

**School of Social Sciences**



# **Working Paper Series Paper 45**



**First Class Women in the World of Work:  
Employability & Labour Market Orientations**

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**January, 2004**

**ISBN 1 904815 05 7**

# **First Class Women in the World of Work: Employability & Labour Market Orientations**

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## **Working Paper**

### **Abstract**

Within what is increasingly being referred to as a ‘knowledge-driven economy’, where notions of employability have taken centre stage, it is often assumed that those with first class honours degrees will receive the best employment opportunities, regardless of factors such as gender, social background or educational biography. This paper critically evaluates such assumptions. Drawing on survey and interview data the paper outlines some of the differences and similarities in and between the profiles of first class female and male respondents – firstly in terms of their relative ‘positions’ within the labour market, and then in terms of their subjective labour market perceptions, experiences and values. In doing so the paper explores the extent to which, and ways in which, the graduate labour market for those with first class honours degrees may be viewed as ‘gendered’. In light of the data presented, the paper ends by re-assessing widespread conceptualizations of ‘employability’, incorporating an understanding of its *socially constructed* nature and arguing for the incorporation of the voices of high achieving young men and women.

## Introduction

‘Employability’ is the latest notion to have captured the minds of the business world, governments, policy-makers, educationalists and, more recently, academics (see e.g. CBI, 1998; Drucker, 1993; DfES, 2003; DfEE, 1998; Holmes, 2001; Brown *et al.*, 2003) – and it is a notion that is closely tied to changing forms of work and organization. The *gender* implications of this emphasis on employability, however, have so far remained a largely neglected research issue. This research seeks to redress this imbalance by exploring how graduates with First Class honours degrees construct, understand and manage their employability within the labour market, and whether differences exist according to the gender, educational biographies or social backgrounds of students. The collection and analysis of quantitative survey data is supplemented by a detailed *qualitative* investigation of the social construction of employability by graduates with First Class honours degrees. Preliminary findings are presented and discussed.

According to figures published by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA, 2001) women are now graduating – in absolute terms at least - with more firsts than their male counterparts (and thus apparently continuing to close the *educational* ‘gender gap’ examined by Arnot *et al.*, 1999). In 2001, the first year that women overtook men in terms of the absolute number of firsts awarded, women were awarded 10,095 firsts compared to 8,974 awarded to men (HESA, 2001). This pattern continued in 2002 (HESA, 2002) when 11,175 firsts were awarded to women compared to 9,705 to men. Indeed the overall academic performance of female students has improved significantly over recent years, despite the fact that men are still more likely to study numerical and scientific disciplines at university, in which the highest proportion of 1sts and 2:1s are awarded. A first glance at the statistics therefore seems to imply a success story for women’s general ‘employability’ on entry to the labour market.

However this research turns current economic thinking about employability on its head, by sociologically examining micro-level differences in the labour market behaviour, perceptions, aspirations, choices, expectations, experiences and outcomes of a group of graduates with ‘the best’ academic credentials. It achieves this by exploring how such differences are both mediated by, and constructed through, particular subjectivities, understandings of ‘self’, and gendered identities. A central issue is how this group of high achieving women *experience* the labour market and world of work, and how they are positioned both within, and by, the new discourse of employability (Taylor, 1998).

According to Walby (1999), women’s increased participation in the labour market is a result of increasing levels of educational attainment by younger women, the introduction of equity legislation, and changing family or household structures. However, in itself this tells us little about (i) how female graduates with firsts *feel about* and *experience* the world of work on a subjective level, and, closely related to this; (ii) how their identity as high achieving *women*, impacts on their labour market choices and perceptions; (iii) the extent to which female success at degree level is reflected in labour market outcomes, or; (iv) the *value* that different women attach to their credential within the labour market. This research explores not only if and how the aspirations, expectations and experiences of women and men *differ*, but it also

explores differences between women and men *with similar kinds of capital* (Bourdieu, 1995).

This paper argues that employability is about more than simply finding a job – it is about different (competing) value systems, and the relative importance that individuals attach to the two sides of the ‘work/life balance’ for example. Employability is intimately connected to issues of social and personal identity, to individuals’ subjective understandings of ‘self’, to how their actions within the labour market are shaped by different value systems and (crucially) to differences in the labour market *power* of individuals. Employability and labour market choices and behaviour are also shaped by more unconscious elements relating to one’s ‘habitus’ (Bourdieu, 1973). A fuller understanding of the concept of employability necessitates a focus on both the macro and micro levels i.e. it necessitates a focus on the broader occupational structure and the opportunities it offers for different individuals, but also on how different individuals navigate and experience the labour market on a more subjective level.

A number of elements of this research therefore contribute to issues regarding the broad theme of ‘gender and work’. In particular, women’s choices, ‘lifestyle preferences’ (Hakim, 2000) and ‘values’ are of central importance to an understanding of high achieving women graduates’ lived experience of work and the labour market, and also to their constructions of their employability. Against the background of an economic sociology which continues to assert the importance of ‘the rational’, ‘the economic’ and ‘the instrumental’, this study argues that we need to look carefully at the different *values*, subjectivities, constructions and identities that underpin the choices and decisions that female graduates are making, and the way that they behave within the labour market. For example, women with Firsts do not necessarily have a ‘careerist’ orientation to work, but are often caught in an extremely complex web of decisions and ‘choices’, which relate to the different value systems that they variously draw upon and the identities that they both inhabit and more actively create.

Preliminary findings from an analysis of the survey data and qualitative interviews suggest that there are indeed important (and increasingly complex) gender differences in women and men’s experiences of work and the labour market. There are also differences in terms of how different groups of women construct and manage their employability, and in the *values* they attach to both their ‘work’ and ‘personal’ lives. Qualitative interviews have enabled an exploration of the experiences of female and male graduates working in a range of sectors, industries and jobs; both male dominated private sector professions (e.g. engineering) and female-dominated public sector professions (e.g. teaching). Analysis of the research data has therefore allowed the impact of gender on individual perceptions of employability and labour market choice to be explored in depth, and a fuller re-conceptualization of employability to be arrived at. This paper aims firstly to outline the relative positions of the sample of first class women and men within the world of work, presenting some of the main findings from an analysis of the survey data, before going on to explore high achieving women and men’s subjective experiences and perceptions of the labour market. It ends by re-considering and re-conceptualizing common understandings of employability in light of the research data presented.

## Methodology

In order to examine differences in the labour market expectations, aspirations, experiences and orientations of first class degree holders and how they construct and manage their employability within the labour market, the research adopts a combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches to data collection and analysis. The study is therefore based on a multi-method research design consisting of the following three main methods of data collection: (i) secondary data analysis, (ii) a postal questionnaire survey of graduates with firsts and 2:2s, and (iii) a series of semi-structured qualitative interviews with a sample of first class degree holders.

In July 2002 a postal survey of graduates from eight Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) representing a wide range of status positions was undertaken. The questionnaire was sent to two cohorts of university graduates now in the labour market – those who graduated in 1997 (who therefore have slightly more experience of the labour market) and those who graduated in 2001 (the newer and relatively inexperienced cohort). The questionnaire was sent to all students who graduated with firsts in each of these years, and also to a matching random sample of graduates with 2:2s for comparative purposes. The questionnaire covered a range of issues, allowing for the collection of some detailed data on the personal characteristics of respondents, as well as information relating to their job search activities, career details to date e.g. what they did after leaving university, what their position in the labour market is now, whether or not they are satisfied with their current position etc., details of income and some more generic attitude-related questions concerning their views on, and perceptions of, various elements relating to the broad theme of ‘work and the labour market’. There were 834 respondents to the survey (a response rate of 20%), achieved from a single mail-out.

The next stage of the research involved conducting semi-structured qualitative interviews with 50 first class graduates selected using a theoretical sampling method from the returned postal questionnaires, in order to explore their opinions, experiences and aspirations in some more detail. The graduates interviewed were selected on a purposive or ‘theoretical’ sampling basis from respondents to the questionnaire, in order to represent graduates from a range of social class backgrounds, genders and educational biographies. Using a qualitative method to ‘give voice’ to individual respondents was particularly important, given that a central aim of the research is to understand the socially constructed and culturally mediated nature of employability, and to allow respondents to speak in their own words about issues that are salient to them. Furthermore, a qualitative research strategy was the most effective way of collecting data on *why* these graduates have made the decisions that they have, rather than examining simply *what* they have done (the focus of stage one).

## **The Personal & Educational Characteristics of Survey Respondents: A Profile**

Before reporting some of the findings from an analysis of the survey data, the personal and educational characteristics of survey respondents will briefly be summarized. This is in order that readers are aware of the characteristics of respondents, on which the quantitative analysis is based.

A fairly even gender split was achieved: 52% of respondents were male and 48% female. In terms of social class background, 73% of respondents were from professional/managerial backgrounds and 27% from routine service/manual social class backgrounds. Interestingly, on a self-rated or 'subjective' measure of social class, 28% of respondents considered themselves to be from a 'working class' background, just 1% (8 respondents) classed themselves as 'upper class', and the majority (71%) classed themselves as having a 'middle class' background, which almost exactly mirrors the 'objective' measure of class into which respondents were categorised. In terms of university attended, 57% of respondents came from 'elite' institutions, 23% from 'middle status' institutions, and 20% from 'low status' institutions. In this study participating institutions are categorized, for the purposes of analysis and comparison, into three distinct 'grades': 'Elite', 'middle status' and 'low status'. 'Elite' institutions include universities that are part of the 'Russell Group' i.e. generally old, 'established' universities with high levels of 'reputational capital' (Brown & Scase, 1998) and a high-ranking position within league tables. 'Middle status' institutions include universities that occupy 'mid-ranking' positions in published league tables. 'Low status' institutions include those found towards the bottom end of published league tables, with lower levels of reputational capital. This sample includes three 'newer', post-1992 universities. 19% of respondents had studied an arts/humanities degree course, 19% a natural science course, 20% a social science course, 27% a 'vocational' course (e.g. engineering) and 15% a maths/computing degree course. There were however differences in the gender composition of the various subjects, as might be expected, with women over-represented amongst the arts/humanities and social science disciplines, and men over-represented amongst the 'vocational' and maths/computing subject disciplines:

**Table 1: Area of Degree Study by Gender (All Respondents, N = 781)**

	Frequency		Percentage	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
Arts/Humanities	48	99	11.7%	26.8%
Natural Sciences	68	76	16.5%	20.5%
Social Sciences	53	107	12.9%	28.9%
'Vocational'	156	57	38%	15.4%
Maths/Computing	86	31	20.9%	8.4%
Total	411	370	100%	100%

Finally, in terms of the variables relating to graduation year and degree class, 55% of respondents were graduates from 2001 and 45% were graduates from 1997. 56% of respondents to the survey had achieved a first class honours degree compared to 44% who had achieved a 2:2.

# 1. The Relative Positions of First Class Female and Male Graduates Within the Labour Market

This section explores what may be termed the ‘objective labour market positions’ of first class female and male respondents to the survey e.g. their employment status, occupational group, income, and the amount of training they receive. Such ‘objective’ or ‘factual’ indicators of labour market position are commonly used to assess graduates’ general ‘employability’ or (initial) labour market ‘success’. In fact this is a contentious measure of an individual’s ‘employability’, given that as a *social construction* one’s general employability is dependent not only upon such ‘objective’ indicators, but is also fundamentally related to subjective evaluations of self, to identities, values and individual orientations to the labour market, as well as on the macro-level *demand* for particular types of labour. However, although this paper argues that employability is not simply about finding any job within the labour market, such ‘objective’ measures do give an indication of female graduate respondents’ positions within the labour market *relative to their similarly qualified male counterparts*. These insights can then form the basis for theorizing and conceptual discussion of respondents’ relative positions within the occupational structure, and provide a useful backdrop for the qualitative stage of the research. Key issues via gender differences in graduate employment include the gender pay gap, how far differences in males and females’ experiences in employment reflect differences in their skills and knowledge, how far experience *at work* leads to differences in career outcomes, the extent to which different groups of male and female graduates have divergent career aspirations, and the impact of changes in education and employment on these graduates’ labour market ‘choices’, identities, behaviour, perceptions and orientations.

Given that employability depends on how one stands relative to others within an explicit or implicit hierarchy of job seekers (Brown *et al.*, 2003), the ‘positional’ aspect of employability assumes major importance in understanding who will find elite employment. Thus, when Brown *et al.* (2003) define employability as “the *relative* chances [that individuals have] of finding and maintaining different kinds of employment” (emphasis added), they implicitly suggest that employability itself, as well as the opportunity structure, is structured by a person’s social characteristics such as their gender, class or race. However the mechanisms by which this occurs, and the complex ways that gender interacts with constructions of employability require further analysis: In short, gender needs to be brought more explicitly and centrally into the analytic framework that they employ, namely positional conflict theory (see Brown, 2000). The data emerging from this study of first class graduates provide a good opportunity of bringing gender more centrally into the analytic framework of the theory, and indeed (perhaps more importantly) of exploring empirically the extent to which graduates themselves actually *view* the labour market and their place within it in competitive, positional terms.

This section begins by examining the current employment status and occupational grouping<sup>1</sup> of respondents at the time of the survey. It then goes on to compare the

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<sup>1</sup> Coding was based on a classification of individual respondents’ job titles, and used to achieve an individual’s NS-SEC class position (see Rose & Pevalin (2001) for details of the NS-SEC approach to the conceptualisation and measurement of social class).

position of men and women with firsts vis-à-vis income and the number of days training they receive per year. The section finishes by examining the relative position of men and women in terms of their likelihood of having completed a fast track graduate training programme. *On all of these indicators women are found to fare less well within the labour market than their equally qualified male counterparts, and to this extent having a first does not appear to 'compensate' for the gender of respondents.* The key question that forms the centre of this section is: How are first class women faring relative to their similarly qualified male counterparts within the labour market? But also, how are different groups of women faring relative to each other, according to variables such as subject studied, university attended and social class background?<sup>2</sup> This section therefore gives a snap-shot of the macro-level dynamics of the labour market for men and women with first class honours degrees who responded to the survey, before going on to look at the micro level of analysis in terms of respondents' *subjective* labour market perceptions and orientations. The differing expectations and values of women and men on a micro level are shown to seriously complicate the picture by adding a subjective element to the 'neater' quantitative picture. However these subjective elements are just as, if not more, important to social constructions of employability. Finding a way of bringing these structure/agency/value dimensions into an integrated framework for the analysis of employability therefore poses one of the most interesting questions for future analysis of the gendered dimension of employability.

Figure 1 shows the current employment status of respondents to the survey by year of graduation and degree class<sup>3</sup>. It shows us a number of things: Firstly, 1997 graduates are more likely to have made the transition into permanent employment than newer graduates, as might be expected given their greater length of time within the labour market. Interestingly, it also shows that graduates with 2:2s are in fact slightly more likely than their first class counterparts (for both cohorts) to be in permanent jobs: However, it does not tell us (crucially) about the *type* of job in which respondents are employed. For example, the greater number of graduates with 2:2s in permanent jobs may simply indicate that there are more of these graduates working as check out operators in their local *Kwik Save* for example. In each of the cohorts those with firsts are more likely than their counterparts with lower seconds to be involved in further study / research<sup>4</sup>, particularly when comparing the position of newer graduates. Recent graduates with 2:2s are considerably more likely than their first class counterparts to be either seeking employment or engaged in 'short term' employment.

Figure 2 includes only those with first class degrees, and compares the positions of men and women from each of the graduation cohorts. It shows that in each of the graduation years men are slightly more likely than their female contemporaries to be in permanent employment (but again it tells us nothing about the *type* of job in which respondents are employed). The difference is less important for the older cohort, which suggests that over time women do improve their position relative to their

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<sup>2</sup> Clearly however, within the spatial and temporal constraints of a standard paper it has only been possible to include a snapshot of some of the main findings of the research. Others have necessarily been omitted from the discussion.

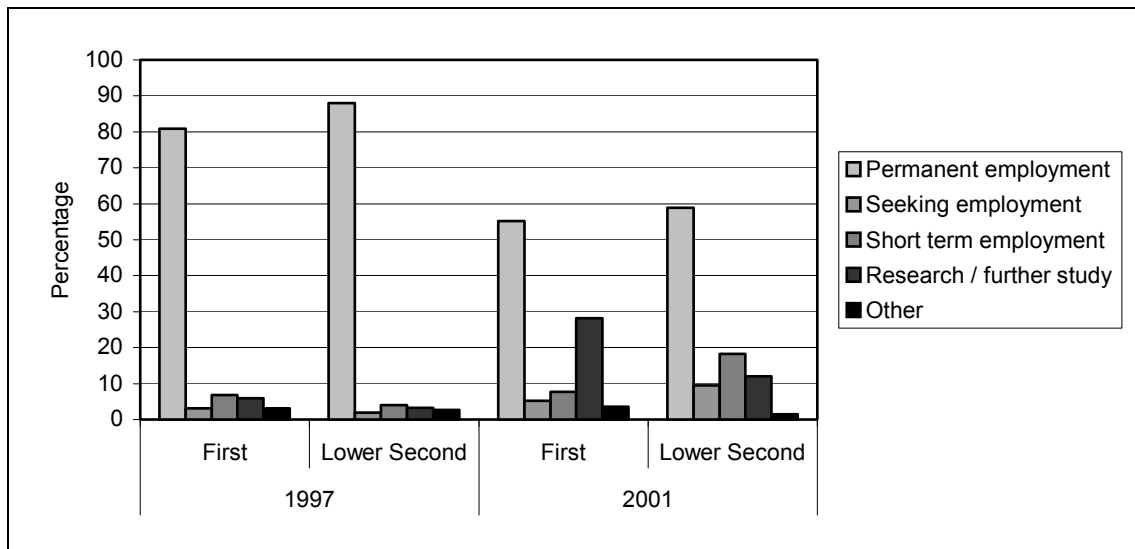
<sup>3</sup> NB. This research is part of a larger-scale project looking at *Graduate Employability in a Knowledge Economy* (GEKE), headed by Professor Phil Brown, Cardiff University School of Social Sciences.

<sup>4</sup> Tests of statistical significance have been run on all the findings presented in this paper.

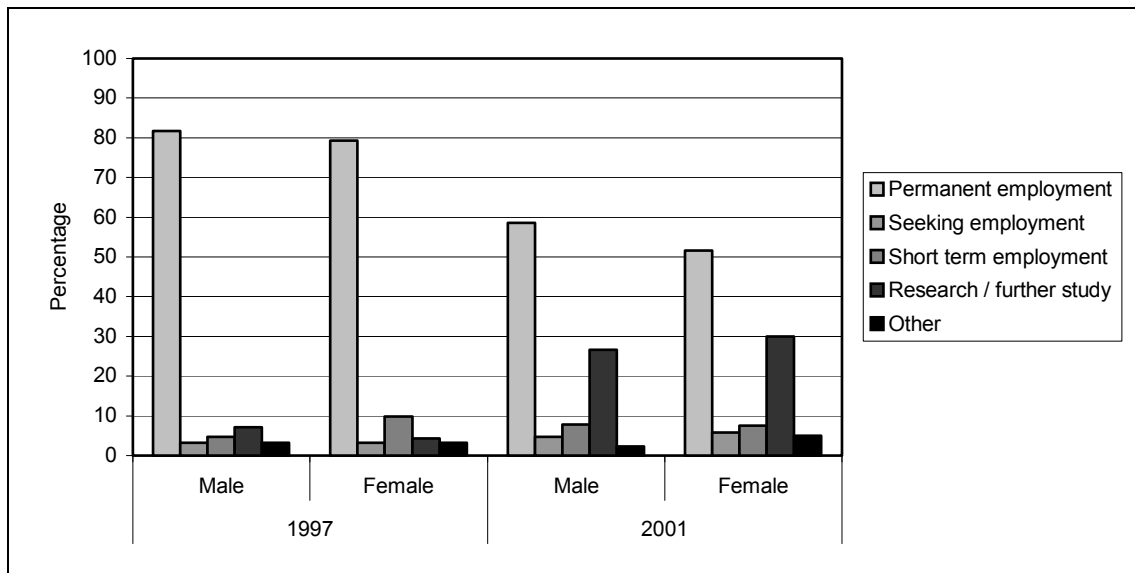


similarly qualified male counterparts within the labour market. Female graduates from the older (1997) cohort are however slightly more likely than their male peers to be engaged in short-term employment. Looking at the more recent (2001) cohort, female graduates are more likely to be engaged in research / further study than their male peers, and are also more likely to have chosen the ‘other’ option, which included responses such as ‘motherhood’ and self-employment.

