The Instrumental Self: Student Attitudes towards Learning, Work and Success in Britain and Singapore

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Abstract

The view that an instrumental outlook is prevalent among higher education students is shared by both advocates and critics of human capital theory. It is visible in educational policy initiatives aimed at maximising national productivity, and in the accounts of critics who argue that instrumentalism restricts the broader role of higher education as a social and civic good. Research on the attitudes of university students is limited, however, and we know little about how students actually understand the purpose of higher education, nor how this understanding may be inflected by the social and economic context, or by the particular subject they are studying. What follows is a qualitative investigation of the outlook and experiences of university students in Britain and Singapore. It identifies four types of instrumental motivations amongst students that vary according to national socioeconomic context and subject choice. Looking at how students' attitudes articulate with graduate employment prospects, it proposes that an instrumentalised approach to learning is more problematic in the flexible labour market context of Britain than it is in the more tightly regulated labour market of Singapore. It also reveals that student motivations and attitudes can be conflictual, and suggests that tensions between the public and private roles of higher education can foster untenable, potentially 'anomic', aspirations. This project builds on existing literature on higher education, skill development and student attitudes to learning in order to provide a more nuanced conceptualisation of instrumentalism amongst students, and a better understanding of the link between the economic management of higher education and the hopes, fears, strategies and expectations of university graduates.

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Contents

Tables and Figures

Chapter 1: Introduction

In recent years, the number of young people enrolling at university in both the developed and developing world has proliferated (see figure 1). Entry rates for university-level programmes increased by almost 25 percent, on average, across OECD countries between 1995 and 2010 (OECD 2012a). If current patterns continue, it is estimated that 62 percent of today's young adults in OECD member countries will enter university level programmes over their lifetime (OECD 2012a). In the UK, the percentage of the population classed as graduates[1] has been rising steadily from 17 percent in 1992 to 30 percent in 2013 (ONS 2013). Analysis of enrolment figures for 113 emerging and developed countries reveals a near doubling of undergraduate and postgraduate enrolments within a decade from 72.5 million in 1996 to 136.1 million in 2007 (Brown *et al.* 2012).

Figure 1: Entry rates into university-level education (2000, 2010)
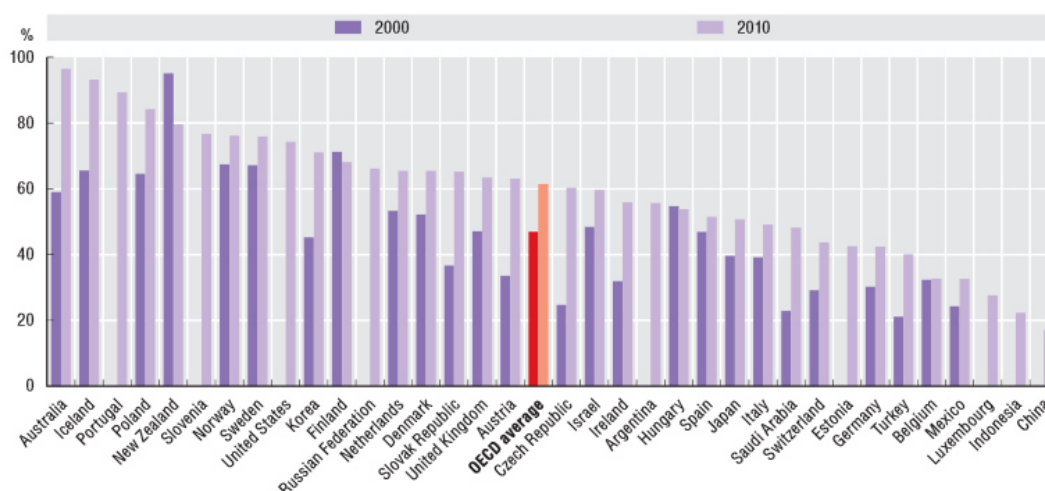
Source: OECD (2012a)

Widening access to higher education is driven by the idea that we are living in a de-industrialised, knowledge based economy, and that the most valuable thing that we have is human capital. According to this school of thought, in order to compete successfully in the global economy, we need as many smart people doing smart things as possible. Since the 1960s, the proponents of human capital theory have argued that investing in skills and knowledge via education benefits both individuals, by enhancing their career prospects, and national economies, by stimulating a high-skilled knowledge economy (Schultz 1961, Becker 1994). In Britain, this 'learning equals earning' equation has justified both increasing the

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[1] Classed as those who have left education with qualifications above A level standard.

overall number of student places at university, and rising tuition fees, on the assumption that there is a demand for knowledge workers, and that graduates will earn more than non-graduates (Brown *et al.* 2012).

However, in the British context, there seems to be a significant gap between rhetoric and reality. When I applied for PhD funding at the peak of the financial crisis in 2009, I was living with two smart and enthusiastic graduates who were unable to find work commensurate with their talents, and would come home exhausted and dejected after long shifts unpacking clothes in the basement of a department store. This is not an uncommon story: since the financial crisis almost half (47%) of all recent[2] graduates in the UK have been working in jobs that do not require a degree (Allen 2013). Moreover, the problem of graduate underemployment[3] is not solely linked to the financial crisis: prior to the recession graduate underemployment stood at 39 percent (Allen 2013), suggesting that there is a more systemic mismatch between the supply of, and demand for graduates. Against this backdrop, graduates report being told to dumb down their CVs in order to find 'survival jobs' (BBC 2012). Indeed, one graduate's experiences of working in a café after graduation led her to advise current students to prepare for the possibility that they will be working in the service sector on the minimum wage (Kay 2014). Despite this, many young people are still being encouraged to go to university on the premise that it will lead to better opportunities in the future. Indeed, just before the motion to treble tuition fees was passed by the House of Commons, Prime Minister David Cameron explained 'we want more people to go to university, not less' (quoted in The Telegraph, 2011).

In addition to the oversupply of graduates and the likelihood that graduate fortunes will be polarised in a congested labour market, it has been argued that the increasingly economic character of higher education has mediated the student experience itself (Lawson 2006). Various scholars have suggested that the emphasis on the exchange value of a degree and its role in making young people more employable has altered the way that students orientate themselves to higher learning. More specifically, it is asserted that perceptions of a competitive graduate labour market encourage students to take an instrumental or 'acquisitive' rather than inquisitive approach to their education (Fromm 1979, Brown *et al.* 2012, Evans 2005). It has also been suggested that the fear of not being able to find a 'good

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[2] Defined as those who have left full-time post-compulsory education in the last five years.
[3] Although the term 'underemployment' can also refer to a deficiency in working hours (e.g. working part time despite desiring to work full-time), here I am using it to describe over-qualification: having the skills and credentials beyond the requirements for a job.

job' might crowd out the opportunities for self-discovery and personal development that are traditionally associated with going to university, as more time and effort is poured into a type of 'defensive expenditure' (Brown and Lauder 2001). This chimes with my own experiences: in 2006 I dropped out of a graphic arts degree because, despite enjoying the opportunity to be creative, the fear of getting into debt and worrying about my employment options afterwards became paralysing. I decided to study something more *substantial*, at a Russell Group university, in the hope that it would make me more employable.

There are numerous studies into national skill formation, graduate employment rates and the graduate premium according to degree subject, institution and social background (e.g. HECSU/AGCASE 2012, HESA 2014). However there is little empirical research into how an emphasis on employability might be reflected in student *experiences* of higher education and *approaches* to learning in different socio-economic contexts, and much of the critical literature on student approaches to learning is based in the West. By considering the possible differences in the ways that students from two different countries might construct success, their attitudes towards employment and their approaches to learning, this project provides a comparative analysis of many of the issues that have been studied at a national level. This is especially important in a context of globalisation.

It makes sense to draw comparisons with a country which has both a tight connection between the supply and demand of graduates, *and* has developed its higher education system primarily with the intention of augmenting the national workforce. This should help us to compare student attitudes in terms of graduate fortunes, and the societal framing of higher education. Singapore has experienced unprecedented economic growth since claiming independence in 1965 and has been dubbed the world's richest country due to its impressive GDP per capita and the high concentration of individual millionaires (Mahtani 2012). The Singaporean success story is widely attributed to the quality of its workforce, fostered by direct intervention of the state and an emphasis on education as the means for economic development (Brown and Lauder 2001b, Mok 2003). The supply and demand of graduates is tightly regulated in Singapore, meaning that graduates can expect a much more certain return on their investments of time and money into higher education than those in the UK. Examining students' approaches to learning and plans for the future in the context of contrasting state governance and graduate employment prospects therefore seems like an ideal way to explore trends of instrumentalism amongst students.

In addition, building on literature that suggests that trends of instrumentalism are more prevalent amongst those studying Business or Economics degrees (Frank *et al.* 1993; Beverungen *et al.* 2013), and that less instrumental capacities like empathy and critical thinking are fostered in the humanities (Nussbaum 2010), this study incorporates a secondary comparison between those studying Business and Sociology. These subjects have been chosen because they are both non-vocational, in the sense that they are not perceived to train individuals for specific roles, and so, in theory, support a more open-ended approach to learning that some critics argue is being undermined by a focus on employability. Moreover, both degree courses are available at most major universities. Importantly, by selecting the groups of students portrayed in the literature as the *most* and *least* instrumental, the possibility of capturing a range of student attitudes and understandings is maximised.

At the heart of this study is a consideration of the countervailing challenges and pressures facing today's university students. At a time when the economic fortunes of graduates in the UK are far from secure, and as the British government is moving towards further marketization and privatisation in the higher education sector and shifting the burden of university funding towards a user-pays model (McGettigan 2013), it is vital that we understand how students understand and engage with their own education and respond to the pressures of becoming employable.

Chapter summaries

Chapter two introduces some of the literature relevant to this project and is divided into three sections beginning with an explanation of human capital theory. The second section explores critiques of human capital theory from a positional perspective, and the third section outlines a range of perspectives critical of instrumental approaches to organising education on the grounds that it suppresses the social or public goods traditionally associated with higher learning.

Chapter three draws on national empirical data to build up profiles of how education is connected to the economy in Britain and Singapore. It outlines trends in higher education and graduate employment in each country, before linking them to the developmental state model in Singapore, and the growth of neoliberalism in Britain. Here I draw a distinction between the organised or 'closed' economic conditions for graduates in Singapore, and the more disorganised or 'open' conditions in the British graduate labour market.

The fourth chapter is a reflexive account of my methodology. It details the decision to undertake a comparative research project via qualitative case studies, and explores the challenges of cross-national comparison. It also outlines my research procedure, including access, sampling, conducting interviews, coding and analysis. This chapter ends with a consideration of the ethical dimensions of the project.

Chapters five to eight explore my empirical data. Each findings chapter details the attitudes and experiences of a particular group of participants, beginning with the Singaporean Business students (chapter five), moving on to the British Business students (chapter six), and the Singaporean Sociology students (chapter seven), before ending with the British Sociology students (chapter eight). Each of these empirical chapters is divided into four sections and follows the same structure. I begin by describing how students in each group define the role or purpose of higher education: what they think education is for, how they made the decision to study at university, and their reflections on the value of their degree. The second section of each findings chapter is concerned with how each group of participants thought education works and how this relates to their own learning practices. In the third section of each findings chapter I explore students' definitions of success and their hopes for the future. I end each findings chapter by examining students' post-graduation job-seeking strategies in relation to their perceptions of fairness and their understandings of the self. My findings are summarised at the end of chapter eight with a typology of ideal types (p.182).

The ninth and final chapter links my findings to the literature introduced in chapters two and three to address my research questions. It grounds the different types of instrumentalism I have discovered in this study to national context, and considers the links between a rational economic approach to higher education and individualistic understandings of social inequalities. It also reflects on the different pressures experienced by each group of participants in relation to their expectations for work, well-being and authenticity. I conclude by identifying limitations to the project and highlighting avenues for future research.

Defining terms

To enhance the clarity of my writing, I have simplified some of the terms in this project, which bear some explaining at the outset. While Singapore can be referred to more accurately as a city-state, I refer to both Britain and Singapore as countries and talk about 'national policies' in each, for ease of reference.

The 'British' side of the comparison adds an extra level of complexity: the developments in higher education that I have referenced in chapters two and three largely pertain to policies in England and Wales only[4]. However, economic indicators (for example, GDP) are normally articulated at the aggregated *British* level. This means that whilst I interviewed a mixture of Welsh and English participants, I want to relate their accounts to the character of the British labour market. It therefore makes sense to refer to my Welsh and English participants under the umbrella of their Britishness, with the caveat that the views of Scottish and Northern Irish students are not represented here. The comparison is between the British and Singaporean socio-economic contexts, but I am operationalising this comparison with research involving English and Welsh students at a Welsh university. Similarly, as will be discussed in more detail in my methodology, Sociology and Business have been used as shorthand for a number of subjects subsumed under these labels.

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[4] Welsh devolution also means that there are some differences in the English and Welsh higher education systems, although the fact that these two systems are largely interdependent and accommodate a mixed cohort of students from England, Wales, and beyond, has led some to argue that this difference is, in practice, negligible (Rees *et al.* 2005).

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

This review of the literature is divided into three sections. It begins with an outline of the ideas surrounding globalisation, post-industrialism and the rise of a global knowledge economy, and an exploration of the ideas of the human capital theorists, who linked the development of skills through education and training to enhanced individual and national prosperity. The second and third sections of this chapter explore critiques of the application of the human capital model to higher education. Section two explores the perspectives of positional conflict theorists who challenge the validity of the human capital theorists' assumptions that individuals would benefit from investing in their own educational credentials, arguing that widening access to higher education without a reciprocal increase in graduate-level positions has led to social congestion and credential inflation. The third section is dedicated to critiques of the human capital model of higher education which claim that it undermines the social or public role of education, restricts student engagement with their learning and damages the capacity for critical thinking and empathy. Together, these sections pave the way for the identification of my principal research question at the end of this chapter.

2.1 Globalisation and the rise of the knowledge economy

During the expansion of the higher education sector in most Western countries in the 1960s, a consensus emerged between economists and sociologists that the future prosperity of a post-industrial society lay in the 'knowledge economy', and that the winners in this new environment would be those who were quickest to invest in the acquisition of information, educational credentials, and 'human capital' to maximise their employability (Becker 1994; Bell 1973; Reich 1992).

Two key characteristics of post-industrial society are the creation of a service economy and the subsequent change in occupational distribution. The expanding service sector, defined as 'trade, finance, transport, health, recreation, research, education and government', required more skilled, technical, professional or 'white collar' workers (Bell 1973:15). This new demand for skilled workers was accompanied by a reduction in the number of semi- or

unskilled jobs, particularly in the manufacturing sector. The opening up of international trade made it easier for multi-national companies to offshore low-skilled work to developing nations where production costs were lower, and technological advancements in the West reduced the overall number of blue collar jobs in some sectors. Indeed, already by the 1950s the number of white collar workers outnumbered blue collar workers in the US for the first time (Bell 1973), and it was no longer the case that, in the developed West, school leavers could look forward to a 'job for life' on the factory floor (Brown and Lauder 2001a). The demand for skilled workers and a reduction of blue collar jobs stimulated an expansion of educational institutions, and meant that education and training were increasingly linked to being successful in the labour market. In this new 'knowledge based' society, knowledge became an important strategic resource for both individuals and national economies.

2.1.1 Human capital and national competitiveness

As a result of these trends, during the 1960s, the skills and knowledge relevant to the burgeoning service sector began to be conceptualised as 'human capital'. Becker famously likened investment in human capital - an individual's education and training - to business investments in technology and infrastructure (1994). Similarly, in his presidential address to the Annual Meeting of the American Economic Association in 1960, Schultz drew explicit attention to the role of human capital in the economy. He asserted that this hitherto overlooked dimension of economic competitiveness was the result of 'deliberate investment' in 'useful skills and knowledge' and was growing at a faster rate than conventional (nonhuman) capital (1961:1). As a result, Shultz asserted that human capital was becoming crucial to national economic success. According to Shultz, investment in human capital includes 'direct expenditures on education, health and internal migration to take advantage of better job opportunities', partaking in on-the-job training, foregoing income to remain in formal education, and the use of leisure time 'to improve skills and knowledge' (1961:1).

Since the 1960s, proponents of human capital theory have argued that investment in human capital through education and training can greatly increase national productivity by improving the *quality* of human effort (Becker 1994 & 2002, Shultz 1961, OECD 2001). This hypothesis helped to explain the extensive growth in output in the US and other industrial countries that went beyond the input of labour and capital (Hirsch 1976). Indeed, whilst other forms of capital, like technology and infrastructure, are seen to retain some of their importance, these thinkers argue that human capital has become the most significant. For

example, Becker argues that 'the economic successes of individuals, and also of whole economies, depend on how extensively and effectively people invest in themselves' (2002:292). Such is the importance of human capital, that a failure to recognise its role may hinder economic progress, particularly in developing countries where investment in non-human capital (structures and equipment) is not accompanied by reciprocal investment in human capital (training individuals to be able to use equipment) (Shultz 1961).

Whilst human capital theorists emphasize the benefits of investing in human capital in both developing and developed nations, understandings of the importance of human capital in a knowledge economy rely, to a certain extent, on a particular vision of the international division of labour. Becker makes a distinction between richer countries that 'specialise in high-knowledge products and services', and poorer nations that focus on 'lower-skilled and raw material-intensive products' (2002:293). Similarly, Rosecrance (1999) conceptualises a productive partnership between 'head' and 'body' nations: 'Head' nations would be able to offshore their low-skilled and poorly waged work to the developing Eastern 'body' nations, and focus their efforts on garnering the rewards of highly skilled and well-remunerated work. Importantly, according to these thinkers, economic superiority in the globalised labour market relies on extensive investment in human capital in order to attract high skilled (and thus high paid) work (Brown *et al.* 2012). According to this perspective, whilst the fortunes of low or semi-skilled workers are restricted by trends of offshoring, those workers who invest in their human capital (for example lawyers, management consultants and research scientists), dubbed 'symbolic analysts' by Reich (1992), can benefit from an almost limitless international market for their skills and talents.

2.1.2 Human capital and benefits for the individual

Investment in human capital has also been linked to the career progress of individuals within post-industrial societies. Since differences in earnings 'correspond closely to corresponding differentials in education', those who seek higher earnings should invest in becoming more educated (Shultz 1961:4). In the United States, Becker asserts that 'college graduates earned on average about 50 percent more than high school graduates' between the 1960s and early 2000s (2002:293). Moreover, the wage differentials between college and high school graduates increased from 40 percent in 1977 to 60 percent in the 1990s (Becker 2002). This higher earnings potential of college or university graduates is conceptualised by Shultz as the 'yield' on investments into educational credentials (1961). In this sense, investing in human capital is seen to enhance welfare, since 'by investing in themselves, people can enlarge the

range of choice available to them' (Shultz 1961:2). The human capital approach thus represents a re-framing of the value of attending university from more traditional notions of 'culture and humanism' to the idea of a tangible *product* that enhances an individual's chances for success (Hirsch 1976:45). However, for the human capital theorists this did not necessarily entail a reduction of the non-economic role of higher learning. Shultz, for example, made a distinction between expenditures in higher education for consumption (satisfying consumer preferences) and for investment (enhancing employment prospects), arguing that most relevant activities straddle these two categories (1961). Beyond providing material benefits in terms of enhanced employment prospects and earnings potential, OECD research links investment in human capital to improvements in health, happiness and civic participation including voluntary work and charitable giving (2001).

2.1.3 Meritocracy, efficiency and social justice

Human capital ideas have also been linked to enhancing social justice. The understanding that there would be a greater demand for skilled workers in the burgeoning knowledge economy prompted investment in, and the expansion of, higher education. Assuming that ability is randomly distributed throughout the population, proponents of human capital theory argued for a focus on the efforts, skills and talents of individuals regardless of their social background (Brown and Lauder 2001a). This would allow 'talent', wherever it may be found, to rise to the top of the hierarchy (Brown and Lauder 2001a). This rewarding of talent and effort is perceived to minimise the differential advantages of ascription or social background, and to ensure that the individual *best* suited to excel in a particular role can be selected.

The twin ideals of both efficiency and social justice were therefore fused through the idea of allocating rewards in society *meritocratically* according to effort and ability. By enabling all individuals an equal opportunity to enhance their own prospects through access to learning, social welfare could be enhanced whilst ensuring that the most productive individuals would be selected for the appropriate roles in society. For example, Shultz explains that 'by investing in themselves, people can enlarge the range of choice available to them', and tentatively suggests that investment in human capital has the potential to alleviate the circumstances of the less-fortunate in society:

> Without [the growth in human capital] there would only be hard, manual work and poverty except for those who have income from property (Shultz 1961:16).

The human capital theorists were not alone in their assertion that investment in higher education fostered social justice. Rational choice theorists emphasized the logic of individuals investing in their own human capital in order to break the structure of inherited (dis)advantage. Similarly, liberals, leftists and Fabians emphasized the logic of the state investing in higher education in order to do the same at the collective level. Given the strong role attributed to human capital in determining the life chances of individuals, it impacts meaningfully on social exclusion and equity (OECD 2001).

2.1.4 Current trends in human capital development

The ideas of human capital theorists provided an economic rationale for the 'major expansion of education' in both developing and developed countries of all sizes from the 1960s onwards (Hirsch 1976:46). Investment in human capital has since become the dominant strategy for nation states in their bid to maximise market buoyancy, and the assumption that knowledge is linked to increases in productivity has driven economic and educational policies around the globe (Brown *et al.* 2012). In the context of globalised labour markets, politicians on both sides of the Atlantic now talk about being 'out-educated' and therefore 'out-competed' by other nations (Facer *et al.* 2011). The continued salience of human capital has been sustained by the widespread belief that the opportunities for those willing and able to upgrade their skills will continue to expand as the post-industrial knowledge based economy relies on 'new ideas, technologies and innovations' (Brown *et al.* 2012:4). In 2002 Becker argued that human capital was becoming even more significant:

> Studies of the economic growth of different nations show a close relation during the past several decades between economic performance and schooling, life expectancy, and other human capital measures. (p.293)

Indeed, OECD research shows that in member countries 'one extra year of education leads, on average and in the long run, to an increase in output per capita of between 4 and 7 per cent' (2001:4). The premium placed on 'education, training, and other sources of knowledge' has become increasingly prominent and has extended beyond the years of formal education to encompass an idea of 'lifelong learning' (Becker 2002:293). The OECD also highlights the heightened importance of 'attributes' alongside skills and knowledge, as a result of the changing demand for human capital. It is suggested that the requirement for 'soft' skills, including 'teamwork, flexibility and communication skills' will become increasingly prominent in knowledge-based economies (2001:4). The individual benefits of investing in human capital are accentuated by the diminishing demand for workers with 'only basic skills'

(OECD 2001:4). Indeed, the OECD warns that the prospects for those who have not invested in their own human capital are likely to be ever more limited (2001).

Universities are seen to have an increasingly important strategic role in the new economy; and as a result vast numbers of institutions of higher learning have emerged in both developing and developed countries, often serving populations which previously had little access to education (Brown *et al.* 2012). Existing higher education institutions have been put under pressure to 'restructure or reinvent the way that they are managed', and 'have begun to shift their paradigms from purely upholding the mission of research and teaching to…promoting economic and social development' (Mok 2005:539, 554). Proponents of human capital theory - or the 'learning equals earning' doctrine - focus on forging a tight connection between the skills and knowledge taught at university and the current and projected demands of the economy, in order to ensure a good fit between graduates and graduate-level positions. As a result, it is claimed that higher education has become an important arbiter of status and success.

2.2 Education as a positional good

There is a significant social science literature critical of human capital theory. While these ideas do not necessarily constitute an approach, they nevertheless share a critical stance in relation to human capital ideas. The remainder of this chapter is dedicated to exploring some of these critiques in order to raise questions pertinent to my research. It is divided into two principal sections, exploring, in turn, the theories of education as a positional, and as a public good.

