attitudes and habit. Graham and McKenzie (1995) refer to the 'Pygmalion' effect or self-fulfilling prophecy, where employers will present undergraduates with the employment criteria they expect them to possess if they are considering joining the company. Market forces determine these criteria and undergraduates often respond competitively, demonstrating to employers the employment skills that fulfil the necessary criteria requested by employers.

The approaches that graduates use towards finding employment are based on their personal belief systems. To enter their chosen employment, most graduates will relate these personal values to the employer's criteria to ensure an ideal match.

Purcell and Pitcher (1996) state that this matching process occurs because the majority of graduates seek interesting and challenging work that they consider will be beneficial to themselves. Purcell and Pitcher referred to the intrinsic rewards where the graduates' focus is on job satisfaction and fulfilment. Graduates consider career progression and achieving success in the job to be their driving force as opposed to extrinsic rewards in the form of immediate high earnings and other fringe benefits. Graduates are currently looking for jobs that can provide a firm training ground from which they can initially establish their careers.

Because of the changed employment world in some sectors, the competition for jobs is intense. This means that undergraduates have to know when to apply for graduate jobs and to be sufficiently prepared to get into the jobs of their choice. Employers are expecting graduates to deal quickly with the employment learning curve and to fit quickly into the organisation, whilst using their initiative to increase the productivity of the organisation.

In a survey of one hundred and fifty eight organisations, Harvey & Green (1994) discovered that employers want graduates who can take on more immediate responsibility in a de-layered and downsized environment. As such, employers want graduates who can deal with organisational change and 'grow the job' by being effective immediately.

Employers want graduates who can adapt to the organisation, understand the job requirements and produce work that has a clear return as quickly as possible (pg. 22).

According to Harvey and Geall (1994) “Growing the job” requires a willingness and confidence on the part of the graduate to develop the allocated role, as well as a desire by managers to see the role grow and to facilitate and encourage the process.

I would look at the skills of the people they have got in the marketplace and develop the job and the roles for them rather than pushing them at the bottom level (pg. 23).

(iv) Commitment and Satisfaction

Greenfield (1973) argues that the current flat management structure in organisations only functions by the grace and cooperation of individuals. Satisfaction and commitment have to come from both the employee and the employer. Thus, Bagshaw (1997) states that organisations have now moved from controlling and ordering employees to empowering them and encouraging a flexible and adaptable work force.

Employers give employees more responsibilities because of an effort to show commitment and loyalty but also to give and receive satisfaction from employees. Organisational change has ensured an employee-organisation relationship where the inducements offered by employers are counterbalanced by the contributions offered by employees, because of the need to maintain high performing organisations (Bagshaw, 1997).

Tsui, Pierce, Porter and Tripoli (1997) view this mutual relationship as “a combined economics and social exchange, which attempts to develop a clan-like flexibility” (pg 110). They additionally mention that under such situations, employers offer employees open-ended broad ranging rewards, including a commitment that they will invest in the employees’ training and career. In return, employees are expected to meet employment targets and to follow the instructions of the employer, holding the organisation in the same regard as they do their job.

Tsui, Pierce, Porter and Tripoli (1997) also suggested that not all organisations and employers experience the same mutual commitment to loyalty and satisfaction in their relationship with one another. They referred to the under-investment relationship where the employer gets the benefits and rewards of the open-ended obligations of the employees, but in turn rewards the employee with short-term monetary reward. This they agreed demonstrates a lack of commitment in the long-term relationship of the employee.

Chapter Three

Research Design and Methodology

Introduction

The focus of this research study is the preparation and entry into work of the 1999 cohort of graduates at one higher education institution in West London. The research uses hitherto ignored processes to investigate the impact of biographical and contextual variation on preparation for employment. It explores the impact of the graduates' curricular antecedents by investigating the way they pass through periods of transition within education and into work. It seeks to understand and explain how these transition points interact with graduates' experiences of higher education and how such interaction shapes preparation for employment.

This chapter examines the research design and methodology of the research.

Research Design and Methodology

To date, the primary evidence of graduate transition from university to employment has been in the form of quantitative data produced by the annual survey of the destination of leavers from higher education (DfEE, 1999). However, it is becoming increasingly acceptable in this area to seek to enhance knowledge development by using mixed research approaches where the qualitative methods of the social sciences are called on to investigate research findings derived from quantitative studies (Creswell, 1998). The acceptance of this has arisen because researchers have acknowledged that quantitative research is not sufficient to demonstrate the dynamics and richness of social life. Rossman and Wilson (1984), for example, suggest that by

linking quantitative and qualitative research, confirmation or corroboration of each research area occurs through the process of triangulation.

In the case of this particular study the intention is to provide a richer account of graduates' experiences of their different transitions into employment than is possible through analysis of destination data, alone. However, during the first stage, the Institutional focused Study, destination data formed the basis for scrutiny.

The Institutional Focused Study – a quantitative study using graduate employment destinations dataset

In the study, the first stage was an examination of the higher education statistics agency (HESA) dataset based on the employment destinations on the 1999 graduate cohort from the West London University.

HESA is the government agency that facilitates the collection of these statistics from higher education. The employment destinations of graduates are a major issue, frequently determining government policies and university practice. The data set allows universities to identify degree courses that produce graduates who enter graduate employment and those who do not and the Higher Education Funding Council to produce performance indicators for all universities.

The responses from the purpose-designed government survey questionnaire sent out to two thousand graduates six months after graduation, which inquires into the graduates' employment destinations is coded by the university's careers service and later sent out to HESA. This raw information, which remains in the careers service and is used as

reference material, formed the basis for the data set that was used to inquire into the employment destinations of the 1999 graduating cohort.

The different types of employment entered by individual graduates from each degree course programme at the University were analysed. Graduates from the departments of Health Studies, Education and Social Work were excluded. This is because these particular degree courses contain relevant employment modules and structured work placement training opportunities which lead to employment within specialist professional employment fields.

The following figure shows the full range of variables employed during the analysis.

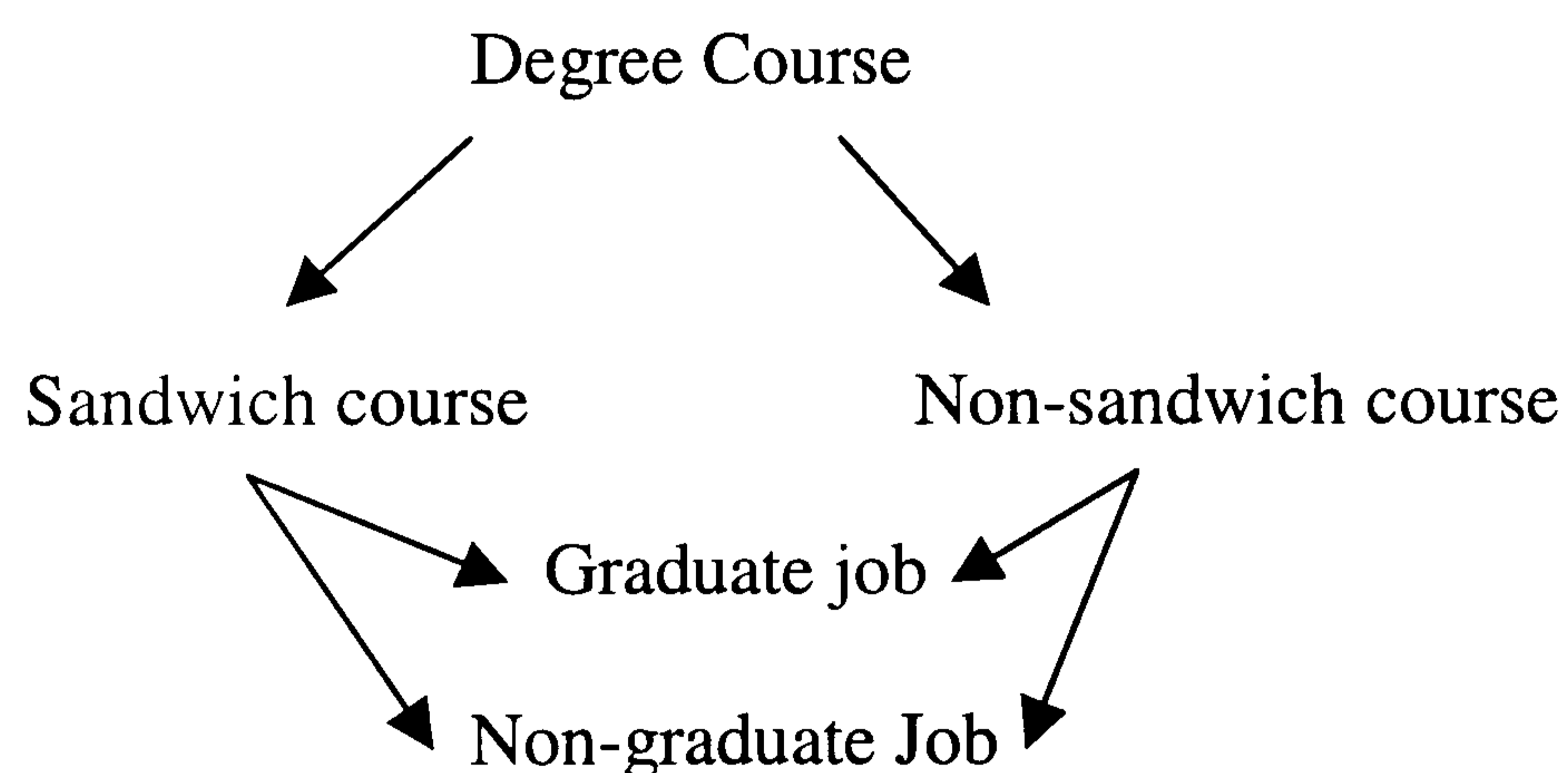


Fig.1: 3 illustrating the variables examined in the employment destination dataset

The results of the analysis, described in detail in Chapter 4 clearly demonstrated the complex nature of the relationship between employment destinations and variables such as sandwich placements and degree course. It became increasingly clear that a further study was required to explore a broader range of variables affecting the experiences and perspectives of the individual graduates. As Nesfield-Cookson (1987) states

...no matter how exact measurement may be, it can never give an experience of life for life cannot be weighed and measured on a physical scale (pg17).

A qualitative paradigm.

A qualitative study provided the means to examine the effect of contextual variation on the graduates' learning and experiences. In order to do so the study sought to focus on the meanings attached by the graduates to their experiences and employment destinations. Creswell (1994), and Cohen and Manion (2000) state that qualitative research begins with the individual and sets out to understand their interpretation of the world around them. The use of the qualitative approach allowed the researcher to provide 'thick descriptions' of graduates' lived experiences thus allowing individual events to speak for themselves. The approach meant that the researcher could be specific about graduates' differing experiences and perceptions regarding their transitions into employment. There was also an expectation that the results would make a contribution to the problem of understanding the links between personal events and public issues as suggested by Goodson, (1983).

The life-history narrative

The data takes the form of graduates' life-history narratives describing their differing experiences of their transitions into employment and their underlying understanding of those processes (Denzin, 1989).

This recognises the importance of the key roles individuals play in the research process since it is only they that can disclose those significant moments in their contextual learning and experiences as they prepare for employment.

According to Denzin (1984), this method

“involves the use and collection of personal life documents, stories, accounts and narratives, which describe turning-point moments in the graduates’ experiences as they prepare for employment” (pg13)

Denzin (1989) refers to the turning-point moments as an epiphany, which he states are “interactional moments” that leave marks on people’s lives. Plummer (1983) further suggests that the symbolic interaction nature of epiphany often helps to locate the individual in the wider cultural and social world.

The epiphany is subsequently defined by Denzin (1989) in four forms.

- Major, touching every fabric of a person’s life
- Cumulative, eruptions or reactions to experiences, which have been going on for some time.
- Minor (or illuminative), symbolically representing a major problematic moment in a relationship or person’s life.
- Relived, meanings are given in reliving the experience in question.

It is these turning-point moments which are presented as central to the 1999 graduates’ transitions to employment. This focus is intended to reveal the uniqueness of different individual experience and to gain a depth and richness of information that cannot be acquired by other means. The graduates are to be asked to respond through semi-structured interviews to questions that in combination seek to reveal their experiences of their transitions to employment.

The questions broadly reflect the turning-point moments for the graduates where the intention is to seek answers to the following questions:

- What is the impact of choice of higher education institution?
- What is the effect of the choice of subject area?
- What is the effect of the choice of the three-year and sandwich courses
- What is the impact of the experience of the internship context in sandwich courses?
- What is the impact of the passage from higher education to employment?

Research Study Issues – access and participation

Once the feasibility of the research study was established and an outline prepared I, as researcher, set about seeking permission to carry out the research at the university. In doing so, I needed to be aware of the ethical issues involved in seeking permission to carry out the research at the university. Being an employee with the higher education institution alleviated a lot of red tape I might otherwise have experienced in getting the required information to contact the graduates. Additionally I was helped in gaining institutional support to carry out the research study.

Continued access to the graduates' details still had to be established. The careers centre's head of service who had knowledge of my research activities and who supported me in carrying out these activities allowed continuous access and participation. This support was highlighted in my request to seek permission from the university to acquire access to the graduates' personal details for contact to be made to start the collection of data in the summer of 2001.

I received a list of names and addresses from the university's alumni office, of all the graduates who graduated in 1999. I had to sign a statement stating that I would not

breach the Data Protection Act by using the personal details of the graduates for anything other than the research study.

This university-wide support of the research study allowed me to gain knowledge of the graduates' employment destination two years after graduation.

Choosing the graduate population

In choosing the graduate population for the different biographies, I had to be aware of two factors that were likely to influence the outcome of the study whilst ensuring that a broad representation of graduates was acquired from the different curricular contexts.

Essentially, by asking the graduates to take part in the research, I was assuming that graduates would want to reflect on and talk of their learning and experiences. I hoped the graduates would be sufficiently open to want to articulate their stories.

Planning on who would be targeted for the research involved knowing the number of participants I would need to contact in order to get the best response possible that would be suitable for the research. Resources would also dictate how this area of the research would be embarked upon.

I was aware that all the graduates who took part in the research had to be representative of the general graduate population and the different courses studied at the university. I selected graduates from the personal details of lists provided by the university alumni office with a London address, and organized by degree subject, which formed a stratified random sample. These graduates were from the 1999 graduate cohort apart from those graduates who studied Education, and Health courses because these courses

were vocational in nature and graduates leaving those courses entered specific professional jobs. Two hundred and fifty graduates were sent letters, inviting them to take part in the research study.

Designing the Letter

In designing the letter to send to students inviting them to volunteer to take part in the research, I became aware of the importance in getting 'informed consent' from the participants (Cohen & Manion, 2000).

I endeavoured to explain in the letter the purpose behind the research and what I was aiming to achieve from undertaking the research. Particular emphasis was placed on the aim of the research study, which was to explore the biographies and contextual learning and experiences of the 1999 graduate cohort. Emphasis was also placed on the added value that would be attached to future graduates' transitions into employment.

I was aware that during the process of probing the graduates for information I would be encroaching on the privacy of the graduates. This could expose the graduates to different elements of stress, depending on their personal situation because they were temporarily surrendering their autonomy to the interviewer (Cohen & Manion, 2000). So informed consent had to be reached. I gave the graduates a choice to decide upon whether or not they wanted to take part in the research.

In seeking their informed consent, I was also providing the graduates with the right to make their own decisions about what they should tell her, thus allowing them to take on the responsibility for what they revealed to her as the researcher. Cohen and Manion (2000) suggested that

Informed consent is the procedure in which individuals choose whether to participate in an investigation after being informed of facts that would be likely to influence their decisions (pg 51).

Ethical considerations concerned with being a careers adviser that the graduates might know, and being a researcher in the field arose. So the importance of emphasising confidentiality in the letter was expressed. Additionally, the letter also stated that any information revealed during the process of the research would only be disclosed within the analysis and reporting of the research. Even when analysis and the findings were written up, personal details would not be revealed.

Having assured the graduates of the confidential nature of the research in the letter, I further guaranteed that the graduates would be given access to the transcribed interview, to ensure that the data collected on audiotape was representative of what took place in the interview. The graduates were further assured that the tapes would be destroyed once they were no longer needed for the research.

Graduate Responses

Out of the two hundred and fifty graduates contacted to take part in the research study, sixteen graduates responded and consented to taking part in the research. They represented the range of different degree subjects of those studying on the three year and four year sandwich programmes.

The responding graduates included five graduates who studied engineering. Three were on the four-year sandwich degree courses where a year's work placement was an integral part of the degree course. Two studied on the non-sandwich course.

One graduate studied on the four-year sandwich Industrial Design course. One studied the four-year sandwich course in History and Politics. One studied the four-year sandwich course in Business Management.