**Figure 1: Current Employment Status of Respondents by Degree Class & Year of Graduation**



**Figure 2: Current Employment Status of Respondents with First Class Degrees by Gender & Year of Graduation**



Although the above figures reveal some interesting differences in terms of men’s and women’s current employment status and their relationship to degree class and graduation year, they tell us nothing about the *type* of work in which respondents were employed at the time of the survey, and this is crucial when considering the issue of employability. This is because *all* graduates are in a sense ‘employable’, but it is the

*type* of work that they obtain that is more indicative of their relative employability and the extent to which they are finding work commensurate with their university education and qualifications. But then again, simply looking at the relative position of different individuals within the occupational structure tells us little about *why* different individuals have achieved the position that they have: Here individual values, ‘choices’ and ‘constraints’ must constitute a central part of the analysis. Such ‘objective’ measures do not give us the whole picture: Differences in the expectations, choices, values and identities of individuals will invariably mean that even equally well qualified graduates will achieve different labour market outcomes, *regardless* of other factors and all other things ‘being equal’ (which they clearly are not most of the time.)

Figure 3 shows the occupational group of respondents to the survey (coded according to the NS-SEC measure of class<sup>5</sup>) by gender and degree classification. Only those who graduated in 1997 are included, given that this group of graduates will have had more time to ‘adjust’ and make their transition into the labour market than the more recent group of graduates, and given that we know from Figures 1 and 2 that those with firsts who graduated in 2001 are considerably more likely to be engaged in further study.

Figure 3 shows that for this sample, having a first does have a premium in terms of access to modern and traditional professional occupations and avoidance of clerical and intermediate occupations, relative to those with 2:2s. However, the gender differences are both pronounced and important. Women with firsts *and* women with lower seconds are appreciably more likely than their similarly qualified male counterparts to be in *modern* professional (or newly professionalized and therefore often lower status) occupations. An interesting pattern emerges when we consider the ‘traditional professional occupations’ category: Here men with firsts fare better numerically than any other group. *Interestingly, men with 2:2s are more likely to be in traditional professional occupations even than women with firsts.* Women with 2:2s fare worst of all in terms of access to this occupational group and its ‘benefits’ in terms of status, pay etc., with fewer than 10% working in traditional professional occupations such as doctors, engineers or lawyers.

Men and women with 2:2s are more likely than their first class counterparts to be in the ‘senior managers or administrators’ category, and women with 2:2s are more likely than men with 2:2s to be in this category, which is at first glance surprising. However, there are some fundamental differences in status and pay between being a senior manager and an administrator, and it may be that most of the graduates included in this group are more likely to be in an administrative position than in a senior managerial role, which would explain their greater predominance in this category. But women and men with 2:2s are also more likely to be in middle or junior managerial posts compared to their first class counterparts. Turning to consider the ‘clerical and intermediate’ occupational category reveals the long-standing and expected pattern, with women - with both firsts and 2:2s - predominating in this category compared to their similarly qualified male counterparts. Women with 2:2s fare worst of all, with almost 25% of women with 2:2s in the sample having ended up

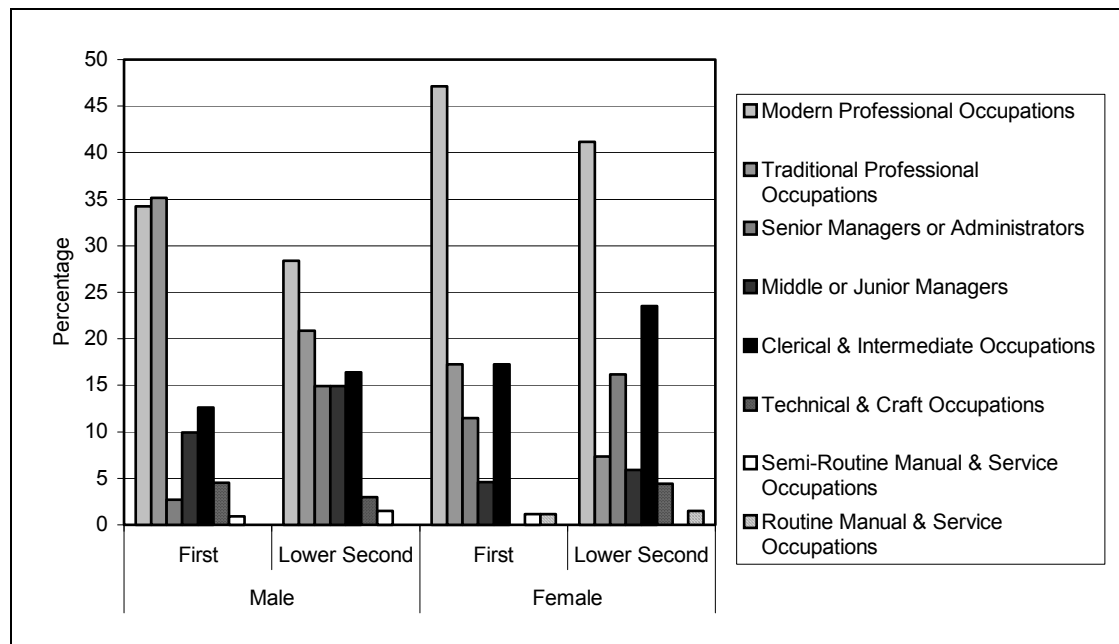
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<sup>5</sup> See Rose & Pevalin (2001) for a detailed definition, explanation and discussion of the occupational categories e.g. ‘modern professional occupations’ that constitute the NS-SEC measure of social class.

(at least for the time being) in clerical or intermediate occupations. Men with firsts clearly come off best of all overall, and the pattern between women with firsts and men with 2:2s is in many respects surprisingly similar, which suggests that women with first class credentials are being under-valued by employers (or indeed themselves) within the labour market. Or indeed, it may be the case that modern, highly qualified young women's identities and values are leading them to favour or 'choose'<sup>6</sup> different occupations from their similarly qualified male counterparts (Hakim, 2000).

No women with firsts in the sample were found in technical/craft occupations but fewer than 5% of all the other groups of graduates were. Surprisingly, no men *at all* were found in routine manual / service occupations; small numbers of women with both firsts and 2:2s were found in this category. Finally, looking at the 'semi-routine manual and service' category, no women with lower seconds were found in this category, but small numbers of all the other graduates were present here.

**Figure 3: Occupational Group of 1997 Graduates by Degree Class & Gender**



Overall, Figure 3 is perhaps most interesting when considering gender differences in terms of access to traditional and modern professional occupations and access to intermediate and clerical work, where the gender differences between men and women with different levels of credential are most obvious. The figure suggests that appreciably fewer women are entering traditional professional occupations; more are entering modern professions and intermediate/clerical posts, *regardless* of the degree they achieve. Taken as a whole, the majority of graduates surveyed are in either 'new professional' (e.g. social work, teaching) or 'traditional professional' (e.g.

<sup>6</sup> Although the concept of 'choice' is a complex, fraught and well-debated one which will be discussed more fully in the thesis, the author accepts that while certain groups e.g. unqualified young women may have less perceptible 'choice' in relation to their occupational aspirations, well-qualified young women like those in this study are often located in a contradictory position when it comes to making and pursuing their 'choices' in relation to the labour market, as discussed in the third section of this paper.

engineering, law) occupations. However, when a similar group of women are compared to a similarly qualified group of men they still seem to fare worse. In fact Figure 3 suggests that first class women are more likely, in terms of their initial labour market ‘outcomes’, to share a similar pattern and position as men with 2:2s, a pattern that is repeated quite frequently among other responses to questions on the questionnaire. Indeed it is an interesting question why overall men obtain fewer firsts, yet at the same time they continue to dominate traditional professional occupations.

### ***The Gender Pay Gap Among First Class Male & Female Graduates***

The issue of the gender ‘pay gap’ has provided an ongoing but intermittent focus for researchers for decades, but has recently come back into sharp focus on the Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC) agenda with the publication of Purcell’s recent (2002) report on the subject. Until now research has persistently shown that men are more likely to earn more than women, even when subject of study has been accounted for, and regardless of the type of work done – in fact even when doing the same job (see e.g. the discussion of this issue in Rees, 1992). Within the context of a mass system of HE in which women are gaining more firsts than their male counterparts, and in light of the well-documented changes in the labour market, exploration of any differences in earnings amongst equally highly qualified female and male graduates remains a crucial issue.

Figures 4 and 5 show the average annual income (before tax) of respondents to the survey: Figure 4 compares men and women with firsts to men and women with 2:2s. Figure 5 compares men and women *with firsts* from 1997 and 2001.

**Figure 4: A Comparison of the Annual Average Income of Men & Women with 1sts & 2:2s**

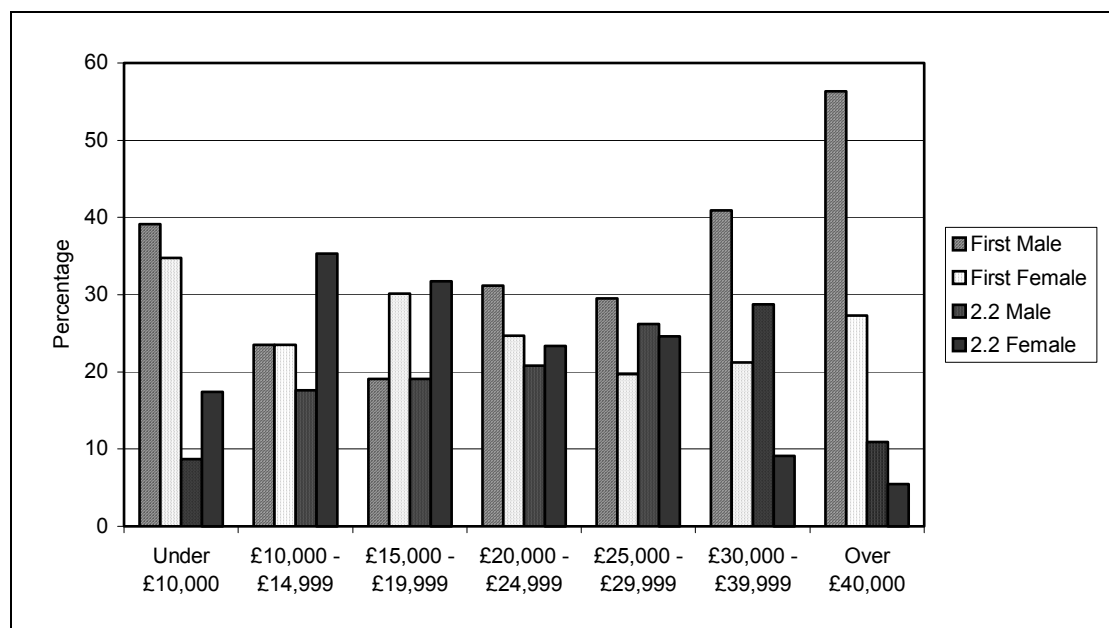


Figure 4 reveals some interesting differences between the earnings of male and female survey respondents, and between those with firsts and 2:2s. It is immediately

apparent that the greatest pay-off in terms of earning the highest income band is for men with firsts, almost 60% of whom are earning over £40,000 per annum. However it should be noted that although both men and women with firsts are over-represented in the lowest (under £10,000) earning band, this is probably due to the fact that these graduates are also more likely to be doing research work or further study, which are both associated with relatively low incomes, after which their earnings may well rise (Figure 5 discriminates between 1997 and 2001 graduates). Indeed it is quite likely (as shown by Figure 5) that the earnings of those with firsts do indeed tend to increase once they have finished doing PhDs or further study and enter the labour market 'proper'. Overall the Figures show that those with firsts do have some sort of 'earnings premium' in the labour market (at least relative to those with 2:2s), but men with firsts do best of all in terms of their initial earnings<sup>7</sup>.

The majority (roughly 35%) of women with 2:2s are earning between £10,000 and £14,999. This is in stark contrast to similarly qualified men (those with 2:2s), who are *a lot* more likely, even with the same qualifications, to be earning far in excess of this figure. In fact surprisingly, the majority of *men* with 2:2s are found in the £30,000-£39,000 income band (the second from highest), despite having a relatively 'poor' qualification (compared to under 10% of women with 2:2s earning this amount).

From these Figures we can conclude fairly confidently that gender does appear to remain an important factor in terms of determining men and women's relative earnings within the labour market, *even for those with the same qualifications*. However, the explanations for this are complex (see below). Again, when looking at men and women with the same qualifications, women with firsts and women with 2:2s are notably more likely than their male counterparts with exactly the same degree classification to be earning £15,000-£19,999, the relatively lower end of the earnings spectrum. For those with firsts, from hereon the pattern is reversed, with the men earning more than their equally qualified female counterparts at each subsequent rise in the earnings spectrum. In fact the pattern becomes particularly pronounced, and the gap between the earnings of first class women and men substantially wider, the higher the earnings band that we are considering. *This difference becomes most stark when considering the top earnings band, where men with firsts are over twice as likely as their first class female contemporaries to be earning over £40,000*. Here women seem to be at a severe disadvantage, at least in terms of earnings, relative to their equally qualified male counterparts. Having a first appears to give men an earnings premium far higher than that accorded to their equally well-qualified female contemporaries from the £20,000 mark upwards. This is a serious issue in terms of women's access to financial capital and income, suggesting that although women have improved their academic performance at degree level and are now just as likely to participate in the labour market as men, they are still at a serious disadvantage in terms of the earnings or financial exchange value of their qualifications within the labour market, which has all sorts of implications for the extent to which women are able to achieve 'true' independence and break away from traditional patriarchal structures of domination and gendered routes and relationships within the labour market.

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<sup>7</sup> NB. Strictly speaking the data do not show whether firsts bring a premium over *all* other degrees (e.g. 2:1s and thirds), but only indicate the premium over 2:2s.

A similar pattern emerges when we look at the relative earnings of men and women with 2:2s: Here the graphs flatten out in the middle, but at the higher end of the earnings spectrum i.e. from the £25,000 earnings band upwards males predominate, which again shows that relative to their similarly qualified female counterparts men do better in terms of earnings. In short, the crucial and clear finding to emerge from this comparison of male/female earnings is that *even with the same qualifications men receive higher rewards within the labour market in terms of earnings than their female counterparts, although overall having a first does give graduates an earnings premium, relative to those with 2:2s.*

Elias *et al.* (1999) found that female graduates earned 15% less than male graduates on average three years after graduation in 1998. Moreover, they earned 11% less than male graduates after controlling for a wide range of other factors, including subject of degree. A recent study of art and design students also showed salary bias in favour of males (Blackwell *et al.*, 2001). Despite the fact that young women are now entering the labour market as ostensibly well-qualified as their male peers, the distribution of their earnings three years after graduation has remained significantly different: Women were compressed into the £10,000-£21,000 salary bands and there were significantly more men earning over £21,000 (Elias *et al.*, 1999). These findings are replicated and reinforced by this study where the earnings even of women with firsts are compressed into the relatively lower income bands.

Purcell (2002) has recently reanalyzed some of her 1996 survey data (Purcell & Pitcher, 1996) for the Equal Opportunities Commission, looking specifically at the issue of qualifications and earnings. She also concludes that despite the greater participation of women in both the HE system and the labour force, there continues to be a substantial difference between the earnings of female and male graduates. In fact all the recent published surveys of new graduate salaries are in line with these findings, concluding that women have lower average earnings, are less likely to be in the highest-earning groups and are more likely to be among the lowest paid. The results of this survey lend *further* weight to these findings.

Moreover surveys of final year undergraduates consistently suggest that female graduates have systematically lower earnings *expectations* than their male peers, both before they enter the labour market, but also in their first posts *and* five years later (Purcell & Pitcher 1996; High Flyers Research, 2001). The evidence suggests that they are right to think this. However, the data emerging from this research strongly suggest that the earnings gap is not simply about *expectations*, but is closely connected to the different value-systems that women inhabit, the 'choices' that they make within the labour market as their situations and understandings of their 'selves' and self-concepts change, and the way that their aspirations, experience and identities shape the routes that they take and decisions that they make. The earnings gap between men and women is also arguably a result of the inequitable practices of employers, deliberate or otherwise, and the fact that women take time out to have children and therefore lose out on incremental scales. It is also highly possible that women are less likely to *ask for / demand* higher salaries for the work that they do. An excerpt from one of the research interviews reveals how women's choices and their willingness to perhaps accept work with a lower remuneration is indeed down to the 'choices' that some women make within the labour market. Of course 'choice' itself may be seen as a social construct, shaped by characteristics such as gender, class

and identity, and located within broader structural constraints that influence the extent to which ‘choices’ can actually be realized. But despite this, the following interview extract highlights how the inhabitation of particular identities shaped by ‘lifestyle’ aspirations and needs – i.e. by values other than work - are underpinned by particular value systems that emphasize labour market rewards other than simply money.

Are you happy with your current salary?

I would like more... I am still not earning the average graduate first job, according to the Times statistics and stuff, which says the average graduate in their first 5 years is earning £20,000 or something. I’m not earning anything like that... [Does that bother you?] It’s kind of the state of play. If I had gone into industry or graduate fast track type management things, I would be earning more but I would probably find my job less rewarding. And I kind of see you spend so much of your life at work, doing something that makes you miserable affects the rest of your life so badly, I would rather have less money and do something that I could think has some value. I don’t think it’s fair, but... I mean my brother is 4 years younger than me, he’s living in Sheffield, he did the graduate fast track thing with a transport company and he is earning significantly more than me, so every now and again that gets kind of annoying. But I chose this profession knowing that it’s not a particularly well paid one. I could have chosen something else, had money been my main priority. I mean I earn enough to cover my basic needs, and while more would be a very good thing in terms of paying off the enormous amounts of student debt I have, and you know just having a more comfortable lifestyle, my needs are met and that means that other things - other priorities - can come to the fore, in terms of motivation. If I was still earning the £11,000 that my first graduate job paid me, I might have a problem because that actually brings me to the point where it’s a de-motivator because you can’t make ends meet whatever you do... But I think once your basic needs are taken care of money becomes less of a motivating factor, at least for me.