Human capital theorists have emphasized the importance of education in providing individuals with more choice and better access to high skilled and well-paid work. However, others have argued that there are major impediments within the developed economies to create the jobs and opportunities that people want. This first critique draws heavily on positional conflict theory and focusses on the articulation between the number of skilled knowledge workers and the requirements of different national economies.

2.2.1 The positional or relative nature of credentials

Positional conflict theorists critical of the human capital model of higher education draw attention to the relative or *positional* economic value of educational credentials. In *The Social Limits to Growth,* Hirsch explains that the value of an individual's investment into his or her

human capital via working towards a degree qualification will decline as more people attain the same level of education:

> The value to me of my education depends not only on how much I have but also on how much the man ahead of me on the job line has. (Hirsch 1976:3)

From this perspective, the screening function of education[5] is weakened as it becomes less exclusive, meaning that as more people recognise the potential benefits of investing in their own human capital and anticipate a better standard of living in reward for their efforts, the demand for education increases, and the number of individuals entering the competition for high-skilled knowledge work rises. If this rising number of graduates is not met with a corresponding number of graduate-level jobs, the mismatch between supply and demand leads to social congestion or crowding around a small number of desirable jobs and intensified competition between individuals (Hirsch 1976). Since not all members of any given society can be engaged in high-skilled, high-paid work, the practice of seeking qualifications in order to improve performance in the labour market can be seen as a zero-sum game. Thus, Hirsch reveals a problem of composition overlooked by the human capital theorists: 'what each of us can achieve, all cannot' (Hirsch 1976:5). Hirsch explains that individual advancement necessarily entails 'improving one's performance in relation to other people's performances', meaning that the strategy of becoming more educated becomes less effective as more people enrol at university: 'If everyone stands on tiptoe, no one sees better' (Hirsch 1976:5). Hence, the rationale behind widening access to higher education whilst hoping to maintain the exchange value of a degree qualification is undermined.

2.2.2 Limits to the demand for knowledge work and its value

Moreover, it has been argued that a number of factors have restricted the market value of knowledge in developed economies, and have exacerbated the mismatch between the global supply of graduates and the demand from employers for knowledge workers (Brown *et al.* 2012). The widespread popularity of human capital ideas has led to the widespread massification of higher education around the globe, meaning that knowledge workers can be found in locations other than the developed West. Indeed, while the global number of university level enrolments has doubled in the last ten years, much of this educational expansion has taken place in developing countries such as India and, most notably, China,

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[5] The selective role of education was first outlined by the structural functionalists who conceptualised education as a system that acts to both socialise and select individuals for appropriate roles in society (Durkheim 2006, Parsons 1961).

which now has more university students than the US (Brown *et al.* 2012). It is argued that this unprecedented rise of global higher education provision, particularly in Asia, has disrupted the human capital model of the international division of labour according to low- and high-skill locations. Marxist economists and geographers have used Trotsky's concept of 'uneven and combined development' to explain this process (D'Costa 2003). Rather than being content to carry out the low-skilled work cast-off by the developed West, emerging economies are keen to compete for high-skilled knowledge work, and have a significant cost-advantage:

> The global economy allows emerging economies to leapfrog decades of industrial development to create a high-skill, low-wage work force capable of competing successfully for hi-tech, high-value employment. (Brown *et al.* 2012:3)

Knowledge workers in developing countries have therefore been able to undercut the high-wages expected by knowledge workers in the developed west. This global restructuring of education and labour markets means that multinational companies are able to make use of the 'cut-priced brain power' of developing countries rather than paying a premium for 'home-grown' talent, putting graduates in the developed West at a distinct disadvantage (Brown *et al.* 2012:8). As a result of this 'education explosion', the demand for managerial, professional and other high-skilled jobs in the West has not been as high as the human capital theorists predicted. Indeed, statistics on graduate employment in a number of developed nations suggest that employment prospects for graduates are no longer free from the uncertainty and risk previously viewed as characteristic of the low-skilled and peripheral workforce (Osborne 2012). This undermines the vision of head and body nations put forward by Rosecrance (1999). It therefore seems probable that policies aimed at increasing access to higher education and the associated changes in the nature of work will play out differently in different national and economic contexts according to stages of economic development and positioning in the global division of labour.

It can also be argued that the 'learning equals earning' equation fails to take into account the perspective of businesses, since it is in their interest to implement procedures to retain the profits gleaned from knowledge work. Importantly, it is suggested that employers are able to use technology to standardise knowledge in order to minimise the number of knowledge workers needed to operate efficiently (Brynjolfsson and McAfee 2011, Brown *et al.* 2012, *The Economist* 2013). Brown *et al.* argue that these practices constitute *digital Taylorism,* and contribute to trends of flattening organisational structures and the polarisation of

incomes as more high-skilled workers compete for an ever receding pool of high-skilled jobs. Similarly, a speculative piece in *The Economist* warns that 'knowledge workers are now in the eye of the storm', pointing to the scores of 'bank clerks and travel agents [that] have already been consigned to the dustbin' and arguing that 'teachers, researchers and writers are next' (2013: para 3). According to the author it is the 'innovators, investors and consumers' rather than the workers who 'get the lion's share of the gains' (*The Economist* 2013: para 4). Moreover, Brown *et al.* (2012) argue that given the rising number of graduates, employers are in an increasingly strong position and are able to treat recruitment as a 'reverse auction', by seeking out the individual prepared to accept the smallest salary and the poorest employment conditions.

From this perspective it is argued that the influx of skilled workers from emerging economies who are prepared to do more for less, and business practices that find ways to maximise productivity and efficiency whilst minimising labour costs, both contribute to the diminishing relative value of a degree and the decline in the 'overall value of human capital' (Brown *et al.* 2012:12). Advocates of this viewpoint assert that high demand for paid work means that businesses can extract more from their employees.

2.2.3 Social congestion and credential inflation

As a result, it is argued that educational policies informed by human capital theory raise individual expectations without a reciprocal increase in graduate level jobs, fuelling heightened competition in the labour market. This leads to 'social congestion' or crowding around desirable graduate jobs, and a state of 'credential inflation' (Hirsch 1976). Put simply, credential inflation means that as the number of people holding degree certificates increases, the relative value of the credential diminishes. In a situation where the number of high-skilled graduates outstrips the number of high-skilled jobs available in any given economy, the relative value of a degree decreases, meaning that widening access to education and qualifications will not necessarily deliver individual freedom and improved prospects as human capital theorists have suggested, but will instead lead to the necessity of increased personal investment in higher education credentials and heightened competition for jobs after graduation (Dore 1976). Credential inflation also leads to an 'intensification of job screening' that extends 'the obstacle course of education' and therefore favours those who are 'best able to sustain a longer or more costly race' (Hirsch 1976:50). As a result, individuals are compelled to do more in order to differentiate themselves from the rest of the competition:

Students who want to get ahead are forced to go back to school for longer periods, to get advanced degrees and professional specialisations. One can predict that the process will continue to repeat itself at the more advanced level too. If in the future everyone had a PhD, law degree, M.B.A., or the like, then these advanced degrees would be worth no more than a job in a fast food restaurant, and the competition would move on to still higher degrees. (Collins 1994:146)

2.3.4 A lack of viable alternatives

From this perspective it seems clear that those who invest in their own human capital via education and credentials may not in fact benefit from increased opportunities in the labour market, and may instead face intensified competition for jobs. Positional conflict theorists stress that individual employability is affected by both the skills and talents of the individual and the skills and talents of other jobseekers, which means that pursuing credentials alone does not guarantee success in the labour market. However, this competitive situation does not make obtaining educational credentials any less important, since they remain at the top of most employers' checklists and without them an individual's chances of success are extremely limited: 'as overall educational levels rise, the cost to any one individual of not participating in education increases' (Green *et al.* 1999:87).

Furthermore, Brown *et al.* argue that the idea of opportunity put forward by the human capital theorists is in reality an *opportunity trap* which 'forces people to spend more time, effort, and money on activities that may have little intrinsic purpose in an attempt to fulfil one's opportunities' (2012:12). As a result of this competitive climate, the authors argue that 'almost every facet of one's public life and private self are implicated in the battle to get ahead' (Brown *et al.* 2012:12). They posit that this sense of pressure has spread further down the education system so that 'competition begins almost at birth', as parents try to secure a place at the best nurseries and primary schools for their children in order to gain some kind of positional advantage (2012:11).

2.2.5 Education and social closure

A number of thinkers argue that the increased importance of educational qualifications in determining the economic fortunes of individuals in society according to the principle of 'equal opportunity' is problematic. A number of factors undermine the meritocratic relationship between education and employment. For example, it is not a novel insight that the uneven accumulation of different forms of capital problematizes the principle of meritocracy within systems of education (Bourdieu 1984, Bourdieu and Passeron 1977), notwithstanding a well-trodden path of research that explores the various ways in which

educational institutions and policies privilege certain members of society whilst failing others (e.g. Coleman 1969; Bernstein 1977; Gewirtz *et al.* 1995; Reay and Lucey 2000). Importantly, admission to university is heavily dependent on academic performance lower down in the education system, and represents the culmination of significant personal investment made by parents and pupils according to different types of capital that are unevenly distributed throughout any given society (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977). As such, this system arguably allows the middle classes to translate their social and cultural capital into economic advantage in terms of their children's education. Indeed, Weber argued that the very development of credentials is symbolic of efforts by the middle classes to retain their advantageous position in society, and moreover, that educational progression and future economic reward presupposes economic resources rather than natural talent or 'charisma':

> The elaboration of the diplomas from universities, business and engineering colleges, and the universal clamour for the creation of further educational certificates in all fields serve the formation of a privileged stratum in bureaus and offices. Such certificates support their holders' claims…to be admitted into the circles that adhere to 'codes of honour,' claims for a 'status-appropriate' salary instead of a wage according to performance, claims for assured advancement and old-age insurance, and, above all, claims to the monopolization of socially and economically advantageous positions. If we hear from all sides and demands for the introduction of regulated curricula culminating in specialised examinations, the reason behind this is, of course, not a suddenly awakened 'thirst for education,' but rather the desire to limit the supply of candidates for these positions and to monopolize them for the holders of educational patents…As the curriculum required for the acquisition of the patent of education requires considerable expenses and a long period of gestation, this striving implies a repression of talent (of the 'charisma') in favour of property, for the intellectual costs of the educational patent are always low and decrease, rather than increase, with increasing volume. (Weber 1978:1000)

In addition, despite the promotion of the idea of equality of opportunity that prompted the implementation of comprehensive secondary education and the expansion of higher education in the UK, at least, the first few decades of post-war HE expansion did not weaken the advantage held by graduates from Oxford and Cambridge over particular professions (Hirsch 1976). Moreover, the introduction of new universities is likely to have 'increased the value set by employers on the Oxbridge degree', since it 'conveys the information that employers can trust' and 'enables them to buy the elite contracts of the employee' (Hirsch 1976:48). Similarly, Brown *et al.* assert that employers concerned about 'hiring the next generation of talented employees' tend to seek graduates from elite universities 'because they are believed to have the best and brightest students' (2012:9).

2.2.6 Linking credentials and employability

The value of using credentials as a determinant of employability has also been criticised from a different perspective, on the grounds of how relevant the skills learnt at university are to particular positions in the labour market. For example, Hirsch argues that the role of the university credential in signalling the abilities commensurate with high-skilled work is unclear, credentials being an imperfect and partial indicator of an individual's talents and appropriateness for a particular role in society (1976). This is reflected in the comments of the founders of an internet hiring firm, who argue that that in a dynamic economy where jobs evolve quickly, 'a bachelor's degree is no longer considered to be an adequate proxy by employers for your ability to do a particular job' (Friedman 2013: para 1).

As a result of this perceived discrepancy between credentials and relevant skills, many employers have sought additional measures to distinguish otherwise similar graduates from one another. Whilst this does not make obtaining a degree any less important, some students argue that it has shifted the balance towards favouring extra-curricular activities and work-experience over achieving a particular degree-classification (Clark 2014). Students' perceptions may well be shaped by media reports such the provocative declaration made by the vice-chairman of Oglivy – an advertising, marketing and public relations agency based in the UK – that he would only hire graduates with third class honours degrees on the basis that 'nobody has any evidence to suggest that, for any given university, recruits with first-class degrees turn into better employees than those with thirds' (Sutherland 2013: para 4). He claimed that focussing on those 'undervalued by the market' would garner rewards for his company in terms of enhanced loyalty from employees[6] (2013: para 5). However, this is an unorthodox strategy, and, according to a recent survey of employers, most continue to tighten their selection criteria, often disregarding applicants with lower than a 2:1 or sometimes first class honours degree (Targetjobs 2012).

2.2.7 The increased importance of soft-skills and social networks

In a context where more individuals have degree credentials, graduates must find other ways to distinguish themselves from the crowd. Beyond credentials, different forms of social and cultural capital become more important. University students are increasingly told that graduate-level employment requires more from them than just a degree, and success upon graduation is dependent upon the economic valuation of 'soft' skills like personality and

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[6] Sutherland's critique of the link between qualifications and productivity in the labour market is premised solely on the grounds of efficiency rather than on the grounds of social justice as per the social closure critique.

enthusiasm. Indeed, amongst the participants of Brown and Hesketh's (2004) study into graduate recruitment, there was widespread awareness amongst participants that in such a competitive climate, university credentials may not carry the same weight as previously assumed, and may not be enough to secure a high-skilled job commensurate with the skills and knowledge developed at university.

Additional qualities like work-experience and evidence of particular favourable attributes thus all become more important. This is not necessarily out of step with the principle tenets of human capital theory. In fact, the OECD calls for a more complex measurement of human capital, beyond numeracy and literacy to include competencies like ICT, teamwork and problem-solving (2001). However, many argue that 'soft skills' are mediated by ethnicity, social class and familial background in ways that undermine the idea of equality of opportunity (Moss and Tilly 1996, Jackson 2001, Brown and Hesketh 2004, Brown and Scase 1994). Most obviously, the opportunity for individuals to gain work experience and undertake unpaid internships will depend on whether or not they are able to forego an income. In addition, entry into such positions may depend on an individual's social capital. Hirsch argues that the role of social networking is 'systematically understated in the simple model of the economy in which firms respond to information and opportunities equally known and available to all' (1976:48). Indeed, research undertaken by Granovetter (1992) demonstrates that social networks have a significant effect on an individual's employment prospects.

More generally, Brown and Hesketh argue that graduates are increasingly aware of the ways in which their physical appearance, accent, gender, ethnicity and social class all contribute to their job prospects alongside academic grades (2004). They argue that as a result, individuals feel increasingly compelled to suppress or augment aspects of the self in order to appeal to potential employers (the possible costs of which are explored in the following section). Those interviewed were conscious of the fact that 'in congested markets the self must be presented as an expression of work' and that applicants must convince potential employers that 'work *is* life' (2004:135 emphasis in original). Brown and Hesketh divided their participants into two ideal types – *players* and *purists* – according to how they understood and chose to manage their employability. Purists broadly subscribed to the meritocratic model that has informed public understandings of personal success, viewed education as 'the progressive unlocking of human potential', and strived to retain their sense of authenticity in their search for a job (2004:137). In contrast, 'players' played the market

to assess their position and devised tactics to sell themselves according to what they perceived employers from different organisations want. They understood employability as a positional game in which they must adopt strategies to give themselves competitive advantage over other well-qualified applicants.

It has been suggested that the ability and inclination to engage in networking, and the augmentation of the self to fit particular candidate specifications defined by potential employers, is mediated by social class. For example, Bourdieu argued that those from the upper middle classes tend to have a set of dispositions or *habitus* best suited to this type of embodiment of employability, compared to the solidarism of the working classes (1984, 1988). Lamont (2000) found that working class American men tended to view credentials as less important than experience and the informal acquisition of knowledge and skills. They also valued friendship over competition, and were driven by a sense of collectivism to a greater extent than their middle class counterparts, who prioritised ambition and competitiveness. Similarly, Fevre argues that beyond aligning individuals to the goal of educational achievement, middle class identities 'school individuals in the behaviour needed to capitalise on their credentials in the labour market' (2003:178).

Given these trends, it seems probable that in an intensely competitive labour market for graduates where a degree certificate is only the minimum requirement, the fortunes of individuals within it are increasingly dependent on non-academic factors including their soft skills, social networks and their inclination to become a 'player'. Given that these attributes are generally mediated by social class, the idea of equality of opportunity and raised prospects for all of those prepared to invest in their own human capital via educational credentials is undermined. The expansion of higher education has thus failed to address class inequalities and the maldistribution of wealth in the way that most liberal reformers anticipated.

2.2.8 Inflated expectations and anomie

As a result of these trends, positional conflict theorists argue that, rather than providing individuals with opportunity and the autonomy to design their own futures, a mismatch between the supply and demand of graduates may contribute to inflated or anomic expectations and increases in graduate un- or underemployment.

Durkheim first used the word anomie to describe circumstances in which individual appetites are not sufficiently regulated by society (1964). This situation of malintegration or

'normlessness' can be damaging to individuals who are unable to reconcile their expectations with social realities, and, in the most severe form, can contribute to suicidal tendencies (Durkheim 1952). The concept of anomie can be related to the situation of those who have been encouraged to invest in their own human capital by studying for a degree with the promise that they will be able to find interesting and rewarding knowledge work afterwards, but who in actual fact struggle to find graduate level employment.

In their study of graduate plans and labour market strategies in the UK, Brown and Hesketh found that amongst their participants, making the commitment to go to university was based on the belief that it would 'spare' them from the 'realities of routine work' and help to protect them from the kind of work that was unfulfilling (2004:117). Almost all of the individuals interviewed shared high expectations of the world of graduate work, citing it as a source of personal achievement and career development. Additionally, research into the recent phenomenon of graduate un- and underemployment in the UK has pointed to the deleterious effects it has on individuals (Cassidy 1994, Feldman 1995, Burke 1998). Graduate unemployment first attracted attention in the UK during the 1990s with the 'growth in graduate numbers and the increased competition for scarce jobs' (Cassidy and Wright 2008:181). In their longitudinal study of the work transitions of recent graduates in the UK, Cassidy and Wright found that both unemployment and underemployment had 'deleterious effects on psychological and physical health, social support, optimism and achievement motivation' (2008:181). 69.4 percent of graduates in the study who were unemployed reported clinical levels of depression, compared to 34.4 percent of those in stop-gap jobs, and 4.4 percent of those who were employed in a job which they saw as part of their career plan. In this final group, measures of psychological distress were also much lower. Scores for health behaviour reduced for all groups except those who were employed in a desired job, and achievement motivation decreased for the un- and underemployed (Cassidy and Wright 2008). The researchers conclude that 'both unemployment and underemployment are sources of distress for graduates, while finding employment in line with a career plan has significant benefits for mental health' (Cassidy and Wright 2008:189). In this context, raised expectations of middle-class lifestyles fuelled by the 'learning equals earning' equation promoted by the human capital theorists may only exacerbate social congestion, and with it anomie, by encouraging more individuals to follow the same crowded path to success (Brown and Hesketh 2004).

2.2.9 Work, self and authenticity

In addition to questioning the demand for managerial and professional workers in the developed nations, the assumed quality of working life and rewards associated with those jobs can also be scrutinised (Brown *et al.* 2012). Indeed, when exploring the role of educational credentials in providing individuals with enhanced job prospects, alongside questioning the demand for knowledge-workers, it is important to discuss the type and nature of the high-skilled work that today's students hope to secure upon graduation. Whilst the previous sections have outlined the difficulties individuals may face when trying to obtain graduate level or knowledge work and the polarising fortunes of graduates both within and across national borders, this section explores the character of this knowledge work itself, the means by which individuals seek to obtain knowledge work, as well as considering critiques of the centrality of work in contemporary society.

Human capital theorists have universally described knowledge work as exciting, interesting and rewarding. Whilst the characteristics of particular roles may vary, many would argue that work is organised dichotomously into types that are positive and rewarding, or negative and unrewarding (Sayer 2011); proponents of the knowledge economy would surely argue that knowledge work falls into the former category. As the previous sections outline, human capital theories of education implore young people to attend university on the grounds that it will help to protect them from the second negative and unrewarding type of work. Graduates are supposed to be able to find work that is intrinsically challenging, rewarding and worthwhile, and also provides them with external goods like financial remuneration, security and recognition of their contributions from others. Whilst the preceding sections problematize this equation in terms of the mismatch between the supply of graduates and the lesser number of graduate positions, it is also important to offer a critique of the nature of knowledge work itself as pleasurable and emancipatory. Beyond issues of (un)employment, the *quality* of work is significant to individual well-being. Some critics challenge the idea that knowledge work is necessarily positive and rewarding, arguing that there may indeed be personal consequences for pursuing the type of knowledge work extolled by the human capital theorists, including mindlessness, a lack of autonomy, emotional numbness or insincerity and cynicism (Sennett 1998, Hochschild 2012, Brown *et al.* 2012).

The aforementioned use of technology in the workplace and trends of digital Taylorism bear important implications for our collective understandings of what constitutes a graduate job

and the levels of satisfaction and autonomy that we traditionally equate with 'high-skilled' or 'professional' work (Brown *et al.* 2012). Many argue that practices of standardisation and routinisation of skilled tasks render them increasingly 'mindless' and undermine autonomy (Sennett 1998). Even when knowledge work is not standardised and does require intelligence, imagination and experiential knowledge, other critics argue that it still entails personal costs for the individual. In the shift from material to immaterial labour in post-industrial society, Gorz (2010) argues that the boundary between work and non-work activities is blurred and more of the 'self' becomes implicated in paid employment. Individuals are expected to display high levels of personal involvement in their work and 'performance is no longer defined in relation to tasks, but implicates persons directly' (2010:8). The worker does not just produce labour power, but produces him or herself, internalising company culture. This activity of self-production is an important element of immaterial labour since it 'tends to call on the same capacities and personal dispositions as free, non-work activities': individual capacities and dispositions are totally mobilised (2010:16).

Moreover, Gorz posits that if work requires our mental and affective powers and, in turn, contributes to the way that we define ourselves, then it becomes difficult to sabotage work without feeling contempt for ourselves and feeling the contempt of others. He asserts that the very nature of immaterial knowledge work dissolves the traditional barriers that maintain the distinction between paid employment and the self, meaning that 'we no longer know very clearly when we're working and when we're not' (Levy cited in Gorz 2010:22-23). Similarly, in a context where 'communication' and 'encounter' have become crucial to success in the workplace in increasingly service-based economies (Bell 1973), Hochschild argues that the common requirement of using personality as a form of capital is not entirely without its consequences:

> [Emotional] labour requires one to induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others…this kind of labour calls for a coordination of mind and feeling, and it sometimes draws on a source of self that we honour as deep and integral to our individuality. (2012:7)

In order to undertake emotion work, Hochschild argues that workers must 'mentally detach themselves from their own feelings' and risk becoming 'estranged or alienated from an aspect of the self' (2012:17, 7). Indeed, the commodified personalities displayed by the 'players' in Brown and Hesketh's study of graduate employment led them to argue that this

strategy for gaining competitive advantage may also entail personal costs, since these individuals 'may never get the option of being themselves at work' (2004:134).

Therefore, contrary to the claims of the human capital theorists, a range of perspectives suggest that there is no guarantee that knowledge work will be fulfilling, challenging, stimulating and rewarding, and that it may bear consequences for conceptions of self and authenticity. Moreover, a number of critical theorists pose the argument that an all-encompassing focus on work as a primary source of wellbeing limits the freedom and happiness of individuals. Notwithstanding environmental critiques of placing work centre stage in people's systems of significance (e.g. Hayden 1999, Schor 2007, Soper 2008), a number of well-established studies have questioned the link between productivity at work and broader issues of well-being, tending to argue that beyond a certain point, economic development does not garner significant increases in the general happiness and wellbeing of any given society (Easterlin 1974, 2007; Layard 2005; Wilkinson and Pickett 2009). In fact, according to Steuer and Marks, in most Western countries the relationship between productivity and wellbeing is argued to be logarithmic – 'at any given level of income a 20 percent increase gives rise to only a 2 percent increase in subjective life satisfaction' (2008:11).