Seven other graduates studied on the three-year degree courses. The range of these courses varied from three graduates studying English and television studies, one studying English and history, another studied English and American studies. One studied English and History. One graduate studied business studies, another studied management studies and one graduate studied sports studies and leisure management.

Courses	Sandwich	Non- Sandwich	Total
Arts	-	5	5
Humanities	2	3	5
Technology	4	2	6
Total	6	10-	16

Fig 2:3 demonstrating graduate responses on the non-sandwich and sandwich courses

Although there was a work experience module within the particular three-year courses, they were optional modules and of a three-week duration. Students were required to complete a work experience log, but without structured feedback from their host employers or their tutors.

Using the Research Interview

An interview was used for this research study because the data gained was to be based on the situational circumstances of the individual graduates (Silverman, 1998).

Kvale (1996) stated that interviews marked a move away from seeing human beings as simple objects that could be manipulated and data being 'external to them' to knowledge which was generated as a result of interactions.

As an interview, an interchange of views between two or more people on a topic of mutual interest sees the centrality of human interaction for knowledge production and emphasizes the social situatedness of research data (pg 14).

Cannell and Kahn (1968) referred to the purpose of the interview as a "two-person conversation initiated by the interviewer for the specific purpose of obtaining research-relevant information..." (pg 527). The intention of the interviews was to collect data for this research study, the content being, to "provide systematic descriptions, prediction or explanation" (pg. 527) of the graduates' experiences.

One advantage of using the interview was that it allowed the participants to become more involved and motivated towards the research. It encouraged the participants to say more about themselves, their values, attitudes and experiences. But this meant that it was important to ensure that the graduates had been clearly informed before hand about what to expect from the research study. Anything asked of them within the interview situation would then not be too much of a surprise (Oppenheim, 1992).

Oppenheim (1992) proposed that participants in the interview should understand the interview questions. Additionally, it was important to ensure that all participants were asked the same questions. I was aware that in exploring the perceptions of the graduates, skill was needed to prevent any question, which might be interpreted as

being an emotionally loaded question by the participants, becoming explosive. My intention was to handle the questions so that the participants would be enabled to talk freely and emotionally and according to (Oppenheim, 1992) to provide “candour and richness, depth, authenticity, and honesty of their experiences (pg 65).

Finally, I decided that because I was not aware of issues surrounding the different transitions of the graduates’ experiences from higher education to work, I would use the semi-structured interview. Appendix 1 contains the schedule of initial questions.

Semi-Structured Interviews

The insights gained from using the semi-structured interview to explore the learning contexts and experiences of the graduates would allow me to get the information required for the research study using an open-ended approach, which would provide flexibility and freedom for in-depth questioning.

The semi-structured interviews would also allow respondents to elaborate on their responses to provide a diversity of understandings and ideas that might extend beyond the scope of the original research design. I was aware that in order to obtain information to help me to uncover the interactions and relationships within graduates’ experiences, I needed to probe any responses from the respondents, which could provide detailed issues for research analysis and discussion, whilst simultaneously respecting how the graduates framed and structured their responses (Radnor, 2002).

I decided that I would endeavour to establish mutual trust and understanding at the start of the interview, by being friendly and welcoming to the participants. At the same time, I ensured that I maintained my professional status as researcher.

A detached standpoint was not intended to make the participants feel uncomfortable but it was necessary in helping me follow through with their responses, whilst focusing on the research questions. I was also fully aware of the two-year time-gap between them leaving university and entering employment and that the interview could contain hazy recollections that would not be fit into the purpose of the research study.

The interview was therefore 'intersubjective,' allowing the participants involved to discuss how they saw and interpreted the world around them and to find out their perceptions of the different situations in which they found themselves (Laing, 1967).

During the interview process, the graduate would be considered the expert and authority on his or her transitional 'turning-point' moments and would therefore be given the freedom within the framework for the interview, to determine which experiences were significant and to talk about them.

As researcher, I also realised that despite this need for the interview to be open and systematic and objective I needed to ensure that any major disadvantage of this research method was not realised through bias or influence on my part. I would therefore only talk during the interview when I considered that a further question was required to clarify what was being said.

I had to demonstrate empathy and understanding of the participants' situations. To get the most from the graduates and to avoid them presenting partial accounts of their lives, their responses would be probed either directly or subtly through silent pauses

that would suggest that as the interviewer, I would be expecting the graduates to talk more about their experiences.

A meeting place to interview the Participants

I was very aware of the busy schedules of the participants and that the graduate participants might not all be living in London. I was therefore concerned that I could not solely determine the meeting place. This was another occasion where I had to be flexible in order to carry out the research study and to give the participants the opportunity to determine how a section of the research would be carried out. I therefore informed them that I would interview them initially in the careers service, but if that were not convenient for them, I would willingly agree to meet them at a mutually agreed alternative public arena. This ensured that all concerned in the interview process felt safe and comfortable.

Cohen & Manion (2000) suggested that any interview longer than an hour could produce too much data for analysis. I made certain that all the interviews were kept as conversations where, according to Silverman (1998) “meanings are not only conveyed, but cooperatively built up, received, interpreted and recorded” (pg 119).

Usher (1997) also talked about timing as being “the most important mechanism of control...” (pg 111). I clarified that the time scale for the interviews would be an hour. In ensuring this timescale, I was injecting a hint of realism into the research, which would ensure that the questioning and probing were as precise as possible.

Thirteen of the graduates were happy to meet me on one of the three sites of the university. Three of the graduates asked for their interview to be conducted on their

work premises, whilst two preferred to give me time at a more social event. None of the interview locations chosen was problematic to the interview data.

The interviews took no longer than the allotted time, except where I met a graduate who was interviewed within a social setting where the interview carried on for over an hour. In this instance, it proved more difficult meeting and interviewing within a social situation but I ensured an element of privacy, by positioning ourselves within a quiet area.

Interviewing the Participants.

Uttermost in my mind when interviewing the participants was the fact that the interview was a social, interpersonal encounter that was not just an exercise for data collection (Cohen and Manion, 2000). I followed the already established rules for conducting the interview carefully and sensibly, establishing the appropriate atmosphere of welcome to the participants. I therefore thanked each participant for attending the interview and conducted small talk that ensured they were at ease. Once I perceived they had become more comfortable and willing to talk freely, I reiterated the confidential basis of the interview, already mentioned in the research letter they had received. I established interview rules that also gave the participants control to stop the interview at any point if they should feel uncomfortable with my line of questions. My intention was to motivate the participants so that they would feel comfortable and enjoy responding to the lines of questions in a secure environment.

Kvale (1996) stated that the “interview is not usually a reciprocal interaction between two equal participants” (pg 136), and it was important that I anticipated the nature of

the interview and how it was likely to progress so that I could keep the interview moving forward.

I was clear about what I wanted to ask the participants and the information I wanted to find out from them. But I was careful to avoid leading questions that would specifically direct the interviewees towards revelations that would encase the research question too tightly since I wanted the respondents to be as open as possible. Radnor (2002) explained,

The good active listener involves (him or) herself in the conversation.... Questions are asked that (he or) she genuinely wants to find an answer to and not receive the sort of responses that would feed the responses the interviewer would like to get (pg 61).

Active listening was essential in using the semi-structured interviews because as Miles and Huberman (1994) indicated, I had to create an atmosphere that encouraged the interviewee to talk freely and be clearly understood. I had to employ strategies that gave feedback and encouraged concrete examples, explanations and expansion of what was initially said. As Radnor (2002) suggested the aim was to collect rich data from interviews in order to build up a picture of what the person was saying so follow-up questions took the following form: 'If I understood, what you are saying...'; 'If I understood you correctly...'; 'I've made some notes let me check whether I've got it right'.

My personal stance within this situation, as well as being open and friendly also needed to be neutral lest my manner of inquiry biased their responses (Holstein and Gubrium, 1994).

Thus my body language responses to what the participants were saying were deliberately positive (Argyle, 1983). Gestures included opening my hands in a non-confrontational manner when speaking or asking the participant questions, leaning towards them while smiling, so as not to seem to be intruding in their space. The inherent danger in getting graduates to clarify points through more in-depth questions was the possibility of “fracture(ing) the stories being told” Silverman (1997 pg 101). On the other hand, Leonard-Barton (1990) argued that there would often be problems with people recalling events and even when they did, their recollection would be partial. I paid particular attention to the issue of ‘fracture’ and attempted to reduce its occurrence during the interview whilst also bearing in mind that it is the interviewer’s task to guide the interviewee through the various stages of their accounts of their life histories.

In the event my cause for anxiety was unfounded because the participants were lucid and articulate in describing the events, as they perceived them to have occurred. Comparing their responses regularly with the research questions, helped to test the consistency and accuracy of their responses (Silverman, 1998).

Recording the Interview

An audiotape was used to record the interviews. I realised that it was insufficient to just inform the participants in the introductory research letter that the interview would be tape-recorded. At the interview, I then again explained the benefits of using the tape-recorder to the participants in that it would accurately record the information they provided. Tape recording would allow for the whole interview to be captured and would provide a complete data analysis so cues that were missed the first time round could be recognised when listening to the recording.

I also stated that the tape recorder could initially be intrusive but assured them that once they had settled into the interview, they would forget that the tape recorder was there. The respondents confirmed their agreement to be tape-recorded and quickly relaxed and ignored the machine.

Recording the interview meant that I could concentrate on listening and responding to the interviewee and that I was not distracted by trying to write down what was being said. “The discussion flows because the interviewer does not have to write down the response to the questions before moving to the next” (Radnor 2002 pg 64).

However, there are disadvantages to tape-recording as is noted by Cohen and Manion (2000 pg 281) “...there is a potential for massive data loss, distortion and the reduction of complexity”. Mishler (1986) also argues that

The audiotape filters out important contextual factors, neglecting the visual and non-verbal aspects of the interview although the non-verbal communication gives more information than the verbal communication (pg 63).

Miles and Huberman (1994) referred to this process as the data being ‘decontextualised,’ in that having been abstracted from the dynamics of the situation, data become frozen in time and space.

It was therefore important for me to recollect the different bodily movements which made an impression on me during the different interview interactions. To prevent these important snippets of information from being lost, they were quickly recorded besides the relevant transcripts.

Identifying each participant's interview data

To ensure easy identification of each research subject once interviewed, and in ensuring confidentiality, each research subject, was given a unique identifying code depending on where they fitted in to be interviewed. These codes ranged from I1 to I16, which I used to identify the different reflections of the participants during the analysis of the data because it was easier to remember and visualise the graduates and the individual interviews as they took place once the analysis of the data commenced.

Courses	Sandwich	Non- Sandwich	Identities	Total
Arts	-	5	I7, I9, I10, I12, I16	5
Humanities	2	3	I1, I2, I6, I8, I11,	5
Technology	4	2	I3, I4, I5, I13, I14, I15	6

Figure3: 3 demonstrating participants' coded identities according to courses studied

Summary

The research study initially set out to investigate the employment destination of the 1999 graduate cohort of one West London University using its employment destination dataset collected on behalf of the Higher Education Statistical Agency. The findings from the employment destinations dataset were suitably explored but were found to be insufficient as an instrument to explore the underlying narratives behind the contextual

variations. The qualitative method using life-history narratives was found to be a more suitable approach for exploring the graduates' contextual learning and experiences of their different transitions.

This research study is likely to be significant because to date research and development on graduates' preparation for employment has tended to concentrate on key skills on the assumption that skills deficits exist whereas this study focuses on the whole experience of the graduates before their entry into higher education, the impact of their experiences in higher education, their preparation for employment and the impact of their transitions into employment. The study seeks to understand how particular transition points interact with graduates' differing experiences of higher education and their developing identity and how such interaction shapes preparation for employment.

Chapter Four

Quantitative Data Analysis and Findings

Introduction

This chapter will explore the impact of choice of higher education, and the effect of the choice of subject area of those graduates who studied on the three-year and sandwich courses through an Institutional Focused Study undertaken of the West London University's cohort of 1999 graduates.

Impact of Choice of Higher Education

The request by the government (1987) White Paper to meet the needs of the economy so that greater commercial and industrial relevance in the curriculum could be achieved fostered an expansion of universities through different mergers.

Driven not just by economic but also academic need, the larger West London University, where the degree courses were mainly four-years with sandwich elements merged with a College of Higher Education, where the degree courses were all three-years in length including at that time, Higher National Diplomas (HND) courses.

Accompanying the merger was an immediate change in some of the courses being studied. The HND did not survive the curriculum in the new University. The University merger created five faculties. Between three and six subjects were taught within each department. Many subjects were further subdivided into individual discipline areas.

Subject Curriculum

Before the university merger between the college and university, the subject curriculum were diverse. At the college, a system of Interdisciplinary subjects (IDS) was taught within the Department of Arts. In this research, only the major IDS subjects would be explored and the findings presented in this research. This is where students majored in one subject whilst studying a minor subject. Thus as an example, a student would major in English and have Art as minor. In the university, either students studied a three year-degree subject either single or combined or they studied a four-year single sandwich degree.

The range of IDS subjects consisted of English, Art, American Studies, History, Film and Television Studies, Sports Studies, Business Studies, Leisure Management, Computer Studies, Geography and Earth Sciences, Religious Studies, Drama and Music.

This system of studying a major with a minor subject was eventually eliminated, allowing for just one subject to be studied.

The subjects within the Faculty of Arts once abridged included,

- American Studies, which was studied as a major with anyone of the courses listed
- English, which was also studied as a major with anyone of the courses listed
- Performing Arts (Drama and Music), which was additionally studied as a major with any of the courses listed.

The Faculty of Professional Education, consisted of the more vocational courses (refer to footnote 1), but for this research study, Sports Science was the course focused on. Sports

Science was an integrated course that could also be studied with any of the courses listed as part of the integrated degree subjects.

Subjects studied in the Faculty of Science included:

- Biological Sciences, within which there was a range of courses. These courses formed either part of the three-year degree or were four years sandwiched where an element of a one-year internship existed.
- Geography and Earth Sciences also formed part of the integrated degree and any subjects from the integrated degree list could be studied as a minor.
- Information and Systems and Computing contained three-year courses, some of which were part of the IDS system and were studied as a major with other subjects from the IDS list. Other courses formed the three-year single degree. Yet others were part of the four-year sandwich courses.
- Mathematics and Statistics where the course could be studied as four-years or three-years.

Subjects studied in the Faculty of Social Sciences consisted of the following, offered a wide range of subjects in the ensuing areas:

- Economics and Finance where the degree is available in either the traditional three-year format or as a four-year degree with integrated professional placements
- Government and Politics is also available either as the traditional three-year degree or the integrated four-year degree with professional placements.

- The Human Science Degree is also studied as either a three-year degree or a four-year course with a professional placement, offering a range of single and joint honours degree.
- Law also is studied as a three-year or a four-year course with an industrial placement, offering a range of single and joint honours degree
- Business and Management Studies offers a range of single and joint honours with three-year degree courses and four-year degrees.

The Faculty of Technology Department of Design collaborates closely with employers to develop suitable programmes of study for the students. Although there are three-year degree courses, more students study on the four-year degree sandwich courses. In 1999, two hundred students studied on the sandwich courses in the Faculty of Technology, Department of Design, in comparison to sixty who studied on the three-year course. The subjects studied within the faculty consists of:

- Industrial design
- Electrical Engineering and Electronics
- Manufacturing and Engineering Systems
- Materials Engineering
- Mechanical Engineering

The University's first destination returns data completed in February 1999 and sent on to HESA, offered a picture of what graduates were doing at the six months mark post-graduation. The study explores the employment status of graduates by methods of study and course of study. This will be followed by an examination of the jobs graduates have entered within industry. The research question asked is, What is the effect of the choice of

subject area on the transitions of the 1999 graduate cohort from one South West London University, into employment?

1.The Faculty of Arts

1:1 Three-year degree courses

Table 1 demonstrates that two hundred and forty seven students graduated from the different subject departments in the Faculty of Arts.

Departments	Emp.	Unemp	Further Stud	Unknown	Total employed and further study
American Studies	37 51%	4 5%	12 16%	20 28%	73 100%
English	44 52%	2 2%	17 20%	22 26%	85 100%
Performing Arts	50 56%	3 3%	10 11%	26 30%	89 100%
Total	131 53%	9 3.6%	39 15.9%	68 27.5%	247 100%

Table 1. demonstrates the destinations of graduates who graduated from the Faculty of Arts three year course - 1999

Of those graduating Sixty-eight (27.5%), of these are 'unknowns'. One hundred and seventy nine graduates (72.5%) have known destinations. The department of Performing Arts achieved a percentage of 56% of graduates entering employment. In English 52% entered employment and 51% of graduates who studied American Studies entered employment. When the percentages entering employment from each subject are combined with those entering further study, English has a percentage of 74%, Performing Arts has a percentage of 95% and American Studies has a percentage of 67%.