[Female, 1997 cohort, Arts/Humanities degree, ‘middle ranking’ university, Librarian]<sup>3876</sup>

In considering the balance between her work and private life the following graduate commented:

I value my private life more than my career, and I’ve made decisions where I’ve put people in my life first *over* my job. And sometimes there is a conflict, where you have to work late and you don’t necessarily want to, but you’ve got to get something done. I’ve also worked a few weekends with work, which has impinged on my outside life. But there’s not an *awful* lot expect of me outside of my normal hours, so there’s a fairly good balance I would say between work and life. The work side is important to me - I wouldn’t like *not* to work. I would always like to be working, because it’s something that you do independently and you can take pride in, because it’s something that comes purely from your own individual achievement. So it is important to me. But I don’t think of it as the be all and end all of life. And I’d like to think that I would put my family before my career choices.

[Female, 1997 cohort, Arts/Humanities degree, elite university, senior development editor]<sup>1227</sup>

The Higher Education Careers Services Unit (CSU) has recently concluded that ‘the marked difference in earnings of the two genders should not be taken as evidence of discrimination. Males and females enter different occupations, do different degrees, have different academic backgrounds and different skills’ (CSU, 2001, quoted in

Purcell, 2002). Purcell (2002) challenges these conclusions. Her analysis suggests, among other things, that whatever subject or discipline male and female graduates study, there is a gender salary differential and a greater likelihood that males will evaluate their current employment conditions and opportunities more positively. Interestingly, the quantitative data from this study (see p.26) show that men also evaluate the role of their *credential* more positively. Indeed findings from this survey add weight to arguments suggesting that whatever class of degree female graduates achieve, males with the same level of qualification earn more, on average. According to Purcell (2002), even when their qualifications are in applied subjects that are particularly relevant to the labour market e.g. Engineering or Languages, substantial numbers of female graduates are employed in more routine manual and non-manual jobs. Male graduates with similar qualifications are much more likely to work in higher-level managerial and professional occupations, and male-dominated occupations tend to be higher paid than those where numbers of male and females are more equal. Again the findings from this study add weight to these arguments.

The two variables most likely to affect income are year of graduation and degree subject studied. Differences in graduation year are accounted for in Figure 5 below. In terms of differences in earnings between graduates that studied different degree subjects, although not presented here, analyses suggest that having a first in a 'vocational' or maths/computing discipline does lead to higher average earnings than a degree in an arts/humanities, social or natural science subject. If we include only those graduates who obtained a first class honours degree and compare average earnings for each year of graduation (by subject) we find men with first still fare better than their equally qualified female counterparts. Furthermore, as we know, there are major gender differences in men and women's likelihood of taking these subjects at university, with men far more likely to study 'vocational' subjects such as engineering or maths/computing-related subjects. Hence men are more likely to choose precisely those subjects that have a greater pay-off in terms of earnings in the labour market. This makes the task of challenging the traditional male dominance of these subjects at A-Level and University level an even higher priority.

Figure 5 compares the earnings of *first class* men and women in each of the graduation cohorts surveyed. It suggests that earnings do improve over time for these graduates, for women as well as men (the earnings distribution for the 1997 graduates is much flatter, compared to the distribution for the more recent graduates, which rises at the start indicating the lower earnings of this group of graduates as they continue their education and undertake further study<sup>8</sup>). But again, despite the fact that they have the same qualifications as their male peers, the distribution of female earnings for each graduation cohort is drastically different from that of their male contemporaries, as a cursory glance at Figure 5 reveals. Again it can clearly be seen that women from both graduation years earn on average less than their male peers; again their earnings are compressed into the lower three salary bands (i.e. under £25,000). There are a lot more men earning over £25,000 for each graduation year,

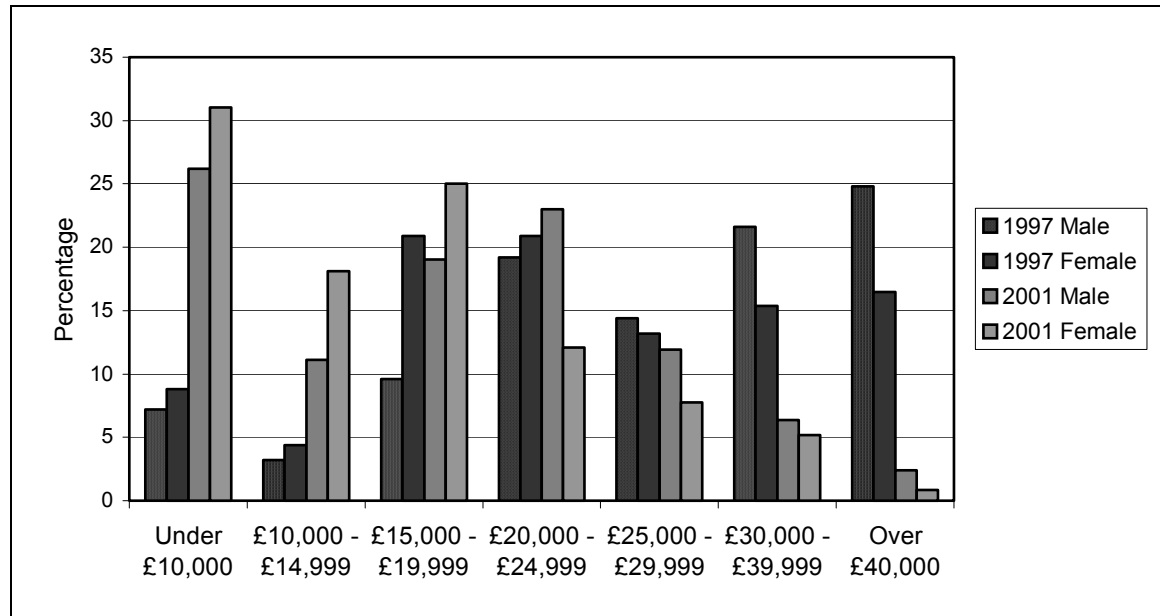
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<sup>8</sup> Differences were also found in terms of the relative likelihood of men and women holding different post-graduate qualifications. For example, 7% of male respondents had PhDs compared to 4% of female respondents, 31% of men had a Masters qualification compared to just 14% of women, but 8% of women had PGCEs compared to just 2% of men. 13% of men had some 'other' professional qualification such as a post-graduate diploma or accountancy qualification, compared to 24% of female respondents.



which adds further weight to the evidence presented above that relative to their equally qualified female counterparts men are at an advantage in terms of earnings.

**Figure 5: Average Annual Income of Respondents with First Class Degrees  
By Gender & Year of Graduation**



Focusing on the 1997 cohort it can clearly be seen that women with firsts are clustered within the £15,000 - £25,000 earnings range, whilst the earnings of their similarly qualified male contemporaries are more likely to be over the £25,000 mark. At each of the three highest earnings bands men fare relatively better off in terms of earnings than their equally well-qualified female contemporaries.

Turning to consider the 2001 cohort, it is clear that women are again at a substantial earnings disadvantage compared to their first class male peers: The latter are considerably more likely to be earning £20,000+. In contrast few women with firsts who graduated in 2001 are earning over £20,000. In fact roughly 70% of women with firsts who graduated in 2001 are earning *below* £20,000 compared to roughly 50% of similarly qualified men. Again the conclusion that is most apparent is that women are disadvantaged in terms of earnings compared to their equally well-qualified male peers – even with the highest level of degree-level qualification. Again this adds weight to the findings and arguments presented earlier in relation to Figure 4. Purcell (2002) also found that higher classes of degree carry a premium, but this is greater for men than for women and increases more with level of achievement. There is clearly some relationship with subject studied, but there would also seem to be evidence of a lower evaluation of women’s achievement (Purcell, 2002), either by women themselves or by others. Of course the really interesting question is *why*, and what the implications of this earnings differential for women might be. Also, the question of whether men and women are satisfied with their earnings, and how their earnings compare to their *expectations* also becomes a crucial issue.

As noted above, some of the earnings differences between men and women can no doubt be explained by their different distribution across the subject/disciplinary range

(Purcell, 2002). Women and men do continue to opt for degree subjects according to traditionally gendered patterns, so that women are more heavily represented at the Arts/Humanities and Social Science end of the disciplinary spectrum than among highly quantitative Mathematical, Computing or Vocational degree subjects. This is certainly the case for this sample (see p.5). A recent study (CSU, 2001/2) showed that degrees that include the development of numerical ability also tend to be the subject areas leading to higher average earnings. This has been one of the traditional explanations put forward for female graduates' lower earnings and it seems that it continues to play an important role in terms of the labour market outcomes of equally highly qualified men and women. Not only earnings, but also access to fast track training programmes and other labour market opportunities, also appear to be structured according to the degree subject studied. It therefore seems as if educational biography in terms of subject studied at university (which we already know is highly likely to be gendered) is acting to structure labour market opportunities and to exclude women (who we know are less likely to study the relatively better rewarded vocational or maths/computing related disciplines) from certain labour market opportunities. 'Exclusion', or at least the restriction of subsequent choices and trajectories, continues to work substantially at the level of (degree) subject studied, which we know is highly structured by gender, so that those subjects usually associated with more limited labour market opportunities – arts/humanities or social science related subjects, are precisely those that are numerically female dominated – a catch-22 situation or a further manifestation of an 'opportunity trap' (Brown, 2003).

Multivariate analysis of data from the UK's largest representative survey of graduates also reveals that degree subject is significantly related to earnings outcomes, although to a lesser extent than gender (McKnight, 1999). Purcell (2002) also shows that women earn less on average than their male peers, whatever subject they specialise in. For all of the twelve degree subjects analysed, male graduates had higher average earnings than their female counterparts three years after graduation. The difference between the earnings of comparable samples of men and women was widest for law, and mathematics and computing graduates, and narrowest for education graduates (Purcell, 2002).

The data presented above suggest that having a first class degree does carry a premium in terms of earnings, but this is greater for men than for women. Men with 2:2s are also more likely than their female contemporaries with 2:2s to have higher earnings, though the earnings premium does seem to increase more with level of achievement. There is clearly a relationship between earnings and subject studied and there may indeed be a lower evaluation of women's achievement within the labour market as Purcell (2002) argues. However, it is also likely that differences are due to women's *expectations* and even the choices that they make, which are underpinned by different (often gendered) value systems. These issues are explored in more depth in subsequent sections of the paper.

The question of *why* this is the case is of course, as always, a little more complicated. Is it because social and labour market *structures* are leading to women's relatively worse position? Is it down to employers' recruitment and working practices? Is it because of women's experiences of work? Is it because of the individual choices that women are making? Or is it a combination of all of these things? Possible explanations include the fact that women are (somewhat unconsciously) just not

choosing those jobs / careers that are well remunerated, or that they are consciously making particular ‘lifestyle choices’ (Hakim, 2000), driven by particular value-systems, and that money is simply ‘not as important’ to them. In Brown *et al.*’s (2004) terms, are women (or at least some women) therefore more likely to be ‘purists’ than ‘players’? An alternative explanation is that perhaps young women are actively reacting against what has been perceived as ‘radical feminism’. There is certainly evidence of this in the interviews – almost without exception the women interviewed thought that they were now ‘equal’ to their male counterparts and had the same opportunities, and were reluctant to use their gender as what they perceived as ‘an excuse’. Such ‘invisibility’ of gender difference makes it increasingly difficult to explicitly identify the structures, cultures and constraints that serve to reproduce women’s position within contemporary society and the division of labour. For example, asked generally whether their gender had ever been an issue for them, two of the female graduates interviewed replied as follows:

Well, I’m a woman in what is traditionally, but thankfully changing, a male-orientated career, aren’t I? There are more women obviously taking up a post in this subject than there has ever been. ... I mean I’m no women’s libber but I think if you can do the job, does it really matter on your sex? - It’s never been an issue to me.

[Female, 1997 cohort, Engineering/Technology degree, ‘low status’ university, design technology teacher / assistant head of Key Stage]<sup>984</sup>

That’s a really difficult one... But I think in the consultancy job, it wasn’t easy, because it was training project management. And often I found myself in a classroom situation with 10 project managers who were all men, and who were all older than me... And then you’re – you know, it’s very difficult then, trying to get information across and coming across as *credible* so they can actually learn something *from someone like me*... But then I’m not one of these feminists either! I think life is what you make it. I think it has been an issue, and I think sometimes yeah women might be looked down upon, but then there can also be advantages as well. So yes and no.

[Female, 1997 cohort, Natural Sciences degree, elite university, project manager]<sup>4184</sup>

Similarly, the majority of the male graduate interviewees felt that women would generally have an equal chance of recruitment and promotion for jobs, alongside an equally well-qualified male candidate:

I’d like to think that these days gender probably wouldn’t make *too* much of a difference. I’m *sure* there are still cases where it would make a *slight* bit of difference, but generally I think that that sort of thing’s hopefully died out really.

[Male, 2001 cohort, Arts/Humanities degree, ‘middle ranking’ university, studying for an MA]<sup>3567</sup>

Yeah, in my profession then definitely - it would be *completely equal*.

[Male, 1997 cohort, Arts/Humanities degree, elite university, sub-editor / self-employed journalist]<sup>1219</sup>

If it was purely on gender I don’t think it makes any difference.

[Male, 2001 cohort, Interdisciplinary degree, 'low status' university, Founding partner in company and self-employed technical director]<sup>951</sup>

However the following extract brings home some of the gendered and stereotypical assumptions that continue to exist (which is somewhat worrying when considering that this graduate had been involved in recruiting new staff at the company he worked for):

I don't think gender makes a difference in getting a job these days, not in my field. I think it's the skills that you have and how sociable you are that gets you the job - it doesn't matter what sex you are... I mean IT we have - not an equal mix of women and men - *most women aren't particularly interested in IT...* [Emphasis added]. But it's good to have a few women around because we'd learn something from them...

What kind of things do you think you'd learn – can you be a bit more specific?

Hygiene...! [Laughter] No, they sometimes bring a friendly face. Women engineers tend to be really good, they tend to be – well, *just like blokes* [emphasis added], but it's nice to have a female to talk to in an office, because otherwise it's just loads of men...

[Male, 1997 cohort, Business & Computing degree, 'middle ranking' university, computer programmer]<sub>2</sub>

Implicit discrimination within the labour market, or employers' different evaluation of women's qualifications, skills and qualities may also be part of the problem. Of course some would argue that the lower pay of women may also to some extent involve companies taking advantage of female graduates searching for jobs (who may be willing to unconsciously work for lower wages) who are highly-qualified, pleasant, middle-class, educated, and less likely to *demand* more money. Male recruiters perhaps also still hold to the model that they think women 'need less' because perceptions of men as the 'main breadwinner' still persist. It may also be the case that women are still more likely to join, and are therefore clustered within, those occupations which traditionally have had lower earnings e.g. administrative and clerical jobs. Part of the explanation may also be that women are more likely to study subjects leading to lower earnings. Depending on which argument one supports, there is still arguably scope for women to challenge existing structures, by for example choosing male-dominated courses at university.

Arnot *et al.* (1999) go further in arguing that 'the lesson' girls learn today is that their sought-after academic qualifications may not easily convert into well-paid and skilled employment. But different groups of women and different individuals also articulate different *values* and therefore make different 'choices'. Chisholm & du Bois-Reymond (1993) argued that for the majority of girls the qualifications they achieve merely establish their 'intellectual credentials'; and indeed this research demonstrates that a first class credential does not *necessarily*, on its own as if by some stroke of magic, improve the labour market outcomes of women compared to similarly qualified men. This study has also found that young women's 'intellectual credentials' are seen above all as a source of *personal* merit and prestige – not necessarily as something which will instrumentally lead to the best job opportunities - but are also, for some women at least, seen as a key marker of 'identity' within the

labour market. Interestingly, the interview data in the current study suggest that whilst some graduates experience this marker of identity positively, it is experienced far more ‘negatively’ by others, and in several cases it is something that has even been *deliberately concealed* from potential employers.

Turning to look at anticipated future earnings, the same, gendered pattern emerges when we examine responses to the question asking graduates to look ahead and consider their average annual income in 10 years’ time. Figure 6 compares the responses of men and women from both cohorts to this question, including only those graduates with first class degrees.

**Figure 6: Self-Estimated Average Annual Income in 10 Years’ Time of Graduates with Firsts, by Gender & Graduation Year**

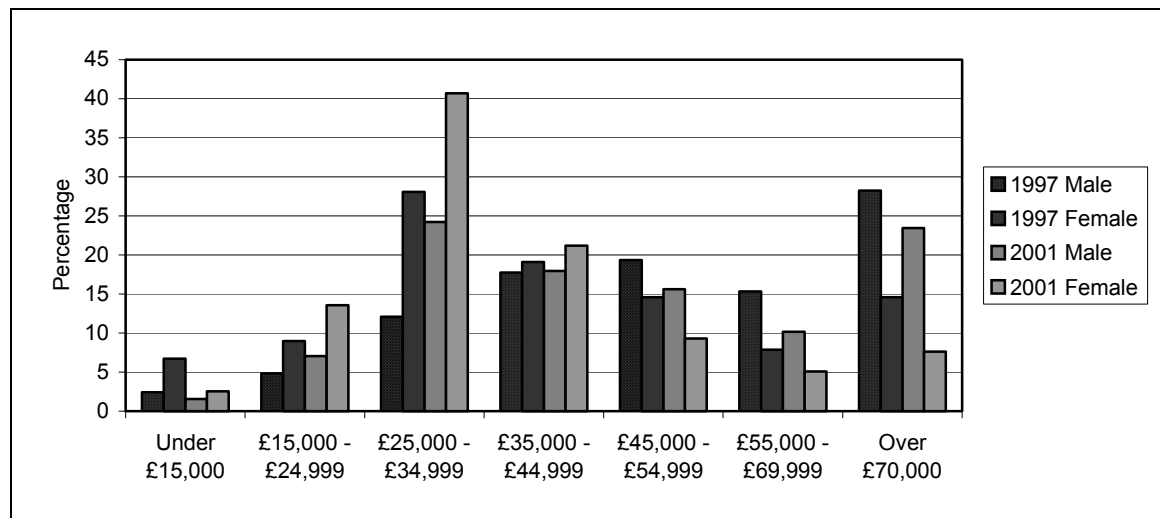


Figure 6 reveals quite clearly that men *anticipate* and *expect* that their earnings will be higher in 10 years, whereas women (perhaps realistically), anticipate that their earnings will lie between £25,000 and £35,000 pounds. In fact for each cohort of graduates by far the majority of women anticipate their earnings to be within this band, and in particular the most recent (2001) female graduates, over 40% of whom expect their earnings in 10 years to lie between £25,000 and £35,000, whilst almost a quarter of the most recent male graduates expected to be earning over £70,000 in 10 years. The gender differential in salary *expectations* is quite marked, with the larger proportion of women students’ expectations of salary being in the £25,000-£44,000 range, whereas the proportion for men is more equally spread and far more men anticipate earning over £70,000. Such differences in salary expectation can perhaps partly be explained by the greater preference for the public sector expressed by women, but it also perhaps echoes women’s concerns about salary drops when they have families, the fact that they value a high salary less, or the fact that women fail to value themselves as highly as they might (Purcell & Pitcher, 1996; Purcell, 2002).