2.3 Education as a public good

The human capital model of higher education implies an acquisitive approach to learning, in which individuals invest their time, money and effort to obtain the knowledge and credentials necessary for excelling in the labour market. Whilst the original proponents of human capital theory did not necessarily discount the broader, non-economic role of education, many argue that the subsequent implementation of human capital ideas has elevated the economic importance of education and is shaping student experiences and understandings of university in new and distinct ways. As higher education and the qualifications associated with it are increasingly perceived as important arbiters of success for a bigger proportion of the population, a number of concerns have been raised about the way that students experience university and orientate themselves towards learning. This third section of the literature review chapter first explores narratives pertaining to the corporatisation and financialisation of higher education and the associated re-framing of knowledge from a progressive and collective resource to a source of competitive individual advantage. It then relates these trends to perceived shifts in the way that young people

conceptualise the primary role of university, how they reflect upon their own learning, and how they understand merit, success and achievement in society.

It is important to point out at this juncture that most of the following critiques tend to emanate from Western countries such as the UK where universities are older institutions[7], and where higher education has a longer, broader and richer cultural heritage[8]. In many emergent economies including Singapore, higher education institutions have been developed specifically with the purpose of furthering economic prosperity and, without the juxtaposition of *old* and *new* institutional forms, the economic role of higher education has gone largely unquestioned. However, arguably, the tighter connection between education and jobs in Singapore and related discourses of individual competition make it more vulnerable to critiques that stress the value of education as a public good.

2.3.1 The corporatisation and financialisation of higher education

In the developed West where universities have a longer cultural lineage, they have traditionally (and perhaps idealistically) been framed as seats of unbiased learning that are dedicated to fostering experimentation, imaginative thought, progressive ideas, intellectual enquiry, personal development and self-actualisation (Holmwood 2011, Olin Wright 2010). These elements of higher learning were visible in Robbins' (1963) report on the role of universities in the UK and in Kerr's depiction of the 'multiversity' in the US (1963). Proponents of this liberal arts or 'public' model of higher education argue that universities ought to provide young members of society with a broad general education, providing a break from the economic imperatives of needing to secure their own futures, giving them the time and space to develop socially and culturally, and to flourish as human beings, both for their own personal (private) benefit and for the (public) benefit of wider society, which would profit from this social, cultural and intellectual nurturing of its citizens (Olin Wright 2010). Central to this traditional idea of the 'public university' is that the benefits it bestows onto its graduates go beyond private advantage and are spread throughout society in a number of different guises. This is visible, for example, in the role that students have played in a number of progressive social and political movements, including campaigning for civil rights and the advancement of feminism (Altbach and Cohen 1990). As such, in this form, education is

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[7] For example, only one university in the Russell Group is less than 100 years old.
[8] It is for this reason that the discussion in this section largely pertains to debates in the West. The specificities of the British and Singaporean context will be considered in more detail in the next chapter.

viewed as a social right 'necessary to the achievement of other liberal rights' (Holmwood 2011:3).

Critics of the implementation of human capital theory in higher education policy argue that the emphasis on equipping individuals for their role in the labour market restricts this broader purpose of learning and limits students' consciousness of their civic responsibilities. Barnett (2013) describes this as a shift towards the *entrepreneurial* university. Entrepreneurial universities are both conscious of their enhanced role in the global economy and actively carry it forward by touting their knowledge products and services, generating income and reducing their financial dependence on the state. To be successful in this context, universities must recognise that they are in active competition with one another - competing for students, research grants, and national and international rankings. This is visible in international student recruitment drives, university branding, and partnerships with various industries to diminish dependence on the state (Evans 2005). It is also apparent in practices of funding university departments differently according to calculations of how profitable they are, and how much graduates from these departments will contribute to the future economy (McGettigan 2013). The framing of education as a means for enhancing employability also legitimates a 'user-pays' model of funding and undermines the idea that the benefits of higher education should be public. Beverungen *et al.* argue that 'ongoing restructuring in universities has placed increasing emphasis on financial dynamics, through privatisation, increased tuition fees and advertising through graduate salaries, among other things' (2013:114). Beverungen and colleagues also argue that this process of financialisation in higher education creates tension between the charitable status of universities and their increasingly corporatized behaviour (Beverungen *et al.* 2014). A number of private providers have also emerged hoping to profit from the increasing emphasis on educational credentials (McGettigan 2013).

The prioritisation of economic imperatives is also present in changes to the quality assurance systems used to monitor educational provision at universities. Becket and Brookes (2005) argue that auditing and quality control practices increasingly focus on the interests of external stakeholders (employers, prospective students and professional bodies) rather than students and frontline staff. This leads to an emphasis on consistency, value for money and fitness for purpose, rather than transformative processes like empowerment and self-development. Becket and Brookes argue that this narrow focus on economic imperatives leads to the neglect of other important considerations including the transformative potential

of higher education, both for students as learners and for wider society (2005). These trends are said to be particularly prevalent in business schools, which have acted as 'the testing group' for financial innovations and so keenly recognise that their institutional continuity is dependent upon this financialisation (Beverungen *et al.* 2013). As a result, it is claimed, business schools produce 'ruthlessly talented graduates who have ambition in abundance but little sense of social responsibility or ethics' (Beverungen *et al.* 2013:102). Beverungen *et al.* go further to contend that financialisation in the higher education system contributed to the global financial crisis, and that business schools were 'complicit' in the intellectual development of those responsible (2013:102).

2.3.2 Reconceptualising knowledge

A key concern for those critical of the human capital model of higher education is that knowledge is becoming a private rather than public good. The understanding of knowledge as a private good and a source of competitive advantage may undermine the traditionally collaborative tone of intellectual enquiry at university. Amongst others, Barnett argues that the framing of the university as a corporate entity, operating according to market logic, limits its capacity for collaboration, lateral thinking and matters of 'universal interest' (2013: para 6). As such, 'knowledge is becoming a source of rivalry and exclusion' (Barnett 2013: para 14). Similarly, Holmwood contends that knowledge is increasingly only 'enjoyed to the extent that that it confers an exclusive advantage' (Holmwood 2011:7). It is argued that this reframing of knowledge both limits the scope of intellectual enquiry, and limits opportunities for public debate:

> By viewing learners simply as future workers, a premium is being placed on the development of specialist and technical knowledge to support growth of the economy and to enhance the competitiveness of individuals within it, to the detriment of the wider knowledge, skills and understanding which higher education could and should provide. (Steuer and Marks 2008:5)

These critics tend to make a distinction between *general* and *specialised* knowledge, often arguing that an emphasis on the development of specific vocational knowledge and skills is detrimental to the broader intellectual flourishing of individuals, and restricts their ability to make a positive contribution to society. In his commentary on the spread of the 'iron cage' of economic rationality, Weber had paraphrased Nietzsche's indictment of the 'last men', describing 'specialists without spirit, sensualists without heart', as antithetical to the 'age of full and beautiful humanity' which Goethe believed was irrevocably lost (2005: 124). This humanist sentiment was echoed by Robbins, when he stressed the civic importance of

producing 'not mere specialists but cultivated men and women' (1963: para 26), and it reappears in Nussbaum's (2010) more recent defence of the arts and humanities, which I will return to in a moment.

It was in this same spirit that Bertrand Russell argued against the idea that 'the only knowledge worth having is that which is applicable to some part of the economic life of the community' (2004:28). In his view 'some of the worst features of the modern world could be improved by a greater encouragement of [useless] knowledge and a less ruthless pursuit of mere professional competence' (2004:31-2). There is both a personal and social element to this argument, since, by 'promoting a contemplative habit of mind', 'useless' cultural knowledge can both cushion individuals from unpleasant things in life by providing a broader context for their misfortunes, and encourage people to 'concern themselves, in part at least, with large impersonal objects, not only with matters of immediate concern' (2004:34, 33).

However, this championing of general and non-vocational, non-useful knowledge can itself be criticised from a social class conflict perspective. Bourdieu and Passeron argued that less useful and more 'cultured' pursuits are a vehicle for reproducing class privilege (1977). From this perspective, the upper middle classes display their dominance via their academic activities because they are the only social group unrestricted by the imperatives of making a living and are able to invest their time and money into the essentially impractical activities of self-perfection through culture (1977). What counts as 'culture' and 'civilisation', in other words, is simply what the dominant class are able to claim a monopoly over because of their freedom from the constraints of earning a living.

We should also pay attention to the fact that humanist culture and generalist knowledge may not be as economically 'useless' as is often assumed. While Durkheim (1964) asserted that 'man is destined to fill a special function in the social organism' (p.402), and condemned the 'loose and flabby' nature of the generalist (p.42), some more recent commentators have argued that the knowledge economy values those who aren't narrowly specialised. For example, Gorz (2010) argues that the post-Fordist economy requires openness, flexibility, the capacity for continued learning, and communicative as well as technical abilities. This represents an economic argument for the return of the cultivated individual, but also implies that these individuals will be compelled to commodify and sell a bigger part of themselves in the service of that economy.

2.3.3 A rise in instrumental or acquisitive learning

A number of critics have argued that the human capital 'learning equals earning' model of higher education has served as a catalyst for acquisitive or instrumental learning. A key argument is that education in this guise restricts or impedes learners' engagement with broader ideas beyond those that are perceived to be useful for employment (Lawson 2006). In a context in which a degree certificate is the minimum requirement for an increasing number of jobs, individuals may feel compelled to embark on a degree course with little sense of purpose or interest in the subject beyond the end result of the qualification (Brown *et al.* 2012). As such, it has been argued that perceptions of a competitive labour market, and the fear of not being able to find a good job, are crowding out the opportunities for self-discovery and personal development as more and more time and effort are dedicated to a type of 'defensive expenditure' (Brown and Lauder 2001). Similarly Beverungen *et al.* argue that increasing student debt encourages students to understand learning as 'first and foremost an investment in human capital' (2013:114). In this sense, higher education is particularly susceptible to Dore's 'diploma disease' – the practice of framing learning as the means of certification for work (1976).

Eric Fromm makes a helpful distinction, in this respect, between learning as *having* and learning as *being*. Learning as being, in its un-commodified form, is a transformative process, in which learners are occupied and interested by the topic and respond in an 'active and productive way'. They relate lecture material to their own thinking processes and 'new ideas, new perspectives arise in their minds' (1979:38). Students in the being mode do no not simply memorise and store knowledge, instead it affects and changes them: 'each [student] is different after the lecture than he or she was before it' (1979:38). They are not 'passive receptacles of words and ideas' but are occupied and interested by the topic; 'they listen, they *hear*, and most important they *receive* and *respond* in an active, productive way' (1976:38). Students in the having mode of existence will concentrate and listen to what is being said in a lecture, carefully writing down every word and memorising these notes in order to pass their examinations. However, Fromm argues that in this mode of existence, students do not absorb the content into their own individual system of thought; they are not changed or enriched by it. Instead, the words are stored in 'fixed clusters of thought' and 'the student and the content of the lecture remain strangers to each other except that each student has become the owner of a collection of statements made by somebody else' (1979:37). The key issue is that the students do not have to produce or create anything new with the information they have been exposed to. In fact, students in this mode of existence

feel threatened by new thoughts or ideas about a given subject that serve to disrupt the 'fixed sum' of information they have:

> To one for whom having is the main form of relatedness to the world, ideas that cannot easily be pinned down are frightening – like everything else that grows and changes, and thus is not controllable. (Fromm 1979:38)

It is argued that this second orientation to learning is reflected in the growing concern for 'value for money' amongst students in a way that is altering their expectations of university (Mok 2005). Indeed, for Miller, the positioning of students as consumers who are compelled to invest vast amounts of time and money into a qualification based on the understanding that it will improve job prospects, means that higher education is becoming less about what students learn and more about what they are worth (1998). Nussbaum also describes an increasingly instrumental view of education in which young people are encouraged to frame their learning as the pursuit of knowledge 'possessions' that 'protect, please and comfort' rather than challenge, transform and deepen understanding' (2010:6).

2.3.4 Self-interested learning and threats to social cohesion

Beyond entailing costs for the individual, Nussbaum argues that instrumentalised learning damages social cohesion by compelling individuals to see others as 'objects' and encouraging relationships of 'mere use and manipulation' rather than relationships of empathy and mutual understanding (2010:6):

> When we meet in society, if we have not learned to see both self and other in that way, imagining in one another inner faculties of thought and emotion, democracy is bound to fail, because democracy is built upon respect and concern, and these in turn are built on the ability to see other people as human beings, not simply as objects. (2010:6)

Nussbaum (2010) argues that this trend is exacerbated by the prioritisation of those subjects that are seen to be most financially viable and the subsequent marginalisation of the arts, humanities and social sciences, which, she argues, are vital for the development of empathy and critical thought. She warns that if this trend is to continue, nations around the world 'will soon be producing generations of useful machines, rather than complete citizens who can think for themselves, criticise tradition, and understand the significance of another person's sufferings and achievements' (2010:2).

This perspective is somewhat supported by empirical research into the relationship between self-interestedness and studying economics. Robert Frank and colleagues sought to test the

claim that 'from the perspective of many economists, motives other than self-interest are peripheral to the main thrust of human endeavour' (1993:159). Beyond the common assertion that subjects like business and economics attract more competitive and self-interested individuals than social science and humanities subjects, some research suggests that exposure to economic-rationality encourages self-interested behaviour (Frank *et al.* 1993). Whilst this research has been criticised on the grounds that it relies on analysing student responses to 'specialised games or surveys' rather than their 'real-world' behaviour (Yezer *et al.* 1996) it nevertheless illuminates the importance of considering the extent to which the study of various disciplines affects tendencies toward self-interest, cooperativeness and altruism. Indeed, extending Nussbaum's argument further still, it seems plausible that those individuals who take a predominantly instrumental or acquisitive approach to their education might be more inclined to study business or science-related courses than arts or humanities courses, and that the human capital approach to learning might not be evenly distributed amongst students enrolled in different departments.

2.3.5 From communicative to instrumental rationality

It is also argued that this shift towards instrumental learning entails focussing on the end product of the degree, and a reframing of the role of higher education away from the value of an open-ended intellectual journey. In Habermasian (1984) terms, this represents a shift from *communicative* to *instrumental* rationality. In its communicative form, higher learning would be part of the public sphere, providing a forum for debate and affording the exploration of values and ends. This contrasts with *instrumentally* rational higher learning, which frames university as a means to pursue a predetermined and unquestioned end.

In this sense, the competitive and instrumental framing of knowledge undermines the university's traditional role in encouraging 'debate and common resources of knowledge' (Holmwood 2011:3) and closes off the traditional 'open-endedness' of studying at university (Crick and Joldersma 2007). Following Habermas, Crick and Joldersma (2007) argue that the heightened salience of economic and political (or bureaucratic) interests within the education system reduces the discursive opportunities for communicative action that are vital for mutual understanding and citizenship:

> Education is increasingly viewed as a vehicle for maintaining or enhancing the nation's economy. Education's dominant purpose then increasingly becomes thought of in terms of producing individuals capable of maintaining their own economic wellbeing and who will participate in the economy as workers and consumers. In turn, the players in the educational institutions often think of the main

aim of educational offerings as gaining credentials for the work force. When this begins to dominate, when students view schools less for learning and more for credentialising, we would argue that schooling is being colonised by the economic. (Crick and Joldersma 2007:82)

As a result of this colonization, Crick and Joldersma assert that the broader purposes of educational institutions and their responsibilities for fostering and stimulating the conditions necessary for a flourishing civil society are suppressed.

2.3.6 Perceptions of meritocracy and the legitimation of inequalities

As outlined in the first section of this chapter, the human capital model of higher education was premised on liberal democratic meritocratic ideals: the allocation of jobs and rewards in society on the basis of earned achievements rather than ascribed characteristics. Section two of this chapter explored arguments contesting the meritocratic functioning of educational achievement and subsequent graduate recruitment. In addition to this functional critique of meritocracy, it has also been argued that the *appearance* of a meritocracy (and a belief that the role of education is to rationally equip individuals for predetermined employment goals) may undermine an individual's capacity to observe distributional injustice and empathise with others. Amongst others, Tilly (1998) argues that this individualisation of success and failure according to personal effort, rather than recognition of the role of family background and other circumstantial factors, conceals inequalities in society and legitimates self-interest.

Similarly, Sayer (2011) argues that widespread subscription to the idea of 'opportunity for all' encourages individuals to focus on being fit for the competition, and steers attention away from the zero-sum fact that there aren't enough 'good' quality jobs for every member of society. Indeed, the competitive nature of the labour market is commonly justified by arguing that 'because success in getting a good job and upward social mobility are possible for some individuals, success must be possible for individuals simultaneously' (Sayer 2011:13). Like the positional conflict theorists, Sayer describes this as a 'fallacy of composition', since even if all those seeking employment could compete for 'good jobs' on equal terms, 'no matter how hard they strove for them, only a subset of them could get them' (Sayer 2011:12). Nevertheless, it is 'commonly assumed' that an individual's position in the occupational hierarchy 'simply reflect[s] differences in ability and effort' (Sayer 2011:12). As a result, individuals 'struggle for position, but not to change the nature and structure of positions themselves' (Sayer 2011:13). Hence, debates about how to better organise the structure of opportunities within societies are sidestepped. Like Tilly, Sayer

argues that this overestimation of the role of 'individual' achievements underplays the structural elements of success and failure.

Hence, the ideology of meritocracy deceptively individualises failure as well as success: those who do not excel within the education system are to shoulder the blame for the outcome (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). This is visible in widespread cuts to welfare in many developed countries as individuals are compelled to take responsibility for their own employability and to expect less in terms of financial support from the state (Brown *et al.* 2012). Mistaken beliefs about individual responsibility and just desserts also reinforce 'opportunity hoarding' by certain social groups as they try to maintain their position (Tilly 1998).

2.4 Summary

The first section of this chapter introduced human capital theory, and outlined the manner in which human capital ideas have shaped education provision from the 1960s onwards. In the context of a burgeoning 'knowledge economy' human capital theorists made a link between educational achievement and high-level employment, according to the dual principles of efficiency and social justice. The expansion of higher education was therefore seen to benefit national productivity, and to improve the wellbeing and earnings potential of those individuals who were prepared to invest their time and effort into obtaining a degree qualification. This shift away from ascribed towards earned status captured the liberal democratic spirit of the time.

The ideas put forward in the second section challenged some of the core principles of human capital theory. Firstly, positional conflict theorists point to the relative value of qualifications and argue that a number of factors have restricted the market value of university credentials. According to this perspective, a mismatch between the supply of graduates and demand for them in the labour market leads to intensified competition, credential inflation and the increased importance of 'soft' skills. As a result fortunes for graduates are polarised. Indeed, whilst certain national economies or businesses might be benefiting from the products of the knowledge economy (i.e. high skilled workers), this benefit is not necessarily transferred to those workers in the way that human capital theorists predicted. So, whilst human capital may indeed contribute to economic growth and stimulate productivity, positional conflict theorists question whether these benefits readily translate into enhanced welfare and

opportunities for *all* workers. Instead, it is argued that the 'learning equals earning' doctrine is leading to polarised fortunes across and within national borders. As a result, it is argued that the shift towards allocating jobs and rewards in society according to educational credentials is not meritocratic, but in actual fact exacerbates inequalities between different social groups. In addition, critics of human capital theory stress that credentials are an imperfect reflection of an individual's skills and talents and an unclear indicator of their appropriateness for a particular role. Moreover, some assert that the increased importance of educational credentials forces individuals to focus on becoming employable at the expense of other worthwhile pursuits.

In the third section, critiques of human capital theory on the grounds that it restricts the broader, cultural and social role of higher education were explored. According to proponents of various critical perspectives, instrumentalised and self-interested learning practices and a focus on the economic returns to investments in education may suppress positive responses to, and relationships with knowledge that, ironically, may be beneficial to students as they navigate the labour market and try to find work that is meaningful to them and allows them to challenge and express themselves as socially responsible citizens. This viewpoint contrasts strongly with the human capital model which stresses the positive connection between learning and the anticipated rewards of knowledge work.

These contrasting accounts of the relationship between education and success in the labour market raise an important research question regarding how students orientate their own learning and expectations for graduation.

> **Given the conflicting academic studies and discourses surrounding the expansion of higher education in many parts of the world, how do university students actually understand the role of Higher Education, the purpose of study, and the prospects for their own future work and well-being?**

This seems especially pertinent considering that very little existing research has explored this topic from the perspective of students themselves.

Chapter 3: The Relationship between Education and Economy in Britain and Singapore

Policy narratives informed by the ideas of a global knowledge economy and the importance of human capital have emerged in national administrations around the world. Whilst Britain and Singapore share a general understanding of the importance of developing skilled workers in a competitive knowledge economy, they have taken two different approaches to securing national prosperity. In order to understand these different approaches, it is important to examine the economic and cultural context of each country.

Table 1: Key economic indicators in Britain and Singapore

	Britain	Singapore
GDP per capita	$37,300 (2013 est.)	$62,400 (2013 est.)
GDP real growth rate	1.4% (2013 est.)	3.5% (2013 est.)
	0.2% (2012 est.)	1.3% (2012 est.)
	1.1% (2011 est.)	5.2% (2011 est.)
Size of workforce	32.32 million	3.428 million[9]
Population growth rate	0.54% (2014 est.)	1.92% (2014 est.)
Unemployment rate	7.7% (2013 est.)	2.1% (2013 est.)
	8.0% (2012 est.)	1.9 (2012 est.)
Youth unemployment rate (15-24 year olds)	21% (2012)	6.7% (2012)
Education expenditure (percentage of GDP)	6.2% of GDP	3% of GDP
Proportion of young people[10] in Higher Education	38% in 2012[11]	27% in 2012[12]

Figures taken from the CIA World Fact Book Database 2014 unless otherwise stated.

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[9] Excluding non-residents

[10] Whilst care has been taken to provide comparable data where possible, there is a slight discrepancy here between definitions of 'young people' in the two national contexts. In the UK, HEFCE define 'young people' here as the proportion of 18 or 19 year olds who enrol at university. In Singapore a period of two years' compulsory National Service for young men complicates this picture, and the figure has been adjusted to include a wider age-range, though precise details of this are difficult to find. It is also unclear the extent to which the number of foreign students (and permanent residents in Singapore), and indeed the number of indigenous UK and Singapore students studying abroad, might skew these figures.

[11] HECFE 2013

[12] MOE 2012

3.1 Headline economic figures

Both Britain and Singapore have highly developed market economies. The UK is the third largest economy in Europe after Germany and France, and Singapore has a per capita GDP higher than almost all developed countries[13] (CIA 2014). Whilst the UK industrial heritage stretches back to the industrial revolution, Singapore has experienced rapid economic development since gaining independence in 1965. It has been widely cited as a role-model for economic development (e.g. Khanna 2011, Jones-Evans 2008 and 2013).

Both national economies were adversely affected by the global financial crisis in 2008, the UK due to its large financial sector, and Singapore because of its high-dependency on exports (CIA 2014). However, since then, key indicators point to Singapore's economy recovering much faster from the global financial crisis. As table one indicates, despite having a workforce almost ten times smaller than Britain, economic growth rates in Singapore have consistently been higher[14]. Unemployment rates are also lower in Singapore (2.1% compared to 7.7% in Britain in 2013), and amongst young people (6.7% compared to 21% in Britain in 2012). The Ministry of Manpower forecasts the continuance of modest economic growth in Singapore depending on events in other parts of the world (MOM 2012).