American Studies has the largest number of graduates at 5% who are unemployed, Performing Arts has 3% and English at 2%. The total percentage of graduates from the Faculty of Arts in 1999 was 3.6%.

2. The Faculty of Professional Education

2:1 Three-year degree courses

Sports Science is the only subject that will be examined within the faculty of professional education.

Table 2 demonstrates that in the department of Sports Science, eighty-seven students graduated in the 1999 cohort of students. Of this number, the employment destinations of sixty-two graduates (71%) are known, and twenty-five graduates' (29%) destinations are unknown.

Departments	Emp.	Unemp	Furt Stud	Unknown	Total
Sports Science	42	2	18	25	87
	48%	2%	21%	29%	100%
Total	42	2	18	25	87
	48%	2%	21%	29%	100%

Table 2 . demonstrates the destinations of graduates who graduated from the Faculty of Professional Education three year course - 1999

48% of graduates from the Sports Science course entered full-time employment. 21% entered further study. When this 21% of graduates entering further study is combined with the employment percentage, 69%, of graduates entered significant activities. This leaves 2% of graduates who are unemployed.

3.The Faculty of Science

3:1 Three- year degree courses

The results demonstrate that within the Faculty of Science full time courses, one hundred and forty six graduates left the course. One hundred and three graduates' (71%) destinations were known and a further forty-three (29%) were unknown.

Departments	Emp.	Unemp.	Furt. Stud	Unknown	Total
Biological Sciences	8 36%	-	6 28%	8 36%	22 100%
Geography and Earth Sciences	28 51%	-	14 25%	13 24%	55 100%
Information Systems and Computing	20 45%	3 7%	8 18%	13 30%	44 100%
Mathematics and Statistics	8 32%	-	8 32%	9 36%	25 100%
Total	64 44%	3 2%	36 25%	43 29%	146 100%

Table 3:1 demonstrates the destinations of graduates on the three-year course from the Faculty of Science: 1999

In the Biological Sciences, 36% of students entered employment. 28% entered further study. There were no recorded unemployed graduates, but 36% of graduates, had unknown destinations.

This table shows 24% of graduates leaving the Geography and Earth Science course are unknown. 51% entered employment and 25% entered further study. There were no recorded graduates from this course, who were unemployed.

Information Systems and Computing had thirty-one (70%) of graduates with known destinations studying on this particular course. 30% of graduates' destinations were unknown. Of those, 45% entered employment and 18% entered further study, making a combined percentage of 63%. Information Systems and Computing is also the only full-time course in this faculty where unemployed graduates are apparent by 7%.

Sixteen graduates (64%) whose destinations were known graduated from Mathematics and Statistics. Of these, eight, (32%) entered employed and a further eight (32%) entered further education, making a combined percentage of 64%. There were no graduates who registered as unemployed but 36% of graduates' destinations were unknown.

3:2 *Four-year courses*

One hundred and eighty-four graduates, graduated from the sandwich course in the Faculty of Science. Of these, one hundred and forty eight (80%) of destinations were known.

Thirty-six graduates (20%) were unknowns.

Departments	Emp. Sand.	Unemp Sand.	Furt Stud Sand.	Unknown Sand.	Total Sand.
Biological Sciences	30 51.7%	4 7%	19 32.7%	5 8.6%	58 100%
Information Systems and Computing	63 64%	4 4%	2 2%	29 30%	98 100%
Mathematics and Statistics	23 82%	2 7%	1 4%	2 7%	28 100%
Total	116 63%	10 5%	22 12%	36 20%	184 100%

Table 3:2 demonstrates the destinations of graduates who studied on the sandwich course from The Faculty of Science: 1999

In the Biological Sciences 51.7% of graduates entered employment. 32.7% entered further study making a combined percentage of 84.4%. 7% were unemployed and a further 8.6% were unknown.

64% of graduates from the Information systems and Computing course entered employment. 2% entered further study. This made a combined percentage of 66% who were involved in known activities. There were 4% unemployed and a further 30% whose destinations were unknown.

82% of graduates from Mathematics and Statistics entered employment and 4% entered further study, which makes for a combined percentage of 92%. However 7% of students were unemployed and a further 7% had unknown employment destinations

Summary

A comparison between the three-year and the four-year sandwich course demonstrates that the numbers of graduates entering employment from the sandwich course (63%) exceeded those on the three-year course (44%) by 19%. There were more graduates entering further study from the three-year course (25%) than those on the sandwich course (12%) by 13%.

In terms of unemployment, more students on the sandwich courses showed they were unemployed (5%) than those who studied on the three-year course (2%). This is despite the number of graduates whose destinations were unknown from the three-year courses (29%), compared to 20% from the sandwich courses.

4.The Faculty of Human Sciences

4:1 Three-year degree courses

Four hundred and thirty graduates, graduated from the faculty of Human Sciences.

Of those three hundred and forty graduates (79%) had known destinations whilst there were ninety unknowns (21%).

Departments	Emp.	Unemp.	Furt Study	Unknowns	Total
Economics and Finance	29 54%	5 9%	8 15%	12 22%	54 100%
Government and Politics	20 53.7%	2 9.3%	12 14.8%	10 22.2%	44 100%
Law	18 34%	2 4%	17 32%	16 30%	53 100%
School of Business and Management Studies	98 41%	10 4%	90 38%	41 17%	239 100%
Division of Management Studies	20 50%	1 2.5%	8 20%	11 27.5	40 100%
Total	185 43%	20 4.7%	135 31.3%	90 21%	430 100%

Table 4:1 demonstrates the destinations of graduates who studied on the three-year course from The Faculty of Human Science: 1999

54% of graduates from the Economics and Finance courses entered employment and 15% entered further study making a total percentage of 69%. 9% of the graduates were unemployed and 22% were unknown.

53.7% of graduates entered employment from the Government and Politics degree course. 14.8% of these entered further study, there were 22.2% of unknowns and 9.3% who said they were unemployed.

The percentage of graduates entering employment from the Law degree was 34%. 32% entered further study, making a combined percentage of 66% who were involved in known activities. 30% of graduates' destinations from this course were unknown and 4% were unemployed.

In the Division of Management Studies 50% of graduates entered employment. 20% entered further study making a combined percentage of 70%. 2.5% of the graduates were unemployed and 27.5% had unknown destinations.

4:2 Four- year courses

Table 4:2 demonstrate that three hundred and thirty-three graduates left the sandwich courses from the Faculty of Science. Of these two hundred and forty-four, (73.%) had known destinations. Eighty-nine (27%) graduates' destinations were unknown.

Departments	Emp. Sand.	Unemp Sand.	Furt Stud Sand.	Unknown Sand.	Total
Economics and Finance	39 57%	2 3%	6 9%	21 31%	68 100%
Government and Politics	8 40%	-	4 20%	8 40%	20 100%
Human Sciences	56 53.3%	3 2.9%	12 11.4%	34 32.4%	105 100%
Law	12 26.1%	2 4.4%	26 56.5%	6 13.%	46 100%
Division of Management Studies	52 56.6%	4 4.3%	16 17.4%	20 21.7%	92 100%
Total	167 50.2%	15 4.5%	62 18.6%	89 26.7%	333 100%

Table 4:2 demonstrates the destinations of graduates who studied on the sandwich course from The Faculty of Human Science: 1999

57% of graduates from the Economics and Finance course entered employment. 9% entered further study. With employment the combined percentage is 66%. 3% of graduates were unemployed for this course and 31% were unknowns.

In Government and Politics 40% of graduates entered employment and 20% entered further study. Combined, the percentage is 60%. Although there were no unemployed graduates, 40% of the graduates were unknown.

53.3% of graduates from the Human Sciences entered employment. 11.4% entered further study, giving a combined percentage of 64.7%. 2.9% of the graduates were unemployed and 32.4% had destinations that were unknown.

There were 26.1% of graduates from the Law degree entering employment. 56.5% of the graduates entered further study. Combined, this meant 82.6% were involved in known activities. 4.4% were unemployed and 13% were unknown.

Summary

There were little differences (7%) in graduate entry into employment between the three-year courses (43%) and the sandwich course (50%). Similarly the number of students unemployed showed only a .2% difference. 4.5% of graduates from the sandwich courses reported being unemployed compared with 4.7% of graduates from the three-year course. The numbers of unknowns were also not as significantly different (5.7%), with 26.7% of unknowns occurring from the sandwich courses and 21% from the three-year course.

There was however, a distinctive difference in the percentage (12.7%) of students entering further education. 21% of students from the three-year course entered further study compared with 31.3% of students from the sandwich courses. This could be caused by the number of law graduates embarking to study their legal practice course.

5. The Faculty of Technology

5:1 Three-year degree courses

One hundred and eighteen graduates graduated from the Faculty of Technology's three-year courses. Of those, sixty five graduates (55%) employment destinations were known and fifty-three (45%) graduates were unknown.

Departments	Emp.	Unemp.	Furt Study	Unknowns	Total
Industrial Design	2 50%	-	1 25%	1 25%	4 100%
Electrical Engineering and Electronics	7 25%	-	9 32.1%	12 42.9%	28 100%
Manufacturing and Engineering Systems	11 24%	1 2.2%	3 6.5%	31 67.3%	46 100%
Materials Engineering	5 71.4%	-	1 14.3%	1 14.3%	7 100%
Mechanical Engineering	15 45.4%	2 6%	8 24.3%	8 24.3%	33 100%
Total	40 33.9%	3 2.5%	22 18.6%	53 45%	118 100%

Table 5:1 demonstrates the destinations of graduates who studied on the three year course from The Faculty of Technology: 1999

50% of graduates leaving the Industrial Design course entered employment, 25% entered further study. There were no unemployables but there were 25% of the graduate population from this particular course whose destinations were unknown.

There were a high number of unknowns 42.9% from the Electrical engineer and electronics with no unemployment but only 25% entering employment and 32.1% entering further study.

Similarly Manufacturing and Engineering System had a high percentage of unknowns (67.3%), with a 2.2% unemployment percentage. 24% of these graduates entered employment and 6.5% entered further study.

5:2 Four - year Courses

Three hundred and two students graduated from the four-year sandwich course in the faculty of Technology. Of those 86.8% provided their employment destinations. Forty (13%) were unknown.

Departments	Emp. Sand.	Unemp Sand.	Furt Sand.	Stud	Unknown Sand.	Total
Industrial Design	43 58.1%	6 8.1%	8 10.8%		17 23%	74 100%
Electrical Engineering and Electronics	30 52%	6 10%	10 17%		12 21%	58 100%
Manufacturing and Engineering Systems	48 80%	6 10%	6 10%		-	60 100%
Materials Engineering	11 61%	1 6%	4 22%		2 11%	18 100%
Mechanical Engineering	69 75%	3 3.2%	11 12%		9 9.8%	92 100%
Total	201 67%	22 7%	39 13%		40 13%	302 100%

Table 5:2 demonstrate the destinations of graduates who studied on the sandwich course from The Faculty of Technology: 1999

58.1% of graduates entered employment from the Industrial Design course. 10.8% entered further education, which combined, gives a 68.9%. 23% of the graduates were unknown and 8.1% were unemployed.

In Electrical Engineering and Electronics 52% of graduates entered employment with 17% entering further study. 21% of the graduates employment destinations were unknown and a further 10% were unemployed.

Manufacturing and Engineering systems, shows a percentage of 80% of graduates entering employment, and 10%, entering further. There were no unknowns but 10% of graduates were unemployed.

61% of graduates from Materials Engineering entered employment. 22% entered further study. 11% were unknown and 6% were unemployed.

83% of graduates from Mechanical Engineering entered employment. 12% entered further study. 9.8% were unknown and 3.2% entered further study

Summary

For the faculty as a whole, 33.9% of graduates from the three-year courses entered employment with 18.6% entering further study. This is in comparison with 67% from the sandwich courses entering employment and 13% entering further study.

Overall, the figures reveal that of those graduates whose destinations are known, there are fewer graduates who are unemployed from the three-year courses (2.5%) than the sandwich courses (7%).

2. What is the effect of the choice of subject?

Employment Categories.

The analysis is based on the definition that the DFEE in its “Moving on” report (1999) uses for the different occupational sectors of employment. Data from the destination return questions for 1999 is now subjected to further analysis in order to reveal the occupational sector destinations of graduates from each faculty’s departments.

(i) Non-graduate employment (DFEE 1999) comprises occupations that do not require a high level of education and include low-level clerical, manual jobs, low-level security jobs, low-level sale and bar staff jobs.

(ii) Graduate track jobs are made up of what can be considered entry route occupations and new areas of graduate work as well as work in which a degree is not necessary. Occupations in this group include low-level management, technician jobs, skilled caring jobs, some clerical jobs and high-level sales jobs.

(iii) Traditional graduate occupational categories, comprise occupations typically thought of as graduate jobs. These include professional occupations such as teachers, doctors, lawyers and qualified engineers.

In sections 6-7, tables show for each subject area, the breakdown of destinations by occupational sector.

6: Three-Year degree courses

6:1 The Faculty of Arts

Subjects	Non Graduate Employment (Ft)	Graduate track Occupations (Ft)	Traditional Graduate Occupations (Ft)	Total employed Ft
American Studies	31 (84%)	5 (14%)	1 (2%)	37 (100%)
English	37 (86%)	6 (14%)	-	43 (100%)
Performing Arts	46 (92%)	3 (6%)	1(2%)	50 (100%)
Total	114 (87%)	14 (11%)	2 (1%)	130 (100%)

Table 6:1 illustrates the 1999 figures from the occupational areas entered by graduates who studied on the three-year course.

Table 6:1 indicates that within American Studies 84%, of graduates entered non-graduate jobs with 14% entering graduate track occupations and a further 2% entering traditional graduate occupations. 86% of graduates who studied on the English course also entered non-graduate employment with 14% entering graduate track occupations. In Performing Arts 92%, entered non-graduate occupations. 6% entered graduate track occupations and 2% entered traditional graduate occupations.

6:2 The Faculty of Professional Studies

Subjects	Non Graduate Employment (Ft)	Graduate track Occupations (Ft)	Traditional Graduate Occupations (Ft)	Total employed Ft
Sport Sciences	35 (83%)	7 (17%)	-	42(100%)

Table 6:2 illustrate the 1999 figures from the occupational areas entered by graduates who studied on the three-year course.

In Sports science 83% entered non-graduate employment and 17% entered graduate track occupations. This may well be consistent with the vocational element linked to doing a Sports Science Degree.

6:3 The Faculty of Science:

Subjects	Non Graduate Employment (Ft)	Graduate track Occupations (Ft)	Traditional Graduate Occupations (Ft)	Total employed Ft
Biological Sciences	2 (25%)	6 (75%)		8 (100%)
Geography and Earth Sciences	22 (79%)	6 (21%)	-	28 (100%)
Information Systems and Computing	10 (50%)	8 (40%)	2 (10%)	20 (100%)
Mathematics and Statistics	2 (25%)	3 (37.5%)	3 (37.5%)	8 (100%)
Total	36 (56%)	23 (36%)	5 (8%)	64 (100%)

Table 6:3 illustrate the 1999 figures from the occupational areas entered by graduates who studied on the three-year course.

Similarly 75% of graduates from the Biological sciences entered graduate track occupation. This indicates there is an occupational requirement for graduates studying that particular degree to enter specific areas of employment and training. In Geography and Earth Sciences 79% entered non-graduate jobs and 21% entered graduate track jobs. Information systems showed that only 40% of graduates entered graduate track jobs with 50% entering non-graduate jobs. In Mathematics and Statistics, 25% of students entered non-graduate jobs but 37.5% entered graduate track jobs and traditional occupations.

6:4 The Faculty of Human Sciences

Subjects	Non Graduate Employment (Ft)	Graduate track Occupations (Ft)	Traditional Graduate Occupations (Ft)	Total employed Ft
Economics and Finance	11 (38%)	13 (45%)	5 (17%)	29 (100%)
Government and Politics	6 (30%)	14 (70%)	-	20 (100%)
Law	14 (74%)	4 (21%)	1 (5%)	19 (100%)
School of Business Management Studies	50 (51%)	48 (49%)	-	98 (100%)
Division OF Business Management Studies	10 (50%)	9(45%)	1 (5%)	20 (100%)
Total	91 (49%)	88 (47%)	7 (4%)	186 (100%)

Table 6:4 illustrate the 1999 figures from the occupational areas entered by graduates who studied on the three-year course.

Within Law, 74% of graduates entered non-graduate employment. This may indicate that law graduates find transitory employment whilst waiting to attend Law school. Within other subjects such as the biological sciences, the link between occupational sector and the nature of the degree, suggests there is border on a professional qualification.

51% of graduates leaving the School of Business, entered non-graduate jobs and 49% entered graduate track jobs. By comparison, 50% of graduates entered non-graduate jobs. 1% entered traditional jobs of those graduating from the Division of Business.