Another important issue, particularly in the context of debates about the ‘knowledge economy’ and the maintenance of employability within the labour market, is the amount of training received by respondents to the survey. Overall the relatively small amount of training received by both men *and* women is noteworthy. But even on top of this, again we find some startling gender differences. Table 2 shows the number of

days training received by those with firsts, and table 3 the number of days training received by those with 2:2s. Women with firsts appear to receive radically different (again substantially *lower*) levels of training than their similarly qualified male counterparts. For example 44% of first class women – nearly half of all female respondents – receive only 1-5 days training per year compared to just 1/5<sup>th</sup>, or 20%, of their male counterparts - a startling difference. The figures for those with 2:2s are surprisingly similar: The only major difference is women with 2:2s in the 11-20 days of training band. Here again it seems that the majority of women with 2:2s (77%) receive less than 10 days of training per year. In fact women with firsts even fare worse than their male counterparts with 2:2s – which does not bode well for women’s future general employability in terms of training or the rhetoric of ‘continuous learning’, which is a cornerstone of the CBI’s emphasis on employability (CBI, 1998).

**Table 2: Number of Days Training Received per Year:  
Respondents with Firsts (N = 267)**

	Frequency		Percentage	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
1 – 5 Days	29	54	20.3%	43.5%
6 – 10 Days	54	29	37.8%	23.4%
11 – 20 Days	36	24	25.2%	19.4%
21 Days+	24	17	16.8%	13.7%
Total	143	124	100%	100%

**Table 3: Number of Days Training Received per Year:  
Respondents with 2:2s (N = 200)**

	Frequency		Percentage	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
1 - 5 Days	25	43	25.8%	41.7%
6 – 10 Days	31	37	32.0%	35.9%
11 – 20 Days	22	10	22.7%	9.7%
21 Days+	19	13	19.6%	12.6%
Total	97	103	100%	100%

With recent changes in the nature of work, and the emphasis on maintaining individual employability, such differences in the amount of training received by men and women clearly has important implications. If employability is understood as a discourse which is essentially about legitimating the transferral of responsibility (for training, finding and maintaining employment etc.) increasing on to the shoulders of *individuals*, then training becomes an issue that is of paramount importance to the relative ability of individuals to maintain ‘an edge’ within the labour market. And receiving little training then becomes of huge importance and clearly has implications for not only the skills of individual but also their relative ability to ‘sell themselves’ to employers within the labour market. There has of course been a gradual move towards this for decades – first of all it entailed putting increasing emphasis, surveillance and control *on* to individual workers – stripping down layers of middle management, getting rid of Taylorist work processes etc. The new employability rhetoric takes us just one step further and in many respects represents the antithesis of individualism, suggesting as it does that those that are ‘in it for themselves’ - the

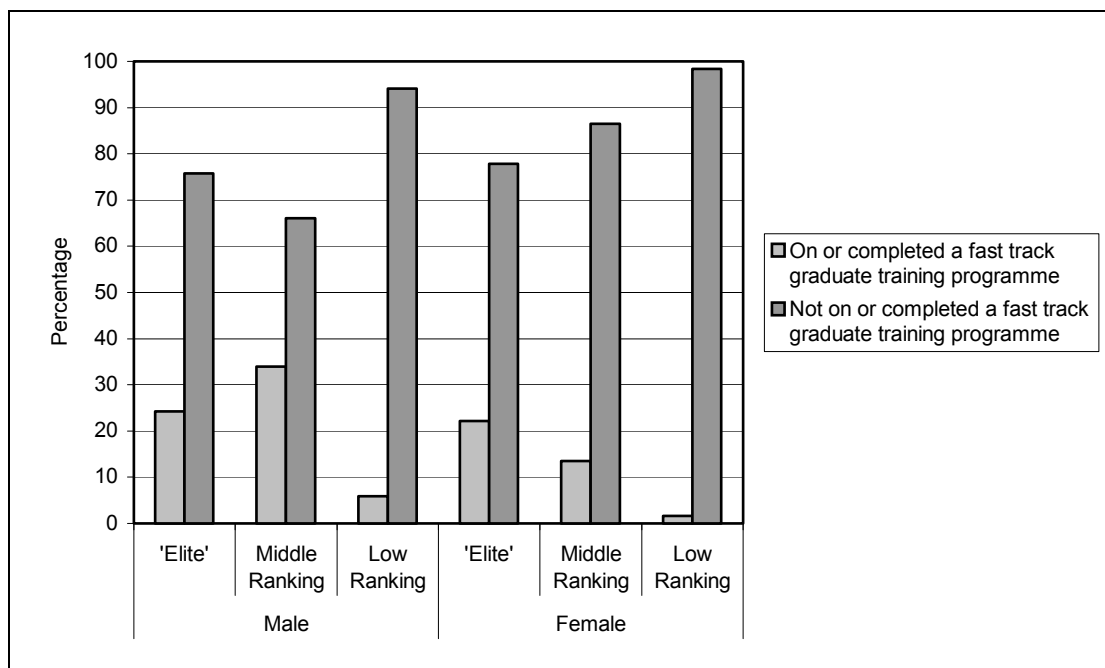
labour market ‘players’ (Brown *et al.*, 2004) - and remain up-skilled and ‘fit’ within the labour market will be winners. But employability therefore also goes some way to addressing the problem of employers losing employees that have been imbued with general and transferable skills through the training policies of companies. When employability takes centre stage, increasingly it is only company-specific skills that will be invested in; more general training will be the responsibility of individuals.

To many the new world of work is simply ‘dog eat dog’; women and men are treated on an equal basis as ‘individuals’ competing for the same labour market rewards. Certainly the general consensus amongst graduates interviewed has been that gender equality within work and the labour market has for all intents and purposes been ‘won’. However, the survey data show that gender inequalities within the labour market – although in a different *form* perhaps – remain; they have simply become more ‘invisible’. Again, perhaps it is the case that gendered assumptions remain to disadvantage women within the labour market - perhaps employers and companies are not willing to invest in training, particularly for women, because they think that they will leave their jobs to have families and that training them is therefore an unnecessary expense for which they will get no real ‘return’. As discussed above, the reasons for this are complex and the arguments presented here are really just hypotheses that need to be investigated further. Similarly, arguments relating to the grand rhetoric of ‘employability’ remain hypotheses that need to be tested against the research data.

Finally turning to the issue of access to ‘fast track’ training programmes, men in the sample were much more likely to be on or to have completed a fast track graduate training programme than their female counterparts – taking the sample as a whole, 21% of males were either on or had completed such a training programme compared to just 12% of females - this is almost double the number of men (in the sample overall). Figure 7 shows the percentage of graduates who were either on or had completed fast track graduate training programmes at the time of the survey by gender and university type. The figure includes only those with first class degrees.

Figure 7 shows us that although men in the sample are more likely than women to have been on or completed a ‘fast track’ training programme, there are differences between different *groups of* men and women, in this case according to the ‘type’ or ‘reputation’ of the university they attended. For example men from middle ranking universities appear to be most likely to be recruited onto fast track training schemes, and women from elite universities are at a marked advantage compared to their counterparts from middle and low ranking universities. In particular, for both men *and* women, being at a low ranking university appears to be a clear disadvantage for recruitment onto fast track schemes and traditional ‘graduate’ jobs. To this extent it suggests that recruiters are still targeting elite institutions for recruitment onto their fast track schemes and that the notion of ‘social fit’ or the formula of ‘tried and tested’ (i.e. that they have recruited graduates from particular institutions before and feel ‘safe’ with continuing to recruit from the same place and the same ‘type’ of student) is still important in recruitment. Hierarchy within the university system and differences in the ‘reputational capital’ (Brown & Scase, 1998) of institutions therefore poses significant problems in terms of individual graduate employability. As Morley (2001) argues, in many cases it is not the title or content of the degree or the skills training programme, but the institution in which it was obtained that carries cachet.

**Figure 7: Whether On or Completed a Fast Track Graduate Training Programme: Graduates with Firsts, by Institution Type & Gender**



On each of the variables examined in this section of the paper the position of men and women differs, and usually to the detriment of women. There are of course also differences *between different groups of* women and men: For example institution attended appears to be a major factor in structuring the labour market opportunities and outcomes of different first class men and women, at least with regard to access to fast track graduate programmes. In itself gender appears to be a crucial factor in terms of accessing training. The data presented thus far show that even with the same high level qualifications gender remains a strong determinant of the pay gap and future salary expectations between men and women, and strongly back up Morley's (2001) suggestion that the 'same qualifications have different exchange values for different groups within labour market' – even at the highest level. Earnings are not the only reward from work though, and not all graduates have similar expectations, aspirations, experiences or values with regard to the labour market. The paper now turns to look at how graduates *themselves* see their positions and perceive the labour market, and how young men and women interviewees anticipated the impact that children and family life would have on their careers and work/life balance, before ending with a brief discussion of some of the meta-theories that have until now framed discussions of employability.

## **2. Subjective Perceptions of the Labour Market and the Role of the First Class Credential**

Although 'employability' is often constructed in somewhat 'objective' terms, as reflecting an individual's ability to 'gain and retain fulfilling work' (Hillage & Pollard, 1998), and is therefore posited as amenable to quantitative 'measurement' in terms of the numbers of graduates able to find employment post-graduation in any given year (the basis of HEI 'performance' indicators), the value of work to



individuals and the ways in which individuals construct their employability is to a considerable extent also *subjective*. This section of the paper opens up this more subjective dimension of employability to closer examination, by exploring the perceptions of first class graduates themselves.

There has been much debate about whether women tend to have distinctively gendered orientations to work and life interests which impinge upon their career development and employment aspirations (see e.g. Purcell, 2002; Wajcman & Martin, 2002; Hakim, 2002). Hakim's (2000; 2002) distinction between work-centred, adaptive and home-centred women has been challenged in the light of qualitative analysis of women's career 'choices' (Purcell, 2002; Crompton, 1999; 2000). Crompton's (2000) work in particular raises the possibility that, insofar as women do make rational choices (as opposed to more or less *ad hoc* contextualised or restricted responses) related to work-life balance, they may do so in their choice of occupation or human capital development, prior to labour market entry (Purcell, 2002). Yet Crompton (1999) is somewhat over-positive in her arguments concerning the 'decline' of the male breadwinner, given that this and other research shows traditional orientations and understandings, on both the part of first class men and women, towards men still being considered the 'main' income-earner, *particularly* after the birth of a child.

Until now much of the research data on women and the labour market (e.g. Rees, 1992; Crompton, 1997) has highlighted the 'problems' facing women in paid employment, emphasizing the barriers that continue to exist for women in this arena. However, increasingly it seems that the gendered nature of labour market processes serving to disadvantage women and restrict their 'choices' appears as 'implicit' and 'invisible'. Such processes are therefore increasingly hard to tap in to. As Rasmussen (2003 : 1) argues, the reconstruction of the gendered division of labour in 'knowledge' or late modern societies, characterized by individualism and a generally accepted norm of equal opportunity for men and women, increasingly appears as the result of the personal and 'free choices' of individuals. The younger and highly qualified respondents to this survey provide an interesting test case to evaluate the extent to which highly qualified women, who potentially could choose to opt for any of Hakim's categories of work-life balance, perceive their choices or have systematically different medium and long-term aspirations. These questions are addressed more fully in the next section of the paper. Here, the responses of graduates to some of the survey and interview questions about longer-term values and aspirations, and the extent to which they felt they were actually *utilizing* their skills and abilities within their work, provide an interesting preliminary indication of gendered similarities and differences. It is to an examination of these issues that this paper now turns.

The following set of tables explore whether respondents felt that they were using their skills and abilities within their job at the time of the survey, and whether they felt the work they did required graduate level ability / training. Whether these top performing graduates are finding jobs consistent with their knowledge and skills within the labour market is an important question. How for example has the expansion of HE and changes in the labour market impacted upon the construction of employability by the highest achieving graduates and the work that they do? What skills and knowledge are required in their work? It is worth noting that although the questionnaire did not

distinguish between ‘personal’ and ‘graduate-level’ skills - which are not mutually exclusive, given that a graduate could feel that they are using their ‘*personal*’ skills in their job but not feel that they are using their ‘*graduate*’ skills or vice-versa - the responses do give a broad indication of the ‘quality’ of the job respondents had entered. Some measure of job quality must form a key element in arguments relating to graduate employability, because in one sense *all* graduates are arguably employable – the key question is ‘employable *for what?*’ (Brown *et al.*, 2003).

Table 4 looks only at those with firsts, and compares whether men and women felt that they were using their skills & abilities in their current job. Table 5 compares the same factors but only looks at men and women with 2:2s.

**Table 4: Use of Skills and Abilities in Current Job:  
Graduates with 1sts (N = 369)**

	Frequency		Percentage	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
Using skills and abilities in current job	162	127	79%	77.4%
Not using skills and abilities in current job	31	30	15.1%	18.3%
Don't know / not sure	12	7	5.9%	4.3%
Total	205	164	100%	100%

**Table 5: Use of Skills and Abilities in Current Job:  
Graduates with 2:2s (N = 301)**

	Frequency		Percentage	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
Using skills and abilities in current job	99	103	66.4%	67.8%
Not using skills and abilities in current job	42	38	28.2%	25%
Don't know / not sure	8	11	5.4%	7.2%
Total	149	152	100%	100%

It is immediately apparent that those with firsts are a lot more likely to agree that they are using their skills and abilities in their current job, compared to those with 2:2s. The gender differences here are relatively inconsequential, compared to the differences between those with different degree classifications, which suggests that having a first does have a premium in terms of this particular measure of job ‘quality’ for both men and women, relative to their counterparts with 2:2s. However, it may of course be the case that those with firsts are more likely to answer this question in the affirmative, given that their higher degree is something they expect to give them access to jobs where they are using their skills and abilities.

Another important issue relates to whether respondents felt that the work they did requires graduate level ability / training. Clearly this is a key question in the context of mass higher education and the position of graduates within an increasingly saturated graduate labour market. Tables 6 and 7 below compare the responses of those with firsts to those with 2:2s. Again it can be seen that the responses of those with firsts and 2:2s clearly differ – graduates with firsts are considerably more likely to respond positively and agree that the work they do requires graduate level ability / training. The responses of the genders are also remarkably similar on this issue.

Those with 2:2s are much more likely to feel that the work they do does not require graduate level ability / training and consequently that they are more ‘over-qualified’ than their first-class counterparts: *Close to 50%* of those with 2.2s felt that the work they did did not require graduate level ability / training. Again the responses of the genders are extremely close - it is the differences between those with different degree classifications that appear to be most salient here. The subjective perception of the majority of graduates is that they are in appropriate employment for people with their skills and qualifications, and there is little difference in how women are faring relative to their similarly qualified male counterparts.

**Table 6: Whether Work Done Requires Graduate Level Ability / Training: Graduates with 1sts (N = 375)**

	Frequency		Percentage	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
Work requires graduate level ability / training	164	132	78.8%	79%
Work does not require graduate level ability / training	38	30	18.3%	18%
Don't know / not sure	6	5	2.9%	3%
Total	208	167	100%	100%

**Table 7: Whether Work Done Requires Graduate Level Ability / Training: Graduates with 2:2s (N = 306)**

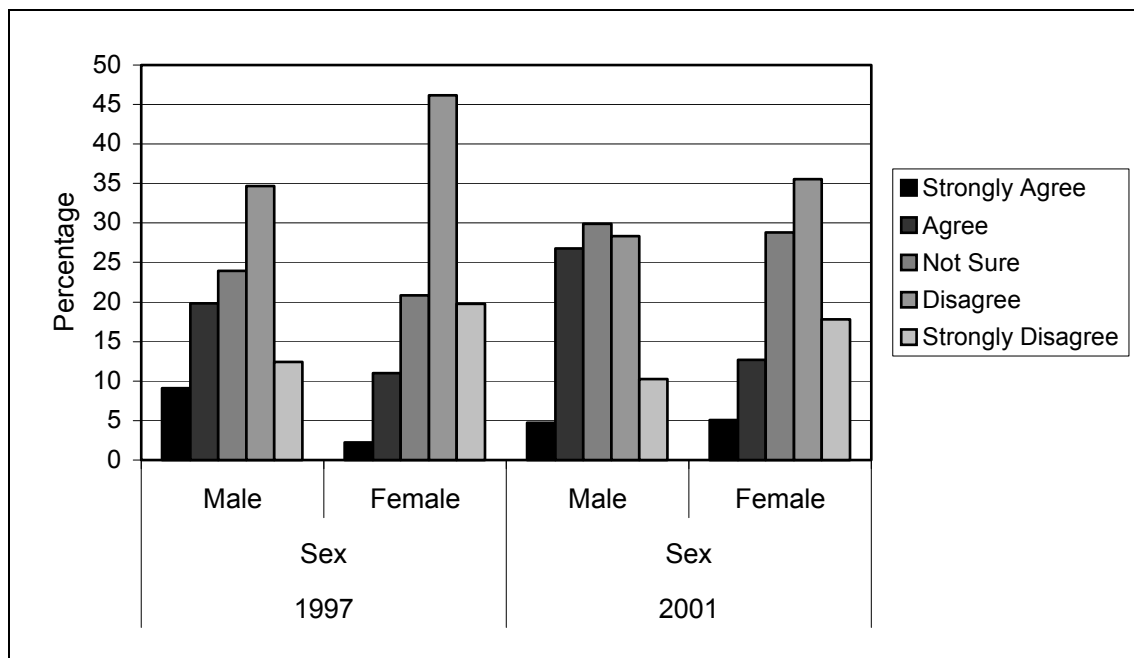
	Frequency		Percentage	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
Work requires graduate level ability / training	90	81	59.2%	52.6%
Work does not require graduate level ability / training	56	60	36.8%	39%
Don't know / not sure	6	13	3.9%	8.4%
Total	152	154	100%	100%

Figure 8 shows responses to one of the central questions of the research - whether respondents feel that having a first gives its holder the best employment opportunities, measured by use of a likert-type scale. The figure includes only those who graduated with a first.

The responses to this are extremely interesting and open up some further questions for exploration in the qualitative stage of the research. Overall, the majority of graduates, both male and female, disagreed that having a first gave access to the best employment opportunities. Apart from the 2001 male graduates all the shapes of the graphs tend in the same direction i.e. towards the ‘disagree’ end of the scale. Women from both 1997 and 2001 were more likely to disagree / strongly disagree that their credential had given them the best employment opportunities, relative to their male counterparts in each of these years. Men were more likely to feel positive about the role their credential had played in the labour market, regardless of the year in which they graduated. Of course what count as ‘the best employment opportunities’ are socially and culturally defined, so there may be differences in how graduates themselves *interpreted* this question. But the graph does suggest some interesting issues which merit further exploration e.g. *why* men and women appear to attach different weight to the value of their credential within the labour market, whether the

women are simply being ‘realistic’ and are more inclined to think that employers judge candidates on criteria other than simply credentials etc.

**Figure 8: “Those with First Class Degrees get the Best Employment Opportunities”: Graduates with Firsts by Gender & Graduation Year**



The interview data throw more light on this issue, as the following example interview extracts illustrate, pointing for example to the importance graduates attributed to things such as work experience, self-presentation and ‘personality’ in a person’s chance of getting a job i.e. facets which are more ‘personal’ and extraneous to the first class credential itself. An investigation of graduate perceptions of the *role* of their first class credential forms a key chapter in the thesis, but the extracts below give a preliminary indication of the issues to be explored.

Do you think that all graduates with firsts have an equal opportunity of getting good jobs?

No, I think it depends on who they are and what their experience is and how they present themselves... I can imagine situations in which a graduate with a first class degree and a whole chunk of relevant work experience is going to be more desirable than a graduate with a first class degree full stop. And there may be an assumption that someone’s who’s got a first but as far as you can tell from their CV didn’t do anything else in college, is maybe going to be a very narrow person...

