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“Universities just pretend that getting that piece of paper is all you need, like they are selling ice cream.” Supporting diverse graduates to achieve post-graduation goals

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Abstract

Internationally, new complexities and permutations have emerged in the world of work: employment is no longer stable or strictly demarcated by graduate and non-graduate work; unsecured and entrepreneurial economies are prevalent. Despite this, an expectation persists in the higher education (HE) sector that educational access will result in positive post-graduate outcomes regardless of prior educational or social disadvantage. This paper explores how students from a range of diverse backgrounds navigate post-graduation landscapes and the issues/obstacles they reported during this journey. Drawn from an analysis of large-scale Australian quantitative data and qualitative data from 268 alumni (O’Shea, 2019), recommendations are made for how the global community can honour difference and support *all* graduates to be “future-ready”.

1 Introduction

Global higher education (HE) initiatives have seen an unprecedented increase in students graduating with a degree qualification (Marginson, 2016; OECD, 2001). However, this rise has not been matched by employer demand, causing an oversupply of graduates and intensified competition for employment worldwide, including Europe, North America, China and India (Allen et al., 2013; Purcell et al., 2013; Roulin & Bangerter, 2013). Thus, the returns that graduates can expect from HE are more volatile (Moreau & Leathwood, 2006). Indeed, any unified concept of a “graduate labour market” is increasingly redundant, as graduate employment is segmented into zones of greater or lesser security, with differing levels of correspondence to graduate-level skills (Morrison, 2014).

“Employability” commonly refers to attributes that make individual graduates inherently more attractive to employers (Boden & Nedeva, 2010) or successful in the labour market (Tholen, 2015). Yet “employability” is far from neutral, but rather encompasses discourses which bring personal and circumstantial differences to the fore, allowing for (re)production of (dis)advantage (Allen et al., 2013) which ultimately ignores systemic inequities in the graduate employment market. Arguably, discourses around “employment” also reflect deeper social trends, such as “employment skills” where deeper connotations of “gendered”, “classed” and “racialized” skills (Moreau & Leathwood, 2006, p.308) may go unidentified. Equally, in the HE

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sector an expectation remains that if individuals are provided with educational access this will “translate” into positive achievement post-graduation regardless of “prior educational or social disadvantage” (Pitman, et al, 2019, p.46).

While national reports of graduate outcomes in the UK, US and Australia indicate high levels of employment and increasing graduate salaries, closer analysis reveals that unemployment, underemployment and underutilisation of skills and qualifications are particularly so for those from diverse or non-traditional backgrounds. Far from being an “even playing field”, graduate opportunities are influenced by social origins which “play a role in shaping up the labor-market and personal outcomes” (Tomaszewski, et al. 2019, p.17). While student numbers grow, a range of barriers and challenges will be faced by equity and first-in-family (FiF) students upon graduation. These hidden injustices within the graduate landscape mean not all students receive equitable returns from their HE participation.

Students who are first in their family at university are a growing cohort in Australia and internationally (Cataldi, et al., 2018; Spiegler & Bednarek, 2013; Universities New Zealand, 2018). FiF is a group characterized by substantially poorer university outcomes and more complex journeys (ABS, 2013; AIHW, 2014; Spiegler & Bednarek, 2013). FiF students face a range of barriers into, through and out of university, including a gap in knowledge about university in the home (O’Shea, et al., 2017), feeling they don’t “fit in” (Lehmann, 2009), and being constrained by circumstances beyond their control (Delahunty & O’Shea, 2020). At the same time, diverse backgrounds are not always a burden or disadvantage, but can be a source of translatable employment capabilities (O’Shea & Delahunty, 2019) including the ability to employ strategic and deliberate techniques to achieve success in the HE environment (Groves & O’Shea, 2019).

Given the unique issues faced by FiF students, and also their capability and strength, it is necessary to carefully examine the qualitative experience of their transition to graduate employment.

2 The study

This research was conducted in Australia in 2019 as part of the project “Mind-the-Gap!” (O’Shea, 2019). The aim was to understand how students from diverse backgrounds actually understand and experience the employment market, post-graduation.