6:5 The Faculty of Technology and Design

Subjects	Non Graduate Employment (FT)	Graduate track Occupations (FT)	Traditional Graduate Occupations (FT)	Total employed (FT) On (Sand)
Industrial Design	-	2 (100%)	-	2 (100%)
Electrical and Electronic Engineering	1 (14%)	5 (72%)	1 (14%)	7 (100%)
Manufacturing Engineering Systems	7 (64%)	4 (36%)	-	11 (100%)
Materials Engineering	-	5 (100%)	-	5 (100%)
Mechanical Engineering	4 (27%)	7 (46%)	4 (27%)	15(100%)
Total	12 (30%)	23 (57.5%)	5 (12.5%)	40 (100%)

Table 6: 5 illustrate the 1999 figures from the occupational areas entered by graduates who studied on the three-year course.

This pattern is also observed in Electrical and Electronic Engineering where 72% entered graduate track careers, 14% entered a traditional profession and 14% entered non-graduate employment. 100% of graduates from Materials Engineering entered graduate track occupations. Mechanical Engineering had 46% entering graduate track occupations and 27% entering traditional graduate occupations.

In total a large number of graduates who studied on the three-year courses entered non-graduate jobs. (33%) entered graduate track occupations.

Graduates who have studied on the sandwich courses are more likely to enter graduate track or traditional areas of employment than those graduates who studied on the three-year course.

7: Four -Year Courses

7:1 *The Faculty of Science*

Subjects	Non Graduate Employment (Sand)	Graduate track Occupations (Sand)	Traditional Graduate Occupations (Sand)	Total On (Sand)
Biological Sciences	5 (25%)	23 (69%)	2 (6%)	30 (100%)
Information Systems and Computing	6 (10%)	52 (83%)	5 (7%)	63 (100%)
Mathematics and Statistics	5 (22%)	16 (69%)	2 (9%)	23 (100%)
Total	16 (13.8%)	91 (78.4%)	9 (7.8%)	116 (100%)

Table 7:1 illustrates the 1999 figures of occupational areas entered by graduates who studied on the sandwich courses.

Table 6:1 shows that 69% of graduates from the Biological Sciences entered graduate track occupations.

Within the Information Systems and Computing sandwich degree course, more graduates entered graduate track occupations (83%) and traditional occupations (7%) than those who studied on the three-year course (40%) and (10%). There is also a 40% difference between the sandwich degree courses and the three-year courses of graduates who entered non-graduate employment.

Similarly, the Division of Business also showed a 43% difference between the percentage of graduates entering graduate track occupation and a 48% difference in the numbers

entering non-graduate employment. Mathematics and Statistics has a 32% difference, Manufacturing and Engineering 27%, and Economics and Finance a 15% difference.

7:2 The Faculty of Human Science

Subjects	Non Graduate Employment (Sand)	Graduate track Occupations (Sand)	Traditional Graduate Occupations (Sand)	Total On (Sand)
Economics and Finance	11 (29%)	23 (60%)	4 (11%)	38 (100%)
Government and Politics	5 (63%)	3 (37%)	-	8 (100)
Psychology	23 (42%)	32 (58%)	-	55 (100%)
Law	6 (50%)	4 (33%)	2 (17%)	12 (100%)
Division of Business Management	2 (6%)	28(88%)	2 (6%)	32 (100%)
Total	47 (32.4%)	90 (62.1%)	8 (5.5%)	145 (100%)

Table 7:2: illustrates the 1999 figures of occupational areas entered by graduates who studied on the sandwich courses.

In Government and Politics, there is a difference between graduates who entered on the three-year course and those who have studied on the sandwich course. 37% of graduates entered graduate track employment compared with 63% of graduates who entered non-graduate position.

At the same time although Law appears to have a percentage difference of 12% of graduates from the sandwich course entering graduate track employment, the percentage was obtained from other graduates who studied on the sandwich courses. There is however, a swing in favour of the percentage (24% less) of graduates who entered non-graduate employment and a small difference of 17% of those entering traditional graduate occupations.

7:3 The Faculty of Technology and Design

Subjects	Non Graduate Employment (Sand)	Graduate track Occupations (Sand)	Traditional Graduate Occupations (Sand)	Total On (Sand)
Industrial Design	2 (5%)	20 (46%)	21 (49%)	43 (100%)
Electrical and Electronic Engineering	4 (13%)	23(77%)	3 (10%)	30 (100%)
Manufacturing and Engineering Systems	15 (31%)	30 (63%)	3 (6%)	48 (100%)
Materials Engineering	1 (10%)	5 (45%)	5 (45%)	11 (100%)
Mechanical Engineering	11(16%)	39 (57%)	19 (27%)	69 (100%)
Total	33 (16.4%)	117 (58.2%)	51 (25.4%)	201 (100%)

Table 7:3 illustrates the 1999 figures of occupational areas entered by graduates who studied on the sandwich courses.

There is a 3% increase of graduates who studied on the Industrial Design entering traditional graduate occupations than graduate track occupations. That shows a total percentage of 95% difference in those entering non-graduate employment.

Similarly Electrical and Electronic Engineering shows a higher percentage of graduates (87%) entering graduate track and traditional graduate occupations. With 77% entering graduate track employment and 10% entering traditional graduate occupations

Manufacturing and Engineering Systems again shows a 69% increase in graduates entering graduate track and traditional graduate employment.

Likewise, the highest numbers of graduates entering graduate track and traditional employment were also noticed in Materials engineering at 90%.

In like manner, 58% of graduates additionally entered graduate track occupations and traditional graduate occupations.

Summary of Occupational Areas

Three-year degree courses

The faculty of Arts showed 87% of graduates entering non-graduate employment in contrast to an accumulative percentage of 12% entering graduate track and traditional graduate occupations. The faculty of professional studies have 83% of their graduates entering jobs compared to 17% entering graduate track occupations. The Faculty of Science has 56% entering non-graduate employment in comparison to an accumulative 36% entering graduate track occupations and 8% entering traditional graduate occupations. The Faculty of Human Sciences has 49% of students entering non-graduate employment and 47% entering graduate track occupations with 4% entering traditional occupation. The Faculty of Technology and Design has 30% of graduates entering non-graduate employment and 57.5% entering graduate track jobs and 12.5.4% entering traditional occupations. The pattern observed is that graduates from the Faculty of Arts and Professional Studies were less likely to enter graduate employment positions than graduates studying other three-year degree courses. The difference between graduates entering graduate employment in the three-year courses in the Faculty of Arts with the least percentage and the Faculty of Technology and Design with the best percentage is a 57% gap.

Four-year degree courses

Graduates who studied on the sandwich courses, were less likely to enter non-graduate employment. Only 13.8% of graduates who studied in the Faculty of Biological sciences entered non-graduate employment, compared to 78.4% who entered graduate track occupations and 7.8% who entered traditional graduate occupations.

By comparison 32.4% of graduates from the Faculty of Human Sciences entered non-graduate jobs, This is an increase from the previous faculty courses, but it reflects the temporary posts students enter as a stop gap and to gain specialist experience before entering more professional employment such as entering the legal field, or occupations in psychology. By contrast, 62.1% entered graduate track occupation and 5.5% entered traditional graduate occupations.

Within the Faculty of Technology, department of Design, 16.4% of graduates entered non-graduate jobs. 58.2% entered graduate track jobs but the largest percentage of 25.4% graduates to enter traditional occupations, reflect the nature of the type of courses the graduates studied and its relevance to specific areas of employment where work experience is required to get into that particular area of work.

Conclusion

This research study explored the datasets containing the employment status of the 1999 graduate cohort from one West London University. It examined the employment destination of the graduates in light of the degree course programmes in terms of the degree subjects the students studied. It drew a comparison of the employment destination of students who studied on the four-year sandwich courses and the three-year non-sandwich courses and investigated the different types of employment the graduates entered from all the degree course programmes.

The data sets showed that the whole range of graduates entered employment upon graduating and up to six months post graduation. Nevertheless closer examination showed

that on the three-year courses, more graduates entered non-graduate work than those graduates who studied on the four year sandwich courses.

Within this general context, the evidence showed that where graduates who studied on the three-year non-sandwich degree courses entered employment, they were less likely than those who studied on the sandwich courses, to enter graduate jobs.

It was most surprising to discover that there were differences in terms of entry into graduate employment between those graduates who studied on the three year courses in the faculty of Technology and Design and those who studied in the same faculty but on the four year courses. This finding in itself reveals the importance of a prolonged work placement to entering graduate employment.

The findings also support the literature review of the importance of sandwich placements in helping to prepare undergraduates for the world of work, by helping them to develop the necessary employment attributes that embody the criteria employers look for in terms of the gradueness and employability of graduates.

The variations of results from this data, justified an exploration for a greater depth of inquiry, using the graduates biographies, their contextual learning and experiences to find out the circumstances concerning what was taking place to influence the individual graduate's transitions into employment.

Chapter Five

Qualitative Data Analysis

Introduction

The purpose of the study is to explore the impact of biographical and contextual influences on students' transitions into employment through their perceptions and experiences. During the interviews, sixteen graduates were asked to reflect on their higher education experiences at three key points of transition. The interviews were recorded and transcribed in preparation for analysis. This chapter considers the analysis and interpretation of the interview data.

The process of data analysis involved a constant, systematic reflection through iteration and description. The contexts of the individual biographies were explored, examined and questioned to find explanations for the graduates' different experiences. During the analysis, the focus of attention was on the dynamics of the data. Adopting an open approach the researcher became totally immersed in the subtleties and undercurrents running through the data, going constantly backwards and forwards within the data, and reading and re-reading the text until a familiarity with each narrative was achieved (Radnor 2002).

During this process, the data were coded to allow "for assigning units of meaning to the inferential or descriptive information" (Miles & Huberman, 1994 pg 56). A number of variables, which seemed to influence graduates' experiences at the points of transitions and a set of underlying dimensions, which accounted for the differential effects of the variables were revealed through this process. The data were then revisited to achieve as much clarity of definition and meaning as possible. During this stage, plausible and rival

definitions were seriously considered and thoroughly examined. Care was taken to ensure that the elements in the data that contradicted, or appeared to contradict the emerging dimension were assimilated.

The following results describe the variables and dimensions at each of the three transition points.

Transition point 1- *Entry into University*

Introduction

Entering university was an important life transition for all the students interviewed in this study. To a certain extent each individual reacted differently to the challenges and opportunities entailed in that transition. The graduates' accounts reveal that a range of biographical and contextual variables were involved in shaping their experiences of and their reactions to this transition period. These included: pre-enrolment information from the University; presence at induction; and opportunities to lay foundations for networking.

However, an underlying dimension was also apparent. The experiences and responses of students who entered the university of their choice were qualitatively different from those who entered university through clearing.

Entry into the university of their choice.

The twelve respondents who entered the university of their choice recollected the deep feelings of satisfaction associated with their goals. "I was over the moon to be gettinguniversity because it was my first choice" (I 5) "... I just needed the university to be right for me..." (I6).

They also recollected the feelings of excitement, anticipation and determination that spanned the months before enrolment. “ I wanted to find out for myself features of the university that would really help me to understand what to expect and what I could do to make the experience worthwhile” (I15) “.it made me want to the visit the university to find out more about what it could offer me....” (I8)

The confidence these graduates said they experienced of wanting to fit into their new environment stemmed from their success in having achieved the entry requirements for getting into the university of their choice. “I achieved ABB in my A-levels and this was useful in securing my place on the course I want to study...” (I2) “...getting the grades to enter university changed my outlook on myself on what I could really do....”(I15)

This belief in their own ability made them want to commit themselves to pre-visits of the university either formally organised or informally. The number of visits made to the university developed their sense of belonging. “Visiting the university was useful because it helped me to become familiar with the whole setup so I could begin to fit in well...” (I5).

They experienced a sense of motivation of “really wanting to study the degree course ” (I5) that aroused a sense of curiosity and a “need to know before hand what the course consisted of, to determine the modules... to be studied” (I2).

One graduate further reported that by following this course of action, there was a need to enquire more into the university and that the course “went some way towards helping to

understand not just the standards that had to be achieved, but some insight into elements of the course” (I15)

By undertaking the pre-visits, another graduate had realised that “the climate of the university was right for me to study my degree course.” (I6). This was important “because I needed to make the most of all my experiences and this university environment provided everything I needed for this...” (I6).

Their pre-entry visits had also made them aware of how much “benefit I could derive from studying at this university” (I5), especially in terms of knowing at that early stage that the university would support them in their drive to enter the professional occupation of their choice. “My intention when I decided to study this course was to enter a ...job. I expected the university to support me with all the learning and practical experience I needed to make this happen.” (I8)

By reading and examining course details and other information before entering university, they were encouraged to contact the university to clarify any points they did not understand so I13 spoke “to my course tutors, explored the literature, to get a feel of the course I would be studying at university.” (I13)

The university’s induction programme helped to introduce them to the support they needed in getting “to know other new undergraduates” (I2) “to form new social relationships” (I15) “to make me feel less anxious by ensuring that I actively get involved in the different interactions” (I7) and to introduce them to “the different services that could help” (I16) them.

These induction programmes meant “ that getting involved in fresher’ activities whilst making new friendships,...” (I6) would help them “to settle into university life much quicker’ (I5). This provided these new students with “emotional and social support” (I2) that helped them to understand and to put into perspective the different changes occurring around them so that “new and different ways of coping” (I7) could be found.

Some found that these relationships “grew into life-long friendships” (I8). “Between us we were able to put the world to rights whilst at university and we are still doing it.”(I16)

Others, especially those who did not live on campus saw induction as an immediate link to those people who lived on campus. “I needed to make immediate links with other students in my year group because I did not live on campus. From these student friendships I got to find out a lot about what it was like living on campus ... which made me feel more involved in student life.” (I5).

Because of these different interactions, they “did not experience feelings of homesickness and anxieties” (I2) and where they did, “this was minimal, which was helped by weekend visits, home” (I13).

Induction ensured that they knew where to look for the different university resources and facilities. “Exploring the different uses of the library and how to find books and articles” (I12) proved to be useful for “researching information on employers” (I15).

Furthermore, induction alerted them to the university’s support structures that were made available for them to “deal with any concerns” (I11) they might have “concerning

problems that could affect university life” (I14). The recommended support ensured that these concerns did not take root and develop into larger dilemmas. “It was important for me to develop a plan that would provide me with a clear outline of the people who could clarify issues so that they did not give me any undue cause for concern” (I13).

The student recalled that at induction “I was encouraged to keep a diary as it allowed me to keep a record of my planning, educational development, personal growth and development” (I5). This advice was essential so that students “could plan their course work in advance and the time frame in which it should be done” (I2). This helped the students “to see and understand the stage that I am at in my life so that I could effectively juggle my work, studies and playtime” (I1)

Taking part in the induction process thus ensured that in the words of one student, “I was prepared for university life and so was able to build on my knowledge and to form an understanding of my new university experiences” (I5)

Their involvement in university-led activities through joining clubs and societies to meet friends and share interests also meant that they were able “to gain a sense of value through personal development and growth” (I2).

This allowed for a climate of reflection and questioning, where the students had to ask themselves “why am I at university, and to begin working towards the reason I was here.” (I2)

As they progressed through their first year, seeing their tutors on a regular basis also “helped me to keep to deadlines and to effectively do something about arising problems” (I6) but students who were unable to see their tutors often referred back to “my friends on my degree course to help me overcome immediate problems” (I13).

In taking control of their own learning situation the students showed an early sense of maturity and an appreciation of their freedom to determine their own actions such as the “willingness to explore other environments so that I could get what I need to help me get through university” (I14).

This gave these students “a sense of meaning and purpose as to why I was doing my degree course” (I1) and the desire to realize their ability and “to want to reach my full potential (I2).

Entry into university through Clearing

There were marked differences in the biographies of the four graduates who entered university as clearing applicants.

They “had not achieved the A’ level grades required” (I9, I10, I4, I3) to get into their first choice university but despite this acknowledgement of their under-achievements, they were taken by surprise by their results, which made them feel “detached from my friends and family” (I4). “I never felt so alone and disappointed” (I3). “Not getting into the university of my choice meant that I had lost something of considerable importance that I could never regain”(I10)

The graduates reflected that they were “still not able to believe how I messed up” (I4) especially as they had “undertaken no preparation for this clearing university” (I3) but felt that it was “my last chance of getting a place on a university course”(I9) and came to “... university because it was the only decent university on the clearing list” (I10).

Yet they were resistant to the need to readapt themselves to an unexpected university environment and “no-one was available to help” (I4) them make the right choices. Because of this, they “became distraught, and experienced a sensation of being trapped and abandoned” (I9). This prevented them from seeing what was ahead of them, for appropriate decisions to be made. “It prevented me from thinking about what was best for me...”(I10).