[Female, 1997 cohort, Arts/Humanities degree, ‘middle ranking’ university, Librarian]<sup>3876</sup>

With more people getting degrees, what factors do you think influence who gets recruited?

It’s a popularity contest. A lot of it goes on personality. And looks, which is *dreadful* - but true ... I was involved in recruiting new editors in the last company I worked for - I was invited along to the interviews as well, along with my manager. And there are all sorts of horrible, devious thoughts that go through their minds. It’s really quite awful – I was quite shocked. There were people that were recruited on the basis that they were women with children who wouldn’t want advancement -

although they wouldn't say that to her - they would hire her on the basis that she would be easy to bully, wouldn't challenge anyone, wouldn't want advancement, wouldn't expect pay rises, would want to sit and do the same job over and over again... There were people that were hired specifically to break down a social dynamic within the group - people that would not fit in and therefore break down the social dynamic of the group because the social dynamic of the group was working against the management and pointing out their failings, and because at one point the manager was a woman she was hiring people that she found attractive – because she wanted to be around them all day and she was single... There are some awful, *awful* practices going on. I mean because there are so many graduates, people are coming in with the same level of ability and being in the same position in their career – they'd usually be people on their second job, who are really interested in moving in to publishing and they would come in and they would be interviewed and they would all be really of the same standard, so it would come down to personal issues or horrible, horrible practices of social engineering and also picking people that would suit their long-term goals of not giving anyone a pay rise and so on. Dreadful. Absolutely awful.

How about gender?

Ah - now that's an interesting question. Let me think about that. Hmm. I don't know, because I think so much of it goes on personality... And I think whether you get hired on the basis of your gender, would depend upon the gender and sexuality of the person that's interviewing you – and it does happen. I know it happens, I've seen it happen - I've seen people be hired for their sex... As I say, a male manager hired a woman because he thought he could bully her – or at least she would be 'easy to control' I think was the phrase that he used, and I've seen a woman hire a bloke because she found him attractive...

In terms of gender, I can't say that I've spotted anything in terms of sexism toward *women* carrying on... Most of the women that I know that have done well, have done it on the basis of how they look. I've never seen an unattractive female manager – ever... As I say, my friend from university who did exactly that – I mean she's on the board of directors now and she's earning a fantastic amount of money. She did the same degree as me, but she's earning a fantastic amount of money, and it's all from really scary things – even sleeping with one of the board of directors in his daughter's bed because that's what got him off! I'm not joking... And she told me that, and I was horrified – I said to her, you're in real danger if you carry on this way. Real danger. But, she's got where she is and she's happy – most of the time she's happy, but sometimes she goes through horrible periods of guilt...

[Male, 1997 cohort, Arts/Humanities degree, elite university, currently seeking employment – previously employed as an editor]<sup>1271</sup>

The above narrative of this male graduate, currently unemployed and who had voluntarily left a previous job due to a case of sexual harassment by a female, is a good (though perhaps a-typical) example of the richness of the data collected. This young man's story is full of *moral* values and evaluations. In particular, his perception of what individuals need, and need to do, in order to 'get ahead' in today's labour market involves an allusion to what he sees as the inherent immorality of today's competitive labour market – the 'dreadful', 'absolutely awful' practices of employers and the 'horrible periods of guilt' that his friend feels. If employability is as nebulous and intangible as his account would suggest, and is based more on the

micro-political and micro-level (largely sexual in his opinion) dynamics between individuals and employers/employing organizations in particular social contexts than on merit or reward for 'work done', then policy understandings of what constitutes employability, based on simply human capital assumptions of investment in individual skills and qualifications, clearly need to be re-thought.

The concept of personal capital (Brown *et al.*, 2004) has recently been introduced and is an extremely useful concept for examining 'who gets ahead' within the labour market. It allows the finer differences of graduates' resources within the labour market to be tapped in to, particularly when looking at graduates with similar levels of educational credentials. Although personal capital does not 'explain it all', judgements about one's 'personal qualities' have clearly become more important, alongside any consideration of paper qualifications. In these terms the value of an individual to an employer is not longer represented by the denomination of academic currency alone (i.e. 'having a first') but by things such as 'experience' and 'personality', as well as the continuing importance of 'social fit'. The narrative presented above certainly suggests that some graduates are aware of this.

This young man's (relatively rare) experience of being a young man sexually harassed by a female colleague has clearly shaped his understanding of both gender relations and his perceptions of the labour market. His narrative is replete with disheartening comments and he appears to be experiencing a real level of disillusionment - even *de-moralization* (Fevre, 2000; 2003) - with today's labour market. Brown *et al.* (2004) distinguish between labour market 'players' (who operate according to market rules of engagement and see employability as a positional game to be won by deploying necessary resources within the labour market) and 'purists' (who operate according to a belief in meritocracy). However the approach of this graduate may more accurately be characterized as one of '*moral retreatism*' from the labour market - he feels he has 'decoded' the rules of the game and is simply not willing to play by them. Furthermore his perception that the labour market today is inherently a morally 'questionable' arena has lead him to retreat from the competition and he has clearly become de-moralized:

I hate the workplace as it is now... I fully understand that in the past, that people progressing through a job perhaps wasn't based on their skills and experience and it was 'jobs for the boys' and there was very much a sexist element to it, but I still think that the ideal of people being promoted as a reward for their dedication and long service and their knowledge, is how a company should work, and it should keep and develop the skills base that it has... But they don't - they really don't. They promote their friends.

[Male, 1997 cohort, Arts/Humanities degree, elite university, currently seeking employment - previously employed as an editor]<sup>1271</sup>

Asked about the jobs that he felt would be 'appropriate' for him:

What jobs would you, or would you *not*, consider?

I wouldn't consider advertising or marketing or sales! And that's a shame because sales makes up so much of the workplace - I was quite stunned by how much of the work environment is made up basically of sales. Because I suppose really the

industry in the UK nobody makes anything any more – all people do is sell. So that was quite a shock to me. So people that have the gift of the gab, that are beautiful and that have got an unlimited supply of cocaine, they do incredibly well in this particular field. But I knew I just couldn't – there was no way that I could do it.

[Male, 1997 cohort, Arts/Humanities degree, elite university, currently seeking employment – previously employed as an editor]<sup>1271</sup>

It is entirely possible that the 'retreat' of many graduates from forming identities *within work*, and engaging whole heartedly with the world of work and their occupational identities, towards a concern with more general 'lifestyle goals' and 'private' identities (see section 3 of this paper), on *how* they work rather than where they work and for whom, and their emphasis on values other than simply work, is tied up with the notion of demoralization (Fevre, 2003), and that this is one of the reasons why the intellectual capital of graduates with firsts is not always translated directly into economic success or pure instrumental labour market 'ambition'. Also, the emphasis on employability as a means of compensating for perceived deficits in social and cultural capital (Atkins, 1999) goes some way to explaining why intellectual capacity and knowledge (as embodied in the first) matter less – and hence demoralization.

Turning again to focus more specifically on the gendered nature of how graduates perceived the labour market, a striking feature of the interview data from this research has been the apparent gender neutrality of interviewees' *'career'* accounts, where *in general* the majority of both men and women thought that merit, as well as the experience and personal characteristics e.g. personality of individuals, would be enough at least for initial recruitment within the labour market i.e. that gender did not play a part in "getting in" (initial recruitment) though it would perhaps become more salient when trying to "get on" (progress). (This 'gender neutrality' however was not apparent when it came to looking at men and women interviewees' 'private' identities, as discussed below in section 3.)

Interestingly however, the following interview extracts point to the way in which many graduates saw being female, particularly in a male dominated profession, as being potentially *advantageous* to women. Although such 'advantages' would be very much dependent upon the sector or job to which an individual was applying, it was generally accepted that for sectors and professions where women were numerically lower represented, then that fact *in itself* would mean that women would be advantaged in the competition for jobs or promotion, compared to their male peers:

If you were to re-enter the labour market now and go for another managerial post or something somewhere, do you think that you'd have the same chance of getting that job as someone in exactly the same position but just of the opposite sex?

I might even have a *better* chance... Because people are all looking to generally improve the number of women they employ, particularly in my industry.

[Female, 1997 cohort, Engineering/Technology degree, elite university, project manager]<sup>4163</sup>

There are very few women in engineering *anyway*, so if anything I think if you *were* a woman you would get not a *definite* benefit, but there would be a general sort of *unwritten* benefit...

[Male, 2001 cohort, Engineering/Technology degree, elite university, graduate engineer]<sup>4648</sup>

It depends on the sort of job you're going to go in to. I mean there are certain instances where gender is very important – if you're looking for a woman's officer, perhaps for some advisory charity, then a woman would be preferable in that position.

[Female, 2001 cohort, Social Sciences degree, elite university, social researcher for an independent charity]<sup>1150</sup>

It depends on the sector. I mean it would depend on what subject you did and what sector you're applying for jobs in. In my sector I don't think it makes any difference at all. If you are one of my housemates who got a first in mechanical engineering while being small and incredibly pretty and very feminine, your application, even though I mean I'm not talking like reverse sex discrimination, just the fact that they ask for an application with a photo and they've got like engineering geek, engineering geek, engineering geek, Pat, makes them stop and look. And that may give you the edge that they actually read your CV...

[Female, 1997 cohort, Arts/Humanities degree, 'middle ranking' university, Librarian]<sup>3876</sup>

No I don't *think* gender plays a role in recruitment, especially in the field I'm in - I didn't really get that impression to be honest. At work I find it more, but not in the selection process... The first job I had had like a very male sense of humour, and the jokes and stuff – not in terms of jokes that were inappropriate or offensive, but jokes that you didn't really get because they were just like 'men's jokes' and culture. But in where I am now there's more women and it's not like that. I don't feel like you can't get *ahead* because of that, but sometimes you have to fight a bit more to get taken seriously...

[Female, 2001 cohort, Social Sciences degree, elite university, Civil Service Fast Stream]<sup>3012</sup>

Especially in terms of 'getting on' or getting promoted, gender was also seen as a salient factor. Again, and particularly in male dominated fields such as computing where there are fewer women, women's greater 'visibility' was seen as a source of advantage that several of the male interviewees lamented on. For example:

Somebody got promoted above of me, and I thought that's a bit unfair, because this person doesn't know this, doesn't know this – and why has this person got a promotion and I didn't? And it was down to the fact that she was a - well, I put it down to the fact she was a woman, and she's a bit more 'visible' than I am.

So would you feel that you had the same chance, in your field, of getting a job you were going for, as someone in exactly the same position but of the opposite sex?

I think they'd have the same position as me, but they might get bumped up quicker than I would, because they get noticed... Middle management tend to be men, which means that women can get promoted quicker. And hence I kind of stagnated at the bottom: Because I don't network, I don't get noticed.



[Male, 1997 cohort, Business & Computing degree, ‘middle ranking’ university, computer programmer]<sub>2</sub>

However, several of the female graduates interviewed clearly did *not* think that they would have the same chance of progression within a job or within their career, compared to someone in the same position, with the same qualifications, but of the opposite sex. Although again women’s perceptions are perhaps strongly related to the sector within which they work and the particular job that they do. But there was a perception that male employers continued to hold to traditional, gendered assumptions and stereotypes and that these could serve to disadvantage women in terms of their ability to progress. For example:

I think as you *progress* it becomes harder as a woman, *to* progress. Because I think if the employer is male, that they do still see women as being sort of ‘the weaker sex’, and slightly more emotional... I think a lot of men *see* women as being more emotional.

[Female, 1997 cohort, Natural Sciences degree, ‘middle ranking’ university, science teacher and assistant head of 16+]<sub>2565</sub>

In terms of the move towards individual-level ‘employability’ and the changes in career structure and work-life history that have been generated by the shift towards flexible work patterns and frequent job changes, the graduates surveyed were asked whether they saw themselves as changing jobs regularly in their working life. Responses were measured by a likert-scale and the responses of first class men and women are shown over the page in Table 8.

The first thing to note is that the majority of graduates (43% of men and 42% of women) either strongly agreed / agreed that they saw themselves as changing jobs regularly. It seems from this as though the discourse of employability and the changing nature of work have been absorbed by graduates, at least by those graduates surveyed. A further 28% of men and 31% of women were unsure. Another interesting thing to note is the similarity between the responses of men and women, which on each response are extremely close. There therefore seem to be no gender *differences* here – the majority of graduates surveyed are playing along with and engaging with the kind of mind-set required for a realization *in practice* of the rhetoric of employability, flexibility and the notion of ‘portfolio careers’. This issue was again explored in more depth in the interviews.

**Table 8: ‘I see myself as changing jobs regularly in my working life’:  
All Graduates with Firsts (N = 465)**

	Frequency		Percentage	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
Strongly Agree	30	20	11.8%	9.5%
Agree	79	68	31.1%	32.2%
Not Sure	72	65	28.3%	30.8%
Disagree	62	47	24.4%	22.3%
Strongly Disagree	11	11	4.3%	5.2%
Total	254	211	100%	100%

The interview data revealed a strong tendency towards increasingly short-term commitments and continuous movement between jobs, mirroring the findings of Rasmussen's (2003) recent study of young workers in Norway. This is often interpreted as the behaviour of a new generation of workers who are mainly interested in their personal careers and are no longer loyal to their employers, so-called 'portfolio-workers', oriented towards their own professional development rather than the interests of the organization where they work (Handy, 1989). Sennett (1998) in contrast interprets it as a result of changes in the work organizations in flexible capitalism: When the companies offer only short-term relations and no long-term careers, it is no longer rational for the workers to invest in the organization. Hence while life-long employment relations in bureaucratic organizations with predictable careers was the norm in industrial capitalism, the employment relations of modern flexible capitalism are characterized by a short-term perspective (Rousseau, 1995). Such a 'short-term perspective' was certainly evidenced in the accounts of by far the majority of interviewees in this study.

Graduates' subjective perceptions of the labour market and the role of their first class credential are extremely varied, as shown by the interview excerpts and tables above. The survey data show that on the majority of the measures relating to graduates' *subjective* perceptions of the labour market, in terms of the match between qualifications and work done for example, men and women's responses are surprisingly similar; it is differences between those with different degree classes that are most pronounced. Men were however more likely than their female counterparts to regard the role of their first class credential in a positive light. A recent CSU report (2001/2) argues that 'women's study and career choices show an appreciation of the need to consider long-term job flexibility which will enable them to have families and keep their career options open'. The data presented here show that both women and men are considering long-term job flexibility in that they see themselves as changing jobs regularly in their working lives. However, similarities in the work and career identities of the young men and women interviewed are not necessarily mirrored when examining their private identities. In this context the interesting question becomes the extent to which young women with firsts are able to balance their career and private identities within today's labour market, and correspondingly the extent to which young *men* feel able to 'choose' family over career and the extent to which work/life or work/family choices and values relate to constructions of employability.

### **3. Gendered Labour Market Expectations and Aspirations: The Surfacing of the Work / Family Dilemma**

My prime aim while I was at university was to secure a good job for financial security. But when I first started to work, I hadn't really thought about when I would have a family, you know, and it does hit you. I think I hit sort of my mid 20s - and I *knew* I wanted to have a big family as well. And it was at that point that I thought mmm, you know, maybe work isn't everything.

[Female, 1997 cohort, Natural Sciences degree, 'middle ranking' university, science teacher and assistant head of 16+]<sup>2565</sup>

More often than not discourses of employability assume an inherently *instrumental* orientation to the labour market and work – they *assume* that people share the same

(work-related) values and want to ‘chase the dream’ of an organizational career, undertaking training and up- and re-skilling themselves to equip themselves with the general, personal and work skills required by the system – and for individuals themselves to assume responsibility for this. Once this is shown not to be the case then a different understanding of the socially *constructed* nature of employability can be arrived at, and a consideration of how constructions of employability are intimately related to identities and understandings of self and values can be undertaken. This section of the paper explores the extent to which women interviewees anticipated conflicts between their ‘public career’ and ‘private’ identities, and whether and how they anticipated having children would impact on their *working* life, career and identity.

As Savage & Witz (1992) argue, and as data from this study show, significant changes to career structures are taking place. Within this context it is often *women’s* domestic commitments (not men’s) that are assumed to present problems and to be in conflict with organisational and career demands and the maintenance of employability. Existing research shows some evidence of decline in sharp differences between men and women’s career experiences (e.g. Crompton & Birkelund, 2000; Halford *et al.*, 1997; Wajcman, 1998), although much of this research focuses on a specific occupational group (managers) and is also sceptical about the idea of ‘convergence’ in what these men and women do in their family lives, and how they negotiate work and family (e.g. Crompton & Le Feuvre, 1996; Halford *et al.*, 1997; Hochschild, 1997; Wajcman, 1998). As Purcell (2002) argues, the apparent convergence between men and women’s education and working patterns has led to a shift in priorities from the promotion of equal opportunities to concerns with the management of the work-life balance. But although investigations of the gendered nature of the latter are clearly important, arguments must not deflect attention from the persistent gender inequalities that underlie current divisions of labour, work organization and reward within the labour market.

The discourse of employability, based largely on an ethos of ‘competitive individualism’, continues to endorse a ‘masculine hegemony’ (Savage & Witz, 1992) based on the idea of the active, freestanding (male) individual who can remain employable at all times and committed to the labour market, even if he is no longer committed to one particular employer for the remainder of his career. As well as having gendered implications, the discourse of employability also has clear social class connotations, being identified closely with graduates who are well versed in performance-based skills, who are ‘good communicators’, ‘team players’ and who can interact comfortably and adeptly with corporate clients and ‘fit in’ with the corporate environment, managers and existing employees. Although women can clearly participate in this ‘new’ world of work, since it is not directly associated with a particular gender, it is a ‘performative culture’ (Savage & Witz, 1992) that depends on a particular configuration of the relationship between home and work, which valorises the independent individual with no other commitments (Savage & Witz, 1992; Wajcman & Martin, 2002). This makes it difficult for people, especially women, who value other aspects of their lives, or who have domestic responsibilities they do not wish to or are not able to avoid, from playing a leading role in organisations and demonstrating their ‘commitment’ to the labour market, to their careers and to their employability.

As Rasmussen (2003) has recently argued, policies of equal opportunity and equity in working life over recent decades have made *unequal* treatment between men and women illegitimate. Therefore, paradoxically, workers who take the responsibility for their families seriously, who take a career-break or who value caring for children above work, are ‘legitimately’ defined and interpreted as being ‘uncommitted’ to their job or employability, and excluded from opportunities at work in a climate where organisations are demanding more of their employees’ effort and time.

The decision to have a family therefore complicates the picture somewhat, since motherhood (or fatherhood) often equates with not being seen as ‘committed’ to the labour market. Childbearing continues to have a fundamental impact on the way in which women are perceived and treated by others – *and perceive themselves*. For example women across all three sectors in Savage’s study (Savage & Witz, 1992) saw themselves as having to make a stark choice between children and careers. This ‘choice’ remains a source of concern for women, as more recent studies by Hochschild (1997) and Wajcman & Martin (2002) have found. Savage & Witz (1992) found that although women were formally free to ‘enter’ the new management culture, they could only do so by not accepting key tenets of femininity, notably motherhood. Many of the same arguments can be applied to the new ‘competitive ethos’ of employability, which positions men and women differently and continues to encourage us to place more value on commitment to work than for example to care of children and family life. The data from this research confirm that for young women with firsts ‘motherhood on the horizon’ is foreseen as a source of tension and serves to highlight the conflict between women’s public ‘career’ identities and ‘private’ identities, as the interview data presented and discussed in this section suggest.