3.2 Higher education in Britain and Singapore

In the UK, the proportion of young people in higher education reached 38 percent in 2012, an increase from 17 percent in 1992 (ONS 2013). In 2013 the total number of UK graduates reached 12 million, and 40 percent of young people now enter higher education by the age of 19 (Coughlan 2013). This general trend of increased participation contracted slightly between the 2011-12 and 2012-13 academic year, as a result of the sharp increase in tuition fees (HEFCE 2013). Meanwhile, in Singapore the proportion of young people with publicly-funded full-time degree places in 2012 was slightly lower at 27 percent (Yung 2012). However, when self-financed degrees from local and overseas universities are taken into consideration this proportion is much higher, with the Ministry of Education reporting that in 2011, 46 percent of economically-active Singaporean residents aged 25-29 were degree holders (2012).

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[13] Coming third overall behind Qatar and Macao.
[14] Of course, it is important not to take these figures at face value without consideration of other factors that might mediate economic growth (differences in population growth, for example) and an examination of the source and comparability of national datasets.

In the United Kingdom women have historically been under-represented in higher education, in fact for centuries universities in England were male-only institutions[15] (Delamont 2006). However, in the last forty years female participation rates have been rising consistently, and overtook male participation rates in the 1990s (see figure 2). The Age Participation Index (API) recorded a 7.2 percentage initial participation rate in favour of women in 2005/6 (DIUS 2008), and in 2012/13 there were more females than males participating in UK higher education at both undergraduate and postgraduate level (see figure 3). This 'gender revolution' can be observed lower down the education system and is reflected across higher education participation rates in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland (DUIS 2008). Conversely, in Singapore there are more male graduates (28.1% of males over 25 in 2012) than female graduates (23.5% of females over 25) (MSF 2014). The proportion of male citizens over the age of 25 who were graduates in Singapore rose from 17.2 percent in 2002 to 28.1 percent in 2012. This proportion was slightly lower for females at 12.4 percent in 2002 and 23.5 percent in 2012 (MSF 2014).

Figure 2: API by Gender 1972-2000, and HEIPR for 17-20 year olds for English domiciled first time participants in HE courses at UK HEIs and FE Colleges 1999/00 to 2005/06[16]
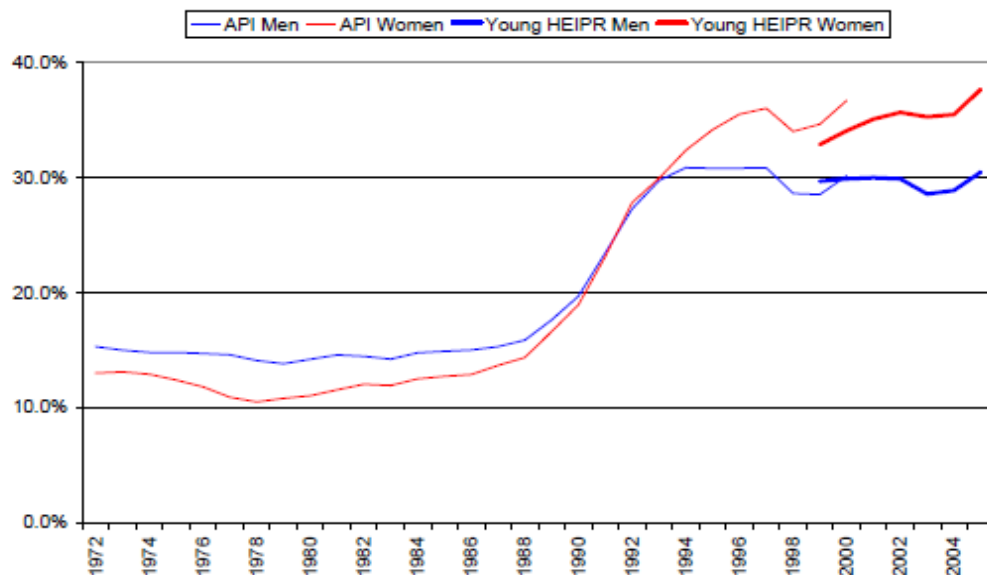
Source: DUIS 2008

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[15] Girton College in Cambridge, the first residential college for women, was established in 1869 (but was not granted university status until 1948).
[16] The Higher Education Initial Participation Rate (HEIPR) is the National Statistic used by the Government to measure progress in participation.

Figure 3: Sex of UK HE students by level of study and mode of study 2012/13
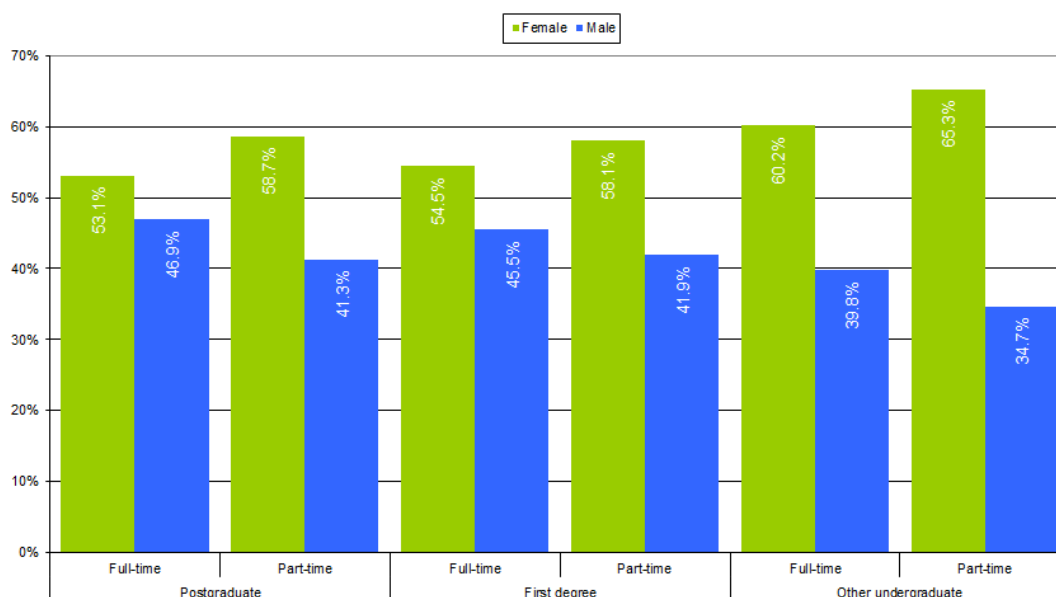
Source: Higher Education Statistics Agency (2014)

Singapore was ranked 13th out of 148 countries on the Gender Inequality Index[17] (GII) with a value of 0.101[18] (UNDP 2013). 71.3 percent of adult women have reached secondary or higher level of education compared to 78.9 percent of adult men (UNDP 2013). Female participation in the labour market is 56.5 percent compared to 76.6 percent for men (UNDP 2013). The United Kingdom has a GII value of 0.205[19] and is ranked 34th in the 2012 index (UNDP 2013). 99.6 percent of adult women have reached secondary or higher education compared to 99.8 percent of adult men. Female participation in the labour market is 55.6 percent compared to 68.5 percent for men (UNDP 2013).

The education systems in Britain and Singapore follow a nearly identical structure in terms of key stages, but an entrance exam for all students at secondary level in Singapore selects pupils for different types of school. In addition, financial rewards are given to those in the top percentage of their year groups in Singapore, and to those who have made the biggest improvement in their performance. This system of rewards for academic accomplishment continues into the higher education arena where the best performers are publicly recognised

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[17] Measured according to reproductive health, empowerment and economic activity.
[18] This reflects a percentage loss of 10.1% in achievement across reproductive health, empowerment and labour market participation due to gender inequality.
[19] This indicates a percentage loss of 20.5% in achievement across reproductive health, empowerment and labour market participation due to gender inequality.

in end-of-year student rankings[20]. Funding for higher education is based on co-contribution. The MOE subsidises roughly 75 percent of tuition fees, meaning that students pay around S$7-8000 per annum depending on the subject (roughly equivalent to the fees in the UK prior to increases in 2012). Those studying more expensive courses like medicine are entitled to a bigger state subsidy. At my chosen university in Singapore, in 2011-12 subsidised tuition fees were S$7,170 for Sociology students and S$7,940 for those in the Business School. The flat rate for those studying for a degree in Wales during the same period was £3,465, although fees increased to £9,000 for non-Welsh students the following year. Given the more stratified system of rewards and bursaries operated by the state in Singapore lower down the education system, universities adopt a more finely calibrated criteria by which to select candidates. It is therefore relatively common for Singaporean universities to offer scholarships to promising students. These scholarships are less prevalent in the UK system, although there are more scholarships available to high achieving students from less privileged backgrounds in England following the introduction of higher tuition fees.

Students in the UK face a much broader choice of higher education institutions, and it is common for individuals to move away from the family home to pursue their university education. In contrast, in Singapore, it is normal for students to spend the first year of their degree living on campus in order to take part in extra-curricular activities, but then to return to the family home for the remainder of their studies. Male students in Singapore spend two years undertaking compulsory National Service before starting at university, meaning that they are two years older than their female counterparts. To compensate young men for the time spent in national service, starting salaries for male graduates in the public sector in Singapore are augmented so that they match the rate of pay for those with two years' experience.

There are over 150 universities, higher education colleges and conservatoires in Britain (Paton 2014), whilst in Singapore there are only a handful of 'autonomous' state-run institutions[21], flanked by an increasing number of private degree-providers and branch campuses of foreign tertiary institutions. Understandably, HEIs in the UK offer a much wider array of degree programmes, including many that cannot immediately be oriented according

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[20] The top 5 percent of students in each cohort within degree a specialism are published on the 'Dean's list' which is available on the university website.
[21] At the time of research these were the National University of Singapore (NUS), Nanyang Technological University (NTU) and Singapore Management University (SMU). More recently the Singapore University of Technology and Design (SUTD) and Singapore Institute of Technology (SIT) have been launched.

to particular industries or career paths. Programmes of this type, including Sociology, are in the minority in Singapore. Given the larger number of HEIs and the broader range of courses in the UK, undergraduate admissions are processed centrally through the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS); young people in Singapore apply directly to their chosen institution. Beyond these differences, universities in both locations have similar modular courses and draw upon similar curricula, delivered via large lectures and smaller interactive seminars. Assessment is via exams, written coursework and group projects and presentations.

3.3 Trends in higher education and graduate employment

Although there is now more recent data available, I have chosen here to start with the statistics pertaining to the cohort of graduates in 2011, the year leading up to the graduation of my research participants. It is this data that informed my research questions, and, importantly, these figures that would have been available to my participants at the time of interview in their final year of study. Obtaining comparable national statistics in this area is somewhat difficult, however. For example, the Singaporean data does not indicate what *type* of work – whether high or low skilled - graduates are employed in when quoting employment rates. Nor does it provide information on how the earnings differentials between graduates and non-graduates develops over time. When complementary data is available, comparison is impeded by discrepancies in measurement, often involving different definitions of terms like 'employment' and 'young people', arguably due to the fact that the data was collected by different research groups in different contexts[22]. These discrepancies highlight one of the challenges of making cross-cultural comparisons, signalling a need to be circumspect when making comparative claims, and pointing to the need for in-depth qualitative analysis beyond a broad-brush quantitative approach. However, even without being entirely comparable in an objective sense, the figures themselves and the manner in which they are reported and circulated in each national context may offer an insight into the material with which students shape their own narratives of employability. Notably, in both Britain and Singapore the prospects for graduates are not reported in terms of gender, except when drawing on figures

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[22]Indeed, many of the figures I am using were probably not intended for the purpose of international comparison. In addition, decisions about measurement may differ according to intended purpose e.g. the positive portrayal of graduate employment rates by government agencies may be aided by detailed emphasis in some areas but not others.

for lifetime earnings, in which the lower overall earnings for women is 'explained' in terms of their decisions to opt out of the labour market in order to start a family.

3.3.1 Graduate employment in Singapore: smooth transitions

In Singapore, 86.4 percent of those who had graduated from university in 2011 had gained full-time employment six months after graduation[23], compared to 80.1 percent of polytechnic graduates and 79.9 percent of Institute of Technical Education (ITE) graduates[24] (MOM 2012). They were also significantly less likely to be employed on a temporary or part time basis (5.0% of university graduates in 2011, compared with 25.1% of polytechnic graduates and 20.6% of ITE graduates). In 2011, the general unemployment rate for graduates from all three types of tertiary institution in Singapore was 2.6 percent. This was slightly lower than the national average (2.9%) and lower than the unemployment rate for school leavers[25] (3.5%) and for those with diplomas and professional degrees (2.7%)[26] (MOM 2012).

In addition, according to the Ministry of Manpower, university graduates in Singapore are likely to earn more than polytechnic or ITE graduates: in 2011 the median monthly gross starting salary for university graduates was S$3,000, compared to S$1,850 for polytechnic graduates (or S$2,100 after national service), and S$1,300 for ITE graduates (or S$1,600 after national service) (MOM 2012). The median monthly salary for graduates in full-time permanent jobs further increased to S$3,050 in 2012 (Chia and Lee 2013). More recently, according to the Graduate Employment Survey[27] undertaken by the three principal universities in Singapore in 2013, 91 percent of their graduates find work within six months of leaving university (Chia and Lee 2013). It seems clear from these figures that university graduates in Singapore can consistently expect a fairly certain and immediate return on their investment in human capital development at university in terms of enhanced employment prospects.

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[23] As a proportion of those graduates who were economically active (i.e. seeking work rather than pursuing additional qualifications)
[24] When National Service is taken into account
[25] Those who concluded their education at secondary level
[26] These results conceal the effects of gender, since the unemployment rate for female residents is 3.2 percent whilst the male figure is lower at 2.6 percent.
[27] The survey calculates rate of employment according to the number of graduates employed as a proportion of economically active graduates (graduates who have entered the labour market) six months after completing their final examinations. It does not, therefore, include students who have remained in education.

Graduate employment rates and earnings do not appear to be particularly differentiated according to HEI (MOM 2012). In each of the three principal universities in Singapore the graduate employment rate hovered between 84.1 percent and 92.0 percent in 2012 (Chia and Lee 2013). Given the smaller range of HEIs in Singapore, the choice of university seems less significant to earnings potential than in Britain. However, choice of degree subject does have an impact on rates of employment. The overall graduate employment rate for graduates from the Business School at my chosen university was between 90.9 percent and 97.4 percent in 2013, depending on students' particular specialism[28]. The vast majority of these jobs were both full-time and permanent (85.7%-96.1%[29]). For those graduating with a Sociology degree, this figure was somewhat lower, with an overall employment rate of 74.4 percent, and a full-time permanent rate of 55.8 percent (MOE 2013). Sociology graduates also tended to have lower gross monthly salary rates than those studying Business and Accountancy, but the difference in earnings between Sociology and Business graduates is less distinct (see table 2).

Table 2: Gross monthly salaries for Singaporean graduates according to degree subject[30]

Degree	Gross Monthly Salary (S$)[31]			
	Mean	Median	25th Percentile	75th Percentile
Accountancy and Business	3727	3350	2900	4000
Business (including Hospitality and Tourism Management)	3214	3000	2700	3500
Sociology	3082	3100	2800	3310

Figures taken from the Ministry of Education (Singapore) Graduate Employment Survey 2013

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[28] I interviewed students studying Accountancy and Business, Business, and Business Tourism Management. Further details of the sampling procedure will be discussed in the methodology chapter.
[29] Percentage of graduates who found full-time permanent work within six months of graduation (MOE 2013).
[30] Of course, it is worth noting the limitations of data taken six-months after graduation as it cannot tell us anything about longer term trends.
[31] The monthly gross starting salary comprises the basic salary, fixed allowances, overtime pay and commissions, but do not include bonuses (MOE 2013).

3.3.2 Graduate employment in the UK: a bumpy ride

For those graduating in the UK, the graduate unemployment rate was 18.1 percent in the final quarter of 2011, meaning that around one in five graduates[32] looking to enter the labour market was unable to find work (ONS 2012). This figure is slightly lower than the peak graduate unemployment rate of 20.7 percent in the UK during the recession (ONS 2012). Interestingly, the unemployment rate of these new graduates in Britain was higher than the rate for those who had graduated 2-6 years ago (ONS 2012). Six months after graduation in 2011, only 61.2 percent of university graduates in the UK had gained employment, compared to 86.4 percent in Singapore (the data does not indicate whether this is on a full or part time basis), whilst 13.1 percent had entered further study or training, 7.6 percent were working and studying, and 8.6 percent were classified as unemployed (HECSU/AGCAS 2012). Indeed, in 2012, non-graduates were more likely to be employed than fresh graduates, the former having an employment rate of 72.35 percent (ONS 2012). The ONS emphasizes that graduate employment prospects do improve over time, and suggest that this relatively low initial graduate employment rate is due to new graduates only just 'beginning to look for work' whilst older graduates have 'had more time to find a job' (2012:4).

For those who do find employment, initial earnings for graduates in the UK are roughly equivalent to the earnings of those who left education with GCSEs. The ONS suggests that this is due to the fact that 'graduates aged 21 will have either just entered the labour market and therefore may be working in a lower skilled role while looking for a post in their desired industry, or may only be temporarily in the labour market' (2013:15-16). Of those new graduates who have found employment in the UK, an increasing number are employed in lower-skilled, non-graduate jobs. Since 2001 the number of recent graduates (defined as those who graduated within six years of the survey date) employed in lower skilled, non-graduate roles[33] has been steadily increasing (see figure 4) and reached 35.9 percent in the final quarter of 2011 (ONS 2012). Over the past decade graduates in the UK have been competing with non-graduates for low-skill positions (UKCES 2012). The OECD suggests that this trend may 'exacerbate the issue of skill mismatch among graduates and put them at a

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[32] The ONS define graduates as those who have completed the first stage of tertiary education, therefore the figures for UK graduate employment rates do not distinguish between degrees, diplomas and technical qualifications in the same way that the MOM in Singapore does.

[33] The ONS defines highest skill jobs as those which 'generally require competence through post-secondary education', compared to low skill jobs which 'tend to require competence only through compulsory education' (ONS 2012: 1).

greater risk of long-term unemployment and disconnection from the labour market' (2013a:2).

Figure 4: Trends in high and low skill employment amongst graduates 2001-2011
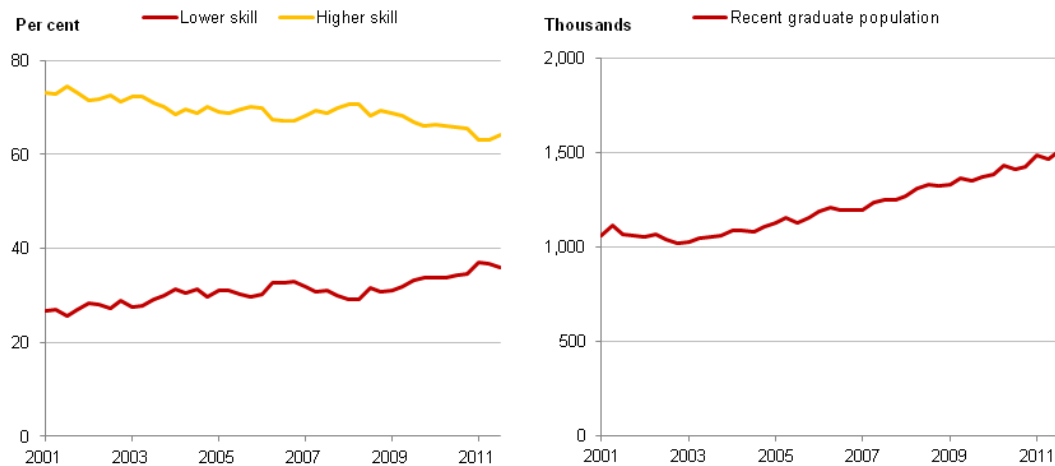
More recently the ONS has observed that this upward trend has been particularly prevalent since the 2008/9 recession and may reflect 'lower demand for graduate skills as well as an increased supply of graduates' (2013:13). The proportion of recent graduates working in low or lower middle skill roles increased from 25 percent in 2001 to 33 percent in 2013 (when focussing just on graduates in work this proportion increases to 26% and 38% respectively) (ONS 2013). Unfortunately, equivalent data on the skill-level of graduate positions in Singapore is not available, although, given the more structured and closely managed nature of graduate transitions into the labour market (which I will discuss in relation to the *developmental* model in Singapore presently), it is possible that this is because the number of graduates who are employed in non-graduate roles is negligible. Together, these figures suggest that having a degree does not initially provide individuals entering the labour market in the UK with an advantage compared to non-graduates in terms of the likelihood of finding work, type of employment, or the rate of pay upon becoming employed. *This indicates a less straightforward and immediate transition into work for graduates in the UK when compared to Singapore.*

However, over a longer period of time, the economic advantages of being a degree holder in the UK become clearer. When considering *all* graduates, not just those who had graduated recently, we find that they have had consistently higher employment rates than non-graduates. In 2011 86.0 percent of all eligible graduates were in work compared with 72.35

percent of non-graduates, and the median hourly earnings of the former were 70 percent higher than those of the latter (£15.18 compared to £8.92) (ONS 2012). Indeed, between 2000 and 2010, UK graduates earned on average £12,000 per annum more than non-graduates[34] (Sellgren 2011). The ONS explains that the annual gross wages of graduates tend to increase quickly with age and experience, levelling out at the age of 38 at an average of £35,000 (ONS 2013). In comparison, gross annual earnings for school-leavers normally level out at age 32 at an average of £19,000, and for those with A levels it increases until age 34 and levels to £22,000 (ONS 2013). However, when these figures are disaggregated the disparity in graduate fortunes suggests that it is a relatively small proportion of high earning graduates that have benefitted far more than others (Brown *et al*. forthcoming).

According to the Higher Education Statistics Agency, full time employment rates for Social Studies graduates six months after graduation were slightly below the aggregated graduate employment figure of 52.7 percent, at 50.2 percent in 2011/12. Conversely, Business graduates were ahead of the national average, with 59.4 percent in full time employment six months after graduation. Both Social Studies and Business graduates had higher unemployment rates than the aggregated graduate average of 8.8 percent (9.5% for Social Studies graduates and 10.0% for Business graduates). Walker and Zhu (2013) calculate a graduate premium (additional lifetime earnings compared to non-graduates) of £256,000 for men and £149,000 for women who graduate from Business and Management degrees. Female Social Studies graduates can expect a graduate premium of £266,000 over their lifetime earnings, but the graduate premium for male Social Studies graduates is reversed at -£86,000. Although Walker and Zhu concede that their calculation is likely to be weak[35], they estimate that once factors like the opportunity cost of taking time out of the labour market to study and student loan repayments are taken into account, the financial benefits for men of undertaking a social studies degree are actually *negative*.

The picture of graduate fortunes in the UK is further complicated when the importance of the degree-giving institution is taken into account. Those graduating from a Russell Group university[36] in 2013 were more likely to work in a high-skilled role[37], and earned on average £3.63 more per hour than graduates from non-Russell Group universities (ONS 2013). The

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[34] The median salary of graduates aged 22 to 64 was £29,000 compared with £17,800 for non-graduates.

[35] Given the small proportion of social studies graduates that are male.

[36] 31 percent of graduates in the UK in 2013 attended a Russell Group university for their undergraduate degree.

[37] 67 percent of graduates compared to 53 percent of non-Russell Group graduates (ONS 2013)

ONS offer two reasons for this disparity: the concentration of subjects like medicine, dentistry, engineering and science in Russell Group universities, and the typically higher entry requirements. It is also important to consider that the UK is one of the OECD countries where socio-economic background has the strongest influence on educational achievement (Causa and Chapuis 2009, OECD 2013a).