This feeling of failure and despair led to confusion and bewilderment especially about what to do next. “I felt that I needed to do something about this but I never knew what. I still don’t know what I could do” (I10).

This lack of self-assurance was combined with an explanation that “I didn’t have a choice so I had to make the best of a bad situation” (I4). This meant that they prepared to go blindly into their clearing university “without any thought about the effects of this decision upon my choice of course” (I9).

One graduate considered one particular option “I could have taken time off I suppose and possibly taken a resit’ (I9) but this was not a serious option. Others explained why not “because all my friends were then entering university, I felt that I also needed to move

on”(I3); “My parents also wanted me to start university” (I10). The conclusion was that they were “pushed into going to university” (I4) by their parents and their peer group.

Once they entered university, the students did not think the university supported “ my entry through clearing” (I3). They were not asked whether they were “making the right university choice” (I4), neither did “anyone offer the advice needed to make the choices that would be most suited” to them (I10). They therefore felt “exploited and used in the university’s effort to fill its courses” (I9). As a result, their transition to the university was of “nightmarish” (I3) proportion. “There was no-one I could turn to... so I felt exploited and confused” (I10).

This was a compelling turning point moment in the students’ lives because at that point they began for the first time, to “question their ability to do things” (I4) and were less assured in taking on ambitious tasks “which would open me up to failure once again” (I9) so “I made sure from then onwards that what ever I did, was pitched to my level” (I10).

The induction programmes set up for the students to acclimatise themselves to the new university environment so that they could find help in alleviating the feelings of being lost, being stressed, anxious and depressed, was not helpful for these students. Two students “... felt too lost and confused to want to take part in university life at such an early stage” (I4), because “everything was happening too quickly” (I10).

They did not “wish to deal with finding out about what the university had to offer at that point in time” (I4). And yet, “not finding out more about the different things university

had to offer me from early on, meant that I missed out a lot on certain aspects of university life, which would now have been useful to me” (I9)

These feelings were not helped by the students’ “...reluctance...to form new friendships through the different social events in the university...” (I3). Neither was it helped by their admission that they spent their “...time watching television as an escape....” (I10) rather than making the most of the opportunities provided at university.

Forming new relationships is associated with greater satisfaction and settling in. However, it was difficult for some students who found it “hard to let go of my old friends” (I9) and to develop coping strategies that would enable proper adjustments to “form current relationships” (I4). “I just wanted to be with my school mates” (I9).

There were exceptions. One student who entered university through clearing to study on the sandwich course considered that preparation for “entry on to the four year sandwich course began with the university supporting my passage into university by presenting me from day one with a focus on the modules I will be taking and encouraging me to think about my internship during my first year....” (I4).

The induction programme helped another graduate to come to terms with attending the clearing university “because I realised then that the course was not much different than the course I would have studied at the university of my choice” (I3).

Although they remained in the grip of disappointment and uncertainty about entering university through clearing, two of these graduates committed themselves to making the

most of their degree course so that they would do well. The idea being that “getting a good degree will make up for my low A’ level grades” (I4), (I10)

Transition point 2 – *Experience of Work*

Introduction

The graduates’ accounts revealed that a range of biographical and contextual variables were involved in shaping their experiences of and their reactions to this transition period. These included students’ expectations, their level of integration on to the degree programme, their degree of integration into the workplace including the realisation of their professionalism as significant for their preparation of graduate employment.

Furthermore, there was an underlying dimension of difference, depending on the degree courses studied. Students who studied on the four-year sandwich courses and those who studied on the three-year degree non-sandwich courses experienced preparation for work differently. The former group undertook a year’s compulsory work-placement programme whereas the latter was presented with optional opportunities such as a module of three weeks’ work experience.

Sandwich Courses.

The expectations students studying on sandwich courses had of getting on to the degree courses “was for me to get the appropriate knowledge and qualification required to get into the occupation of my choice” (I11). The degree provided a “framework for later employment”. The degree was therefore, “a means to an end” (I1), because through the “work placement the degree course offered” (I11), the undergraduates were able to gain valuable experience and knowledge of working in organisations “as it would help me to realise what organisations are about, including their different culture and values” (I13).

The undergraduates' preparation for employment was helped by the readiness of the university to help them find their work placements. "The university takes vacancies from employers of the different placements and really work with each employer to ensure we get the fairest packages" (I5). These packages would sometimes be tied up with the undergraduates' expectations that they "would be offered a salary" (I15) and that "the more competitive the salary the more prestigious the work placement" (I8).

The work placements provided a window of opportunity for the students to explore and understand more around the recruitment process, in terms of "when and how to apply and what to expect at the interview stage" (I8).

The undergraduates' expectations of the different employment placements was realised in how they simulated the graduate employment processes through their general application to get the job. "...the competitive nature of these placements meant that we had to formally apply to the employer in the same way as if we were applying for graduate level jobs" (I3). It also meant that the students needed "to prepare for entry recruitment tests that formed part of the recruitment package"(I5). So, "I needed to past the tests they gave me to get on to my placement" (I5). This promoted the belief that "although at the time it was difficult, I'm glad I went through it because it really prepared me for when I eventually had to look for work" (I8).

The sandwich degree courses additionally provided a level of integration that allowed partnerships to occur between employment, and the university through work placements. This level of integration meant, "...the university is kept informed about up to date

employment changes and expectations of the employer for those going into work placement” (I8). “It draws together the purpose of the work-placement.., and helps the university to keep in touch with what is happening in the employing organisation and the employing organisation with the university” (I5), thus helping the student to realise “the sandwich placement taught me how important adapting to the culture of the work-place is..” (I8).

Its importance was given greater emphasis by having the placement tutors visit the workplace where “my progress was assessed and where my learning as an internee received the university’s stamp of approval” (I3). Additionally, the tutor ensured the internee was “fulfilling the terms and conditions of my contract and not filling the employment gap for someone who was on long term leave” (I11

This integration between the world of employment and the university gave the students a secure environment from which they could relate their learning to the work place. The students developed “an appreciation of the application of my classroom knowledge to the work place” (I15) and a chance to “... build on my knowledge of the workplace that was relevant to the degree course” (I11). Through its practical application to grow “my technical skills” (I3) and “other employability attributes” (I15) “it helped to convert classroom knowledge into practice and to bring that experience of the work place back into the classroom” (I7). It exposed the undergraduates to “areas of work and technology I had only read about in my academic books” (I15) and “emphasised employment points I had not experienced before” (I5).

The work-placements thus taught the students “the importance of the relationship occurring between the workplace and my learning” (I3). It gave the students an appreciation of industry in that “it made me realise the importance of having an early knowledge of how organisations work”(I11). It enhanced their understanding “of working within an organisation, which allowed me to begin thinking about how everything I had been doing fits into the broader framework of the world of work.” (I8).

The students were therefore able to “use the opportunities provided by the work placement, to develop employment knowledge on how to function effectively in the organisation” (I3). So “...using my initiative to help develop a project meant that I had to work within a team and delegate tasks to get the work accomplished” (I8).

This level of integration was an indication that “a sandwich placement provides quality employment for a year and can compensate for low entry qualifications because it gave me the opportunity to show the employer what I could do” (I3).

The degree of integration into the work place provided a platform from which the students could explore occupational areas to which they would not otherwise be exposed. “For the first time I was made aware of the range of jobs within theindustry” (I3).

It helped the students to become more career focused because “it helped me to find out about the range of occupations there are in my employment field.” (I3). By finding out about different occupational areas the students discovered the importance of “managing my time effectively to complete tasks ” (I13), which allowed at least one of them to be “responsible for projects undertaken” (I5). This method of working within the

organisation taught the students the importance of taking the leadership role “to lead organisational changes....” (I3).

The degree of integration also made the students realise they had to keep up with the pace of change occurring within their work-placement organisation, which meant having to reassess their attitude to work and making “a major change in my behaviour” (I15). They were required by the employer to respond to the developments of the organisation. This implied “the only way I could handle the changes occurring around me was to be open and flexible and to adapt to the different situations occurring in my job” (I8).

One undergraduate realised the importance of “leading a team to produce the best results”(I11). Another realised “the importance of seeing developments occurring and deciding what to do about them rather than just responding to these developments” (I3).

Another graduate saw the extent of the integration in terms of clear communication and “writing and presenting concise and accurate reports to employers” (I5). This was an attribute they had “not been taught at university but which provided me with a much clearer understanding of what to expect from work” (I5) and allowed me to reflect on “how gaining that skill enhanced my communication abilities at university.” (I5)

They found that the attributes of communication and team working “allowed me to quickly start working with my colleagues” (I8). It also helped them to “cope with the different types of jobs that were being tossed at me” (I15).

The degree of integration into the workplace shaped the beliefs they had in their abilities “to think as an engineer and to understand the principles of being an engineer” (I3) and identified their intended professionalism defined as “how to become an engineer” (I3).

In developing their sense of professionalism, the students felt they had achieved graduate status within the company. “I was taught the importance of professionalism in terms of my general attitude towards people and the way people see and judge me in the work I do” (I15). “Being in the work placement made me feel like I was already in a graduate job” (I3). “I felt that I had achieved the social and employment position the employer wanted from me.. I felt as if I really belonged to the organisation. They respected me for what I brought into the organisation and I respected them for what they offered me” (I5).

This was affirmed through the feedback, encouragement and commendation they received from the employer. “The employer was positive with the encouragement, ideas and information offered to me” (I13).

This allowed the students to develop “a sense of belonging in the workplace” (5), which enabled them to “develop the confidence I would need to finish my degree with a good classification and to apply to go into graduate work ... or to make other life options” (I3).

Non-Sandwich Courses

The variables identified in the last section that were involved in shaping the graduates’ experiences and their reactions to their transitions included the students’ expectations and intentions, their level of integration into the degree programme and the degree of

integration into the workplace which involved their growth of professionalism and their realisation of their graduate identity.

This section indicates the differences in these variables for those students who studied on the three-year or non-sandwich degree courses.

Four respondents who studied on the non-sandwich course found that employment preparation was informal in that “we were not told anything about what we are expected to get from our work experience,” (I10), neither “was I told about how it all fits in with the course that I am doing (I12). These respondents “had a work experience module which was optional” (I1) during their three-year course, which was often “only for a three-week duration” (I9). The students had a “two-month self-preparation period, where I had to contact employers to get a work experience position” (I9) but “I was not given any formal information on how I should go about getting it” (I10).

They were “not given specific information or details of vacancies that we could apply for” (I1). They had to “do it blindly” (I7) and this proved to be difficult “because the only starting point was getting right into it” (I2).

Each student’s work experience was different because the type of work was either paid-work, part-time work or voluntary work. They devised different creative ways to do so “because the direct approach for short work-experience did not achieve an outcome” (I7). One student showed imagination by “initially work-shadowing an employer which later led to a work experience placement” (I7). One student also “developed a social

relationship with a recruitment manager and later successfully applied to do my work-experience.” (I4). Another student “ managed to get a job doing voluntary work in a charity organisation” (I9). One recalled using “my mother who was working with the organisation to get the job” (I10). Another student “converted my part-time job into a work experience as one-way of ensuring the work experience continued to give me an income” (I1).

The work experience did not provide the students with “feedback or guidance on what we learnt at work” (I4). Because of that, the students did not get a formal “grasp of what was expected of me in the workplace” (I9).

Indeed, this informal approach to their work experience allowed some to consider the work-experience as a “soft credit module option” (I9), which “only required me to complete a work experience log-book to present to my tutor”(I10), rather than an employment experience that could determine their employment chances.

The work experience for these students did not add value to any knowledge that “would allow me to apply for jobs in big companies” (I10). It did not help the situation that the university had “no formal interaction with the university work experience provider”(I9).

Two graduates expressed their enthusiasm for their work-placement because of the benefits they derived from it. “I gained valuable interpersonal attributes that were useful in helping me to communicate with people at all levels”(I4). Most importantly, “it really lit a fire in me. It provided me with the enthusiasm and confidence I needed to go back into that area of work although I also realised that I needed to develop other attributes” (I7).

The networking benefits and the rich source of contacts were used to one student's advantage. "I realised when I took the work experience that it would be difficult to get into that area of work. I made sure that I made as many contacts as I could in the organisation and stayed in touch with the organisation once the work experience was over" (I7).

The work experience did not go to plan for all the students. It was "unsuccessful because it was not long enough for me to complete a project I was allocated" (I9). Feeling "unsupported within the workplace, meant that I didn't want to stay on after my work experience to complete a project I had started" (I9).

Pre-university experience of work

Two graduates (I2 and I16) had taken a year off to work before embarking on their studies. Their attitude to their degree course was similar to that of the students who studied on the sandwich courses. "I strategically chose the degree I wanted to study because having worked for a year, I knew which course would develop my knowledge for that area of work" (I2). "I became interested in doing English as a degree course because it would be useful within the personnel area of work" (I16).

Their integration into their course was for the sole purpose of "entering graduate employment" (I2), because "working for a year before starting my degree course helped me to know what I wanted out of the degree course" (I2) and it further confirmed their "idea about the area of employment I wanted to enter" (I16). They both stated that their "course had enhanced their knowledge base and reinforced everything they learnt in the

workplace” (I2) (I16). Their experience of and integration into the workplace “helped me to develop a knowledge of what is expected in the work place (I16). “I know what it is like working long hours to complete projects at work...” (I2) and to be able to “enforce policy changes” (I 2).

Taking a year off also made them aware that “to get into the area of work I had set my sights on, meant having to maintain certain standards in my choice of part-time work” (I2). They “maintained a calculated foothold in the higher levels of the employment market through formal summer work–placements, for which I independently applied (I16). “I wanted to maintain my foot at the graduate employment level so each summer whilst at university, I applied for quality summer placements...where there was competitive application and entry for the jobs”(I2). But to get into those types of employment, they had to be aware that “applying at certain times of the year meant having to keep a sharp eye out for the advertisements ”(I16)

Transition point 3 - *Entry into Employment*

Introduction

The graduates expected to enter graduate employment. Yet, some of them, on, graduation, initially entered non-graduate jobs in order to gain experience of the employment market and to facilitate the crossover into graduate or professional employment.

There were diverse reasons that graduates did not directly enter graduate employment. These reasons were often dependent on how well the graduates knew when to apply for graduate employment, whether they had knowledge of the world of employment and how they related their learning to employment and being aware of the expectation of the employer and the relationship between employer and graduate. If the employer and the

graduate's expectations were the same, it allowed the graduate to successfully fit into the organisation. Finally, taking time off before entering employment affected the graduate's entry into graduate employment.

An underlying dimension was also apparent in this case. The experiences and responses of students who entered graduate employment were qualitatively different from those who entered non-graduate employment.

Graduate Jobs

The graduates recalled that they knew when to apply for graduate level jobs. "I knew that I needed to apply for jobs in the first quarter of the semester in my final year, because I was told when they would be advertised"(I8). Two graduates "used my knowledge of how and when employers recruit to successfully apply for a graduate position" (I13).

These graduates knew where to look for employment vacancies. "I bought the newspaper on the days I knew the vacancies relevant to the position I wanted, would be advertised, to find the vacancy that allowed me to apply for the position I'm currently in..." (I8).

Because some graduates had previous knowledge about how to apply for graduate level posts, they found the application procedures "not too challenging because I knew the things that I needed to say to get me the job." (I8).

In particular, two graduates who entered university after having taken a gap year in industry were aware of when to apply for jobs. "I knew exactly when to apply for the

graduate training jobs and integrated all my knowledge and skills in getting the job” (I16).

This knowledge of the recruitment process gave the graduates the “confidence and determination I needed to get the job” (I5). If their employment awareness were any less broad, “I would have struggled to successfully compete in the graduate employment market because the employer was expecting applicants to have commercial awareness” (I5). This was because the graduate “was able to fall back on my previous knowledge and experience. I was able to transfer these to get myself a graduate training position with this company ” (I3).

The nature of employment preparation made the graduate “reflect on my learning and experience and make it applicable to the job I was doing” (I15). In addition, to using “my different experiences and knowledge to present to the employer what I could offer him if he should recruit me” (I15).

The graduates needed “to reflect to the employer, some knowledge of the changes that had taken place in the organisation” (I2). This knowledge showed the employers “my long term commitment to the organisation” (I8) because “I followed the progress of the organisation through their annual reports and league tables” (I8).

The nature of employment preparation also meant that the graduates wanted to demonstrate to the employers that “I could immediately be effective in the workplace” (I3) so if they were asked to take on a task, “I could get into a live project and move the

project along quickly...” (I5) “I wanted to show that I could take on responsibility and be innovative and creative...” (I3).

Employers’ expectations of graduates often began with their “clarity of expressions and thought” (I2, which was often distinguished in the terms of “knowing what I want from the job and telling the company what I could offer them and what I would like them to offer me...” (I8).