Purcell (2002) argues that, in terms of orientations to work and ‘life values’ in general, young women are less income-orientated, more concerned with intrinsic aspects of employment and more ‘other-directed’<sup>9</sup> than men, have different values and expectations of employment, and still appear to accept the cultural mandate that has allocated the primary parenting responsibility to females. Nevertheless many of the women interviewed as part of this research – in line with many of the men - exhibited high levels of ambition and commitment to their career development, whilst at the same time acknowledging the tension and difficulties for women when it comes to starting a family. Many looked forward with angst to trying to balance their career progression with caring for children and partners, when family would probably ‘take priority’.

The following extract shows the conflicts, tensions and difficulties that one of the young female managers interviewed as part of this study foresaw arising when it came to having children, and how this would be incompatible with her ‘public career’ identity. She talks of the “terrible, terrible choice” that women have to make and feels that “your career is pretty much over” once you have children. She is quoted at length because the data speak powerfully for themselves.

I know that in the ideal world and the way it *should* be, is that it shouldn’t impact on your career at all. Certainly it shouldn’t affect colleagues’ *opinions* of women that

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<sup>9</sup> Purcell’s (2002) use of the term ‘other directed’ is questionable (see e.g. Riesman *et al.*, 2001; Fevre, 2000). For Riesman (Riesman *et al.*, 2001), being ‘other directed’ means seeking out our own feelings and our own ‘difference’.

have children and things... It may be an old-fashioned view, but I can't help thinking that once you've announced that you're pregnant in an organization, that really your career is pretty much over, until you sort of come back and re-establish yourself. And I think in that sense the workplace is still very sexist. We might have equal opportunities, and we might have law and trade unions and all the rest of it, to ensure that sort of thing doesn't happen. But personally I believe it does. I think if a company needs to get rid of 10% of its employees - I know they have to be very careful with figures, to make sure it's not just people that could have children or have had children or are likely to have children - but I can't help but think that it doesn't do you any favours once you've had children. Not that it would put me *off*, but I think a lot of women are under pressure. And the other thing as well, is in certain jobs you have to work a lot longer hours than your contracted hours and what you're paid to do. So I think for a woman with children that would be a terrible, terrible choice to have to make... I've looked at some of my colleagues and I feel very sorry for them. There's women that have got families at home and they don't want to work until 10 o'clock every night and so either they've got to sacrifice their children, or their job. Now if they sacrifice their job and go home, often there's plenty of men that can come in and *will* work those hours, and they're often competing with male colleagues that have got maybe a housewife at home. Something that's always annoyed me, is if I need to go home because I know that I've got people coming at the weekend and I've got lots of housework to do and all the shopping to get and all the rest of it, and I really wanted to leave on time that night, I find myself competing or working with male colleagues who have a housewife at home, who can do all that *for* them. So I think it's often harder for women. Because if you're working with male colleagues who are the sole providers in a family unit - you know, working mothers have got an awful lot more responsibility *outside* of the office as well, that they need to balance. And therefore they're at a competitive disadvantage...

[Female, 1997 cohort, Natural Sciences degree, elite university, project manager]<sup>4184</sup>

This young woman's narrative makes an interesting contrast with that of the following *male* graduate, who was of the same cohort and had studied the same degree, but who had less commitments 'outside' of work and could therefore work longer hours, was 'more visible', and was hoping that the extra hours he put in would indeed put him at a competitive advantage when the next pay round came around:

The balance between my work and my personal life is completely the over work side at the moment, due to me being up here. I find it difficult to make friends so I'm just cramming everything into work. I'm supposed to work a 40-hour week, but I'm basically working 60-hour weeks, so that's an extra 20 hours I'm giving free! ... But I'm enjoying it. And I'm trying, at the same time, to impress. And I know the bosses are impressed - they've seen me there working all these hours - I know they're impressed. I'm hoping, when the next pay round comes round, then they'll think of me and think yeah, just give him an extra few percent. There are a lot of things which I'm thinking about. You know, if I put myself out then everybody - they do notice. Although my social life has been totally neglected, I'm just concentrating on work at the moment - social life can come later on. I need a lot of money at the moment [because] I want to buy a house. So I'm just working full out to get that.

[Male, 1997 cohort, Natural Sciences degree, 'middle ranking' university, bio analyst]<sup>3850</sup>

Turning to consider some of the quantitative data for a moment, Figure 9 shows survey responses to the issue of the career/family balance among those with first class degrees. Apart from the 1997 male graduates there is a remarkable similarity in the

orientations of female and male graduates, the majority of whom, both men and women, either agree or strongly agree that they want a job that enables them to balance the demands of having a career with that of having a family. Similarly, both the young men and women interviewed as part of Rasmussen's (2003) Norwegian study said that they would work less, or change job, when they had children. Interestingly, male graduates from 1997, who are older, have more experience of the labour market, and many of whom who will be at an age when they are beginning to think about starting a family, are notably less likely to strongly agree with this; although they are still inclined to 'agree' that they want a job where they can balance their careers with a family, they are also more likely to be 'unsure'.

**Figure 9: 'I want a Job where I can Balance My Career with a Family':  
Graduates with Firsts, by Gender & Graduation Year**

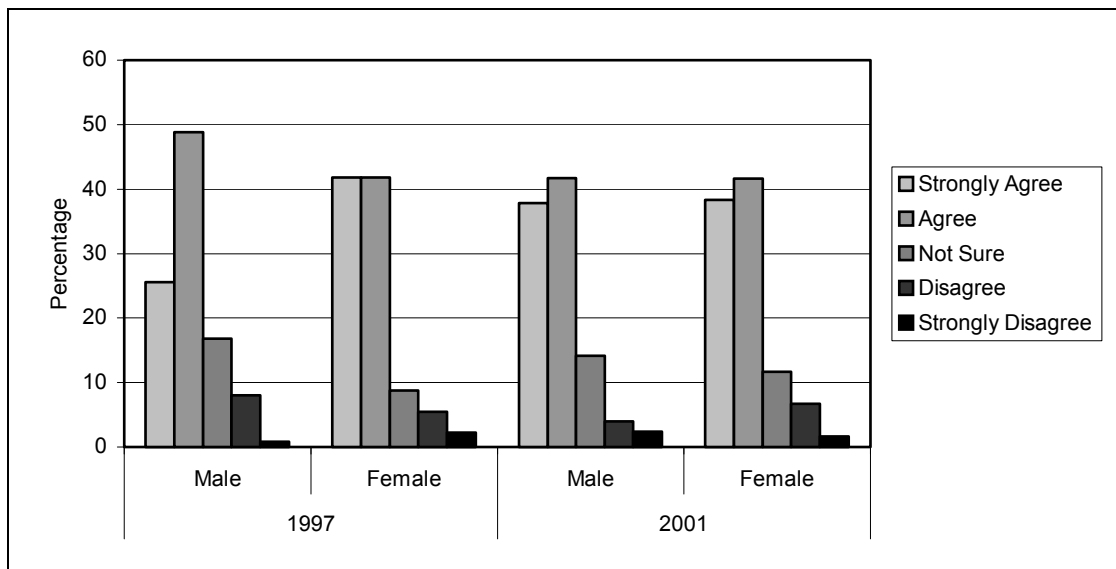


Table 9 compares the responses of women with different degree classifications to this same question and shows that, contrary to popular perception that high-flying and high-achieving women are often more 'careerist' in their orientation to work and the labour market, and more willing to follow their career at the expense of having a family etc., women with firsts and 2:2s share remarkably similar attitudes to this issue.

**Table 9: 'I want a Job where I can Balance My Career with a Family':  
A Comparison of Women with Firsts & 2:2s (N = 392)**

	Frequency		Percentage	
	First	2:2	First	2:2
Strongly Agree	84	67	39.8%	37%
Agree	88	76	41.7%	42%
Not Sure	22	25	10.4%	13.8%
Disagree	13	11	6.2%	6.1%
Strongly Disagree	4	2	1.9%	1.1%
Total	211	181	100%	100%

Whilst there is absolutely no doubt that the labour market behaviour of women has changed significantly over recent decades, contemporary young women's choices and values are an *extremely* important part of the 'employability picture'. The following extract is taken from an interview with a mature female student, whose children are now young adults. It is indicative of the changes that have taken place in women's thinking and identities over recent decades. She was brought up to think of work 'second' and family 'first', whereas the younger graduates interviewed as part of this research very much saw themselves as having to *balance* family and career – they wanted both, and both were fundamental to their idea of being a 'successful' woman.

I was brought up in the belief that (a) I didn't need a qualification because I was going to get married and have babies, (b) I was going to marry a reasonably wealthy man who was going to be able to look after me, and (c) I was going to be a housewife all my life. I was brought up to *believe* that. So I think it's much harder for me to run away from my duties as a housewife than it is for example my 23 year old daughter, who doesn't look at life the same way round as I do. You know, to me my responsibility's to the children, the home, the family – and *then* my work. I was always brought up to think of work *second*. So it's hard for me to flip it the other way round...

[Female, 2001 cohort, Social Sciences degree, 'middle ranking' university, studying for Masters / part time assistant chef]<sup>3504</sup>

In the 1990s, different models for linking child bearing with employment became more of a viable 'choice'. However as Purcell (2002) argues, young women still appear to accept the cultural mandate that has allocated primary parenting responsibility to females. In most cultures women continue to be allocated the roles of homemaker and primary parent (Hochschild, 1989). The strong social mandate for women to subordinate their individual career development and ambition to family-focused priorities has meant that, to a greater extent than men, women have been faced with work-lifestyle 'choices', the most significant of which has been the choice between giving priority to essential (market) work-centred roles or to family-centred work and relationships (Hakim, 2000; 2002). The extent to which this reflects socially restricted or freely expressed preferences is perhaps the most important and interesting research question currently faced by social scientists concerned with the operation of the labour market. Also of increasing importance is whether young *men* feel that they have such choices, or are able to exercise such choices. What makes it so difficult is that there is still a lack of suitable arrangements making it possible to *combine* work and family for young women (and men) with higher education and ambitions, but also with family obligations (Rasmussen, 2003).

Despite changes in the labour market behaviour of women, the debate about the extent to which women are able to make 'free' choices and the extent to which they are constrained by more structural and cultural forces and frameworks remains at the forefront of feminist and sociological thinking on gender and the labour market. Hakim's (2000; 2002) contentious arguments for example are largely constructed around the idea that there are three 'types' of women – work-orientated, adaptist and career-orientated. This study offers a good opportunity of examining *qualitatively* the orientations of high achieving young women. The data collected so far in relation to this issue have been extremely interesting, and it would be fascinating to follow the young women interviewees who were yet to have children through the family-

building stage to investigate how far their expectations are realized, and whether for example they expect their *partners* to take a career-break when the time comes (although the data collected suggest that on the whole they would not, and continue to aspire to motherhood as a fundamental part of their feminine identity). One of the young women interviewed as part of this research was pregnant with her second child, and was determined to carry on working despite being heavily pregnant. Yet she felt that she had little support and understanding from her (male) colleagues and that attitudes towards women and pregnancy at work had changed little. She perhaps provides a good example of Hakim's 'adaptive' women, attempting to combine work and family life.

The men at work don't seem to understand *at all*. I've been *really poorly* in the last couple of weeks - constantly sick - I've been being sick *whilst* I've been at work, so people have *seen* that I've been really bad, but they just say 'stop moaning!' And I haven't even really *said* anything, but *they* bring it up and *they say* oh 'stop moaning' - they're *terrible*. Especially the older men - they have *absolutely no idea* what it's like to work full time *and* look after children.

[Female, 1997 cohort, Natural Sciences degree, 'middle ranking' university, science teacher and assistant head of 16+]<sub>2565</sub>

In contrast the following extract taken from the narrative of a young, Asian female interviewee who had graduated more recently provides an example of what Hakim would typologize as a (self-professed) 'career-centred' women:

I know a lot of my friends criticize me for this, but initially I don't really think about children or relationships. I want to get my career on track before I think about even marriage or anything like that! ... Because I'm like a really career-minded person, I just want to establish myself and my career and stuff first...

[Female, 2001 cohort, Business Studies degree, 'middle ranking' university, studying for Masters]<sub>2691</sub>

At least in terms of their career narratives, the majority of the women who have been interviewed for this research do not feel that their gender has been 'a problem', and many have become quite defensive when the subject of gender has been touched upon - perhaps *reactive* is a better word, as discussed earlier.

How about your gender - has that ever been an issue?

It never was at the previous company I worked at, because it was a very large firm and they proactively employed women. On site obviously you're one woman amongst an awful lot of men and so there's always *comments*, but it's never been a 'problem'. In my current job I'm the only female professional, and so it's caused *comments*, but again it's never been a 'problem'.

[Female, 1997 cohort, Engineering/Technology degree, elite university, project manager]<sub>4163</sub>

However there does appear to be a discrepancy in the data collected - on the more 'objective', survey-related measures women seem to fare worse (e.g. in terms of training and pay), but on *subjective* measures i.e. in the qualitative interview data where graduates talk about their careers and opportunities themselves, women see



themselves invariably as equal to their male counterparts and as having equal opportunities for career advancement etc. Similarly there is a difference *within and between* different women's subjective accounts: For example, when talking about their careers there is in general a kind of gender-neutrality, but when it comes to an examination of these young women's more 'private' identities gender becomes far more salient. As Rasmussen (2003) argues, when women and men see themselves as individuals constructing their own lives as individuals independent of gender and class, the gendered patterns and divisions of labour do not appear as a consequence of structurally unequal opportunities or modern capitalism's market orientation, but as a result of individuals' *personal choices*.

Wajcman & Martin's (2002) recent study of managers in Australia also found that the dominant mode in which both men *and* women interviewees told their *career* stories was through what they term the same 'market' narratives; individualized, neo-liberal accounts of market action and choice where managers placed themselves as 'choosing selves', placing the source of career decisions and actions in the desire to satisfy individual 'preferences' determined outside the career realm and brought to it (Wajcman & Martin, 2002 : 992). They were essentially producers of a commodity – themselves (Wajcman & Martin, 2002). This contrasts sharply with bureaucratic narratives based upon commitment to the organisation. However, while the men and women interviewed used similar narratives to describe their *careers*, gender remained a significant factor in how public career identities were articulated with *private* ones (Wajcman & Martin, 2002).

When looking at the maintenance of 'private' identities, differences by gender were discernible, as in the current research. In general, the male managers that they interviewed could accommodate the 'private' world of the family and family responsibilities fairly comfortably within their career narratives (Wajcman & Martin, 2002). The moral discourse around guilt and children, which was so much a feature of women's accounts, did not figure in men's discussions. Indeed, far from the moral 'rudderlessness' described by Sennett (1998), moral and ethical considerations loomed large for women, as they do in this study. For example a mature female student interviewed as part of this study, with three teenage children looking to go to university, spoke of the difficulties of combining and managing her working and private lives saying that:

It takes a lot of organization... And you do feel a lot of *guilt*.

[Female, 2001 cohort, Social Sciences degree, elite university, project officer in education department for local city council]<sup>1415</sup>

I think both work and family are completely intertwined, because without work, the family starves. So the two have got to go together. You've got to balance the two in such a way that you're trying to get the best for *both*... But I suppose [the] bottom line – family first. *Children* first. Not *husband* first, *children* first...

[Female, 2001 cohort, Social Sciences degree, 'middle ranking' university, studying for Masters / part time assistant chef]<sup>3504</sup>

Similarly, a young female graduate spoke of the constant worry of thinking about how she would manage to balance the fulfilling career that she wanted with a family, which she was also keen to have:

Have you given any thought to your future in terms of relationships or having children?

I give a lot of thought to that all the time – it's always worrying me!

How do you see that impacting on your career or working life?

*Greatly.* That is something that concerns me because I just think that - obviously I'm doing a PhD and it could take a while to get into a job that I can excel in or achieve the best I can in, and I feel that – so if I'm 27/28 by the time I'm achieving what I want out of a career, I could be then looking to having children, and I see that as – even if you try to maintain your career I still think it would basically have a big impact on it for the next however many years of your life... I used to think I'd be prepared to give up work, but now I'm working I don't think I *could*... I guess I'll have to possibly change my career.

[Female, 2001 cohort, Natural Sciences degree, 'middle ranking' university, PhD student]<sub>2629</sub>

This suggests that there has been both change in women's attitudes, but also some continuity. Wajcman & Martin (2002) found that although men sometimes referred to the difficulties of constructing a balance between work and family, it never fundamentally threatened the integrity of their identities as market actors. For women managers, making sense of their career narratives when combined with their private stories was far more complicated. While they adopted the market narrative in accounting for their careers, many referred to a deep sense of conflict when adding their familial stories. For others there was simply a stark choice. There were also major differences between women. Many women tried simultaneously to inhabit the market narrative of a successful career and the private narrative identity of being a good mother/wife, which continues to be integral to a feminine gender identity. Few women were able to integrate their public gender-neutral career narratives with a feminine identity that included being mother and wife. In attempting to navigate a pathway through these dilemmas, many responded by rejecting a key role, either that of mother, wife or of serious careerist. So although career identities appeared to be gender neutral, so that differences between men and women in career routes were less and less dictated by gendered differences in their self-images in work and the labour market, because private identities remain fundamentally gendered, they are the increasingly dominant source of the quite different 'family-work' choices and dilemmas men and women face (Wajcman & Martin, 2002).

Similarly in this research the women interviewed were a lot more vocal about the issue of having a family and being a mother – they appeared to have already given a great deal more thought to having children and almost without exception spoke freely on this issue and their 'plans' of what they might do or what they saw as the dilemmas ahead. For the young men interviewed, although a few admitted that they would like to have children this was expressed more often than not as a monosyllabic 'yes' or 'no' answer – they did not appear to have given it so much thought, or to be so concerned about the tensions brought about by trying to combine a career with a family. Although both men and women thought that they had a roughly equal chance

of either getting a job or being promoted within work compared to someone with the same qualification but of the opposite sex (and in some largely male-dominated areas that women even had a better chance), when looking at differences in relation to family life gender differences became more marked. The women interviewed as part of this research who already had children spoke in terms of having to fit work around children and make career choices based on the needs of their children:

I looked at a couple of graduate training schemes like with the Inland Revenue and the NHS, but they wouldn't really have fitted in with my commitments with my children, because they wouldn't have been local, and I wasn't going to up sticks and move. The children are all at High School, so that wasn't a possibility for me.

[Female, 2001 cohort, Social Sciences degree, elite university, project officer in education department for local city council]<sup>1415</sup>

For many of the young women interviewed as part of this research, the choices, conflicts and setbacks commonly associated with motherhood had yet to really impinge. However, some of the interview data illustrating the anticipated difficult decisions that those who wanted to balance work and family would have to make are given below. The quotations illustrate clearly that these women are still operating on the assumption that they will take primary responsibility for looking after their children, when and if the time comes. Moreover for those who were yet to have children there was a strong presumption they would take time off or go part time with the birth of a child.

Yeah, I'm keen to have a family ... Ideally I'd not work at all, if I had two children that were very young, until they went to school, and then I'd work part time and as they get older gradually get back to full time I expect. But it depends on the financial situation!