Given these figures it would appear that the benefits of investing in human capital via higher education in the UK are significant for some, but these benefits generally take longer to manifest themselves than in the Singaporean system. So, whilst recent graduates and non-graduates are alike in both having consistently high unemployment rates, the work and earning prospects of older graduates and non-graduates diverge over time[38]. In their analysis of the impact of a degree on earnings pre and post HE expansion in the UK, Walker and Zhu found 'no significant differences in the graduate earnings differentials associated with the expansion of HE' (2013:6). They do, however, predict a positive relationship between obtaining higher education credentials and increased lifetime *net* earnings into the future. Their report asserts that the private benefit of a degree should average at £168k for men and £252k for women, matched by even higher public benefits through higher income tax revenue (2013).

It would seem from a provisional exploration of the data available that graduates in Singapore can expect a more certain and immediate economic return on their investment into higher education credentials than those in the UK, where the benefits of being a degree-holder are initially unclear and take longer to develop. In Singapore there seems to be a straightforward relationship between level of qualification, the likelihood of becoming employed, and the amount of remuneration an individual will receive that is effective upon graduation. In the UK the situation for graduates is less certain, with high initial rates of un- and underemployment, but an enhanced career trajectory compared to non-graduates over a longer period of time. Graduate fortunes appear to be mediated by choice of degree subject and institution, and some empirical evidence points to polarising fortunes amongst graduates. In order to better understand these post-graduation employment prospects, it is important to consider the socio-cultural context of higher education in the UK and Singapore.

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[38] However figures on lifetime earnings here include those individuals from an age where HE was more selective and therefore might not adequately reflect current trends in graduate lifetime earnings.

3.4 The developmental state model in Singapore

Since gaining independence in 1965, Singapore has become one of the world's most prosperous countries with strong international trading links and a per capita GDP to rival the leading nations of Western Europe. Given its size (647sq.km) and lack of natural resources, it is commonly understood that economic development in Singapore hinged on upgrading the skills of the workforce to meet economic imperatives (Ashton *et al.* 2002). Singapore's rapid economic development is widely attributed to the decisive role played by the state in steering and managing its growth. Alongside other contextual factors, including the city state's geographical position and size (Olds and Yeung 2004), the prevalence of Confucianism and other 'Asian values' (Hill 2000), political censorship and paternal authoritarianism (Green *et al.* 1999), the state has played a vital part in directing and managing Singapore's progress. Whilst there remains some disagreement over the exact definition of a developmental state, the term is most commonly used to refer to the pro-active and strategic involvement of the government and state apparatus in the socio-economic development of non-Western countries. The term was first elucidated by Johnson (1982), who outlined five key characteristics of the developmental state as part of his study into post-war Japan. Firstly, economic development is the top priority for state action; issues of growth, productivity and competitiveness are paramount and policy goals are devised with reference to other high-performing economies in a process of emulation. Secondly, a state commitment to private property and the market means that interventions in these areas are minimal. Thirdly, the state pilots or guides the market with instruments developed by an elite economic bureaucracy. Fourthly, the state orchestrates extensive consultations with the private sector in order to coordinate policy formulation and implementation. And, finally, whilst it is the bureaucrats who rule in the developmental state, politicians create the economic and political room for manoeuvre. They help to maintain the legitimacy and relative autonomy of the state whilst preserving political stability, often in a type of 'soft authoritarianism' in which a single political party has a virtual monopoly of political power (Johnson 1982). This much debated *developmental* approach to governance enabled Singapore, as one of the first wave of Asian Tigers[39], to achieve rapid industrialisation.

The developmental state model, though committed to market competition, doesn't entirely trust the decision-making of individuals with regard to human capital investment, particularly given the dynamic pace of change in Singapore. The state therefore plays a

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[39] Singapore, Taiwan and South Korea, otherwise known as EANIES – East Asian Newly Industrialised Economies.

stronger role in shaping education and training provision than in the Western neoliberal model:

> While human capital theory conceives of individuals optimally investing in skills, it is more appropriate to think of individuals as subject to bounded rationality where only a limited field of possibilities affects decisions. Moreover, since the downside risk of mistaken investment in human capital is high, individuals minimise that risk by restricting their investment and concentrating it on general academic skills. This may be rational for individuals, but not for society if citizens choose a low level of investment and shun more risky, vocationally specific education. (Green *et al.* 1999:86)

The developmental state therefore acts to steer individual choice in order to maximise efficient human capital development.

3.4.1 Rapid industrialisation

Initially, post-independence, Singapore faced an unemployment and housing crisis. Given the sustained threat to its autonomy after independence, the ruling People's Action Party (PAP) were under pressure to secure Singapore's continued existence. The government embarked upon a modernisation programme with a focus on manufacturing, and substantial investment in education. A rational strategy was developed first to industrialise and then to move up the value chain, employing a number of different mechanisms to ensure a tight connection between education and training on one hand, and the current and projected requirements of the economy on the other (Ashton *et al.* 2002). In the first phase of early industrialisation, the state relied on foreign direct investment (FDI). The government encouraged multi-national companies (MNCs) to invest in Singapore with the promise of cheap and plentiful labour. In return, MNCs provided the capital, technology and managerial expertise needed to kick start the industrialisation process. The government was successful in attracting the oil and chemical industries, soon followed by the electronics and electrical industries, including companies from America, Japan and Europe. This low-skill low-wage approach to the national economy was successful, and unemployment levels fell steadily from a rate of 14 percent in 1960 until labour shortages were experienced in the 1970s. Much of this employment was in the manufacturing sector, rising from 16.1 percent of the workforce in the 1960s to an average of 26.4 percent in the 1970s and 28 percent in the 1980s (Brown and Lauder 2001b).

The export-led approach to industrialisation contributed to strong economic growth, but new challenges arose as wage costs increased and rival emerging economies were able to

offer even cheaper labour. In order to remain competitive the Singapore government implemented strategies to move up the value-chain by further investment in the skills of the workforce to attract value-added jobs to Singapore. These strategies proved to be highly successful. In the first three decades after Independence the Singaporean economy grew at an average rate of 9.1 percent each year, becoming by the 1990s one of the world's most prosperous countries with the highest GDP per capita in Asia outside of Japan. Indeed, Singapore's GDP per capita increased from S$435 in 1960 to S$26,475 in 1997, which took it above Hong Kong, Sweden, France and the UK (Brown and Lauder 2001b). Rapid industrialisation also paved the way for the development of government-funded public infrastructures in the key areas of housing, health, education, pension provision and defence, contributing to high levels of prosperity and stability for Singaporean citizens. Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew was business-minded in the development of various government agencies and famously modelled them on Royal Dutch Shell (Khanna 2011). By the 1990s Singapore achieved the world's highest rate of home ownership via a publicly subsidised system that provides affordable housing[40]. More recently, as part of a new phase of economic development, the government manoeuvred to transform Singapore into a high-tech knowledge-based economy in order to attract new media and financial services (Brown and Lauder 2001b).

3.4.2 The importance of education as a facilitator of economic growth

In a developmental state, various political mechanisms work together to ensure that 'education and training policy formations are subordinated to the imperatives of economic growth' (Green *et al.* 1999:82). Ashton *et al.* (2002) outline three components of the developmental model in relation to how it manipulates the education system to foster economic growth, all of which are visible in the Singaporean approach to education provision. The state first assumes centralised control over the education system, enabling it to deliver the appropriate level and type of skill required for the chosen industries. Alongside skills-based training, there is also a strong moral component to the curriculum, to inculcate as sense of national unity. Secondly, a 'clearly articulated' trade and industry policy is required to pilot the industrialisation process (p12). And, thirdly, mechanisms must be devised to ensure that decisions made about the outputs of the education and training system are informed by the skill requirements of the new industries.

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[40] The Housing Development Board (HDB) typically sells flats on a 99-year lease, after which the property is returned to state ownership. Within HDB blocks a quota of ethnicities roughly comparable to the national average is maintained in order to avoid racial segregation (HDB 2014).

In Singapore, the state took a phased approach to education and training strategy and invested selectively at each point of development according to the human infrastructure that was perceived necessary to support chosen industries (Lall 1996). During the early stages of industrialisation the education and training system was geared towards providing a base line of basic numeracy and literacy skills with an emphasis on 'nation-building' in primary schools (Green *et al.* 1999). From 1979 onwards capital intensive high-skilled employment was encouraged and MNCs were encouraged to relocate their low-wage, low-skill jobs out of Singapore and into neighbouring countries. Education policies were modified, and the curriculum was expanded to include more technology and computer-based subjects. A comprehensive adult education system also was developed to provide opportunities for lifelong learning. To fund the upgrading of skills in the existing workforce, the Skills Development Fund (SDF) was introduced in 1979. This was resourced through a tax on low-skilled work, and provided financial incentives to employers to upgrade skills in the workplace. Alongside adult training, secondary and tertiary education was also expanded and developed. Quotas were set for courses in universities and polytechnics according to the anticipated industry demand for different kinds of workers. Since 2001, the government has sought to expand and diversify education and training provision according to emergent trends in the global economy.

Throughout Singapore's economic development to date, education provision has been systematically upgraded, according to the requirements of the economy. The government has retained firm control over its education and public training system, enabling it to 'make important changes at all levels, in the balance of curriculum, in the proportion of students who obtain vocational education, in the flow of students into the tertiary sector and the type of subjects they study there, and in the quantity and quality of vocational training provision outside the workplace' (Green *et al.* 1999:90). This level of control has in turn enabled a quick response to the dynamic changes in the small city-state economy. In 1979, 60 percent of the workforce had no secondary education and only 3 percent had tertiary level education. By 1994, around 27 percent of the workforce had tertiary level education. The education system had been transformed into one of the most 'efficient factories' for churning out well-qualified students in the world (Brown and Lauder 2001b:120). In particular, Singapore's success in Mathematics and Science has earned it world acclaim (Green *et al.* 1999).

3.4.3 Current economic policies and challenges for the future

The government has taken a number of steps to reform its economic policy in order to pursue its goal of becoming a 'hub of the global economy' (OECD 2013b:2). These include sustaining the growth of small and medium enterprises (SMEs) by offering a range of financial incentives; fostering innovation in the domestic market; and managing foreign worker dependence by increasing the productivity of the local workforce (OECD 2013b). Importantly, the government has sought to shift its policy focus away from 'attracting and serving the needs of MNCs', towards fostering a 'critical mass' of indigenous creative workers to help develop innovation-led industries (OECD 2013b:8). This strategy has been galvanized by 'targeted government measures in a few areas such as access to finance, the development of human resources and the internationalisation of SME's operations' (OECD 2013b:8).

Public spending on education has consistently been the second highest in the government's annual fiscal budgets after defence (spending on education was 17.9% of the budget compared with 20.8% for defence in 2012) (OECD 2013b). This equates to 3 percent of GPD (compared to 6.2 percent of GDP in the UK, see table 1 p.35). The OECD argues that the emphasis on education in Singapore has contributed to its strong record of human capital development, which is superior to other countries in the region (2013b). Current Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong has committed to increasing the proportion of young people in higher education to 40 percent by 2020; two more publicly backed universities are planned. It has been argued that a number of social and cultural factors have coalesced to contribute to the unusually high participation in human capital formation in Singapore and elsewhere in East Asia. Some prioritise the role of Confucianism and 'Asian values' (Hill 2000), whilst others attribute it to dominant discourses of meritocracy within society, in which an individual's social status is largely constructed according to their educational achievement and subsequent economic position (Green *et al.* 1999). Under these circumstances, resistance to the role of the state is eased, the state is able to direct and control a committed and enthusiastic body of students rather than having to 'cajole a reluctant populace to leave the family or work-place for the classroom' (Green *et al.* 1999:87). Beyond education, Sung (2006) describes the Singaporean 'developmental worker' as both highly disciplined and aligned to a sense of national project. During the 1990s a consensus emerged around the 'Singaporean Dream' as the pursuit of the five C's: cash, car, condo, credit card and country club membership (AsiaOne 2010). Whilst there have been numerous attempts by politicians to update these aspirational lifestyle goals, to include things like 'consideration' and 'charity'

(AsiaOne 2010), the original (in some cases largely unobtainable[41]) five remain the established vernacular for many Singaporeans (Uniquely Singapore 2014).

Various peculiarities of the Singaporean city-state mean that, since Independence, the state has been able to 'extend its control over most aspects of social and political life of its citizens' (Olds and Yeung 2004:513). Singapore's modest geographical size means that the territoriality of governance is relatively small and gives the government unique capacities for coherence and strategy compared to governance on bigger scales (Olds and Yeung 2004). Singapore has been able to bypass the complex bureaucratic systems associated with larger nation-state politics and there are no tensions between different regions that in bigger constituencies might compete for resources. In addition, Olds and Yeung (2004) assert that Singapore's Colonial history helps to engender openness to constant change. This, it is argued, has contributed to an advanced awareness of the realities of the new global economy, and the subsequent emergence of 'a political discourse of survivalism and ruthless competition…which implies the deferral of political options to the global scale' (Yeung 2000:145). In this context, the pursuit of becoming a global economic hub has been 'relatively uncontested' by Singaporeans and the government has been able to 'mobilize social actors[42] and tremendous resources to meet its national objectives' (Olds and Yeung 2004:513). In addition, it has been argued that the labelling of Singapore as one of the world's safest countries (Vijayan 2014) is due to both a tough stance on crime[43], and widespread social acceptance of high levels of surveillance amongst citizens (Harris 2014). Whilst the approach of the PAP has been widely regarded as 'pragmatic' and non-ideological, Chua argues that its sustained legitimacy has been aided by an ideology of 'universalism' and a cultural normative order that has acted to 'depoliticise', discipline and align citizens to the Party's goals (Chua 1995). Under such conditions the state has acted to absorb and 'co-opt' dissenting voices in order to maintain the normative social order.

However, a number of factors cast doubt over the continued economic success of Singapore, the hegemonic voice of the PAP, and the disciplined and accepting citizens it has created (Chua 1995). Firstly, rising wage inequalities between different groups and rigidifying class structures have coalesced to threaten the unified 'Singaporean Dream' (Brown and Lauder

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[41] For example, given Singapore's congested road system, those wishing to own a car must bid for a ten-year Certificate of Entitlement which can cost as much as S$80,000 (approximately £47,000), in addition to various road taxes and other levies, and the cost of the vehicle itself (Land Transport Authority 2013).

[42] Indeed, the Singaporean population works the longest hours in the world (Hodal 2013).

[43] Singapore is famed for its continued use of corporal and capital punishment.

2001b). Whilst those born in the first decade post-independence were likely to have enjoyed high upward mobility thanks to investments in public education, as the Singaporean economy has matured to a steady growth rate, and average years of schooling begins to match that of advanced countries, upward mobility in education has been decreasing (Ho 2007). It has been argued that skill-biased parental influence on a child's educational attainment restricts intergenerational mobility and exacerbates wage inequalities (Ng and Ho 2006, Ho 2007). As a result, it has been argued that 'finding the right blend of pro-growth policies and redistributive measures will be critical for sustaining the Singapore story of growth with equity' (Chan 2007: para 14)

A number of scholars also warn of a possible identity crisis following the invitation extended to 'foreign talent' to reside in Singapore, and the broader shifts towards globalisation and the opening up to different cultural influences that often accompanies it (Brown and Lauder 2001b, OECD 2013b). The government has struggled to boost indigenous population figures and has therefore committed to grant citizenship to more foreigners in order to increase its population by one third by 2030. In order to limit the state's dependence on migrants to fuel the economy, the Singaporean government has also launched various policies to encourage Singaporeans to marry and procreate. These include government-funded speed-dating schemes and educational pamphlets on how to flirt. Most recently a collection of 'modern fairytales' relating to marriage, sex and fertility have been distributed amongst university students. A key aim is to warn women of their declining fertility and the 'biological cost of extending their care-free adolescence'[44] (Hodal 2013). Critics have argued that these governmental strategies entrench gender stereotypes (Hodal 2013).

As values of individualism and consumerism have become more prevalent in Singapore, the hegemonic consensus has been eroded as 'an increasingly differentiated set of opinions and views' emerge amongst an increasingly 'economically and ethically stratified population, held together by loosely observed mass loyalty to the nation' (Chua 1995:5). A more cosmopolitan society implies less cultural homogeneity, which threatens the cohesion of nation-building discourses, and weakens the singularity of the voice of the PAP. In anticipation of the changing demands of the knowledge economy the state has invested in the creative industries, but it may not be able to isolate itself from wider global cultural trends. The introduction of arts and humanities studies at university level, and the wider shift

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[44] In a university address, former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew advised a 27 year old female PhD student that in order to contribute to society it was more important to start a family than to finish her thesis (Yini 2011)

in educational policy towards creativity, critical thinking and entrepreneurialism may mean that graduates are more engaged with political issues and less accepting of the status quo. It can also be argued that younger generations, who haven't experienced the same rapid industrialisation and stark contrasts witnessed by their parents, and who have greater access to the individualised consumer-oriented discourses of the West, may not share the same work ethic and seek instant gratification instead (Bell 1979).

3.5 Markets and choice in the UK

3.5.1 Economic nationalism and widening access

Policy makers in the UK hoping to strengthen national economic competitiveness according to the prescriptions of the human capital theorists in the 1960s faced a different situation to those in Singapore, since universities in the UK had a longer history with their own sets of goals and practices, independent of economic concerns. As a result, the development of universities as vehicles for human capital development has been more complex and multifaceted than in Singapore, where policy makers started with a blank canvas. In the nineteenth century, higher education had an exclusionary character and was seen 'primarily as a means of maintaining social distance between the elites and the masses', whose fortunes were predetermined at birth (Brown and Lauder 2001a:60). After the Second World War, the pace of economic and technological development made it harder to 'recruit sufficient numbers of white-collar workers from within the ranks of the privileged' (Brown and Lauder 2001a:60). As a result of this perceived need for skilled and motivated workers, the barriers to working-class mobility were weakened, and higher education was reconceptualised as 'an investment in the promotion of economic growth as well as a means of promoting social justice' (Brown and Lauder 2001a:60-1). Importantly, during this period of economic nationalism it was understood that intelligence was distributed randomly throughout the population, and that in order to allow individuals to flourish regardless of their social background, the education system should be organised according to the principle of equality of opportunity. The expansion of HE was therefore seen as a vehicle for a fairer and more meritocratic society, in which everyone is given a stake in society, albeit on different rungs of the ladder.

The 1962 Education Act introduced state payment of tuition fees and maintenance grants as part of the widening access agenda, and the following year the Robbins Report

commissioned by the then Conservative government recommended the massive expansion of HE to provide for all those who had the necessary ability (1963). It called for a diversity of HE institutions, better integration between universities and the secondary school system, and promoted the idea that citizenship was a more desirable virtue than the parading of individual excellence (Robbins 1963). In the report Robbins acknowledged that only a small minority of individuals would attend university 'if there were no significance for their future careers in what they hear and read', and that 'the maintenance of a competitive position' increasingly depends on 'skills demanding special training' (1963: para 25). However, he also asserted that regardless of its practical use, 'what is taught should be taught in such a way as to promote the general powers of the mind' and should not produce 'mere specialists' but 'cultivated men and women' (para 26). In addition, the report outlined an important cultural dimension of universities in which their contribution to the communities in which they are situated is seen as paramount to the health of society (para 28).

The political consensus surrounding ideas of equality of opportunity, meritocratic achievement, and the importance of investing in education in order to be economically competitive *and* to promote social mobility, fuelled the massive expansion of higher education in the UK, as seen in figure five. Only three percent of the population attended university prior to the Second World War, predominantly privileged white men from public schools and mostly destined to become the political, financial and military elite. This figure increased to 7.25 in 1962 and to 12.7 percent by the end of the 1970s (Brown and Lauder 2001a).

Figure 5: Higher education participation in the UK 1960-2001
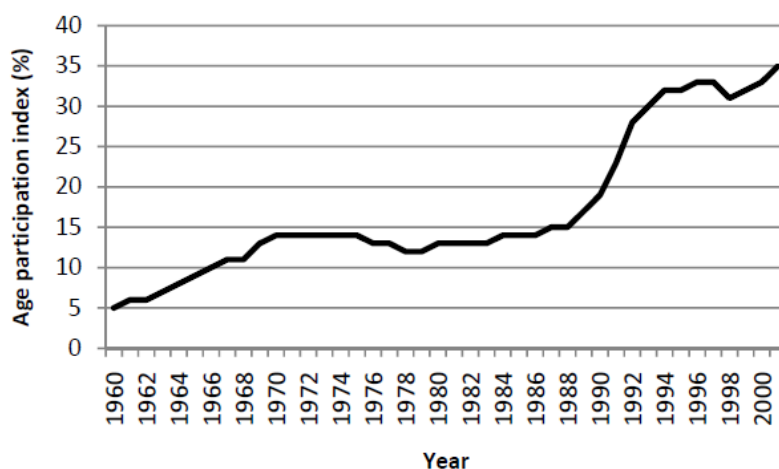
Source: Walker and Zhu (2013)

3.5.2 Neoliberal responses to economic imperatives

As part of the shift away from the Keynesian welfarism that informed state approaches to education during the post-war period of economic nationalism, since the late 1970s higher education reports, policy documents and recommendations in the UK have increasingly focussed on the role of higher education in making individuals more employable. Consistent with a broader move towards privatisation and marketization under the neoliberal Conservative government in the 1980s, the mission of higher education institutions was increasingly framed in private terms according to the benefit it would bestow on individuals (Barnett 2013, Holmwood 2011, Gewirtz and Cribb 2012). This was seen by those within the Conservative governments of the 1980s and 1990s in terms of releasing universities from 'an elitist, anti-business humanities mind-set that was detrimental to national economic competitiveness' (Gewirtz and Cribb 2012:69). In 1979 the Conservative government cut educational spending, which, according to Gewirtz and Cribb, signified 'a major shift in the construction of public spending in official policy discourse from an investment to be welcomed to an economic drain and a threat to national competitiveness' (2012:63). As a result, the share of public expenditure on the higher education system as a proportion of HE funding decreased from 80 percent in 1995 to 29.6 percent in 2009 due to the increase in private funding, although public subsidies remain in place to help those from disadvantaged backgrounds to participate in education (OECD 2012b). Funding cuts have not affected all departments evenly: those subjects considered to be most instrumental to the success of the nation, including science and engineering, have been prioritised (Gewirtz and Cribb 2012). This period was also marked by the rise of new managerial practices, including a more formal approach to quality assurance and a preoccupation with productivity (Gewirtz and Cribb 2012). In particular, the Jarratt Committee's evaluation of the efficiency of universities in 1984 paved the way for the emergence of a whole new generation of 'corporatized vice-chancellors' and 'the increasing use of performance management instruments borrowed from the private sector' (Gewirtz and Cribb 2012:67).

The continuing expansion of higher education was intensified by the incorporation of polytechnics into the university system in 1992, and more generally by 'increased exhortations to young people about the benefits of higher education' (Holmwood 2011:8). The value of a degree has been increasingly couched in private, rather than public terms. This repositioning of education as a predominantly private good, that had the potential to improve the social standing of the individual, undermined the idea that it should be publicly funded (Holmwood 2011). In 1997 the Dearing Report concluded that students would have

to pay towards the cost of university, and despite fierce opposition the then Labour government implemented an annual tuition fee of £1,000 in 1998. This figure was raised to a maximum of £3000 with the introduction of top-up fees in 2004. The understanding that graduates would earn more than non-graduates over their lifetime led to another dramatic increase in tuition fees in 2012, representing a doubling or nearly tripling of fees in some universities as governments attempted to stabilise university finances in the wake of the financial crisis (OECD 2012b). The reconstitution of the primary role of higher education in terms of its contribution to national economic competitiveness, and the neoliberal faith in the power of the invisible hand of the market underscored a new approach to the management of higher education in the UK. State responsibility was limited to providing individuals with opportunities rather than centrally orchestrating provision as per the developmental state model in Singapore.