As part of this expectation, students had to “have a grasp of the employer’s language” (I13) to be able to “effectively put across my ideas to the employer” (I16).

This was of great significant to employers because the graduates were “expected to meet targets, which are important for the organisation to maintain its competitive streak in the economic market” (I8).

Employers expected graduates to demonstrate some intrinsic motivation towards working for the employing organisation, which involved commitment to the organisation. “I felt real commitment to this organisation because they were giving me everything I wanted” (I2).

Their time in industry made them aware that employers were searching for “well-rounded people” who had the interpersonal skills to adapt themselves to the organisation and who could initiate change. “I needed a lot of assurance to help move the organisation forward into changes that would reflect economic growth and productivity” (I2).

When these expectations were met, employers would reward targets reached. This incentive “helped to move me up the career ladder within the organisation” (I15) and to develop “my effectiveness (I3). “The employer rewarded me by sending me on a training course, which could mean an overseas transfer” (I13). The graduates recognised the “The company wanted to invest in my knowledge” (I5) and considered that “promises kept, deserved loyalty and commitment to the organisation in the form of hard work” (I8).

In helping to successfully downsize her employing organisation, one graduate recollected, “the company realised my potential and they moved me on to an accelerated leadership programme” (I2).

So in fulfilling expectations, “a depth of understanding” (I5) about the organisation needed to be achieved so that the graduates would continue, “to be educated in the organisation’s principles” (I13) so that the employer “could keep the team spirit high in order to supply the customers with the best devices and technology to meet the customers’ needs” (I8).

For graduates to fit into the organisation, they had to be prepared to do more than was requested of them in their jobs. This often involved “growing the job” (I16) so that “I could move the organisation onwards in the anticipation of change” (I2). “ I had to reflect the changes occurring not only in the organisation, but also globally” (I16). This involved the graduate having “to find new and creative ways of evolving within the organisation where no guidelines existed, to keep pace with the changes in department structures and functions” (I16). “...I also had to have a grasp of what the employer wanted in the new role by using the Internet as a starting point...”(I16)

Further knowledge of how the organisation could be developed was obtained “by going out and speaking to other employers, researching what other companies were doing by having information sent to me and also visiting external agencies as well as community organisations” (I16). Through this, the graduate was able to build on the ideas most relevant to the “company’s vision and with the company’s approval implement those ideas” (I16).

Organization fit often involved having to take on jobs that the graduate did not necessarily want. “The employer wanted me to take on the responsibility for making a hundred people redundant. I did not want to take on such a poison chalice, which no one else wanted, but I felt compelled to do it... I organised workshops on redundancy, developed a register of different places where they could get employment advice and information and provided them with alternative referral points where they could access the information needed to make the redundancy process easier.” (I2)

Some graduates decided to take time off before starting employment. In doing so, one respondent decided to apply for employment on his return. He made the point that because he had “ample knowledge of the employment area, I was able to apply for a job on my return and to get a job with good career prospects” (I3). Similarly, for another graduate, “taking time off helped me to mature and realise what I wanted to do because I was able to escape the academic box and relate the degree to the outside world. This helped me in successfully applying for a civil service job” (I6).

In one instance, taking time off appeared to have an employment sell by date. One respondent who took two years off after graduating thought that in applying for graduate

work, “I was in competition with graduates two years my junior and was finding it difficult to get a job” (I11). The employers wanted graduates who were fresh out of university and “my past work experiences lost its effectiveness, for graduate jobs. I now have to set my sights on lower level jobs” (I11).

The respondent’s impression was that employers “want to be able to mould new graduates to suit their organisational needs” (I11). The employers considered that “young graduates entering employment were far more impressionable because they did not have the inflexibility of more mature graduates with more diverse experiences...” (I11). However, employment is constantly changing and “graduates have to remain flexible in the workplace to keep pace with the changes occurring or else the job could become overwhelming” (I15).

Non-graduate jobs

Some graduates were unaware of how the employment market advertised for graduate-level jobs - “When I started looking for graduate jobs, the deadlines had already gone”(I10) - neither were they aware of suitable employers to apply to. “I wanted to enter the media but except for the BBC I did not know how to go about applying” (I9).

Even if they knew when to apply for work, their knowledge of the employers’ culture was not adequate for them to be successful in getting the job. “I wasn’t quite sure what the employer expected from me in my application” (I12).

One respondent expected employers to be “ looking for people who can demonstrate they can cope with responsibilities” (I12). But “these type of responsibilities involved project work” (I4) and because “I have no experience of working on projects” (I12), there would

be problems “ producing the type of results the employers are looking for within their given period unless I get some training” (I1).

Their disappointment in not getting the jobs they wanted led graduates to feel nonplussed and confused. “I felt so lost, I did not know what I should do next because I placed all my hopes on getting this job” (I4).

This dissatisfaction led them to enter other jobs that continued the delay of their permanent career employment. “I became so frustrated at not being able to get into the job I wanted that I started applying randomly for anything that came up and eventually got this job, which I am not happy with” (I4)

Some respondents recollected that employers, who advertised their jobs as graduate level jobs, misled them. “When I finally started examining my role, I realised that I was not in the graduate level job I was promised but that anyone with my job and some computer knowledge could do the job.” (I1) “This job that I’m in was advertised for people with A’ levels. The job offers me some autonomy and I like it but I see no future in it as it’s very repetitive” (I9).

This perception of having been misled by employers could be disadvantageous to the employer, in that the employee was likely to give less than their best to an employer. “I did not want to give more of myself to the employer because I felt cheated....”(I1).

Clearly there was a mismatch in the expectation and understanding between the employer and these particular graduates “they were not clear in the information they give to

graduates...I was not sure what the employer wanted from me and because I did not give the employer what they wanted, I had to change jobs” (I4).

Neither did the graduates believe that some employers had much idea of how to empower them to take on more responsibility and develop their career. “There is so much I could see that needs doing in this job but I have not been given encouragement to get on with the job. I went to see my manager about it, but she did not seem to want to take my ideas any further.” (I14).

Additionally, graduates found it difficult to fit into the organisation when the organisation was slow in bringing about the completion of their promises. “I came into the organisation so keen and wanted to move on but they were moving too slowly in giving me what I needed to move on”(I12).

This led some graduates to leave the organisation. “I am now looking for other jobs because the organisation was not giving me what I wanted” (I1) and “I felt that I did not get the supported I needed to promote the product to customers.....” (I12).

One graduate expressed a sense of “being trapped” (I1) and showed “resentfulness towards the company.” Blame was levelled at the university for not having “taught me how to work with different types of people and deal with difficult people” (I4). “On the course you are taught how to work within a team but if you are working with someone you don’t like you could easily change team-members. Now I have to deal with difficult people and I don’t know how to do it...” (I1).

Negotiating with the employer for a career move helped some of the problems to be resolved. To do that, the graduate needed to sell their requirements to the employer. “When an appointment came up, I persuaded my employer to look favourably at my application. I was offered the job....” (I7).

Dealing with difficult employers was also problematic especially when the mood of the employer had to be gauged before the employer was approached. “I had to wait until my employer was in a good mood before I could ask him for an appraisal which would help with my career progression” (I10).

Conclusion

The analysis shows, for three transitional points the biographical and contextual influences on students’ move into and through university into employment. The main dimensions affecting the three points of transition were their mode of entry into university, the mode of placement experience, and their entry into graduate or non-graduate employment. Subsumed within each of the dimensions were the variables that impacted on the graduates’ experiences.

Traditionally, statistical analysis has been used to support the view that the sandwich placement and graduate employability are positively related. What is shown here is the variability and complexity rather than the simplicity of the biographical and contextual influences that impact upon graduates’ transition into successful graduate employment.

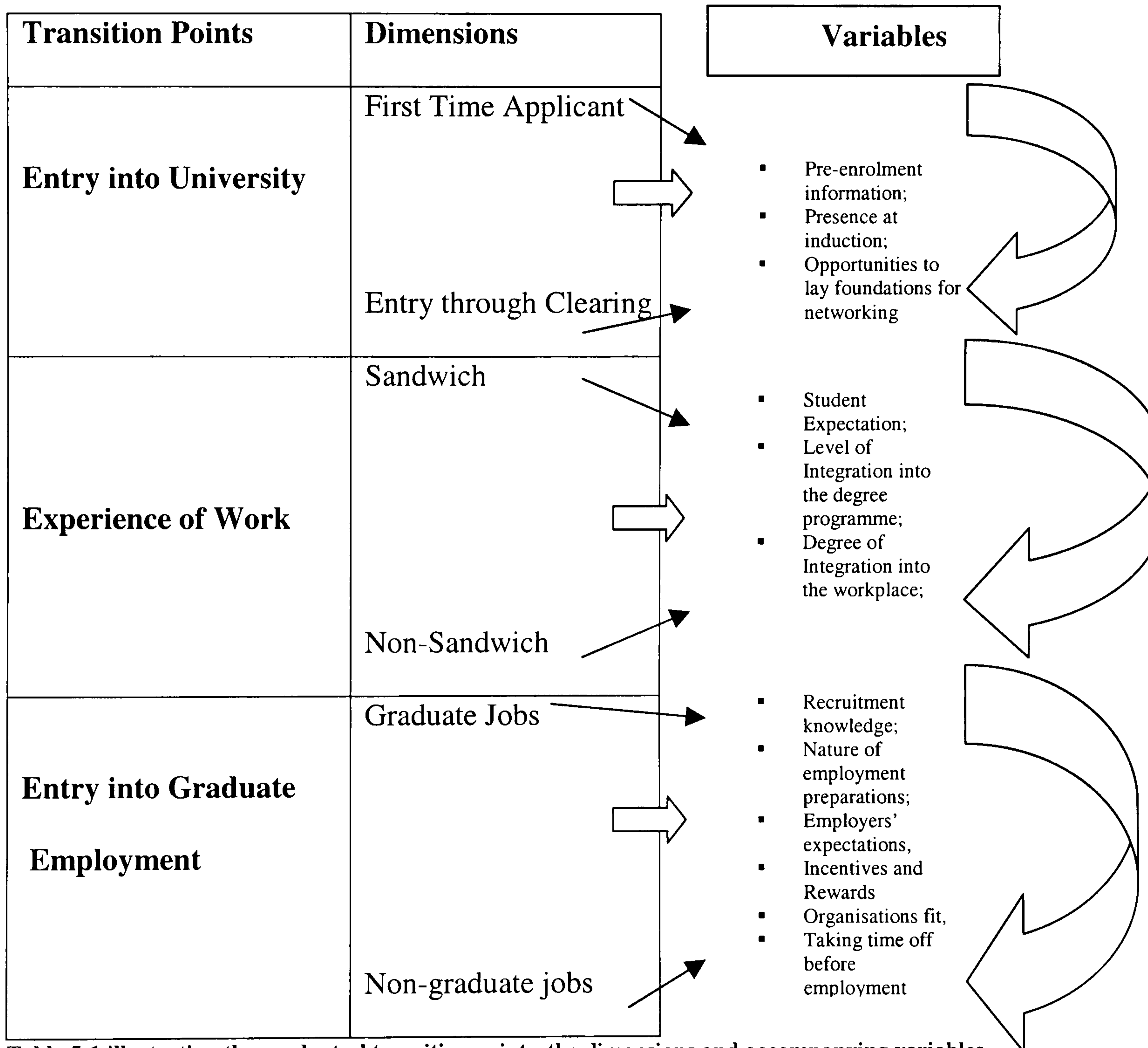


Table 5:1 illustrating the graduates' transition points, the dimensions and accompanying variables

Chapter Six

Discussion

Introduction

This study has shown that the biographical and contextual learning of graduates allowed them to reflect back with hindsight on their different university experiences and on other significant events and influences that affected their transitions.

The findings of the study showed the key turning points of the graduates that shaped their university experiences were their entry into university, their preparation for work through internships and work experiences, and their search for and offer of employment. The study also suggested that the graduate's initial entry into university had a significant effect on their progress at university and on their transition into work.

Transition point 1. *Entry to University*

The data analysis revealed that the undergraduates' entry into university is significant in determining how they will adapt and fit in within the wider university. There were distinct differences in attitudes towards their university experiences between those students who entered the university of their choice and those students who entered through the system of clearing. The clearing system gives the student the opportunity to attain their aspiration of attending university even though they did not get the required grade to enter the university of their choice. The research study showed that entry into university is a turning point in a students' life that can determine their attitude towards their university experiences.

Those undergraduates who entered the university of their choice did so with a variety of forms of preparation. In particular, having acquired the academic entry qualifications, they

demonstrated a more positive and adaptive attitude towards their courses. These early applicants had thought out with care suitable university courses, which they would not just enjoy studying but which would also provide them with the personal and skills development that would lead them into graduate employment.

The data analysis illuminated that this positive attitude towards university was significant in helping the students to form solid social relationships and social networks that supported their academic studies. Indeed, the students demonstrated a sense of purpose and direction, which served as the basis for effectively coping with and adapting to the demands and transformations of their daily university lives. The graduates showed that they were prepared and committed to their programme of study.

Côté and Levine (2000) identified that the students' adjustments to their new environment was a reflection of the understanding they placed on their new environment and their need to want to take ownership of it. Students therefore entered university with a sense of readiness and purpose to benefit from their educational setting and in particular the social relationships this new environment provided. The contributory factor that was most significant was the university's induction events, identified as the fresher's fair and induction programmes that provided a structure from which the students could be introduced to university life.

In the results of a study undertaken on a freshman's workshop to enhance the transition to university, Peat, Dalziel and Grant (2000) confirmed that a formal induction into university life was important for the new undergraduate because, evidence suggested,

“the quality of the first year’s experience plays a crucial role in determining academic performance, self-esteem and future employment prospects” (ibid 294).

The undergraduates were unlikely to experience stress, loneliness and depression, were more likely to achieve a self-directed approach to learning and to develop a sense of belonging to the university. They were also more likely to develop coping strategies that would provide them with the help, advice and encouragement they needed during their early days at university.

Graduates who entered university as first-time applicants had profound self-beliefs concerning their abilities to achieve and do well within their university courses. They wanted to master, learn and understand what they were doing at university so they could achieve their goals. They were therefore able to seek out the kind of information that would help them to evaluate and prepare for employment. They wanted to develop competence within their subject area and to achieve or obtain a high degree classification.

Côté and Levine’s (2000) study showed that if students’ attitudes towards their environment were positive, they were likely to do well academically and be more open to personal development and skills acquisition. Because they were self-motivated, they were inclined to undertake specific activities, such as researching and exploring the university’s facilities at the start of their degree course, that would allow them to achieve their goals. They would also have developed the habit of reflecting upon their learning and their different university experiences, linking this to their academic work.

This integration of their different skills and experiences would enable their personal and skills development to be enhanced.

These 'first entry' undergraduates also wanted to make investments in themselves by doing well at university. Their expectation of university was that it would add further depth and understanding to their degree course and their employment vision post-university. Ideally, their course would be related to the world of employment and they would be able to discern the relationships occurring between the two. The 'first entry' undergraduates therefore considered their university courses to be a means by which they could get the qualifications and experience needed to enter the employment of their choice.

In support of these undergraduates who entered university as first time entrants, Côté and Levine (2000) stated that those individuals who made a successful transition into university would often possess motivational readiness by ensuring they firmly established themselves in the higher education environment. They would form solid relationships and social networks that supported their academic studies whilst relating these studies to the world of work.

Accordingly, those graduates who entered university as first time applicants, were more likely to have profound self-beliefs concerning their ability to achieve and do well within their university courses. They would demonstrate the need to want to master, learn and understand what they were doing at university so they could achieve their goals. In possessing these particular values, the undergraduates were able to seek out information that would help them to evaluate and prepare for their transitions.

Their different biographies demonstrated varying interests in their subject area, and to achieve or obtain a high grade in their degree, combined with the necessary employment skills that would enable them to enter graduate jobs.

They were more likely to develop social networks and different levels of intimacy with their peer group to help them achieve their goal. Thus, the more self-exploring an individual appeared to be within their university environment, the more likely and better prepared they were to make the transition into the adult world (Berzonsky, 1996).

In demonstrating their motivation to capture the opportunities offered to them by the university, the students' adoption of particular methods of coping and self-management were applied to solving their problems and dealing with issues that were new to them.

Baxter and Hatt (2000) stated that this demonstrated mental astuteness, which the graduates used when applying their knowledge and experiences quickly to problems that required decision-making. The 'first time' applicants also demonstrated that they were more likely to be outgoing and therefore have more wilful interactions with people.

The data analysis further showed that this was not the situation with those students who came through clearing. Their biographies illustrated that they were unlikely to make a successful transition into higher education except where their courses were

structured to take on board social skills and employment skills development as illustrated with one particular student who studied on a sandwich course. The students' primary attitude towards their courses on entering the clearing university was shown in their inability to form social relationships and integrate on to their courses.