[Female, 2001 cohort, Natural Sciences degree, 'middle ranking' university, Optometrist]<sup>2697</sup>

Can you think of anything in particular that might stop / help you to achieve your ambition (of being an FD in the music industry)?

Probably a change in lifestyle – having kids or something like that, that could impact. That would be the biggest thing I think. [Is that something you think about?] It's in the back of my mind, yeah... [How do you think that would impact on what you did?] It would because I don't think I'd like to leave the kids with a nanny – I'd like to take time off. I mean as long as it was financially possible I'd take time off, to the point where they're going to school or certainly quite established to a nursery school at the age of 4 or whatever. I'd like to take that time off if possible, so that puts a bit of a whole... and then you have to re-start again. You take four years out and then you have to kind of - if you're taking time off while your kids are born and are young, then that means that you then have to go back into the workplace and you lose technical skills as well as the feel for the job and things like that. So it's a lot harder to go back in then...

[Female, 1997 cohort, Natural Sciences degree, elite university, Chartered Accountant]<sup>4091</sup>

If I'm going to do something, I like to do it properly. It's like when I went to university – that's why I decided not to take a part time job, because I thought if I'm going to do something, I want to put my all into it. And I'm like that with everything.

And I think if you're lucky enough to have children then you should put your all into it... It would be nice to have the maximum amount of maternity leave that you could have, and then go back part time, or for a couple of years at least. I would like to do for my children what my mum did for me, and she was around for a couple of years. So although I equally respect women that go back to work straight away, I think first of all if I was lucky enough to have children, secondly if I had the luxury of choice which I know a lot of people haven't, but if I *had* the luxury of choice, I'd definitely rather put my focus on that, rather than work.

[Female, 1997 cohort, Natural Sciences degree, elite university, project manager]<sup>4184</sup>

If I had children I would probably reduce to part-time, although I'm not quite sure what part-time that would have to be. And I think it would be relatively flexible – I mean 3 to 4 days a week - but it might also include more working at home.

[Female, 1997 cohort, Engineering/Technology degree, elite university, project manager]<sup>4163</sup>

Children will impact on my working life, there's no doubt about it... And for me, I'm not really the kind of person that wants to have a child and then goes and leaves it with a nanny or something like that, all day, while I'm you know doing my career - that's not *me*. So for that particular reason we've decided that we're going to wait to have children, wait until we've finished all of our studies. ... I want to do all of that – travel, and enhance my career, and probably become the chartered psychologist and that. *Then* have a career break.

[Female, 2001 cohort, Social Sciences degree, 'low status' university, psychological assistant]<sup>1007</sup>

I suppose that I'd probably either stop working for a certain amount of time or cut down to working part time. Or stop and then go to part time, and hopefully be with someone who was prepared to do the same. I don't know if I want to be a full time child-rearer, but I'm not completely closed to the idea.

[Female, 2001 cohort, Interdisciplinary degree, 'low status' university, university library assistant]<sup>406</sup>

Similarly some of the male interviewees foresaw the impact that having children would have on their own careers or working lives, although they generally had far less to say about the issue. Although several of them mentioned that they thought having children would entail striking a better 'balance' between work and home life, and that beginning a family would inevitably change their 'priorities', the moral content of what they said was far less conspicuous, and not one of them mentioned the conflict or tension that beginning a family would entail, and the effect that this might have on their careers. The language the young men used to describe this was also very different (as well as just more limited), compared to the young women that I spoke to:

Obviously having children will change my priorities - I think it'll *have* to... I'm quite happy to be a househusband if it was necessary to be one.

[Male, 1997 cohort, Mathematics/Computing degree, elite university, senior software engineer]<sup>4299</sup>

Certainly with children you have to strike more of a balance I think, so you may have to reduce the time spent at work. And also the working hours, I think, will have to change. And maybe it will mean having to work more at home, later in the evenings or something like that, so you can be off during the day.

[Male, 1997 cohort, Natural Sciences degree, elite university, research fellow]<sub>4097</sub>

I guess if you get married or have children then it just means you've got to prioritize different things and so obviously that's going to mean work becomes *less* of a priority in *some* ways. But I hope to still be doing work that's fulfilling and so I hope to be able to balance all those things...

[Male, 1997 cohort, Arts/Humanities degree, elite university, sub-editor / self-employed journalist]<sub>1219</sub>

On the one hand such narratives point to changes in how young women and young men think of their 'self' / understand their own sense of self, how they manage their identities and how powerful they feel. For young women this change has involved moving into the labour market on ostensibly equal terms with men, but at the same time their feminine identity and 'private' identity is still heavily dependent on being a mother / having a family. Hence the women have been formally kind of 'empowered' by their qualification, but many still feel powerless when trying to balance work with life and when trying to balance their roles / identities and take care of their 'self'. For men this change has involved *some* move towards taking their 'private', as opposed to their 'career' or 'market' identity more seriously. But overall 'private' identities and approaches to family life are still heavily gendered amongst the young men and women interviewees in this research.

In light of the above and young women interviewees' careful articulation of foreseen tensions when it comes to beginning a family, stories about high-flying women who 'had it all', and who subsequently gave up prestigious jobs to concentrate on motherhood (at least for a while) are perhaps hardly surprising. Coward (1992) for example charts the guilt and pressures felt by mothers who strain to perform well both in their jobs and at home, and more recently Hochschild (1997) looked at the difficulties faced by women who were both mothers, partners and workers. The young women in this study are well qualified, mostly middle-class young professionals and their expectations are an interesting example of their future commitments to work/family.

The following interview extracts show that a motivating factor of giving up work or going part time to have children for many women is the fact that "my mum did it". It is also extremely interesting that the anticipated desire to have children is a reason influencing the first graduate's choice of consultancy as a career over engineering. Given contemporary concern about the lack of women not only taking engineering at university level but also in taking up and remaining in engineering *as a profession*, suggests that this may be an important factor in young women's decisions about which particular career path to pursue. And again the moral content of the second extract, of 'not wanting to fail my children' by not being there for them, is a striking example of the way that values condition the labour market decisions of many young women today.

I would love a family; I love children more than *anything*... But that was another reason why I decided I want to try and make the most of the career I *do* have, before I have children. Because I would like to be like my mum and give up work whilst I have my children, and watch them grow up. And that definitely influenced my choice of career - of consultancy over engineering - because obviously with consultancy I would pick up far more generic skills that I can use if I were to have a career break for say 5 to 10 years and go back. Whereas engineering, I wouldn't have done. That was *the* deciding factor...

[Female, 2001 cohort, Engineering/Technology degree, elite university, management consultant]<sup>4656</sup>

Having a family is something I would definitely like to do. But it's one of those things that... It's *timing* really, isn't it? - If I work back from 30, I'm already late! So I need to start now! But yeah, it is something I want to do. But I think the choice is always quite stark and quite difficult to make...

How do you see that impacting on your working life?

I think it would be difficult, partly because of my family background, because my mother didn't work, and I think that gave me in fact a lot of advantages personally, in growing up. And I felt like I had a very secure home life and a lot of time was spent at home, you know, working with me and trying to help me learn. So I wouldn't want to feel like I was failing my children in any way, by continuing to work at the same time. So I think it's the same old story, that you would have to really decide when it *happened*, what you were going to do and how you were going to deal with it, because there's so many constraints - financial and otherwise - that you might be *forced* to go back to work. But it might not be the natural choice you would make. ... I suspect that my work may become less important or may be difficult to sustain, if I were to *have* children. So I might be forced to choose one or the other...

[Female, 1997 cohort, Arts/Humanities degree, elite university, senior development editor]<sup>1227</sup>

Wajcman & Martin (2002) quote one young woman who talked about her career plans, strategies and expectations in the same terms as a dynamic man, identifying with work and feeling that she was overcoming all the obstacles, whilst at the same time recognizing that, being in a male-dominated industry, as a woman she had to 'continually prove herself' (Wajcman & Martin, 2002 : 997). She acknowledged that becoming a mother is the flash-point for career women and was therefore putting this off as long as possible. Some very similar responses were obtained in this research:

I felt like I had something to prove to be quite honest. I felt like I ought to go in saying look, don't worry about children, I've sorted child-care, and don't worry about... You know, I felt like I had to go in and prove myself, *before they asked me anything*, to be quite honest.

[Female, 2001 cohort, Social Sciences degree, elite university, project officer in education department for local city council]<sup>1415</sup>

Again, when talking about her choice of career the young female graduate quoted above said she felt that her gender had been a factor in her choice of career, and that being a female in a male-dominated career had given her a 'hang up'. Again she is quoted at length because she speaks articulately about being a female engineer, and

the data show for themselves the influence of gender on her decisions, choices and labour market behaviour.

My gender did influence my choice of not going into engineering, because I kept trying to *prove* myself - as an engineer. I mean I felt like I had to do double the work and be doubly as good. And that counted against me as well when I started at university - when I was doing group work, I had that kind of attitude and it took me a long time to get it out my system. And a lot of female engineers do do that as well - when they first start at university they sort of – I mean it's a substitute! - which is quite difficult. But my *current* job, the intake with me was 50:50, but *now* I'm on the congestion charging project in London, and I'm working with traffic signal engineers so I'm back to an all-male environment again...

Would you say it's an advantage or a disadvantage – being a female engineer?

I think it's a disadvantage. Well it's a disadvantage *personally* because it gives you such a *hang-up*, that you *know* you've got to try to prove yourself... I really thoroughly disagree with the whole women into engineering programmes that they've got going. I have done from the start. Because women who go in to do engineering - as a degree or whatever - have to do it because they *want* to - you can't be persuaded into it. It's such a tough option to take, *personally*, that you have to want to do it. If you don't *want* to do it then you're going to hate it and you're going to quit, and we don't need *anybody* like that... So I'd much rather two or three added to the list or whatever, who become female engineers *per year*, than them try and get a huge influx of 100 people who quit within two years, because it gives a bad name for the people who *do* want to do it. I mean I've got a few female friends who've gone and done engineering - and they love it – but I mean it gives them a bad name if other people go in and try and do it and then quit because they have problems with it. And I disagree with that, so... But it is particularly difficult. Being a female engineer *in management*, is *very* beneficial, because you're a lot more confident than a lot of other women in my peer group or my current career... Like because I had to struggle and try and prove myself before, I know myself very well - you've sort of *been* through it already! - so it makes being a graduate employee, I think, much easier.

[Female, 2001 cohort, Engineering/Technology degree, elite university, management consultant]<sup>4656</sup>

This backs up Wajcman & Martin's (2002) research revealing a persistent gender structuring of 'choices' about career and family in what they term 'the new capitalism' by focusing on identities as important sources of action. Clearly what has been referred to as the contemporary 'performative' culture, based around values of competitiveness, specialist skills and dedication, is very much a 'performance-related' hierarchy in which rewards and progress are justified in terms of ability to carry off certain objectives (Savage & Witz, 1992). Within this context not only a person's personal capital (Brown *et al.*, 2003), but also their values in relation to family life often become more important than simple 'merit' in terms of a person's ability and willingness to progress within a particular company or within their career and also – crucially – in influencing how they construct and manage their employability within the labour market.

Walby (1997) found young women interviewees in her study were more likely to have longer-term plans and aspirations and were making use of increased educational assets to grasp the opportunities provided by feminization. She (Walby, 1997) clearly sees

the new 'knowledge economy' offering greater opportunities for young women. Bradley's (1996) research suggested that young women in particular are more committed to 'career development', in the expectation that much of their lives will be spent in the labour force. The data from this research cannot lead to such simple or optimistic conclusions: The majority of young women (and men) interviewed as part of this research had primarily *short-term* orientations to work, and when they did mention their longer-term plans and aspirations these were combined with an awareness of the tension that beginning a family would present, and with the realization of other lifetime goals such as taking time off to travel. However, it is perhaps worth bearing in mind the possibility that the research cited above is based on data collected now almost a decade ago, and in a fast-changing field like this one may by now be very much out of date. There does seem to be some sort of cleavage along the lines suggested by Hakim (2000; 2002), but the young women interviewed as part of this research were still operating on the assumption that they would be the ones looking after children - and indeed *wanted this to be the case*, and this poses a potentially large problem for women's true 'equality' in years to come. It is here that a conception of equality recognizing that sometimes to be 'equal' means being 'treated differently' (the EOC slogan) needs to be taken more wholeheartedly on board. As employment is, at the crux of things, dependent on the relationship between individuals, gender will always play a role, and in many ways equality is still an awry concept.

I think employers have *always* got the problem with women - if they're young women who've got *no* children, they think 'oh - going to leave and have children?', or 'going to take maternity leave and cream some money off us and have children', or they look at older women like me, and they think 'mmm, going to be grand children? How old are her parents? Is she going to leave to go and look after her ailing father, or...?' I think there is a lot of that involved, and I think that stands against women, because women *care*, and they *know* we do, and that's part of the reason that they don't want to take us on. And I think a lot of men don't want women who are smarter than *they* are - that we intimidate them to some degree, and that's why they always feel they have to intimidate *us*...

[Female, 2001 cohort, Social Sciences degree, 'middle ranking' university, studying for Masters / part time assistant chef]<sub>3504</sub>

Hence despite the trumpeted advances up the ladder for many women, the road is still in many ways separate from that for men. Women are disadvantaged, or disproportionately advantaged, depending on type of job and position (e.g. part-time administration in the latter sense). But employability also depends on what individuals *want*, and what they are *going* for within the labour market. And it is here that other identity markers come into play e.g. class or race, and cross cut with gender to shape, influence, and in some cases 'limit', the choices and pathways that individuals navigate within the labour market.

### ***The Interaction of Race & Gender***

Bradley's (1996) work emphasizes the inter-active and inter-related (often conflicting) nature of class, race and gendered dimensions of experience within society today, and how this leads to what she terms 'fractured' identities. Bradley's (1996) work on fractured identities is similar to other post-modern theories that conceptualize



identities as ‘shifting’ and multiple. Clearly identities - be these along gendered, classed, racialized, work-related and ‘public’, or ‘private’ lines - are very closely related to how individuals construct their employability and to what individuals perceive as ‘appropriate’ choices for them to make in relation to the labour market as well as other areas of their life such as consumption, lifestyle etc. Although the main focus of this paper is on gender issues, the data from this research certainly show that the ‘identities’ of the graduates interviewed were to a greater and lesser extent ‘multi-faceted’ – of course they saw themselves as ‘graduates’, but they were also inhabiting a host of other identities, and there was also a clear recognition, amongst the graduates interviewed, that other key markers of identity such as age, race and class play a role within the labour market. For example some of the ‘ethnic minority’ women interviewees, when asked whether they felt their gender had been an issue for them, also referred to their race:

Gender will be an issue when I’m climbing up the ladder. It will be a challenge. Especially being a *black woman*, aspiring to be a top forensic psychologist - black forensic psychologist - of course it’s going to be an issue ...

How do you think it’ll be an issue?

Just because not many people will... To be honest with you, there’ll be people not wanting you to get there, but you know, it’s not a thing that I make a problem out of. I ain’t going to change. I’ll always be a woman and I’ll always be a gender and I’ll always be inspired... And it ain’t going to stop me. Do you know what I mean?... I think I’m different. I’ve just got a very very strong belief that I am very talented, and it’s that what challenges me. I refuse to let racism and sexism or peoples’ opinions of who I am deter or dictate to me what I’m going to do, or abuse it. So it’s not a problem. I think a more major problem was that I just used to let it *deter* me.

[Female, 2001 cohort, Social Sciences degree, ‘low status’ university, psychological assistant]<sup>1007</sup>

I think that’s really specific to companies – from company to company - because I know some interviews that I’ve been to I’ve felt at a disadvantage... But most of them that I’ve been to I don’t think it makes any difference.

Can you just tell me a little bit more about where you think it’s been a disadvantage?

Yeah... When I was applying for industrial placements, I can remember going to one interview, and I went there and as soon as you went in through the doors it was dominated by males. So I felt at a disadvantage there because obviously walking in to a company if you don’t see an equal balance you kind of think ok they’re looking for a specific type of person... Do you know what I mean? Not only gender, but I think your culture has a lot to do with it – I felt at a disadvantage in that sense as well, because I was Asian...

[Female, 2001 cohort, Business Studies degree, ‘middle ranking’ university, studying for Masters]<sup>2691</sup>

How about race or gender – have either of those been an issue for you?

*Probably*, but I’m too much of a coward to actually stick my neck out. I’m not going to jump on the racist, gender bandwagon about it. I could very *easily* - I’m *both*. All

I need is to sit in a wheelchair and I'd have the hattrick! - This has actually been *said* to me, by people in authority. But I won't use that as an excuse or to progress... Do you see what I mean? But yeah, in *general*, yes, I think that does matter.

[Female, 2001 cohort, Social Sciences degree, elite university, project officer in education department for local city council]<sup>1415</sup>

## **'Lifestyle' Aspirations**

The graduates interviewed as part of this research were also asked about their aspirations for the future and the 'quality of life' that they were hoping to achieve. Some of the responses are given below, and indicate how these graduates are striving for what may broadly be termed 'middle class lifestyles' – the 'two holidays a year', 'a car', 'a reasonably sized house'. To 'be comfortable' was a response that emerged again and again in interviews, and suggests that employability is also about being able to achieve a particular *lifestyle* and to be able to consume particular goods and services, primarily including property and travel, which again is fundamental to the identity that these graduates are hoping to obtain. Stroud (2001) also found that achieving a middle lifestyle was an important aspiration for interviewees in his research. When asked to describe the eventual quality of life or lifestyle that they were seeking in the current research:

I've got a flat at the moment, but I'd like to have something a bit bigger... And I like travelling, so that'd be one thing that I'd like to be able to afford to do ... To live in a reasonably sized house - I mean nothing massively fancy - but in a reasonably sized house and be able to take a few holidays a year, and then when I'm in retirement to have the sort of lifestyle where I can have two holidays a year and live in reasonable comfort.

[Female, 1997 cohort, Natural Sciences degree, elite university, Chartered Accountant]<sup>4091</sup>

I just want to be comfortable really. I don't need a lot of money sitting in the bank. I want to go travelling again, I do want the relationships and the children thing as well, and... But I definitely want to keep hold of a career... I suppose this is another sort of noble concept – I think the career's more important *in itself* than the sort of financial rewards, although I suppose there's a kick-in point - it can't be devastatingly low for ever. But just enough to provide for me and whoever.

[Female, 2001 cohort, Social Sciences degree, elite university, social researcher for an independent charity]<sup>1150</sup>

That I'm seeking? Well, in terms of did I want to be horrendously rich and have a huge house and... - No. All I ever wanted was to have a decent place to live – a nice flat, not too big, not too small, maybe with a spare bedroom, enough money to do what I wanted to do – go on holiday once a year, own and run a reasonable car – nothing flashy. I never aspired to fantastic riches or fame or anything like that. I just wanted to make enough money to live an ordinary life I think. [Are you now optimistic that you'll be able to realise this?] No...

I honestly don't know where I see myself in 5 years time. I don't know what I'm going to do now. No idea. I don't have any faith in the job market or in companies' practices of looking after staff. None.

[Male, 1997 cohort, Arts/Humanities degree, elite university, currently seeking employment – previously employed as an editor]<sup>1271</sup>

I don't know. Sometimes I think maybe to go abroad and work abroad for a little while or something, but it's not that important to me ... I mean just more feel happy with where I am with my family and stuff; that my boy is doing alright in school...