Data were collected via interviews and surveys from 268 FiF alumni and recent graduates who were also highly intersected by a range of equity categories⁴ or markers of educational disadvantage.

3 Findings

This section presents a summary overview of how FiF participants navigated post-graduation landscapes and issues/obstacles during their HE journeys. It addresses (1) the FiF experience of transition to graduate employment; and (2) recommendations for how FiF can be best supported to be “future-ready”.

3.1 Experience of transition

Graduates and alumni considered a range of issues that affected movement out of university and into post-graduation employment. These included “personal” issues of feeling like an “imposter” and the need to negotiate insider knowledge. What was striking was how a limited

⁴ While students were all first-in-family, they also self-selected other demographic categories related to economic, ethnic and geographic factors including being working class (WC) and for alumni, years since graduation.

sense of belonging shadowed these students through their HE experience and post-graduation. Many reflected upon feeling “different” when attempting to engage with the employment market, even after obtaining a job:

I constantly feel inferior to everyone else in my field and don't think I really belong here. I don't know what else I would do but I'm not sure this is for me. (Female, 21-25, 5yrs grad, Survey#79)

A sense of being different to work colleagues or peers was particularly noted amongst older alumni:

Feeling as if I belonged took a while as I had come from a class/family that were somewhat marginalised. (Female, 51, WC, 31yrs grad, Survey#177)

In general, I don't have a lot in common with academics, they are usually from a different background. (Female, 31-40, WC, 3yrs grad, Survey#87)

This difference was at times due to “gaps” in understanding or networks that impacted on pursuit of employment. Students, like Jill who inspired the title of this paper, expressed frustration and disappointment upon graduating and seeking employment. For her, the five years since graduating had been a relentless search for employment in the chemistry field, something she feels university did not adequately prepare her for:

Just having a degree doesn't get you a job. No one thought to tell me, a kid from a family where no one had gone to university, that internships, volunteering, padding out your resume like a preppy sod would make you employable. (Jill)

External factors that impacted on post-graduation employability included financial and spatial issues. The latter refers to how the post-graduation geographical environment was navigated. Given the size of Australia, it is not surprising that distance plays a key role in securing employment. Willingness to move for work was a requirement for a number of participants, and was often referred to in terms of loss, a necessary but somewhat unwelcome decision. As one participant explained:

Moving to another city...with no family support or money. Feeling like you have nothing in common with your family and nothing to talk about with them. They do not get your life or understand what you do. (Female, 26-30, 3yrs grad, Survey#17)

Having to “make do” was often how participants managed these issues, including navigating non-linear pathways to full-time employment. These students reflected on compromises such as abandoning ambitions in favour of basic financial or material needs in the short term or sacrificing employment opportunity due to distance or location.

3.2 Recommendations

Drawn from an analysis of the findings, a selection of recommendations are offered which honour and support the diversity of our participants.

Recommendations for stakeholders

1. **University marketing and administrators:** Be upfront and clear about the length of time involved to become established in degree-related work. Clear messaging must be

complemented by the provision of timely support (practical advice *and* financial resourcing) as students transition into the workforce.

2. **University equity and outreach providers:** Ensure that the “transition out” phase of the student life-cycle is as supported and scaffolded as the “transition in”. Support should be offered in various modes, timed to critical post-graduation stages. Support should be individuated, while also focusing on the groups most at risk of un/underemployment.

Recommendations for sector/policy

3. **Independent university peak bodies:** Provide realistic cost-benefit analyses for different fields of study; prioritise ongoing interrogation of longitudinal “opportunity costs” of a degree so students can make informed choices about the qualifications they pursue and the cost benefits of different qualifications.
4. **Government departments:** Work collaboratively to link statistics on employer demand, work patterns and degree-work transitions.

4 Conclusion

This paper provides a summary overview of how students from a range of equity groups navigated post-graduation landscapes and the issues/obstacles they encountered. It draws on a sociological perspective, which considers the structural and institutional stratification that may hinder progress post-graduation.

The findings usefully inform support measures and initiatives implementable across the student life-cycle for students from diverse backgrounds, changes to policy foci or institutional discourses, and more nuanced understandings of how post-graduate students from equity backgrounds navigate and engage with the employment market.

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