Given the broader historical remit of universities in the UK, these moves to 'modernise' higher education by bringing it into the service of economic imperatives were met with consternation from academics critical of the reduced emphasis on the social or cultural elements of higher learning (Holmwood 2011). The Robbins Report had warned against shifting the responsibility of paying for university to students since, in Holmwood's words, 'the calculation of future benefit is too uncertain, given likely changes in the labour market', and 'there were significant public goods secured by university education', which justified public funding (Holmwood 2011:9). In addition, those aligned to a liberal arts framing of university raised concerns about the diminished funding for, and importance ascribed to, humanities subjects compared to those which are more closely linked to 'economic and technical imperatives' (Gewirtz and Cribb 2012:67).

3.5.3 Current policies and challenges for the future

While the British government has increased funding for certain subject areas according to how vital they were seen to be in global economic competition, it has been more general and less targeted in its approach compared to the Singaporean government (which, for reasons discussed above, had access to a higher level control over the supply and demand of graduates). In a marketised system, student choice remains the key driving force that determines the numbers of applicants in particular subject areas. In this interpretation of human capital theory, it is individuals rather than the state who are best placed to make decisions about where their investments of time, effort and money should lie. As a result, whilst in Singapore an emphasis on economic imperatives regulated by the state led to

trends of specialisation and the fostering of particular skill-sets according to the perceived requirements of the labour market, in the UK it manifested itself in an emphasis on teaching generic and transferrable skills, and phases of mismatch between the supply and demand for certain graduates, including, for example, an oversupply of teachers in 2011 (Lepkowska 2011) and a more recent undersupply of engineers (Groom 2014).

Indeed, the OECD identifies 'a mismatch between UK production and emerging markets demand' as one of the key factors restricting economic growth since the recession (2013a:3). It explains that despite a high level of flexibility in the labour market, youth unemployment is a particular problem and more broadly 'weak skills in some segments of the workforce hinder employment and growth' (OECD 2013a:1). In relation to these trends concerns have also been raised about the rising proportion of unpaid student loans, representing a further public spending outlay (Malik 2014). In order to hasten its recovery from recession, the OECD calls for the enhancement of workforce skills in the UK through greater cooperation between central and local governments and employers (2013a). In particular they highlight the need to strengthen vocational education and training and to raise awareness on government programmes to support youth employment, particularly among small and medium enterprises (2013a). They recommend the enhancement of workers' skills and better facilitation of the transition from education to work. The OECD also points to the UK's relatively low investment in productive assets, and argues that a stronger policy focus on enabling R&D activities 'could boost long-term growth' (2013a:1).

It can therefore be argued that there is a much looser policy connection between education and economy in the UK when compared to Singapore. There is little consensus on what constitutes the best approach to enhancing the connection between the supply and demand for graduates, and some critics argue that the demand for graduates has been exaggerated meaning that current policies are misplaced and may indeed be detrimental to youth skill development and national prosperity (e.g. Keep 2006, Keep and Mayhew 2004). The marketised system in the UK could, therefore, be characterised as disorganised, disruptive, and potentially anomic. In some respects the openness and uncertainty of the UK system is reflected in sociological understandings of Western modernity which often coalesce around ideas of precarity and risk. For example, in the context of post-Fordism, post-industrialism and globalisation, Bell projected a shift from a work ethic to consumer ethic (1979), and Lash and Urry (1987) proclaimed the end of organised capitalism. Beck argued that we are living in an intensely individualised 'risk society' characterised by the need for heightened

reflexivity and self-consciousness (1992). Similarly Bauman depicts a 'liquid modernity' and a shift away from identities forged through work towards consumerism and the leisure society (2000). Bauman argues pessimistically that individuals have become 'disembedded', that they find it difficult to relocate themselves in a set of ever shifting categories and contexts and instead face 'perpetual uncertainty' (2000:63). Whilst some focus on risk and precarity in relation to this new openness, for other thinkers, these developments represent opportunities for new political and ethical life choices that have the potential to be emancipatory (Giddens 1991). These new choices and opportunities may include those that the Singaporean state is reluctant to embrace. Indeed, the theoretical literature on contemporary society in the West demonstrates the diverse social understandings of the manner in which modernity has shifted. These ideas are not universally accepted but they are symptomatic of diverse approaches to understanding wellbeing and identity that stand in contrast to the cultural uniformity and hegemonic consensus that has helped to mobilise Singaporean citizens to strive for national economic success.

3.6 Concluding points

Policy makers in Britain and Singapore have approached human capital development within the higher education system from two very different vantage points. In Singapore, ideas about investment in human capital were central to the development of the primary, secondary and tertiary education systems, and as such the functioning of these learning institutions were carefully framed according to economic imperatives. Conversely, in Britain, where universities had long existed without much of a connection to ideas about the strength of the national economy, the influence of human capital ideas represented a significant shift in the goals and organisation of HEIs. As a result, attempts to condition the higher education system to respond to the perceived need for more high skilled workers in the UK were met by criticism, due to the fear that these changes represented a loss of the public, critical and social roles of universities. These dissenting views can be understood as part of a more diverse collection of cultural understandings about the role of higher education in Britain, as compared to a relative level of cultural uniformity in Singapore where strong normative values have been mobilised in the service of economic development.

Various factors mean that a tighter and more concerted policy connection between the supply of and the demand for graduates has been forged in Singapore, whilst the more flexible labour market and marketised approach to higher education provision in the UK has

contributed to a more chaotic and often 'disorganised' relationship between graduates and high-skilled vacancies in the labour market. This is visible in the empirical data on graduate employment prospects and the earnings differentials between graduates and non-graduates in each country. Graduates in Singapore can therefore expect a more certain and immediate return on their investment into higher education credentials. I have characterised this difference in terms of the 'openness'[45] of the British system and the relative 'closedness' or more highly regulated nature of the Singaporean system.

Graduates in the UK initially face a precarious employment situation; un- and under-employment are both more prevalent than in Singapore. However, over a longer period of time, depending on degree choice and various other factors, some UK graduates can expect enhanced lifetime earnings compared to non-graduates, which may help individuals to legitimate their investment in a degree credential. Importantly, the prospects for graduates in the UK also appear to be mediated by choice of institution and family background to a greater extent than in Singapore. In both national contexts the economic fortunes for business graduates appears to be marginally superior to those of sociology graduates[46].

When future employment is viewed as the key goal of higher education, this analysis shows that Singapore has been more successful in preparing graduates for the labour market compared to the UK. However some argue that shifts in the global economy that add value to entrepreneurial, autonomous and creative skills might weaken Singapore's position, since its market success has been based on careful prediction, ensuring a balance between supply and demand, and rote learning. The UK education system has historically provided liberal arts courses and programmes that are less compatible with immediate market demands, but may contribute indirectly to the development of critical and creative knowledge workers. Ironically, the initial focus on engineering and scientific subjects in Singapore has recently been expanded to include humanities and the arts, and whilst the Ministry of Education has been expanding the choice of creative courses available to students to plug this perceived gap, in the UK funding for the arts and humanities has been considerably cut in recent years on the grounds that these subjects are of less value to the UK's future competitiveness. This

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[45] I am using openness to refer to the flexibility and quasi-unplanned nature of the British policy strategies of graduate employment, rather than the more traditional use of 'open' to refer to an economy that engages in international trade (Singapore is definitely an 'open' economy in this traditional sense).

[46] As illustrated in table 2 (p.42), in Singapore whilst Business and Accountancy graduates earn more than Sociology graduates, there is a less clear distinction between single-honours Business and Sociology students.

synopsis of the relatively distinct articulations of the state-education-economy relationship in Singapore and the UK bring me to my second research question:

Given the differences in the two systems, how and to what extent is this reflected in the attitudes and expectations of students in these two countries?

Chapter 4: Methodology

Introduction

This chapter is a reflexive account of the methodological choices made throughout the research process. Methodological decisions impact the kind of data produced and the manner in which it can be analysed. It is therefore important to explain and clarify the particular steps taken at each stage of the project, from design to execution and subsequent analysis. In addition, a self-critical approach recognises the relativity of the researcher's own knowledge and enables the questioning and development of understanding during the research process (Van Maanen 1988). It is vital for maximising the potential for the 'possibility for new understandings' (McLeod 2003:201) and is increasingly important given the rapid and global nature of socio-economic changes that make our understandings more temporary and less reliable (Alaranta 2006). The chapter begins with a reflection on the decision to design a comparative project, and a discussion of the nature of the comparative work undertaken. I then expand on the approach to analysis before describing the research procedure and ethical issues raised by the study.

4.1 The logic of comparison

Comparison is ubiquitous in social science research, with many, if not most, researchers implicitly comparing their chosen case to their own country or to an imaginary ideal type (Ragin 1987). The logic of comparison is that it enables us to define what we see more clearly, and helps us to understand and interpret cases in relation to one another: it 'provides a basis for making statements about empirical regularities and for evaluating and interpreting cases relevant to substantive and theoretical data' (Ragin 1987:1). Swanson goes further to assert that 'thinking without comparison is unthinkable' (1971:145). More specifically, cross-national comparisons are becoming more prominent in social research, stimulated by social policy concerns of identifying 'best practice' on the one hand, and by theoretical interests on the other (O'Reilly 1996:1.1). This type of research is also increasingly favoured by funding bodies, and some argue that in the context of globalisation, the decision not to engage in cross-national comparisons 'requires as much justification as the choice to conduct cross-national research' (Livingstone 2003:478).

Most cross-national research projects are 'concerned with similar problems related to structure and agency, convergence and divergence' (O'Reilly 1996:1.1). They can broadly be divided into two types: large scale quantitative projects seeking to assess generality across many societies, and smaller scale qualitative projects, which develop descriptive knowledge about specific cases. Comparative research concerned with education and national labour markets tends to be quantitative, statistical and positivistic in character. For example, research on higher education and graduate employability often relies on surveys and questionnaires to measure student attitudes (e.g. HEFCE 2005, Bekhradnia 2009). This type of data tends to be variable-oriented, has a wide geographical scope and is well-suited for exploring generalities across many societies. There are very few cross-national studies focussing on graduate employability from a qualitative perspective. This project is aligned to the second type of cross-national research: case-based qualitative comparative analysis (QCA).

4.1.1 Case-based qualitative comparative analysis

These studies are generally interpretivist in their attempt to account for comparable processes and outcomes that are significant to cultural institutional arrangements (Ragin 1987). Indeed, Ragin defines the 'twin goals' of comparative social science as 'both to explain and to interpret macrosocial variation' (1987:5). In contrast to statistical approaches to cross-national research, methods of qualitative comparison tend to begin by 'assuming maximum causal complexity' and then endeavour to 'mount an assault on that complexity' (Ragin 1987:x). This is achieved by examining the similarities and differences among a limited number of cases, highlighting 'complexity, diversity and uniqueness' in order to provide 'a powerful basis for interpreting cases' (Ragin 1987:xiii).

Case-oriented approaches tend to be holistic and seek to understand relations between the parts within the context of the whole (Ragin 1987, Yin 2003). Unlike the quantitative variable-oriented approach, cases are viewed as configurations or combinations of characteristics (Ragin 1987:3). Therefore, the explanations provided by comparativists often cite convergent causal conditions. This combinatorial approach to analysis allows comparativist researchers to explore the complex interplay of processes (Ragin 1987). This is particularly well-suited to my study since economic and educational processes are deeply embedded in social and cultural contexts. The characteristics of case-orientated research make it possible for researchers to interpret cases historically and 'make statements about the origins of important qualitative changes in specific settings' (Ragin 1987:x). Case-based comparative

work is therefore well suited to addressing my questions about educational experiences and anticipated employment outcomes. It will examine how different conditions (national context and subject studied) produce similar or different outcomes (approaches to learning, understandings of success and labour market strategies). In addition, these characteristics mean that QCA has the potential to augment theory formulation, and to contextualise the current practices of the 'home' context.

In turn, by seeking to relate this qualitative, interpretive data to macrosocial units, cross-national comparative studies explore the relationship between structure and agency to understand the interplay between individual understandings and actions on the one hand, and institutional and cultural framings on the other. Taking a holistic approach to understanding student responses in relation to socio-economic context facilitates a greater understanding of student orientations to learning, instrumentality and success, than studying graduate employment rates alone.

4.1.2 Challenges of cross-national comparison

Alongside the numerous strengths of QCA, a number of significant challenges also face the comparative researcher; in fact, within the social sciences, cross-national comparisons 'are both attacked as impossible and defended as necessary' (Livingstone 2003:477). Whilst some comparativists argue that the methodological issues facing the comparative researcher are no different to other researchers in the social sciences (e.g. Smelser 1976, Grimshaw 1973), others argue that there are important differences in the orientations of comparative and noncomparative researchers (Ragin 1987).

A key issue for comparative researchers to address is that of comparability of 'relatively dissimilar societies' (Ragin 1987:9). Whilst comparativists have been criticised for 'attempting to compare unlike objects' (Livingstone 2003:480), it is also posited that comparative studies allow for the generation of creative and imaginative claims that would not otherwise be possible (Beniger 1992). Other common complaints are that cross-national projects provide 'measurement out of context', and tend to view comparator nations through a western lens (Livingstone 2003:482). Countering these claims, Livingstone asserts: 'if research methods and findings are so thoroughly contextualised that the meaning of any term of measure is understood only within its unique context, there can be no criteria by which to make comparisons in the first place' (2003:482). Moreover, given that all research is comparative in one way or another, and, whether explicitly or implicitly, entails the conceptual categorisation of groups in order to identify contrasts and commonalities, these

critiques lose some of their traction. Noncomparative work 'often permits dominant communities to make the blithe assumption that what holds in one country will surely hold elsewhere' (Livingstone 2003:483). In this respect, cross-national comparisons can make a valuable contribution to exposing the weaknesses of theoretical generalisations exported to 'foreign' cultures (O'Reilly 1996:2.3). QCA approaches to cross-national comparisons therefore hold the potential for a more nuanced form of theory building.

Some comparativists address issues of comparability by seeking to standardise their methodology and research tools in order to achieve strict equivalence across national boundaries; these efforts are often compromised by issues with sampling, translation and data collection (Livingstone 2003). Others, taking a more emic position that values the concepts immanent within the culture(s) studied, argue that 'the more one sets out to control the process of data collection, the more validity is sacrificed' (Livingstone 2003:488). From this perspective methodological standardisation abstracts subjects from their indigenous settings and 'may distort the objects of study and lose valuable, even essential information' (Swanson 1992:22). Rather than seeking 'functional equivalence', and blurring those differences between the educational and economic contexts of my two research sites, in Chapter three I sought to 'mark out' theoretical and empirical differences between these two structures in order that they inform the collection and analysis of data (Carmel 1999:144).

4.2 Research design

Having discussed some of the potential benefits and pitfalls of conducting cross-national comparative qualitative research, this section builds on the methodological orientation discussed thus far to describe the precise research design of this project. The defining features of the social, economic, institutional and cultural specificities of the two national contexts were sketched out in the preceding chapter. These provide the 'structural' context in which the perceptions and experiences of my students will be situated. By exploring the articulation of these structural and subjective elements, my aim is to provide an understanding of the social construction of student experiences of higher learning and graduate employability.

The study adopts a comparative case-study approach, focussing on the relationship between context (education and labour market) on the one hand, and social actors (students) on the

other. The different educational and labour market conditions in these two contrasting national contexts can thus be related to student narratives of the role of education and understandings of employability. There are two principal layers to this comparison – firstly, I am comparing the perceptions of students across two different national contexts – Britain and Singapore. In addition, based on the themes identified in the literature, I am drawing comparisons between students studying social scientific and business-based subjects.

4.2.1 A qualitative approach to understanding success and identity construction

Like many cross-national comparative case studies, this project is interpretivist in nature. An interpretivist epistemology allows for the exploration of the meanings that people give to actions and the manner in which they account for various social phenomena. This approach enables the researcher to capture the individual's point of view and promotes a closer engagement with the issues from his or her perspective (Denzin and Lincoln 1998). The research is designed to amplify the sense-making that social actors apply to their own lives in relation to social, educational and cultural context. Similarities and differences across these accounts will then be categorised according to national context and subject area in order to draw links between individual perceptions and social-economic context.

This qualitative, interpretive approach necessarily has an impact on the generalizability of the research findings, since a focus on the perspectives of a relatively small number of participants may not apply to the general population (of students studying business or sociology in Britain and Singapore, and more broadly to other groups of British and Singaporean citizens). It is difficult to ascertain the extent to which the views expressed by participants are a reliable indicator of the views of their cohort. Accepting this caveat, this research does not claim to provide a representative image of British and Singaporean students, but instead seeks to relate the perceptions of participants to institutional differences within society, and to locate the accounts of participants within the broader structures discussed in the preceding chapters. The research therefore attempts to integrate the macro condition with individual agency, in order to explore the relationship between the experiences and understandings of my participants and their socio-economic context. The institutional structuring of opportunity in each national context will therefore be vital in interpreting participants' accounts, and students' views will be considered within a broader economic and political and cultural context.

4.2.2 The nation as a unit of analysis

Livingstone (2003), drawing on Kohn (1998), puts forward a typology of four orientations to cross-national comparative research. This project can be located within the third orientation, which positions national context as the 'unit of analysis'. It seeks to comprehend the diversity of different national contexts through representing the specificity of Britain and Singapore. The project aims to identify systematic relationships between institutional educational and employment frameworks and student perceptions of education and employability. In this model, the prior identification of measurable dimensions (such GDP and unemployment rates) enables the exploration of the relationship between these factors and participants' experiences, understandings and behaviours. Each nation therefore serves as a data source. This branch of cross-national comparison seeks to identify relations among dimensions of national variation in order to build theory. Although some question the extent to which the nation state is still a valid unit of analysis, given globalising trends, many phenomena, including educational systems, are still defined in national terms and 'national states continue to serve as a convenient shorthand for distinctive histories, cultures and policy environments' (Livingstone 2003:480).

In line with Livingstone's model, I have chosen countries according to their diversity within a common framework in order to operationalise the concepts important to the research. Singapore was chosen as a suitable comparator for a number of reasons. Pragmatically it made sense to choose an English speaking country with an educational structure that almost mirrors the UK system of GCSEs and A-Levels. Theoretically, it is an interesting case because the connection between education and the economy has been made very explicit from the outset, and may offer an insight into how shifts towards arranging tertiary education according to market imperatives might look in the UK. This focus on the economic return one can expect on the investment of time and money students make into their university education alongside a relative lack of social welfare provision in Singapore, also provides a good ground to explore theories of instrumental or acquisitive learning. I therefore selected Singapore as a more extreme example of the human capital model of higher education which does not have the cultural or historical legacy of the university system in the UK. It also has a stronger and more straightforward connection between education and labour market outcomes than the UK. This makes it an ideal testing ground for the research interests presented in Chapter two. Within the British context, a university in Wales was selected for largely pragmatic and resource-oriented reasons. Whilst there are some differences in the educational policies of the devolved nations within the UK, the Welsh higher education

system is highly integrated with the English system (Rees *et al.* 2005), and as such it should provide a relevant insight into the experiences of British students (not just those who are Welsh). A suitable comparator in Singapore was identified: the two universities selected are a similar size and are both internationally recognised institutions.

4.2.3 Conceptualising culture

Following O'Reilly (1996), this project takes an intermediary approach to tackling the cross-national study of culture that recognises both institutional and ideational aspects. Ideational approaches take account of the role of individual and social values, but are not prone to recognising social heterogeneity within a single society (O'Reilly 1996:9). On the other hand, institutional approaches are 'more successful at identifying the material and historical basis for particular societal characteristics' but can create 'a rather static conception of social arrangements, with little account given to the role of actors in shaping and interpreting these' (1996:9.8). Intermediary accounts, when successful, 'manage to identify both the historical constraints and perceptions of contemporary actors in their accounts of societal differences' (O'Reilly 1996:9.8, see also Dore 1973, and Gallie 1978). This project seeks to show the relationship between societal structures and institutions and the attitudes of the individuals who populate these spaces in relation to their educational environment.

4.2.4 Analysis and theory building

Comparativists seek to apply theory to cases in order to interpret them and develop new conceptual schemes (Ragin 1987). The dialogue between theory and data is particularly important in case-oriented research, and Ragin, a pioneer of QCA, advocates a Boolean algebraic approach to analysing data in order to 'simplify complex data structures in a logical and holistic manner' (1987:viii). This entails the transfer of elements of cases into variables amenable to quantitative techniques. Although this approach is well-suited to 'causally focussed' research objectives that seek to explain a singular event, it is less suitable for projects concerned with explaining a series of social relationships, and has been critiqued for setting up a false dichotomy between qualitative and quantitative research according to a 'chimera of objectivity, rigour and generalizability' (Carmel 1999:143). Whilst Ragin is the key authority on QCA and I have drawn on his work extensively to inform my approach to data analysis, given the small number of cases in my study, the Boolean approach that he advocates is not deemed necessary here. In fact, in choosing not to transform my data into variable form, I sought to protect it from the 'culture of fragmentation' that is characteristic of heavily categorised data (Coffey and Atkinson 1996).

Following Swanson (1992) the analysis takes a 'metatheoretical' approach to data analysis, seeking to theorise categories and concepts in order to interpret the comparative data. Swanson (1992) considers the management of theoretical diversity in comparative cross-national studies of political communication. Whilst his discussion of strategies is based on a desire to bring together the varied perspectives of an international research team, his discussion of the metatheoretical approach is helpful for my purposes here. A metatheoretical approach identifies different levels of analysis and directs analytic attention to the relationships between them. At the level of political (or in my case, material or economic) reality, a common theoretical framework can be established according to factors like GDP and graduate employment rates. The task then is to explore the relationship between this structural framework and participants' subjective perspectives. In this sense, whilst recognising the imperfect and partial nature of the available macro-economic data and the fact that their dissemination is mediated by purpose, these elements are used to provide a structural or 'systemic context' (Blumler *et al.* 1992) in which to orient subjective data. Morrow and Brown describe this approach as a type of social theorising based on 'discerning structural relations within and between mediations – relations that turn on the dialectic between human agency and social structure' (1994:218).

4.2.5 The interview design

Interviews remain the most commonly used qualitative research tool and are largely regarded as the most suitable method for obtaining data about actors' perceptions and experiences. In the context of this study, the choice to interview enables me to collect and compare accounts of how students understand their time at university and construct their own employability in relation to their perceptions of the labour market in the two national contexts. Champions of the interview method argue that it can help the researcher to understand the life world of interviewees (Gaskell 2000) and provide an insight into how individuals construct meaning (Kvale 1996). Some researchers critique the use of qualitative interviewing on the grounds that it does not generate data on how people interact with one another (e.g. Silverman 2006) and instead advocate focus groups on the grounds that viewpoints are actively challenged and meanings are negotiated through discussion. Given the suggestion that rules of consensus govern group discussion in Asian societies[47] (Dunn and Wallace 2004), and the recognition that focus groups are not ideally situated to obtain in-depth and personal information about individual experiences and understandings, the

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[47] This is something that I discovered first hand during my masters study into perceptions of higher education and employment among Hong Kong students studying in the UK (Muddiman 2010).

utility of focus groups in this instance is questionable. I am therefore using interviews to explore the framework of interpretation that students use to understand the role of their university education.

Interviews can be structured, semi structured or unstructured. Structured interviews use a standardised set of questions with a fixed order, and whilst they are highly replicable they leave no room for follow up questions. They also tend to provide 'thin' data, since the categories of examination are predetermined and strongly shaped by the agenda of the interviewer. Semi-structured interviews are more flexible in that a general topic is established beforehand but there is space for the exploration of emergent themes. In unstructured interviews topics are not fixed, questions are general and open, and participants are free to tell (biographical) stories in their own way. Both semi- and unstructured interviews allow for the generation of rich and detailed data because answers tend to be lengthier and participants have space to put things in their own words. However, the wide and unpredictable scope of unstructured interviews means that they are less suitable for this project which seeks to acquire comparable data across different contexts. Semi-structured interviews ensure the collection of 'relevant data' by setting out a question guide, whilst providing space for emergent themes that may enhance the research.