[Female, 2001 cohort, Social Sciences degree, elite university, Civil Service Fast Stream]<sup>3012</sup>

Graduates were also asked about the extent to which their present situation had met the expectations that they had at university.

I think if this is where I knew I'd be then I'd be really happy actually. Looking back at it now, if someone said you're going to have your own flat in five or so years time, be working for a music company and travelling round the world every month, I think I'd be really happy!

[Female, 1997 cohort, Natural Sciences degree, elite university, Chartered Accountant]<sup>4091</sup>

I'm mortified... I'm very very unhappy about it, because I think school and university life completely sets you up with the wrong expectations of what the rest of your life's going to be. The impression that I got from school and university was that as long as you work hard, and show that you have the self-discipline to work hard and apply yourself and you do well at it, then you will be rewarded. That was my expectation and I always thought that I would get into a job, I would work hard at it, do well, and I would be *rewarded*. And all I've been is held back, harassed, ignored. I've never, never ever been given the opportunities that I thought I would be given...

[Male, 1997 cohort, Arts/Humanities degree, elite university, currently seeking employment – previously employed as an editor]<sup>1271</sup>

Just these two examples illustrate the different experiences that different graduates have in the world of work, and how issues of well being and changing self-perceptions are closely tied up with constructions of employability and identity. The male Arts graduate quoted above was extremely *frustrated* with the fact that his experiences and current situation had not lived up to his *expectations* of what he thought the world of work would be like and the opportunities that it would offer him as a graduate. Unfortunately, he was not alone in this. For many graduates the feeling that they had 'done all they possibly could' and *still* had not got where they wanted to be - despite having first class degrees and even post-graduate qualifications - suggests that the management of graduates' expectations is already a real problem as ever more graduates enter the labour market with perhaps inflated expectations of the rewards that they will get at work and (crucially) what they will actually have to do in order to get on. Moreover this problem will only be exacerbated if the demand for (particular types of) graduate labour does not keep pace with the supply, and if students continue to be conditioned, throughout their educational lives, to believe that the opportunities afforded by a university education will lead to a good graduate job through a meritocratic allocation of labour where hard work = reward. This is a key theme for future investigation.

Overall, the interviews with first class women and men revealed both continuity and change in how young female graduates are engaging with the labour market: There

was a continuing assumption – and desire - that they would stop work or at least reduce their hours to part time in order to have children (but whether men feel able to give up work to look after children, or have the inclination to, is an important research question), and how these career and family values create conflict between work and personal identities and therefore affects career decisions, development and employability, exist alongside an increasing ‘short-termism’ and individualism in relation to the labour market and jobs. The extent to which young couples *share* ways in which they construct the work/life balance is something that could be explored in further research. A preliminary examination of some of the research data relating to first class graduates’ attitudes towards work and family life has shown that a consideration of some of the more subjective facets of employability – for example values, identities and lifestyle issues - are just as important to an understanding of the social construction of employability as are issues concerning the ‘objective’ positions of graduates within the labour market. Moreover an analysis of these two different types of data reveals quite different patterns. The value and identity dimensions of employability and their relationship to motivation, clearly need to be incorporated into any analytical framework that is used to explore graduate employability in future.

#### **4. Re-Defining Employability**

This section outlines the main, existing meta-theoretical approaches to employability within the literature and suggests a re-definition which recognises that employability must be understood as being about lifestyle issues, values, choices and attitudes, as much as simply about individuals obtaining employment. Employability is not only a matter of making a living or being able to get ‘a job’, but is also a matter of achieving a ‘comfortable’ (middle class) lifestyle (also see Stroud, 2001). There is also a ‘subjective’ dimension to understanding labour market outcomes, as issues of employability are intimately connected to the question of social identities (Holmes, 1995) and *shaped* (not necessarily *determined*) by an individual’s ‘habitus’ (Bourdieu, 1973), as shown in the preceding sections of this paper.

Employability is central to the policy goals of government and has been identified as a key economic and social target by both government and big business (see e.g. CBI, 1998). It is seen as a key issue for individual, business and national economic competitiveness, and the ‘solution’ to changes in work and organization. The CBI (1998 : 6) for example defines employability as:

‘The possession by an individual of the qualities and competences required to meet the changing needs of employers and customers and thereby help to realise his or her aspirations and potential in work’.

The business and policy focus on employability has been presented in terms of labour market changes such as higher skill needs, changing career structures, an increase in flexible working patterns, rising numbers of women in employment, falling job tenure and concerns over unemployment. Central to the whole CBI approach, and that of the government, is the belief that employability is ‘specifically a quality of *individuals*’ (CBI, 1998 : 9). This view of employability has informed much of the contemporary debate. Employability therefore serves the ideological function of shifting the blame for failure on to the shoulders of individuals, and for the removal of social and moral responsibilities away from business and government and on to individuals. Much of

the new economy is about shifting power to employers, affecting the ability of employees to control their work/life balance issues e.g. when, whether, how and where to work. It also serves the ideological function of legitimating existing labour market inequalities by shifting the focus on to individuals. It is therefore questionable whose interests are being served by employability discourses. This paper suggests that without denying the centrality of individuals, employability is better appreciated as a *social construct* and is dependent upon context, as well as on individuals' identities, self-concepts, values and motivations for action.

The CBI (CBI, 1998) and government policy therefore take insufficient account of the *relative* nature of employability: As Brown *et al.* (2003) strongly argue, employability cannot be defined solely in terms of individual characteristics ... because employability exists in two dimensions – the relative and the absolute (Brown *et al.*, 2003). This they call the 'duality of employability'. Furthermore, employability varies depending on economic conditions and the general health of the labour – and capital – market.

According to the CBI (CBI, 1998) the drive for individual employability requires a change in the knowledge, skills, understanding and attitudes of those in and seeking employment. However, employability for individuals is not limited to skills and knowledge – a re-conceptualisation of employability must recognize that *values and attitudes* are just as significant. Furthermore the development and maintenance of employability is seen as a continuous, lifelong process. Aspirations in work e.g. rate of pay, opportunity for development etc. are seen as a vital element in the motivation to improve one's employability. And women, who are more likely to enter and leave the job market than men, are particularly seen as needing to maintain their employability (CBI, 1998). However, this understanding of employability is clearly based on gendered *assumptions* and research is needed to explore the extent to which *men* for example feel able to leave the labour market for child rearing, or to share the responsibility with their partners.

Despite the increasing use of the term 'employability', there is no single definition within the academic literature and its *meaning* remains far from clear (Harvey, 2001). The fact that employability is both a social construction and a contemporary discourse means that it has no 'single' meaning. Incorporating the voices and values of high achieving female and male graduates into theoretical understanding of employability forms an important part of arriving at a fuller re-conceptualization of what employability means to young men and women on the ground, and how they feel about the world of work. Gender must form a crucial aspect of the analysis, taking account not only of the views and values of high achieving women, but also of those of high achieving young men.

The conceptual approaches to employability that exist within the literature can broadly be divided into the following five main approaches (although this does not represent an exhaustive list):

1. Employability as the ability to gain and retain fulfilling work (Hillage & Pollard, 1998), or 'outcome' approaches;
2. 'Skills' approaches to employability (e.g. Dearing, 1997);

3. Graduate *identity* approaches (e.g. Holmes, 2001), which aim to understand how graduates gain *social* recognition of their 'worth' as graduates;
4. Employability understood as both an absolute and a *relative* concept: 'The duality of employability' (Brown *et al.*, 2003), and;
5. Employability as 'empowerment' (Drucker, 1993; CBI, 1998).

This paper suggests that, whilst each of these approaches is helpful in drawing attention to certain aspects of employability, the 'duality of employability' approach (along with a consideration of the identity dynamics of employability) provides the most coherent model within which to explore the employability of *First Class* graduates, relative to other graduates. Employability must be understood as being about *relative chances* (Brown *et al.*, 2003) and differences in labour market power. It is therefore important to examine what the discourse actually means to young women and men on the ground, and to explore how they are positioned both within and by the discourse of employability (Taylor, 1998).

However, existing conceptualisations of employability fail to grasp the value-driven and socially constructed nature of employability. Employability is a social construction, not simply an outcome – connected to identity, the self, experience, habitus. Any individual's employability is dependent upon their identity/identities and values etc. As Brown *et al.* (2003) argue, a major problem confronting researchers interested in issues of employability is the lack of theoretically informed studies. This research aims to help redress this imbalance.

The two main schools of thought relating credentials to the occupational structure on employability have been human capital theory and social closure theory. These theories represent either side of the duality of employability (Brown *et al.*, 2003). Concentrating on the individual worker, the argument that one should invest in one's employability to enhance one's capacity to get or maintain employment, is similar to the line of reasoning as presented by human capital theory (Becker, 1993; Schultz, 1971; Mincer, 1974). Both government policy and the official discourse of employability are informed by human capital assumptions i.e. that those with knowledge and skills will see their incomes rise due to the higher value of their human capital (the 'learning is earning' argument). According to this model the ideology of 'meritocracy' prevails within a knowledge-driven economy where competition for the growing number of professional and managerial jobs is meritocratic – 'talent' does not discriminate on the grounds of gender, class etc. Hence employers and government agree that there is a strong need to invest in human capital and that such investments will benefit employers, employees and national economic competitiveness. However, because it assumes that *skill* rewards people, human capital theory adopts a somewhat naïve and functionalist view of the relationship between skill and reward within what is in fact a highly complex type of market (see e.g. Fevre, 1992).

There are a number of major (and well-rehearsed) weaknesses with such an approach. The most important is perhaps that the relationship between education and employment is far more *complex* than is often assumed. For example, who gets 'the best' jobs may well be more related to differences in labour market *power* than in returns to skills or 'employability' (or even 'luck'). Human capital theory is blind to gender differences and ignores differences in the *power* of social groups to enhance

their employability at the expense of others. Researching *First Class* graduates allows for a detailed examination of these issues. For example, it may be assumed that the labour market power of first class graduates will be similar, given that all possess a similar academic credential. Yet more subtle differences in the cultural, personal, material and symbolic capital of graduates, along with differences in their social, economic and cultural characteristics, affects individuals' abilities to use their labour market power and the extent to which they can effectively *capitalise* on their employability. It is also doubtful whether inequalities can really be overcome by simply investing in the skills, employability and education of individuals.

Social closure theorists (e.g. Weber, 1968; Parkin, 1979; Collins, 1979; Murphy, 1988) on the other hand would argue that the better paying and higher status jobs have historically been 'closed off' to women (or other minority groups or social groups defined as 'other') by men for example wanting to retain their relatively advantageous positions within the labour market and so 'closing off the competition' to those deemed 'outsiders'. According to this model, resources and power are both salient resources which are deployed within the labour market and which serve to increase the position of one group at the expense of another. Social closure theory therefore offers an alternative explanation of the current policy focus on employability. From this approach employability represents an attempt to legitimate unequal opportunities in education and the labour market at a time of growing income inequalities. So for example companies have emphasised employability in an attempt to shift the social and moral responsibility for jobs, training and careers onto the individual. This approach rejects the view that we are advancing towards a high skilled knowledge economy. In fact only an elite is able to preserve their personal autonomy through work. Hence personal qualities are emphasised in an attempt to legitimate the reproduction of inequalities. However, although more attractive than the human capital alternative, social closure theory is arguably too simplistic – the competition cannot always simply be 'rigged', and it sheds little light on how positional competition is experienced by individuals and social groups (Brown, 2000).

Positional conflict theory (Brown, 2000; Brown *et al.*, 2003) has been presented as a more recent 'third way' between these two competing approaches, introduced as a way of conceptualising the changing relationship between education, employment and the labour market. It is grounded in the neo-Weberian tradition where groups are competing for rewards within the labour market, and it recognises differences in the *power* of groups to deploy their capital. Positional conflict theory offers a conceptual framework that enables us to study how positional competitions are structured and how individuals and social groups fare within the 'rules of the game'. It incorporates the work of theorists such as Bourdieu and Bernstein and encourages us to investigate the social structure of competition. However, again this theory makes no real effort (apart from a passing recognition that gender is important) to integrate the position of women or gender into its analytical framework. The gendered nature of this positional contest has been ignored. In fact none of these theories really acknowledge what the emphasis on employability might mean for women. Given the data reported above, the positional element clearly merits attention – moreover women need to be considered both relative to men and also relative to other women, since differences *between* women can often be just as important. Interviews with women and men in both female and male-dominated professions will be used to add 'gendered weight' to this theory, and the extent to which young men and women actually see the

competition for jobs as positional will also be investigated, in the hope that positional conflict theory can be developed further.

According to this model employability depends on how one stands *relative to others* within a hierarchy (which may be explicit or implicit) of job seekers (Brown *et al.*, 2003). The ‘positional’ aspect of employability therefore assumes major importance in understanding who will find elite employment. Using this model entails an examination of *how positional competition is organized and legitimated* and a wider consideration of the changing relationship between education, jobs and rewards.

Bradley (1999) introduces the notion of ‘gendered power’, which could also usefully be applied to the analysis of employability. Although neither Giddens nor Bourdieu applies their ideas to the empirical study of gender, their work can form the basis for theorizing power in terms of different forms of resources (Giddens) or capitals (Bourdieu). Following Giddens’ theory of structuration Bradley (1999) conceives of power in terms of differential access to and control of rules and resources, and distinguishes nine different types of power resource that are involved in relations between men and women: Economic power; positional power; technical power; physical power; symbolic power; collective power; personal power; sexual power and domestic power (Bradley, 1999 : 34-5). Each of these could usefully be applied to the study of employability.

According to Hakim’s (2002) preference theory, women’s motivations and aspirations must be investigated more thoroughly, *alongside* the impact of social, economic and institutional factors. Significantly, preference theory brings *values* back into the investigation by looking at variations in lifestyle preferences among women. The main theoretical and empirical development is the insistence that preferences and life goals can no longer be ignored or assumed to be known or homogenous. Again there are elements of this analysis that can usefully be applied to the study of employability.

In fact ‘employability’ is the product of a complex mixture of different factors located in the labour market, in universities, in the recruitment procedures of businesses, in the economic policies implemented by government and in the personal/social characteristics of individual graduates. Employability is *not* simply ‘an outcome’; *constructions* of employability are intimately connected to issues of social and personal identity, socialization, personal and cultural capital, habitus etc., which begin and have been developed before an individual even enters HE or the labour market. At its simplest level ‘employability’ itself may be seen as a function of the match, or lack of it, between the demand for labour and the supply of labour, *with both these terms being understood as qualitative as well as quantitative concepts* (Kleinman & West, 1998). As Knight (2002) argues, graduate employability is not *divorced* from academic achievements, but academic achievements are only *a part of* the story. When considering issues relating to employability, above all it is perhaps important to recognise that employability is not simply a question of gaining employment - it is important to recognise that *the same qualifications and skills have different exchange values for different social groups in the labour market* (Morley, 2001).



## Conclusions

The findings presented in this paper suggest that any understanding of graduate employability must incorporate a consideration of the values and attitudes of individuals, including in particular the voices of young women and men within the labour market. An examination of the objective positions of first class men and women within the labour market suggested that on all of the measures presented (income, occupational group, days training received and likelihood of having been on a fast track graduate training programme), women fared less well than their similarly qualified male counterparts. At least on these measures the data suggests that having a first does not in this sense ‘compensate’ for gender inequality, and the meritocratic ideals of human capital theory appear as a disguise. Assumptions about women’s behaviour within the labour market, and stereotypes that posit women as the primary homemaker and child carer continue to pose problems for women. The gender pay gap even for graduates with first class degrees appears impervious to efforts to address this problem. However the analysis presented does suggest that some first class women (and indeed men) may ‘choose’ work that does not maximise their earnings but allows for the possibility of subscribing to other family values or life goals. Looking at responses to questions dealing with individuals’ more *subjective* perceptions of the labour market, the picture becomes more complicated. Interestingly, here gender differences were less salient. A preliminary exploration of some of the interview data collected so far suggests that the values and attitudes of both young women and young men must be central to any analytical framework looking at issues relating to graduate employability. Gender, sexuality, values and attitudes all seem to be highly important both in structuring *access* to different occupational positions and rewards within the labour market and in terms of shaping individuals’ perceptions of their employability. The tension between work or social identity and personal or ‘private’ identity is still a source of tension, particularly for young women.

Existing theories of employability were examined in the final section, and the two predominant models relating credentials to the occupational structure were explored and critiqued. Positional conflict theory offers a more promising analytical framework for looking at graduate employability and labour market orientations, but this theory has thus far been fairly blind to gender differences. If it is to provide a really adequate framework for analysis then it must incorporate gender as a central part of the analysis, and also incorporate the value dimension, and the way in which identity is related to choice and constructions of employability. The positional elements will also be interesting when looking at women in male dominated professions, where gender and sexuality become particularly salient issues. The issue of women in male-dominated fields is an interesting one, which until now has been somewhat under researched, largely due to the time it has taken for women to make inroads into male dominated professions. An interesting question is the extent to which women are at an advantage in male dominated fields such as engineering, and how the very act of ‘being’ in a male dominated field impacts on their identity and the choices they make, or one of reasons why some women shy away from such work – that their gender identity impacts on what they see as ‘appropriate’ work for them to undertake. Of course the central question to be explored is the extent to which graduates actually see the labour market in competitive, positional terms. Employability is also about how one ‘markets’ oneself in the labour market, and this

is very closely bound up with identity and willingness to engage in labour market or adopt what Brown *et al.* (2004) would call 'player behaviour', and this in turn is closely bound up with individual values and subjectivities.

Existing theories of gender identity only go some way to explaining how young women and men construct and manage their employability. The emphasis on employability and performance affects women, their decisions and attitudes, and the ways in which they construct and understand their employability. Arguably, the employability rhetoric will have a negative impact on gender identity, since women (or at least certain women) may feel that it is difficult to keep fit in the market for jobs when they want to have a family etc. More importantly, if employability equals 'performance' then this raises potential problems for those (both young women *and* men) who want families. How is 'self' constructed? What is rewarded? This research clearly suggests that graduates manage their employability in different ways that are closely linked to their sense of *personal and occupational* identity. Although the gender dimension of employability certainly needs further analysis, as long as women retain the primary responsibility for child rearing - and young men remain less successful at making 'choices' in relation to this role - then it is arguably going to be hard, or more stressful, for women to maintain their 'employability' within the wider market for jobs. It would certainly be interesting to explore whether the increasingly similar educational and employment experiences of a significant proportion of the highly qualified has led to more egalitarian domestic and child-rearing partnerships, and how this affects the behaviour of individuals within the labour market (Purcell, 2002).

The data and analysis presented in this paper reveals persistent inequalities among first class graduates that cannot be wholly explained by differences in qualifications. The interview data presented do suggest that experiential and 'personal' forms of capital are becoming more important *in the eyes of graduates themselves* in terms of structuring access to labour market outcomes and rewards. In fact in many cases personal capital appears to be far more powerful than academic capital. So for example social *exclusion* on the basis of sex certainly appears, in some important respects, to be more likely than *inclusion* on the basis of one's credential. This research is on going, but the one clear conclusion that can be drawn thus far is that the hierarchy of achievement within university is in no simple way related to graduates' labour market outcomes and rewards – the relationship between credential and occupational structure is far more complex than is often assumed. The data from this research therefore strongly suggest we leave behind the sort of simplistic thinking that lies behind the ideologically laden rhetoric of pervasive concepts and legitimating discourses like the 'knowledge economy' and 'employability'.

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