This attitude, according to Côté and Levine (2000), prevented the students from developing a social support network and experiencing positive changes that would enable them to develop new social relationships that would allow them to fit in with their second choice university. The findings from the data analysis showed that the students were less inclined towards developing a peer-group network and were therefore unlikely to develop a sense of belonging to the university. They experienced a high chance of encountering stress, loneliness and depression, which would lead to feelings of being demoralized and disenchanting.

Côté and Levine (2000), suggested that where the level of social support was low, this often related to negative feelings. It affected the ability of the students to adjust to university life as well as to develop constructive mechanisms for coping with their different university experiences.

The data findings showed clear indications that these students experienced grieving and feelings of being lost at not having achieved their goals of entering the university of their choice. The data analysis further showed that this category of graduates remained perplexed about their experiences. They had not quite recovered from what appeared to be their traumatic experience at a 'clearing' university, even after two years of graduating. They experienced great difficulty in letting go of their initial goal

of studying at the university of their choice. They felt powerless in the face of their lack of choice and this meant that they were unwilling to consider other options such as taking time off and working or resitting their entry courses and reapplying to the university of their choice.

This emotion had obviously stayed quite distinctly with the graduates two years after graduating because it came out very strongly in the analysis of their different biographies.

This finding is supported by Baxter and Hatt's (2000) claims that individuals who were unable to recover from the disappointment at not having achieved their goal, were more likely to go into their shell and to lose confidence and interest in their surroundings. They had more difficulty forming social relationships with their peer group and as such had limited social networks that could support these different emotions brought on by their new environment. The longer the person maintained a lack of interest in their surroundings, the more likely that the person would lose the essence of events occurring around themselves. Consequently, they were more likely to experience anxiety, isolation and low spirits.

The graduates did not consider that the courses they had studied at the clearing university were anywhere as good as the courses they applied to study at their first choice university. They felt that studying their degree courses had not fulfilled their expectations or their perceptions of what a university course should be like. These graduates showed a sense of having been frozen in time because of their unwillingness

to be positive about their unforeseen university environment and to adapt themselves according to the change by being flexible and transforming. They identified their disappointment as the most critical influence on their lack of success in not entering graduate employment.

This, Baxter and Hatt (2000) suggested, implied that both the university and the students had incompatible expectations of one another. Either the university's courses did not match the students' skills and knowledge, or the students had not opened themselves up to the possibilities of studying their degree course at a different institution. Indeed, prospective students entering university through clearing needed time for reflection concerning whether the university and the course they intended to study was right for them. Consequently universities could not just assume there would be mutual compatibility between the courses and the potential undergraduates.

Berzonsky and Kuk (1996), in focusing upon student maturity in educational and social spheres during this transition period, established the theory that those graduates who were resistant to changes because they refused to face up to or confront their problems would be unwilling to revise aspects of their personal lives. Following the Ericksonian framework to explain variations in levels of student development, they claimed that individuals who possessed a sense of consistency and coherence and were sufficiently flexible in meeting changes would possess a sense of purpose in their life choices. Their positive mental attitudes towards unexpected events would open them up to the probabilities of taking control of these changes in their lives and dealing confidently with them.

In reacting negatively to changes, the undergraduates exposed themselves to having other people determine their lives. They therefore placed themselves at a disadvantage at the very start of their degree and this followed them throughout their university experiences and into employment.

Their initial vulnerability showed itself in their reluctance to acquire useful local knowledge of extra curricular resources that could help them to plan strategies for goals to be achieved.

This fits in with Côté and Levine's (2000) theory that if students "were motivated to engage actively in the learning processes when they enter university, they should be more likely to meet the university environment halfway...." (ibid, pg 61). If they were not, then their focus would be limited.

Transition point 2 – *Experience of work*

The relationship between higher education and employment allowed the image of employability and gradueness to achieve its status as a higher education concept because it gave the responsibility to universities to prepare all undergraduates for employment (Relational Skill and Learning 1999). This relationship was framed in the concept of communities of learners, reflected in terms of the skills and personal development undergraduates acquire through formal work placements or internships.

The biographies revealed specific variations in the contextual experiences of those graduates who studied on the four-year sandwich courses where work placements were a core element in their courses and those graduates who studied on the three-year

courses where work experience was for two or three weeks and a bolted on module attached to the degree programme.

Graduates who studied on sandwich courses demonstrated an understanding of what they were learning by integrating their subject learning with their experiences of employment, which further enhanced their employment awareness and skills development. The one-year work placement programme reinforced the positive features with which they entered university, in terms of developing coping strategies, planning, starting instrumental social support, seeking emotional support and a positive reinterpretation of their experiences.

Students' work-placements enabled them to meet different people who would be instrumental to their employment future and so broaden their social networks, whilst at the same time gaining the graduate status required to reinforce their university experiences. Through regular assessments undertaken whilst on placement by the employer, they felt a sense of achievement and a recognition that the judgement placed on their performance by their internship employers provided them with 'a graduate identity' (Holmes 2000).

In affirming the 'graduate identity' of the students, the employer gave the undergraduates a confidence that they were capable of undertaking a graduate job once they had graduated. This declared status placed the relationship the undergraduate had with the employer on the same level playing field as that of a professional. The undergraduates' new found belief in their ability encouraged them to see themselves as professionals and to act accordingly (Holmes 2000).

The biography of the graduates illuminated that this process of affirmation of their employment ability, gave them a renewed confidence in themselves, heightening their self-esteem and motivation. This attitude was especially noticeable with one undergraduate who entered university on a sandwich course through the clearing system.

Through his motivation to achieve, and to move beyond the negative perceptions the undergraduate had concerning his entry into university through clearing, the graduate focused on acquiring the benefits he considered the course would give him. This enabled him to make the best of his university experiences and to engage in a successful one year work placement where the employer wanted him to go back to the organisation as a graduate trainee. Although the employer offered the undergraduate a job, he turned the job down in favour of travel. The skills developed as part of his internship were later used in finding suitable employment where his graduate status was later recognised by the employer, who later promoted him for entry on to a graduate training programme.

In referring to this process of mastering a disadvantaged situation, Dörnyei (2000) stated that motivation does not remain constant but is associated with “dynamically changing and eventual mental process, characterised by (re) appraisal and balancing of the various internal and external influences that the individual is exposed to” (Dörnyei pg.523, 2000).

By developing the attitude of wanting to achieve, the undergraduate was able to positively turn his situation around to get the best advantage possible to reach the graduate identity status placed upon him at university and later employment.

This explanation, derived from his biography, showed that as a new undergraduate, he accepted the situation in which he had found himself. He took ownership of and responsibility for the outcome of his clearing entry to university and the four-year degree to reach a recognised academic and employability standard. It is often that elusive factor of having failed at something undertaken, which acts as a driving force towards later success and achievement in some individuals.

Work placements are a dynamic social process because they shape and are shaped by the sum total of the graduates' experiences, their beliefs and actions within the workplace. It is not just a question of individual employment decisions and earning an income but also developing employability skills such as relating to a team in order to accomplish set goals, which are the values acquired by the individual and valued by employers.

The graduates considered that the relationship they had between the university employers and themselves was necessary so that up to date information could be exchanged on the world of work and on the higher education curriculum (Harvey and Geall 1998).

The undergraduates were also presented with an opportunity to recognise the ways in which their work experience was a significant channel for their learning. This was reflected in the graduates' remarks, which concerned the importance of being able to

use the learning they received at work in the classroom and take that back into the workplace

This relationship between higher education and employment in allowing the image of employability to achieve its status as a higher education concept was framed in terms of communication skills, teamwork skills, problem solving skills and leadership skills which were highly valued by employers.

Some graduates successfully identified the development of these skills in the workplace or internships in terms of the reflections that occurred through assessments and appraisal given within the employing company.

Clearly not all undergraduates would be successful in acquiring the depth and relevance of their learning because not every subject degree would produce the required personal outcomes of the student. Only students studying specific subject degrees will derive full benefits of work-placements (Harvey and Geall 1998)..

So, taking the responsibilities for areas of work within specific teams is an increasing expectation that provides a platform for the graduates to solve problems when they arise.

Harvey (1997) inferred that the ability of undergraduates to solve problems depended on their specific attitude, knowledge and skills towards the employing organisation and the employing organisation's attitude towards the employee. Thus the relationship has to be built on mutual trust and understanding.

As work placement internees, undergraduates will also be made aware of the importance of using employment projects as vehicles for creating and understanding that the essence of a project is not to take it at face value but to explore its meaning within its given context, so that it becomes relevant and enduring to the task in hand. The focus for the students is to acquire the habits of self-reflective practice that increases the quality of their learning the process of working on projects that in the long run will enhance their learning capabilities (Ayas and Zeniuk, 2001).

Through these experiences, the undergraduates who experience a work placement will learn of the importance of intellectual alertness and flexibility, gain high self-esteem and self-directedness in their approach to finding work. Subsequently the undergraduates will show they have developed adeptness at effectively marketing themselves to the employer through employment applications.

Work placements additionally provide undergraduates with first hand information on graduate recruitment. It gives them inside employment knowledge in terms of developing their business acumen and knowledge. Most importantly for recruitment, inside knowledge of business tells the undergraduate where to look for vacancies and how vacancies will be advertised. It helps the undergraduate make up his/her mind about whether the type of work they are interested in is right for them.

Thus, “graduates with work experience were more likely to succeed in the graduate labour market than those without” (Collective Enterprises Ltd. 1999 p3), (Lee 1999, Hillage and Pollard 1998, DFEE1999).

In the analysis, graduates who studied on the three-year courses and who undertook a work experience as an option in their course said that they often felt rushed into getting their placement. There was no formal planning that went into ensuring the graduates knew what they were doing or to realising the importance of a quality placement.

These particular graduates did not consider their placement to be beneficial to their skills learning and personal development because of a lack of substantial employment direction that would otherwise promote employment learning. Their work experience jobs were at the lower end of the employment ladder, so higher level skills were not being developed. This meant that they were not interacting within an environment where assessment and affirmation of their graduate status was being made (Holmes 2000).

They were also unable to link what they were learning in the workplace to what they were learning in the classroom. Their self-awareness of different occupations and employment procedures was not being realised. Neither did they experience the communities of learning that so profoundly defined the sandwich-course placements.

The consequence of this is that the students did not take their work-experience seriously and indeed in at least one instance did not complete a project for the employer. They were unable to relate their learning to employment, so their degree was held in isolation to the world. This could account for the fact that students who studied on the three-year courses always looked for jobs in terms of the relevance of their degree to employment.

Within this general context, the quantitative research findings showed a variation in terms of graduate employment outcomes of students studying on the different courses. Graduates who studied on the four-year sandwich courses were more likely to enter graduate jobs than those graduates who studied on the three-year courses.

The biographical evidence supports these findings and also showed that graduates who studied on a three year non-sandwich degree course were less likely on leaving university, to enter graduate employment than those who had graduated from a sandwich degree course, where work experience was a vital component to the course.

It is this very lack of structure that allowed some of the graduates who experienced low-level job work experiences, to paradoxically acquire valuable creative job search skills. These skills, especially if acquired within a specific industry, paved the way for some graduates to enter non-graduate jobs in competitive industries such as film and television.

Upon graduating, one graduate who refused to fall into the situation of not entering the job she wanted to enter, realised the importance of networking and used her short work experience at a film and television agent company to network with not just the employer but also clients.

The graduate maintained these networking contacts during her final year at university and during time off for travel after graduating. To add value to the employment experiences gained, she also undertook more relevant employment experiences working as a film extra whilst travelling. This helped to broaden the graduate's career area portfolio and to keep her foot in the door of the business.

Once the graduate returned home after travel, the employer with whom the graduate had built up this distant relationship contacted the graduate and made her an offer of a job. This demonstrated the creative and persistent manner that some graduates need to enter the more competitive but not necessarily graduate job market.

There were others who maintained a creative persistent manner, but only to keep themselves in low-level jobs once they graduated. In supporting this reference, Law et al (2002) stated that when it reached the point where a graduate had to start looking for a job, as undergraduates, they would “draw upon personal feelings and experiences, so that they could develop their own narrative.... but the lack of long term planning would ensure that graduates only entered low-level work” (Law et al, 432).

The graduates’ biography revealed that some of the graduates were still desperately seeking their career niche. Additionally, there was also an observation that talking about their situation made their experiences even more real to them.

They entered university with a driven approach to their work, a strong sense of their own personal development and an employment focus towards their degree course. They showed an aptitude in realising that the three-year degree chosen would not be sufficient to get them the graduate job they wanted.

They were able to form strategies and set goals that would help them to manage their career transition. Within the university environment they maintained this vision of their career path by seeking relevant summer placements. This long term planning for

success ensured an easy transition to graduate employment and is suggestive of the approach used by those graduates who studied on the sandwich courses

Transition point 3 – *Entry into graduate Employment*

The analysis of the 1999 graduate cohort data from both the quantitative and qualitative studies revealed that the graduates who had achieved successful transitions into employment were those who possessed wide-ranging employment experience through their internships and other long work experiences.

The biographical study revealed, however, that these particular graduates demonstrated flexibility in being able to become involved in a range of tasks. They demonstrated an ability to build up a graduate identity with their employers by performing effectively in their jobs and by meeting the targets requested of them. They were also able to work with the organisations in accepting and leading organisational changes, whilst taking risks and pushing boundaries so that the changes could be effected smoothly for the organisation.

The benefits of their higher education experiences to the workplace were particularly valuable and relevant to those graduates who found graduate employment. The content of their degree courses was considered by the graduates to be related to the type of work they were doing. Added to this were the skills and attributes the graduates considered had developed. These skills ranged from being able to communicate with different types of people to working in teams.

Effective communication skills were demonstrated in project work that was given to a graduate. The project involved having to make employees redundant. The approach the graduate took in allowing the experience to be free from anxiety for the employees was to ensure an empathy in her relationships with the employees and ensure they had a reference point to help them with their transitions to other employment.

Employers also expect graduates to 'grow the (ir) job' and 'fit in' with the workplace culture. It reinforced the expectation that graduates should adapt a pro-active approach to achieve their goals. This demonstrated the different interpersonal and problem solving skills required in graduate jobs and the expectations employers have of the abilities and skills from graduates in the work-place.

Those graduates who did not show the ability to fulfil employers' expectations led employers to make the all-inclusive statement that they were still not satisfied with some of the graduates who were applying to enter graduate employment (Harvey & Green, 1994; AGR, 1995).

Some employers still consider that some graduates do not have the skills or the commercial awareness that will provide them with the depth of knowledge or experience required to evolve an organisation. Because of this absence in business acumen some employers perceived these as shortcomings in the graduates, and did not consider that degree courses fully prepared them for employment. They also considered that little of the academic content of their course was being marketed to the employer as having any relevance to the job (Harvey & Green, 1994; AGR, 1995).

Evidence from the biographies of some graduates also suggests that their lack of preparedness for employment is blamed on the university and the expectations of employers rather than at themselves. The meanings that the graduates give to their experiences are based on their employment challenges, if their employment search undertaken after graduation is not going well for them. The blame culture they adopted served to invert the responsibility from them to the university.

One graduate wished that the university had taught students how to get on with different types of people. This was because the graduate could not get on with people in the workplace. This deferring of responsibility indicated an unwillingness on the part of the graduate to reflect upon the root of the problem and a solution that might involve personal change and better strategic social interactions. It could also be caused by genuine naivety caused by an absence of quality exposure to the work place, where support and help were given.

Given this situation, some graduates at their transitional point of finding work sometimes realised that an absence of planning strategies, goal setting and developing social interactions throughout their time at university placed them at a disadvantage in the employment market. By contrast, a work environment where the graduates simulated the experiences of graduate employment presented them with a myriad of employment opportunities from which they could gain appropriate experience.

Generally, the employment culture shock to these graduates entering the employment world showed that unless the graduate sells his/herself effectively to employers demonstrating their personal development and skills acquisition and how that relates to their academic studies, will not get a graduate job.

Given that this ability initially stemmed from the different interactions and feed back individuals get from employers, short work experiences do not give the undergraduates from the non-sandwich course the opportunity to focus on the skills they are gaining nor the aptitude to demonstrate appropriate examples of the skills they have acquired.

Even within the jobs that they did, graduates who studied on non-sandwich degree courses remained blind to the value of the skills they were acquiring within the job, with some maintaining a false perception of the jobs as having nothing to do with their degree. Law (2000) stated that “A person is attracted or repelled by certain types of work;...he or she will either enjoy or suffer it;...”(Law, 2000 p 433). In so doing, the degree is seen as instrumental to the employment qualification not the qualification as the instrument for enhancing graduate employment through the marketing of value added skills and academic relevance.

Two graduates who realised the importance of their degree as the qualification for employment took a year out to work in industry before entering university. On account of their work experience, the graduates understood the importance of having a formal degree qualification that had some relevance to their career choice.