The semi-structured or 'structured conversation' approach to qualitative interviewing (Rubin and Rubin 2005:129) is the most appropriate for this research because it facilitates the exploration of students' perceptions of higher education and the graduate labour market from their own perspectives. The interview guide provides a number of themes/topics to be addressed during the interviews, meaning that the data collected will be comparable, but the loose structure allows space for students to elaborate their answers, develop new trains of thought, and to address the core topics in an order that is most congruent to them. This is especially important when the researcher is positioning herself as a learner, and the interview process is iterative to the research project. For example, whilst undertaking fieldwork in Singapore and trying to 'make the strange familiar', learning new details about National Service and how it impacts upon student trajectories after graduation was facilitated by broad and flexible discussion. This meant that I was able to build pertinent elements into subsequent interviews.

I devised an interview schedule to explore students' experiences of their university education (e.g. What topics do you particularly enjoy? Are you involved in any extracurricular activities?); their approaches to learning (e.g. How much time do you spend studying on

average? Are there any shortcuts do doing well in assessments?); their plans for future employment (e.g. What are your plans for after graduation? Will you try and find employment related to your studies?); their anticipated approaches to finding employment (e.g. Can you be yourself and still succeed in the labour market?) and their broader aspirations and goals and views on society (e.g. How would you define success; is it the same as employability? How do you understand inequalities in society?).[48]

Owens (2006) suggests that the task of the qualitative interviewer is to gradually expand the 'conversational space' of the interview according to what both parties deem appropriate. To this end, I began with questions about students' educational background and experiences, before expanding to broader themes that may have been more intellectually challenging. When composing questions I also considered the manner in which cultural differences might intersect the relationship between what participants think and what they choose to say (Narayan and George 2001). This was important on two fronts: firstly, it was important to make sure that my interviews were culturally sensitive and tried to avoid any questions that might make participants feel uncomfortable; and secondly, I endeavoured to delineate the broad scope of the research in order that participants' accounts were not limited by their perceptions of what makes a story noteworthy or 'tellable' (Narayan and George 2001). Previous research (Muddiman 2010) had alerted me to, for example, the possibility that students from a different cultural background might not perceive their extra-curricular or social activities to be pertinent to their discussions with me about their university career, so I made sure to ask about these aspects of university life explicitly.

4.3 Research procedure

This section is dedicated to clarifying certain choices made during the project. Fieldwork in Singapore took place over a six-week period in the autumn of 2011. Interviews with British participants stretched over a longer period of time, and were not completed until May 2012. In total, I interviewed 40 students in their final year of undergraduate study, although for reasons discussed below, one had to be discounted. Male participants in Singapore are two years older than their female counterparts due to time spent in national service.

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[48] See appendix three for the full schedule.

4.3.1 Comparing educational structures

Whilst there are important differences between the Singaporean and UK context in terms of the relationship between the education system and the economy, the curricula and pedagogy are quite similar. In their evaluation of Australian academics teaching in Singapore, Dunn and Wallace (2004) found that most Singaporean students preferred the same approaches that facilitated deep learning as Australian students. However, research by Watkins (2000) suggests that British and Chinese students value different traits in teaching staff, and Jin and Cortazzi (1998) distinguish between the Western emphasis on questioning in order to gain knowledge, and the East Asian tendency to defer questioning until knowledge has been gained in order to speak from a position of knowledge. There was a mix of indigenous and international academic staff at my Singaporean host university and it is notable that the overwhelming majority of teaching staff across both departments had studied abroad in the West, either for their undergraduate degree or doctorate. My attendance at a number of lectures and seminar groups indicated that the pedagogical format is roughly equivalent to that of British institutions. This comprised lectures in which (sometimes conflicting) ideas and theories are presented and illustrated with examples, with questions raised by students at the end; and seminars in which students prepare answers to questions beforehand in order to fuel a discussion.

4.3.2 Sampling and access

Since the study is qualitatively comparative, it is concerned with understanding events and perspectives instead of explaining their causal regularity (Carmel 1999). Stratified sampling was therefore not considered relevant or necessary. The sample was instead purposive: specific groups were targeted for interview, and comparing subject areas allowed for structured variety within this sample. The project sought to explore the views of one specific group - final year students (homogenous) - but sampled students from two different subject areas in each national context purposively (stratified). Specific groups were targeted for interview according to a 'variation sample' which builds in a limited amount of variation within multiple cases.

I sought to recruit ten social science and ten business studies students each in both Britain and Singapore; in Britain this included a small number of joint honours students and one student studying criminology and social policy[49] (see table 3). My sample of business studies

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[49] There is considerable module overlap with sociology programmes for students on this degree course.

students in Singapore included those studying joint honours with Accountancy, or with a sub-specialty in Hospitality and Tourism management (see table 4). Whilst it is recognised that there will be some variation within these samples according to specific degree programme, for the purposes of this project those studying within the social sciences discipline are referred to as Sociology students, and those studying business-related degrees are referred to as Business students. The quota of ten students per subgroup was largely based on pragmatic considerations. Since the sample was not intended to be representative, beyond a certain point increasing the number of interviews would have little impact on the validity of the research. My commitment to in-depth 'thick' qualitative data that would best address my research questions led to the decision to conduct a smaller number of interviews to a high standard.

Previous researchers (e.g. Jones 2006) have spoken about how difficult it is to gain access to participants in Singapore; I was fortuitous enough to have a personal contact who acted as a gatekeeper at my chosen university in Singapore which was invaluable in gaining access to participants. Perecman and Curran (2006:214) advocate allocating time for 'cultural immersion' in a new cultural setting prior to commencing fieldwork, in order to learn the 'lay of the land' and build trust. However, given the constraints on time and funding, this orientation period was brief. I was given a desk in a shared office within the humanities department at the Singaporean university and made to feel very welcome. I was also provided with a complete list of Sociology students from which this sample was selected. It was much more difficult to get hold of Business students because I didn't have a presence in their department, but one helpful Business participant introduced me to members of his cohort who subsequently agreed to be interviewed. Potential participants were contacted via email or through face-to-face introductions. Given the quick turnaround and the fact that I contacted a number of prospective participants simultaneously, I exceeded my quota of participants in Singapore, leaving me with ten interviews with Sociology students and eleven with Business students.

Collecting data at the university in Wales was more difficult than anticipated. Whilst I managed to reach my quota of female Sociology students relatively quickly, given the small numbers of male students within the department I was only able to secure four interviews. In the Business School, after several failed attempts to secure participants via emails, appealing to students in lectures with sign-up sheets and notices on the university intranet, I became worried that I would not be able to secure enough interviews before the start of

the exam period. I resorted to offering a financial incentive of £10. I was subsequently inundated with offers of assistance once it became clear that I would pay students for their time[50]. I do have concerns that in some cases this financial incentive may have altered the interviewer-interviewee relationship, and the quality of the interviews themselves. I also felt quite uncomfortable handing over money to participants, and faced an ethical dilemma over whether or not to contact the students I had already interviewed and offer to pay them retrospectively to make things more equitable. In the end I decided that this would be too complicated and might do more harm than good.

4.3.3 Limits to sampling

When I set out I planned only to speak to those who had been in either the Singaporean education system in Singapore or the British education system in the UK, and who were not planning on continuing in education after graduation (since this would make discussions of the graduate labour market more hypothetical). However, in reality it was much harder to control for these variables, and my sample is much more heterogeneous than I anticipated it would be. For example, one of my British participants had spent much of his childhood in Hong Kong, attending an international school, and almost a third of all participants were planning to pursue further education. My sampling of degree subjects is also more heterogeneous than would be ideal, and I was not able to control for academic ability. In practice then, my sample was self-selecting and relied heavily on snow-ball effect via word of mouth and the recommendations of other participants. The issue of having to pay some of my participants further differentiates my sample, leading me to question what distinguishes those who chose to participate in each of the national contexts. It is important to recognise that students' social background may have mediated their ability and their inclination to become involved in the study, especially in Singapore where it was harder to meet up with those from more modest backgrounds since they were not as mobile (they could not borrow their parents' cars and public transport was costly for them). As such this often meant meeting either on campus, or on one occasion, in the Housing Development Board (HDB) heartlands, which was an eye-opening experience. Unavoidably, I must acknowledge the fact that I may have only spoken to a particular segment of the student population.

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[50] My fieldwork coincided with a point in the academic year at which many students would have been 'running low' on their student loans.

The project did not aim for a statistically representative sample, and sought instead to achieve a spread across cohorts. The majority of Singaporean participants were Chinese, with one ethnically Indian and four Malay Singaporean participants. This roughly reflects the overall student body and approximates the demography of Singapore.

4.3.4 The challenge of defining and measuring social class across national contexts

At the outset, social class was not considered as a key theme driving the design of this research, because, in addition to adding another layer of complexity to the multi-level comparison, there are a number of barriers to accurately measuring British and Singaporean participants' social background or class against one another. Class is traditionally conceptualised in terms of stable, clearly defined categories in which privilege, reflected in enduring identities and values, is transferred from generation to generation (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977). It is therefore relatively normal to gauge students' social class with reference to their parental educational background. However, in Singapore, rapid industrialisation and high levels of social mobility post-independence render determining participants' social class according to their parents' educational attainment level problematic. Whether or not your parents went to university or not does not mean the same thing in Singapore as it does in Britain, where there is a more established and rigid class structure. Using parental educational attainment as an indicator of social class therefore risks providing the kind of measurement out of context that Livingstone (2003) warns against. Differences in national institutional educational arrangements in each national context meant that it would be nonsensical to compare private versus state funded education like for like, and discussions in the literature about a 'coalescing' class structure in Singapore did not provide many clues for how to operationalise the concept either[51]. It became apparent that whilst exploring the contrast between British and Singaporean conceptualisations of class would be a fascinating endeavour in its own right, a project design that is sensitively calibrated to these multifaceted concerns was beyond the scope of my doctoral project. This left me without a straightforward indicator for class that could be read across both national contexts, and so did not form a part of my original line of questioning.

However, during the interview process, social class emerged as a vehicle for discussing privilege and inequality in participants' accounts. It came through strongly in some students'

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[51] Of course, there is an established field of research in the UK that explores the relationship between class and educational aspirations - see Bradley *et al.* (2013) for an excellent example of longitudinal research into graduate destinations.

narratives of their educational experiences and in their comparisons to others, leading me to reconsider my approach. In seeking to identify proxies for class I was influenced by the distinctions made by participants themselves. Importantly, just because it would have been difficult to categorise class meaningfully when designing the project, it didn't mean that participants didn't deploy class to discuss issues in interviews. I therefore endeavoured to be sensitive to this, responding when participants drew on class in our discussions.

Singaporean participants often used the distinction between those who live in state supported HDB apartments, and those who are able to afford condominiums or landed property to talk about inequality and privilege. Around 80 percent of Singaporeans live in HDB apartment blocks, which are subsidised and regulated by the state to provide affordable housing. Around 90 percent of those living in HDB accommodation own their homes on a 99-year lease, after which the property is returned to state ownership (HDB 2014). Within the HDB network there is a range of housing that differs according to size, age and condition of buildings[52], the existence of air-conditioning units, desirability of neighbourhood, and transport links. The prices of apartments vary to reflect this, but within each HDB block a quota of ethnicities roughly comparable to the national average is maintained in order to avoid racial segregation (HDB 2014). Given that four out of every five Singaporeans live in HDB accommodation, it isn't read as a sign of relative poverty and is considered to be quite ordinary. Moreover, owing to the small geographical size of Singapore, the private housing market is fiercely competitive and property prices are out of reach for the vast majority. It is largely Western expats and very wealthy Singaporeans who reside in private condominium complexes (which usually have additional onsite facilities like a pool, gym and concierge); owning landed property (a free-standing house with a garden) is even more exclusive. It is this distinction that started to become clear as I was interviewing students in Singapore: privately owned housing was synonymous with 'making it'[53], and comparisons were drawn between those who lived in private condominium apartments (and had access to their parents' cars), and those living in HDB accommodation (and used public transport). This gave me a way to talk about issues of privilege and inequality with participants, and as I came to understand the distinction between HDB and private housing I began to ask students about

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[52] The Housing Development Board has an ongoing programme of upgrading and improving older HDB buildings, but as many of my participants and others told me during my time in Singapore, there are concerns from residents about the link between the prioritisation of these upgrades and the voting behaviour of residents. Potong Pasir is notable for being the longest-held opposition ward in Singapore (1984-2011) and has a reputation for being more dilapidated than any other HDB development.

[53] As you will remember, 'condo' is one of the five C's of the Singaporean Dream.

it and make a note of their own personal circumstances. Regrettably I did not record this information in some of the earlier interviews (see table 4 for a profile of Singaporean participants).

It is interesting that the Sociology students in Singapore were much more likely than the Business students to refer to class explicitly, often linking it to material they had learnt on their course. It is therefore important to recognise that class, as an explanation for inequality and privilege, might only have come up in interviews because of what these participants were taught. This suggests that the Singaporean sociology students were operationalising class in a different manner to the British students, for whom class seemed to be a more vernacular part of everyday language.

Amongst the British students, the distinction between state and private secondary education was a key talking point. This was particularly apparent when students were talking about their experiences of meeting people from different backgrounds at university, and when considering their options post-graduation. Those who had attended state comprehensive schools often reported being at a disadvantage when it came to using personal networks to help find employment. I asked participants about their schooling as part of a more general line of questioning about their educational trajectory, so no amendment to the original interview schedule was required to record this data.

Whilst these two proxies for class – housing and schooling – do not map directly on to one another, they provided a language with which to talk with participants about inequalities and notions of privilege in each society, whether emergent (Singapore) or entrenched (Britain). In addition, whilst recognising their imperfect nature as proxies for social class, and being cautious about discussing class in Singapore in light of the above discussion, I have used housing and schooling as categories into which to organise participants, in order to tentatively discuss their accounts in relation to class position. When handled sensitively, this provides a gauge to participants' social background that is used in the analysis to contextualise their accounts.

Table 3: Profile of British participants

British Female Business Students

	National/ethic identity	Education	Degree course
Cherry	English	Private	Business Management
Emily	English	Private	Business Management & Language
Jess	English	Private	Business Management
Nicole	English	State	Business Management
Sarah	Welsh	State	Business Management

British Male Business Students

	National/ethic identity	Education	Degree course
Gavin	English	State	Business Management
Glynn	Welsh	State	Business Management
Kurt	English	Private	Business Management
Mike	English	International	Business Management
Pete	English	State	Business Management

British Female Sociology Students

	National/ethic identity	Education	Degree course
Alice	English	State	Sociology
Annie	English	State/ International	Sociology
Beth	Welsh	State	Sociology
Gwen	Welsh	State	Sociology
Xena	English	State	Sociology

British Male Sociology Students

	National/ethic identity	Education	Degree course
Joe	English	State	Sociology & Criminology
Rhys	Welsh	State	Criminology & Social Policy
Ted	English	State	Sociology & Criminology
Vincent	Welsh	Undisclosed	Sociology & Politics

Table 4: Profile of Singaporean participants

Singaporean Female Business Students

	National/ethic identity	Housing	Degree Course
Della	Malay Singaporean	Undisclosed	Business & Accounting
Grace	Chinese Singaporean	Private Property	Business Management
Isobel	Chinese Singaporean	HDB Housing	Business & Accounting
Jean	Chinese Singaporean	Private Property	Business Management
Jill	Chinese Singaporean	Private Property	Business Management
Val	Chinese Singaporean	Undisclosed	Business Management

Singaporean Male Business Students

	National/ethic identity	Housing	Degree Course
Ben	Chinese Singaporean	Undisclosed	Hospitality & Tourism Management
Jimmy	Indian Singaporean	Private Property	Business Management
Ray	Chinese Singaporean	Private Property	Business Management
Reggie	Malay Singaporean	HDB Housing	Hospitality & Tourism Management
Vernon	Chinese Singaporean	Undisclosed	Business & Accounting

Singaporean Female Sociology Students

	National/ethic identity	Housing	Degree Course
Brigit	Chinese Singaporean	Private Property	Sociology
Kate	Chinese Singaporean	Private Property	Sociology
Lily	Chinese Singaporean	Private Property	Sociology
Sadie	Chinese Singaporean	Undisclosed	Sociology
Violet	Chinese Singaporean	Private Property	Sociology

Singaporean Male Sociology Students

	National/ethic identity	Housing	Degree Course
Abel	Malay Singaporean	HDB Housing	Sociology
Carl	Chinese Singaporean	Private Property	Sociology
Felix	Chinese Singaporean	Undisclosed	Sociology
Rudy	Malay Singaporean	HDB Housing	Sociology
Steve	Chinese Singaporean	HDB Housing	Sociology

4.3.4 Conducting the interviews

I adopted a 'guided conversation' approach to interviewing in order to facilitate thick-descriptions and depth of explanation (Lofland 1971). I conceptualised the role of the researchers as 'traveller', rather than 'miner'. In this guise the researcher recognises that understanding is jointly constructed through reflected-upon knowledge, and the interview is viewed as an 'active site' where the interpretative resources of both parties are examined in order to identify influences on thinking. The interview guide was not religiously adhered to; participants were able to bring up themes that they thought were important and could talk as much as they wanted. Typically, Singaporean students, who were already embroiled in job interviews and assessment centres, were more able to go into detail about their employment strategies than their British counterparts; conversely British students were more adept at discussing the social elements of their time at university than the Singaporeans. Given the iterative nature of the project (Rubin and Rubin 2005), the interview guide was refined throughout the research process; it expanded to address emergent themes and certain questions were amended to improve clarity.

Interviews were conducted in a range of environments. They were usually carried out on campus, either in a pre-booked room if available, or in one of the communal areas where a quiet corner out of earshot could be found. At the request of participants, a handful of interviews were carried out off-campus, mainly in cafes, and one in a British students' home. Most interviews lasted around an hour, some were cut short and others ran past the two hour mark. In line with Clarke's (2010) suggestion that participation in qualitative research can be therapeutic, most seemed to enjoy the opportunity for introspection. Compared to sociology students, the Singaporean business students were much more 'business-like'. They kept to time and offered quick fire responses to questions that often felt quite prepared, particularly when we were talking about their educational decisions and their strategies for employment. Most of these students were engaged in interviewing for graduate positions and so were primed in a particular way for talking to me, but tended to loosen up more when the interview topics broadened out to more general discussions. This approach to being interviewed was less prevalent amongst my British business cohort, with only one interview being cut short, because of a social engagement.

The interviews tended to be informal. In Singapore, participants were interested in Western student culture, and I often found that offering up information about my own experiences helped students to relax and feel more able to talk more freely about their own. There was

little to suggest that this contributed to any kind of 'consensus' – indeed, these students were concerned to specify exactly what they had said if they thought that I may have misinterpreted them. They were careful to ask me if I was familiar with things like National Service and were keen to explain unfamiliar terms to me. This general trend of helpfulness and transparency was subverted by one of my male sociology students in Singapore. In this interview, towards the start of my fieldwork, the individual, known here as Carl, became very cagey, making a number of sexist comments and apparently seeking to derail my train of thought and undermine my position as interviewer by saying provocative and contradictory things. After careful examination of the subsequent transcript and discussion with my supervisors it was decided to discount this unreliable interview from my analysis.

Beyond eliciting data I was concerned with getting to know participants and sincerely trying to understand the world from their point of view. This was edifying at times, but perplexing at others. It often felt like a privilege to be able to talk to interesting and articulate individuals about topics that capture my imagination: their experiences of education, their plans for the future and their ideas about society. Some participants were able to point me in the direction of interesting reading material that I enjoyed following up on. However, in a minority of cases participants expressed views that I found difficult to stomach, and I worried that in striving to remain neutral, I may have in fact endorsed or validated perspectives that were troublingly unethical. This tension was particularly apparent in one interview where despite internally recoiling at what my participant was saying, at the end she gave me a hug, thanked me for understanding, and told me that we were kindred spirits.

4.4 Coding and analysis

I began the analysis by familiarising myself with the data. Around half of the interviews were transcribed by others, while I focussed my own efforts on the Singaporean interviews as the local dialect and colloquial terms would have been difficult for the uninitiated listener. Once transcriptions had been returned I sense-checked them by listening back to the recording whilst reading the transcripts and making any necessary changes. During the initial stages of analysis I found that listening to the recording and reading the transcript simultaneously provided additional context, reinforced my confidence in the accuracy of the written documents and aided my interpretation of the data. As I read each interview I made notes of the key words and phrases that emerged as significant. This first, largely descriptive or

categorical round of coding was refined during the second (axial) and third reading of transcripts.

After experimenting with using Atlas Ti and becoming frustrated with the lack of flexibility it offered me, I took a largely manual approach to coding by taking each subgroup of participants in turn (e.g. Singaporean female Business students) to examine similarities and differences within this subgroup, before comparing these to the other half of the group (in this case, male Singaporeans studying Business), and so on. This initial thematic analysis enabled me to identify patterns in the data (Braun and Clarke 2006), according to both deductive (theory-driven) and inductive (data-driven) reasoning. Constant comparison (Corbin and Strauss 1990) allowed me to consider each interview holistically rather than in isolated segments. It also safeguarded against the potential pitfalls of the code-and retrieve-model (Coffey and Atkinson 1996).

My analysis was infused with my reading on the topic, and my intention of applying some abstract theoretical ideas in an empirical context. However, positioning myself as a learner in a field that has not received much qualitative attention, I endeavoured to maintain an open-minded and exploratory approach. I used a mixture of *a priori* codes derived from the existing literature (e.g. player and purist attitudes to finding employment), and those grounded in the data itself. It was a pleasure to develop unanticipated themes and to find my analysis departing from the binaries that I had expected. For example, prior to commencing my fieldwork, given the explicit policy framing of higher education as a means to enhancing employment prospects in Singapore, existing literature seemed to suggest that Singaporean students would take an almost entirely instrumental or acquisitive approach to their learning. In fact, practices of instrumental learning were present in the accounts of both my British and Singaporean students, but took a different character depending on how relevant students thought the skills and knowledge they developed at university would be in the labour market. I could not have predicted or appreciated this distinction from the existing literature.

It is important to note that, by definition, the participants studying Sociology were likely to have come into contact with some of the literature that has informed this study. In fact, during interviews it was common for these students to use sociological ideas in their own accounts of education and constructions of the future. For some, given that I positioned myself as a sociological researcher, this resulted in a kind of 'showboating' of 'cool' or niche terms, however for the main part these students seemed to use sociological language as

part of their interpretation of the social world. At points they described a tension between ideas they had encountered during their degree and their own personal orientations, which offers an important insight into their perceptions of structure and agency. However, whilst the presence of sociological material in these students' accounts has informed my findings, it is important to discern between *participants'* use of sociological constructs on one level, and *my own* analysis at another.

Once I had determined thematic codes, I gathered together the accounts of each sub-group of participants in colour coded segments so that I could view their orientations to each theme together. I also referred back to the raw data to check that my system of coding had not become too abstracted from the original interview narratives. It was important to prioritise these patterns and relationships between different groups to elucidate the comparative element of the research without ignoring heterogeneity within each group. Students within each group presented a range of views about their education and employment prospects, and their understandings of work, self and wellbeing. It was often possible to account for variation within groups according to the characteristics of their social background. For example, those female Sociology students who lived in private housing can be identified as part of a 'leisure class' (Veblen 1994), and their accounts can be contrasted with some of the other Sociology students living in HDB blocks who felt part of a marginalised group in society. However, my analysis necessarily focussed on identifying similarities and differences across my different groupings of students; I therefore had little space to explore differences *within* groups, lest they blur the clarity necessary for a comparative approach. The findings I have presented according to student groupings therefore represent ideal types[54]. A possible avenue for future research might be to explore these differences within groups in more detail.