This demonstrates that a gap year before university could be beneficial to a range of undergraduates if the gap year is spent cultivating the skills and attributes needed for the higher education environment and then employment.

Conclusion

This area of research used the biographical approach, showing its uniqueness to other research undertaken on the graduate population in the United Kingdom.

The graduate biographies enhanced the quality of the quantitative data by showing that graduates who had achieved successful transitions into employment were those who possessed wide-ranging employment experience, including skills development, and were able to relate their academic experiences instrumentally to the workplace.

These particular graduates demonstrated flexibility in being able to become involved in a range of tasks. They demonstrated an ability to build up an image with their employers by performing effectively in their jobs and by meeting the targets requested of them. The graduates also were able to see the new possibilities against the changes occurring within the organisation. Some graduates were prepared to take the risks and push the boundaries so that change might be effected smoothly for the organisation.

The benefits of their higher education experiences to the workplace were particularly valuable and relevant to the graduates who found graduate employment. The content of their degree courses was considered by the graduates to be well related to the type of work they were doing.

The data analysis further showed that graduates, who studied on the three-year courses and without the appropriate employment awareness of skills requirements were unlikely to enter graduate employment.

Chapter Seven

Conclusion and Recommendations

Introduction

This research study focused on the preparation for and entry into work of the 1999 cohort of graduates at one higher education institution in West London. The research used hitherto ignored processes to investigate the impact of biographical and contextual variation on the preparation for employment.

It explored the impact of curricular antecedents by investigating the way graduates passed through their periods of transitions within education and into work. It sought to understand and explain how these transition points interacted with graduates' experiences of higher education and how such interaction better shaped their preparation and transitions into employment.

The Institutional Focused Study, the quantitative analysis of the dataset of the 1999 graduate cohort's employment destinations from one West London University, two years after graduation, showed that there was not much difference between those completing three year and four year sandwich courses in terms of the proportion of graduates entering employment. However, the difference was clear when looking at the types of employment that graduates entered. It was found that those graduates who studied on the four-year sandwich courses were more likely to enter graduate level jobs than those graduates who studied on the three-year courses.

These findings generated a qualitative inquiry that set out to use the biographies of these graduates, as well as their contextual experiences and learning, to inquire into the grounds for the differences in the type of employment entered by graduates. The analysis explored three transitional points for graduates:

- their entry into higher education,
- their preparation for work and
- their entry into employment.

Revealed in the analysis and findings were the variables that influenced the graduates' experiences at the points of transition, plus a set of underlying dimensions that accounted for the differential effects of the variables.

Transition point 1 - *Entry to University*

The research study showed a range of biographical and contextual variables involved in shaping graduates' life experiences and their influences in determining how they reacted to the different challenges and opportunities entailed in their individual entry to university. These included: pre-enrolment information from the university; presence at induction, and the opportunities to lay foundations for networking. An underlying dimension was also evident. The experiences and responses of students who entered the university of their choice were qualitatively different from those who entered through clearing.

The students who entered their first choice university because they achieved the entry requirements needed for admission were more likely to have fully prepared themselves for university by researching the university and their courses in preparation for their admission.

Upon entry, students attended the different induction programmes that introduced them to the culture of the university, which included forming the social relationships and developing the social networks that are necessary to develop confidence and support in their studies. These influences helped them to experience clarity of purpose in studying the degree course they had chosen and to focus upon preparing for employment.

They developed a sense of academic autonomy, which was reflected in their ability to take ownership of their lives. These features were found to be important in terms of their preparation for employment and their eventual transition into graduate employment, because it gave the students a sense of meaning and purpose as to why they were doing their degree course.

Similarly, undergraduates on the three-year courses who took a year out and entered university after spending a year within a large organisation were also able to give their course form and purpose, by using their experiences and learning to shape the way they approached their university degree courses.

The research study also revealed that there were marked differences in the experiences of the graduates who entered university through clearing because they had not achieved the entry requirements to enter the university of their choice.

The study showed that these students generally had not done any preparation for their entry into their clearing university. This meant that upon entry, they had not dealt

with the disappointment of underachievement and so their attitude towards the university was one of indifference towards any induction programmes that could help them to settle into university life. Consequently, the students were reluctant to integrate within the social culture of the university. They refused to form social relationships and social networks that would help to support them throughout their period at university.

Their mixed emotions were important as to how they perceived themselves as settling on to the degree courses. Their focus was on doing well within their degree course because they felt this would make up for their low entry qualifications. However, in doing so, they ignored other processes, such as attending extra-curricular activities that would enhance their degree courses and factors associated with their learning that would enhance their employment outcomes. This placed these students at a disadvantage in the employment market.

Not surprisingly, the study showed that some students could overcome their lack of positive qualities by virtue of the course they were studying. An example was of a student who entered through clearing to study on a sandwich, vocational course. The student was able to gain immediate focus within the university upon entry and to realise the benefits of the degree course rather than focusing on not achieving the entry qualifications to enter the first choice university.

Transition point 2 – *Experience of Work*

The graduates' biographies revealed the range of contextual variables involved in shaping their experiences of and their reactions to this transition period. The variables

included student expectations, their level of integration into the degree programme, their degree of integration into the workplace, and their growth of professionalism and graduate identity.

The underlying dimension was that those graduates who studied on the sandwich courses prepared differently for work through their compulsory internship module or work placement than those students who studied on the three-year degree, non-sandwich courses, even if they were presented with an optional work experience module of three weeks.

The study showed that internship students viewed their courses as partnerships between the employer, the university and themselves. They were important in helping to provide quality employment that even compensated for low entry qualifications into university.

The internships allowed the students to simulate the application for graduate employment, which provided them with valuable skills and knowledge that they could transfer into the world of work. It also helped the University to maintain up to date records of the world of industry.

Internship students' awareness was drawn to the relationships between the workplace and their learning. This provided an opportunity for them to explore and understand more about the recruitment process and occupational areas.

The students discovered a sense of professionalism within the workplace that enabled the development of their graduate identity. This generated professional confidence and learning experiences for the graduates, acquired from employers who provided the undergraduates with forms of assessments and feedback on which open judgements concerning their performance were based.

Those graduates who studied on the three-year courses had optional work experience modules that were bolted on to their degree courses. Some students saw these modules as easy options. However, the options did not have the depth or the breadth in terms of the requirements to simulate the workplace setting. Students' applications were informal and they were not presented with the opportunity to follow other formal recruitment processes such as taking tests and being formally interviewed.

Instead, the students on the non-sandwich courses discovered more informal and creative ways of getting their placement, such as work shadowing, volunteer work and up-grading part-time work. In this manner, the opportunity to find out about the formal preparedness of the workplace, its expectations of the application and recruitment process were not established.

This absence of the employer-higher education interface on the three-year degree programmes meant that the undergraduates who studied on the three-year degree non-sandwich courses failed to acquire the range and depth of knowledge and its transferability into different areas of employment that were required by the employer. They were also not fully aware of the different methods of recruitment used by the employer.

In the case of two graduates who did not take part in sandwich courses but who had spent a year in industry working before entering university the study showed the significance and value of the length of the work experience as a means of consolidating students' learning and experiences.

They found that their time spent in industry formed the basis for wanting to maintain their high-level links with employment. Because their course did not allow them to do so, they discovered that finding a quality summer placement, where they were being recruited from a competitive stream of applicants, meant they had to take a decisive approach to their application and recruitment process. By maintaining this constant link, the undergraduates were refreshing their knowledge of the world of work.

Transition point 3. *Entry into Employment*

The research study showed that most graduates expected to enter graduate jobs. Yet, getting into graduate jobs was dependent on the graduates' experiences of employment and how they were able to apply their learning of the graduate employment to these experiences.

The dimensions that were highlighted in this section were graduate jobs and non-graduate jobs. The variables were: starting points in their search for jobs, recruitment knowledge, the nature of employment preparation, employers' expectations, mutual employer and graduate expectations, employment incentives and rewards, organization fit and taking time off before employment.

Those graduates who succeeded in entering graduate employment had an all round knowledge of the employment world and demonstrated an awareness of commercial knowledge and experience. They knew where to look for vacancies, when to apply and how to present their application and themselves to employers.

The combination of their previous knowledge and experiences gave the graduates the confidence and determination they needed to get the job. They showed employers a sharp sense of awareness of their ability to add value to the organisation by being able to influence and manage change through being adaptive, flexible and leading a team to achieve the organisation's goals. The graduates understood the links between being an effective and efficient worker within the workplace, one who could complete tasks and move forward quickly in the organisation.

This was demonstrated in the targets graduates had to meet on entering the organisation. So one graduate was made responsible for making hundreds of staff redundant. The graduate developed a strategy to do so, which involved finding out about the different sources of support and help the employees could tap into to alleviate any subsequent difficulties. This allowed the redundancies to occur seamlessly, which was favourable for the organisation involved. The study showed that employers recognise and reward employees for their performance in having achieved their different targets.

The research study also revealed that even where a graduate decided to take time off for travel, their previous knowledge and confidence of the workplace helped them to eventually get into graduate employment on their return. However, this was not the

situation for graduates who took extended time off. In one situation, a graduate took two years off, which led to difficulties getting back on to the employment market. This showed that employers place a higher premium on graduates with newly acquired combined learning and experience that they can demonstrate in the workplace.

Students who entered non-graduate jobs were unlikely to enter directly into graduate level jobs. However, their creative abilities in applying for jobs meant that they entered jobs from which they gained relevant experience that enabled them eventually to enter career track employment.

Their creative methods of job-hunting helped them to get into some areas of employment that were quite competitive, but were not graduate employment. The study showed that some of the graduates perceived themselves to have been misled by employers and were often left confused and frustrated with their employment situation.

It also showed that some graduates did not ascribe to the cultural values of the employment situation that would have helped them to progress quickly within the job in which they found themselves – these graduates were already beginning to look for a change of job.

The research study emphasised the importance of being able to negotiate and persuade employers to see the graduates' needs from their point of view. The more

the graduates were able to define their requirements in the workplace, the more likely they were to get the employer to support their requests for career progression.

2. Limitations of the Research Study

This research attempted to examine the employment destinations of graduates initially using an analysis of the 1999 datasets of their responses to the employment destination survey. The major limitation of this particular research study was the restricted amount of evidence available on the full range of processes affecting and influencing the graduates' transitions into employment.

The qualitative method using biographies was a more suitable approach for exploring the graduates' contextual learning and experiences of their different transitions.

Using biographies as a research method on the 1999 graduate cohort meant having to use in-depth semi-structured interviews. The research study could have been further enhanced if data had been collected on the biographical background of the graduates with attention being paid to the possible effect of social class, ethnicity and age on graduates' interactions and experiences. This information could have provided another set of variables to be used to enrich and to provide alternatives to the study's explanations.

When designing the interview schedule, it was difficult to determine an exact starting point. The researcher made the decision to start with the graduates' entry to University. This meant that data on the school experiences of the graduates were not available for exploration. Insights into how and why the graduates came to make their

different decisions at the end of their school courses were therefore lost to the study. With more resources, more could have been made of interviewees' learning contexts within their schools before entry into university. This would have provided further insights over a protracted period into how and why the graduates came to make their different learning choices and how this influenced their different learning experiences and their ultimate transition into employment.

The sample size was also limited, in that only sixteen students volunteered to take part in the research study. A larger sample would have provided a much broader and extensive database and a more robust basis for the research study's conclusions. A breakdown of the sample respondents into significant underlying dimensions shows that only four students entered the University through clearing. One respondent was from the sandwich course whereas three respondents from non-sandwich courses entered university through clearing. Twelve students entered the university as their first choice university. Seven were on non-sandwich courses and five were on sandwich courses.

Of the graduates who entered through clearing, the one respondent who entered on the sandwich course showed a seamless transition into employment, unlike the other three respondents who entered university on the non-sandwich course through clearing. However, this was a small sample and a larger sample of respondents could have provided more diverse findings that demonstrated whether entering university through clearing made a difference to students' final transitions or whether the courses students studied made the difference.

Another limitation includes the interviewer's own personal and professional perspective as a careers adviser. Silverman (1997) mentioned, in his description of the 'Insider' and the 'Outsider' dilemma, the importance of seeking to find realities in interviews by learning more about the social world of the respondents beyond the interview. The Interviewer's own knowledge gained through her professional role meant that this was unnecessary. However, the disadvantage was that this could have shaped the interpretation of the life experiences of the graduates and interfered with their personal meanings of their different lived transitions into university and employment. The researcher had to make judgements about the significance of the data in identifying the significant variables and underlying dimension. For this reason, the key determinant of the quality of this research was the level of detachment the researcher achieved during the research.

The researcher used different techniques to reduce the contamination between the interviewees' perspectives and the meanings attributed to their experiences by creating circumstances in which the graduates established a dialectical relationship with their own accounts. Initially, the interviewer went to considerable lengths to develop rapport and a level of trust with the respondents by maintaining confidentiality and a non-judgemental attitude. This ensured the willingness of the respondents to talk. More importantly it meant that it was possible to invite the interviewees to justify, accept or to challenge their own narratives of their experiences.

This process of self-confrontation that occurred throughout the interviews meant that the students were able to gain some understanding of themselves, the reasons that

allowed them to make their life defining decisions and the implication of their individual decisions on their employment.

This was particularly evident in the emotional responses of some of the respondents especially those who entered university through clearing, as they spoke of their experiences in entering a university that was not their first choice university. They displayed a still lived pain and discomfort of the event as though it was a recent encounter. The experience of the interviews was often empowering and illuminating.

Because of this self-created dialectic, it was much easier for the researcher to remain detached without interference and interruption. The interviewer maintained silence whilst the interviewees told their stories, interjecting only at natural pauses in their stories, to seek clarification and elaboration on minor details.

To ensure the completeness of the narratives it was essential that the researcher understood thoroughly the dynamics of the individual biographies. Capturing non-verbal details of the interview immediately after the interview helped to open up the data so that the researcher could form impressions of anything missed during the data analysis. The researcher found it beneficial regularly to consult with her academic supervisor and other colleagues in the careers service, who laid bare alternative perspectives to the data collected.

3. Implications

The implication of this research study for students at the University is that more effort is expended to provide access for all students. Although the careers centre already

provides a targeted service for students during the induction period, it will encourage students to visit the careers centre at an early stage and work even more widely with academic departments to help give emphasis to the importance of obtaining quality work placements.

In addition the quality of the work experiences of students on three-year courses is to be scrutinised and monitored in order to ensure that they become aware of the relevance of those experiences to their courses and their wider world experiences, in particular employment.

The possible benefits to the University of acting on the results of this study are a higher employability graduate outcome as measured by the destination returns of higher education leavers and better feedback from the graduates and employers about the quality of employment preparation provided whilst studying at the University.

4. Contribution

Although there has been a lot of recent research that has explored graduates' transitions from university into employment, this current research study is unique for two reasons.

It is the only research study known to the researcher to explore the complex contextual influences on transitions by means of biographical material.

It has exposed the many issues that arise from students' whole higher education experiences, from their entry into higher education, their preparation into employment and eventual entry into employment.

Research studies for example Nicholson & Arnold (1989), Dörnyei, (2000) Côté & Levine, (2000), Berzonsky & Kuk (2000), that have focused on the perceptions of graduates' experiences and their transitions into employment have not explored the journey of the graduates from school to higher education and employment. This research study is the first to explore the complete journey and the knowledge gained is expected to enrich the research field as a whole as well as the professional practice of the researcher and colleagues working with Careers Departments.

5. Suggestions for further Study

The area of research could benefit from the extension of the study in the following fields:

- A longitudinal study that starts from Year 13 of pupils entering higher education and follows their progress through higher education into employment, rather than a retrospective study of experiences
- The emphasis placed on employers' perceptions of undergraduates, their experiences and preparation for work and parents' perceptions of the impact of their children's different transition points and the parents' influences in helping to shape their children's journey into higher education and eventual employment.

- A study that focuses on the differences of employment paths between those students who entered university through clearing and those entered through non-clearing.

This study supports other studies that indicate that a graduate's success in industry is dependent upon the different elements of experiences they bring with them to university. Additionally it explains how the students use these features to take advantage of their different transitions as preparation for the world of work.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1

Interview Schedule

- **What entry qualifications did you need to enter university?**
- **Was the university you studied at, your first-choice university?**

- **What degree did you study?**
- **How did university prepare you for employment?**
- **How long was your work-placement?**
- **How did your experiences of university help you to make the transition into employment?**

- **At what point did you begin to plan and apply for your first job?**
- **What was your first job?**
- **What employment criteria do you think you needed to get that first job?**
- **How did you progress in your jobs?**
- **Did your jobs meet your expectations?**

- **In retrospect, how has your university education affected your choices and your role within the different organisations you have worked?**