After identifying key themes and similarities and differences across different groups, I was faced with the challenge of presenting the data in a clear and accessible manner. I originally intended to incorporate comparison into my findings chapters directly, for example, by drawing on British and Singaporean participants' accounts of their approaches to learning and understandings of the role of education in one chapter, before providing a similar comparative account of their different labour market strategies and aspirations for the future. However, the complexity of my findings did not allow for this approach. In some analytical aspects, a strong comparison could be drawn between British and Singaporean

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[54] 'Ideal' in a *logical*, rather than *ethical* sense (Weber 2011).

students, whilst in others, it made more sense to distinguish between the understandings and approaches of those studying Business or Sociology, and national context seemed to have a lesser impact. This complex interweaving of similarity and difference according to different group characteristics led me to present analytical accounts of each of my four conceptual groups in turn. It is important here to distinguish between data categories and theoretical categories. The first round of data categorisation is *observational* – this is the unit used in data collection and data analysis, and is reflected in my grouping of participants according to their nationality and degree subject. The second round of data categorisation is *explanatory*, and 'is used to account for the pattern of results obtained' (Ragin 1987:8-9). In my analysis, a set of conceptually-driven analytical or explanatory categories emerged from the data. These have informed the arrangement of my findings into four discrete but interrelated chapters that map the understandings and experiences of each group of participants in turn.

4.5 Ethical considerations

Crucial to the undertaking of ethical social science research is the concept of transparency (Perecman and Curran 2006). The study was designed with reference to the British Sociological Association's Statement of Ethical Practice (2002) and the ESRC Research Ethics Framework (2010). It was undertaken with the approval of the Cardiff University Research Ethics Committee (26th January 2011). The project adheres to the 1998 Data Protection Act; all interview data is securely stored.

4.5.1 Informed consent

Every participant was furnished with an information sheet about the purpose, methods and possible scope of the research and their rights, and a consent form to consider prior to the interview (see appendix one and two). Prior to each interview I reiterated that participants could withdraw from the research at any time, that they didn't have to discuss anything that made them feel uncomfortable, and that I was most interested in hearing about things from their point of view no matter whether it was positive or negative. I also emphasized that involvement in the study would not impact on students' studies: it was not a condition of their course and could not affect their attainment in any way.

4.5.2 Language and communication

Clear communication is important for facilitating understanding between the researcher and those researched. It is vital for both informed consent, and to ensure the authenticity of any data produced through interactions with participants. Although English is the official formal language in Singapore and lectures at university are delivered in English, individuals also speak their mother tongue. Kuiper and Lin (1989) argue that there is often crossover between these two languages, meaning that Singaporeans often speak their own (predominantly Chinese) language with English-like words and syntax. Similarly, Goby (1999) refers to Singlish: Singaporean Colloquial English, which borrows some Hokkien Chinese words and intonations, and is difficult for the uninitiated listener to understand. The Singaporean students in my research sometimes reverted to Singlish when they became excited about something, before realising that I could no longer understand them. In turn, I took care to avoid or explain colloquial terms and non-standard English so as not to confuse or alienate participants. Careful attention to language was also necessary at the stages of transcription and analysis. When transcribing these interviews, there was sometimes a tension between recording what was said authentically, and amending minor grammatical errors to allow for a better 'flow' of information when moving on to the analysis stage. I actively sought to challenge my preconceptions in order that I did not transfer my meanings onto what was being said unreflectively. This often entailed making fieldnotes alongside any amendments.

4.5.3 Anonymity

Personal identifiers were removed from transcripts, pseudonyms were used, and the names of the universities have not been disclosed. However, given the small sample size, and the sampling methods used, complete anonymity cannot be guaranteed. Particularly amongst my Singaporean cohort, interviewees tended to be part of close-knit groups that spent a lot of time together and often made references to other members in their group during interviews. These factors mean that intra-sample recognition is likely, and means that the project cannot be conceived of as a 'confidential study', since it is impossible to ensure that all details in this final thesis are non-identifiable (SRA 2005). At the outset, participants were informed of the extent to which they could be afforded anonymity and unrealistic guarantees were avoided (BSA 2002).

4.5.4 Impact on participants

Beyond the ethical considerations outlined above, it is the duty of the social researcher 'to ensure that the physical, social and psychological wellbeing of research participants is not adversely affected by the research' (BSA 2002:2). This is especially difficult to control for when the themes discussed during interviews are guided by participants as well as the researcher. Reflexive researchers would argue that social research often entails an intervention into participants' lives and has the potential to activate or draw their attention to previously unconscious or unexamined thoughts and feelings. This can be a liberating or distressing experience. With these issues in mind I took a common sense approach, endeavouring to be alert to possible signs of interviewee-discomfort. I also performed a debrief at the end of each interview in which participants were offered the opportunity to ask any questions they had, to make any additional points and to provide me with feedback.

No students showed visible signs of harm or distress, even when talking about job insecurity or the stress of exam deadlines. Students often remarked that they found it beneficial to be able to talk through some of these issues during their interview. Many of my participants reflected that they had enjoyed thinking about the various themes of the interview and went away from the experience with altered perspectives. Even where this was not the case, processes of reflective self-clarification were much in evidence: 'Gosh, I think I came across very materialistic and money driven', said Ray, a Singaporean Business student, when I turned off the recorder. 'I guess that's how I am; I mean, I've answered all of your questions honestly'.

Chapter 5: Singaporean Business Students

Introduction

This chapter introduces the first group of participants: Singaporean students studying Business. Throughout the chapter I build up a profile of how these students understand and manage their expectations around education and their futures. It is divided into four sections. Firstly, I describe the manner in which these students broadly adhered to the official Singaporean framing of higher education as a means to providing individuals with the skills and aptitudes that are necessary to become a successful, productive member of society. In this sense, they perceived their education as a means to the end of high-level graduate employment, and had a strong sense of how the knowledge and skills they were developing might be applied to particular roles that they hoped to pursue. In the second section I outline how these orientations to education were reflected in students' learning practices, which centred on pragmatic decision making, proactive investment in human capital based in the logic of differentiation, and the careful management of employment expectations. I categorise these behaviours as 'engaged instrumentalist' approaches to learning. In the third section, I consider the students' goals for the future, and how employment featured in their personal aspirations and plans.

The final section explores the students' labour market strategies according to their perceptions of fairness and authenticity. These students broadly agreed that the labour market works meritocratically to select appropriate candidates for positions in the workforce. As such, they argued that it would be illogical to 'fake' certain dispositions, because the benign job allocations process would expose your dishonesty. These students were therefore committed to finding a job that best suited their own skills and aptitudes via dedicated commitment to their own education, training and personal development.

The Singaporean Business students discussed in this chapter have successfully internalised dominant social discourses about their roles and responsibilities in a knowledge-based economy. They locate a deep sense of meaning in finding a good match between personal skills and aptitudes, and an appropriate role within either the corporate or public sector. Education is viewed as a properly functioning vehicle through which to realise gainful

employment, and these students struggled to conceptualise success outside of employment. Instead, success is dynamically tied to productivity, challenging yourself, and working your way up the ladder. These students used their in-depth knowledge of the relative status of different occupations in an accepted social hierarchy to navigate their understanding of success.

5.1 What is higher education for?

5.1.1 What is higher education for?

There was broad consensus amongst the Singaporean Business students that the societal function of education is to prepare individuals for employment, by equipping them for future roles in society. The higher education system was characterised as selecting the best and operating as a strict filtering system, demonstrated in the different programmes for the academically elite. In line with the policy directives outlined in chapter three, these students traced a strong economic element right through the education system which was seen to play a decisive role in individual career trajectories:

> I mean this society is very much based on what you have attained in your university…your qualifications and education play a large role in whether you will be selected or not. (Val)

> Singapore has always been very career-focussed, ever since primary school. (Ray)

This maps on to these students' own educational goals: all of the individuals in this group framed education as the most rational way to equip themselves with the necessary tools for being successful in the labour market. They spoke about the ways in which their university degree would contribute to their own employability, making an explicit link between the skills they were learning and how they would be mobilised in the graduate labour market. In this sense, as we shall see, they had a stronger sense of 'projectivity' and direction relative to my British cohort.

5.1.2 Making decisions about coming to university

Going to university was described as a norm amongst this group of students. They frequently pointed out the lack of viable alternatives – if you want to get a good job, you have to go to university. Beyond making this distinction between the opportunities available to graduates and non-graduates, the Singaporean Business students displayed a high level of in-depth

knowledge about specific career paths that they marshalled to make decisions about what to study at university. They emphasized the importance of knowing where your career path is headed and then choosing your education in line with what you want to get out of a career. For example, when asked about her decision to come to university, Val said 'it's important to know what I want to get out of a job first, and then do university education in line with what I want to get out of a career'; she explained 'it is quite hard to derive something good out of a university education' if you don't know what you 'want to get out of it at the end'. Like the human capital theorists, these students viewed education as a 'deliberate investment' in 'useful skills and knowledge' (Shultz 1961:1).

These students articulated a clear hierarchy of subjects according to employment prospects upon which their educational choices hinged. In line with national statistics, they placed vocational subjects below the humanities, which, in turn, were seen to be less prestigious than the sciences. For instance, Vernon explained that many students choose accountancy 'because it's a lot easier to get a job after you graduate' compared to subjects in the humanities which have 'a much lower employment rate once they graduate'. These distinctions reflect the educational structure, which bisects into scientific and non-scientific pathways, and then again into vocational and non-vocational streams. The received wisdom is that the more gifted you are, the higher up this hierarchy you should aim. For example, Ben explained that at his college, there was a much greater emphasis on the scientific subjects than the humanities:

> Look at my school...the number of classes in the science streams, twenty classes. Arts side, the arts classes, um geography, history, two or three, less than five. That's it.

These students were well-informed about the employment prospects for graduates in different departments at university and were aware that the admission criteria for different courses of study are adjusted according to employment prospects and the salaries of previous graduates. As such, they invested a lot of time and resources into deliberating what and where to study at university, and undertook research in order to make an informed choice. For example, Isobel applied to all three Business Schools in Singapore, and was offered scholarships by two. When making her decision, Isobel marshalled considerable knowledge of the content and reputation of each school: their ranking in league tables, recommendations from an accountancy company with which she was doing a work experience placement, and her own experiences doing a taster course at one when she was a college student sitting A-levels. Her final decision was structured by an intimate knowledge

of the characteristics of the three main universities and the official and tacit differences between the packages on offer in each department. Students in this group described a careful elimination process informed by cost-benefit analyses of different options. They took seriously the decision-making process because they believed that university determines what you are going to do for the rest of your life.

The necessity to adequately plan for your future and pressure to 'get it right' ran through these students' accounts. That these students' future goals were largely determined according to employment roles suggests that these students were taking an *instrumentally rational*, rather than open-ended approach to their education (Crick and Joldersma 2007). Even for those students in this group who didn't have a clear conception of what shape they wanted their future career path to take, there was still a pressure to make wise and prudent decisions, and open-ended or *communicatively rational* learning did not seem to be a viable option. For example, Isobel lamented that she felt uncertain about her career path when choosing what to study:

> Sometimes I feel like I am losing out because I didn't realise things that I should have known back then.

These students' aspirations about what to study at university were socially and culturally bounded by ideas about what they *should* be doing in order to best utilise their talents and skills according to their relative chances of success in the current economic climate. They reported using their in-depth knowledge about the hierarchical status of different occupations and the different types of educational product available at different universities to make decisions about securing their own futures. Crucially, economic imperatives ran through each of these students' accounts of their decision to study Business. This supports Nussbaum's (2010) assertion that a focus on employability dissuades students from pursuing degrees in areas that don't seem to contribute directly to future job prospects. Business subjects were generally regarded as 'safe' since they garner good returns upon graduation compared to subjects in other departments like drama. Thus, for most students in this group, the decision to study Business represented a pragmatic compromise, and choosing a degree course according to personal interests was largely regarded as a luxury. For example, Ray explained that it was unrealistic to pursue his passion for food, and Reggie had surrendered his dreams of becoming a dancer in order to invest in a more stable path. Similarly, Vernon had been enthusiastically engaged with drama since childhood, but, recognising that there isn't a market for drama in Singapore, he decided to study a 'safer subject…which almost

guarantees you a job'. Ray linked this sense of pragmatism to the limited field of well-paid jobs in Singapore, which makes it impractical to follow your dream: 'it's Singapore's way of thinking'. He contrasted this to his experiences of an exchange in Scandinavia, arguing that a flatter income hierarchy and deeper sense of heritage enabled people to take more risks regarding their career paths. Ray contended that the rising cost of living in Singapore would make taking risks more difficult: 'if you're going to be an artist and earn a few hundred bucks a month you're going to have trouble'. These Singaporean Business students explained that it is unrealistic in Singapore to follow your dreams, relating this argument to the cost of living and the differential salaries awarded to the different professions.

In addition to the scarcity of job opportunities, a couple of students suggested that pursuing one of these non-standard routes would be particularly detrimental for gifted students, because the educational infrastructure wouldn't be there to push and support them, and the reputational capital from a non-mainstream department would not be very high. Since emphasis in Singapore is placed on Business Schools and departments like Biosciences and Engineering, these students argued that other departments like Philosophy weren't as established or well-resourced. For example, Jimmy initially intended to study Philosophy in Europe. Upon deciding to remain in Singapore, the only option that 'made sense' was to go to Business School, because he felt that the provision in the humanities wasn't 'strong enough'. In explaining that studying Philosophy wasn't really an option for him in Singapore, Jimmy made a distinction between a degree course that would be *personally valuable*, and one that would be economically or *pragmatically useful*:

> I think that maybe the value at school isn't that great as compared to if I was to do a course in Philosophy, but I felt that studying Business kind of opens you to…many options, and I felt like that was something that was useful to me, the position I would like to be in.

By making a distinction between their own *idealistic* goals, and the less-risky *pragmatic* goals that they have chosen to pursue, students in this group hoped to secure careers in established industries that would engage the academic skills that they were developing at university, and provide them with the social mobility they desired. Education was therefore construed as the means by which they could secure the goal of stable and well-remunerated employment. However, it doesn't necessarily follow that these students didn't have an interest in their chosen degree course; many described a natural affinity with their subject, often telling me that the degree had been less 'dry' and boring, and more stimulating than then had anticipated. Moreover, in addition to selecting career paths that would offer a 'safe'

return on investments of time and effort, these students also wanted to find careers that would challenge then and make the best use of the skills that they had developed. For example, Jimmy explained that his decision to study Business was influenced by what he thought would be useful and enjoyable, and his perception of what would 'push him further'. These decision-making processes demonstrate the way that students directed their efforts away from those personal interests which they regarded as 'risky' or idealistic, and aligned themselves to the pursuit of careers that are valued and rewarded in society.

5.1.3 Reflections on the value of the degree

As demonstrated above, as per the tenets of human capital theory these students primarily talked about the value of their degree in terms of the skills and experiences it had equipped them with and how these would be useful moving forward into the labour market (Schultz 1961). When reflecting upon their time at university they identified an important secondary value that was also present in Schultz's conceptualisation of human capital: that of socialising individuals and fostering self-development. This was frequently seen as going hand in hand with preparing individuals for the (inter)national workforce. So, whilst the British students, as we shall see, spoke about the value of meeting new people and moving away from home as achievements in their own right, and both groups of Sociology students said that what they had learned at university would be valuable to them beyond their working life, the Singaporean Business students stood out in the way they made a more exclusive link between self-development and career development.

5.2 How does higher education work?

All of these Singaporean students told me that their primary motivation for doing well at university was the prospect of future employment. When asked about what motivated her to study, Val contended that you need to 'hit a minimum level to actually get good employment'. Similarly, Isobel told me that getting good grades indicates to employers that you have certain abilities and 'will prove to be a worker who can deliver at his [sic] job'. Perceptions of how recruitment works shaped these students' efforts to 'push' themselves. For instance, Ray said that 'ever since year one' he has pushed himself 'really hard' to get good grades; he told me that this sense of motivation was 'fuelled by the strive to get a good job'. Secondary considerations included familial expectations and a desire to reciprocate the support that parents had shown. Students located this sense of 'returning the favour' (Della)

within traditional Asian values (Hill 2000); which contrasts strongly with the narratives of independence which were so important to the British students.

5.2.1 Knowing where you're going: learning as equipping

My Singaporean Business students framed their education as a means to the end of stable high-level graduate employment. It might reasonably be expected, therefore, that these students would take an instrumental or acquisitive approach to learning. However, a careful examination of the means students adopted to achieve their educational goals reveals a different picture to the disengaged instrumental learner that Fromm (1979) described. These students had a strong sense of how the knowledge and skills that they were developing could be applied to particular employment roles. In this sense, these students' orientations to learning don't correspond directly with theoretical depictions of the disengaged acquisitive or instrumental learner. They were not passive in their desire to 'have' knowledge for the purposes of assessment and then forget it to make way for new material; rather they were proactive in their marshalling of relevant skills and aptitudes that were built into their own personal project of employability. I have classified these students' approaches to learning as *engaged instrumentalism*, because rather than seeking to 'have' knowledge in the manner that Fromm described, they shared the conception that their education was equipping or preparing them for the labour market in a way that would enable them to secure their own futures. I outline the various elements of this engaged instrumentalism in the following sections.

These Singaporean Business students presented themselves as diligently working towards self-defined goals and framed their education as a vehicle for differentiating themselves from others and maximising their potential. They were engaged in a number of different practices aimed at making themselves distinct from the rest of the cohort, and from other graduates around the world with whom they felt they were in direct competition. Participants in this group shared a sense of 'project'; they endeavoured to link up their educational activities in a particular way that pointed towards a specific outcome: a future career. This was exemplified in their pro-active approach to gaining 'exposure' in their chosen field of employment by arranging numerous internships, and can be contrasted with my British Business cohort who frequently complained that internships weren't a compulsory part of their course, but made little voluntary effort to acquire relevant work experience. These narratives of projectivity can be traced right back to students' initial decisions about what to study at university. For example, Grace spoke about 'knowing where

you want to be' and working out what you need to do to get there. She said that enjoying what you do gives you a stronger connection to what you're learning compared to those who 'purely just want a degree' and a job. This connection makes you more ambitious and more involved with activities whilst at university:

> I mean if you don't enjoy it you'll just find it a chore…I kind of know that I want to be somewhere next time[55] which is why…I also take part in a lot of school activities and try and network and get to know people in school and outside school.

As will be seen in the next chapter, this perspective is in contrast with the British Business students who focussed more on the intrinsic value of socialising.

5.2.2 The development of the whole package

Students in this group gave detailed accounts of the practical ways in which their degrees had equipped them for the search for a graduate position, arguing, as per the developmental model, that many elements of their course were well-tuned to employers' expectations and the requirements of the Singaporean labour market (Ashton *et al.* 2002, Green *et al.* 1999). These students described engaging in a wide range of educational and extra-curricular practices aimed at developing different capabilities and establishing connections with important networks of individuals and organisations: they were concerned with developing themselves into completely employable packages.

In addition to formalised types of knowledge, these students emphasised the importance of experiential knowledge and soft skills. Formalised knowledge was seen as widely accessible and forever being updated, meaning that particular information was often superseded. As a result, participants explained that they would only remember what is relevant to them. They also emphasized the importance of general skills, for example managing relationships and integrating different perspectives. They argued that the focus on presentation and 'soft' skills in the Business School was based on the premise that the cohort already had the 'hard' technical skills. Therefore, going to university was seen to socialise students into certain ways of acting and being by enabling them to pick up skills experientially. These students felt that this socialising role would help them to move into the workplace with the flexible, transferrable, contextual knowledge and abilities that economists have identified as increasingly important for continued economic development (OECD 2001). They made strong links between the skills they developed at university and those that would be called

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[55] 'Next time' is a colloquialism for 'in the future' in Singapore.

upon in the recruitment process. For example, Ben told me that there is an explicit focus on the way that you present and package yourself to potential employers whilst at university:

> The way we carry ourselves, in school actually that's what they have been teaching us really since the start, the interview process, the application process, things like etiquette courses, grooming courses, communication course, what to say, what not to say.

Although these students all agreed that their time at university was helping to equip them for the world of work, like the participants in Brown and Hesketh's (2004) study of graduates, they were unsure that their degree alone would be sufficient to secure a good job. For example, Ray told me that even a first class honours degree, by itself 'doesn't guarantee anything'. He explained that a graduate needs the full package of 'good technical skills' and 'strong interpersonal skills' to impress interviewers. Similarly, Jimmy emphasized that 'you can't just rely on school' because of the global nature of the competition for graduate level jobs: 'we're not [just] competing with other graduates at [this university], we're competing with the Ivys and the Russell Groups'. Seemingly well-versed in the Singaporean discourse of survivalism (Olds and Yeung 2004), he argued that in light of this global labour market for jobs, doing well at university is a minimum expectation: 'doing well in school[56] is a given…everybody who is going to compete with you has it'. As a result, Jimmy argued that it was paramount to build up additional experiences and skills to become employable:

> […] good grades get you into the door, and after you get through the door, the grades fly away and it's just you, so what carries you through that whole interview process is your leadership experiences at school, your ability to show that you can communicate, your ability to show that you are able to deliver impact in some way or another.

These students therefore supplemented their studies with a wide range of extra-curricular activities that can be broadly divided into two categories: those linked to furthering their career aspirations, and those that represented a space for fun and experimentation. For example, in the first category, students spoke about their involvement in Business and Auditing clubs in terms of enabling them to enhance their skill-set and confidence, using their talents in international competitions and 'live projects' with companies. Extra-curricular activities in the second category were presented as a kind of pressure valve, a space for experimentation without risk, where students could be creative and get involved with things

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[56] The Singaporean participants I spoke to used the Americanised version of the term 'school' to refer to their time at university.

like dance, sport and theatre without sabotaging the stable futures they envisaged their Business pathways would give them. Extra-curricular activities in this second category were always destined to remain just that – as a minor add-on rather than taking centre stage in these young people's lives. The opportunities for self-actualisation that, as will be seen, were so prominent in my British students' accounts of their time at university were restricted to areas of life not taken up by the imperatives of achieving within the education system.

A notable omission in these students' accounts was the non-academic or social side to their time at university, which, whilst mentioned in passing, didn't seem to play a significant role in their framing of their degree. This could be due to the fact that after the first year of living in halls most students return to their family home, meaning that the elements of independence and rites of passage described by my British participants are less applicable in this context. It wasn't completely clear whether these students led a more modest and less hedonistic lifestyle than their British counterparts, or whether they just perceived their social activities outside of university to be less relevant to their discussions with me.

5.2.3 Making sure you stand out: the institutional structuring of rewards

The perceived need to maximise achievement and differentiate yourself from others meant that these Singaporean Business students wanted to make their efforts visible: they shaped their learning according to reward structures within the university. It was policy at the university to publish a 'Dean's list' of the top five percent of students in each discipline, and email notifications about potential job and networking opportunities are sent out by the careers service only to those with a grade point average (GPA) above 4.0 (equivalent to a upper second honours), and sometimes only to those above 4.5 (equivalent to a first class honours). This provided a clear incentive for students to maximise their attainment level – particularly in the case of the Dean's list, since students' inclusion or exclusion is relative to the performance of others. These students were therefore engaged in a variety of practices to maximise visible attainment and differentiate themselves from others. This included striving towards the highest GPA score that they were capable of, building up networks of professional contacts, and choosing modules that would allow them to demonstrate expertise in areas that would be useful later on in their career. These students' attitudes towards their learning support the signalling theory[57] of the value of education, which argues

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[57] Signalling theory developed as an alternative to human capital theory but there is little existing empirical evidence to support the assertion that it is an individual's ranking within their educational cohort, rather than their time spent in education, which influences employment trajectories and productivity upon graduation (Kroch and Sjoblom 1994).

that it is not just the amount of education an individual has (i.e. level of qualification or number of years spent at university), but their *ranking* within a given cohort, which is important (Kroch and Sjoblom 1994). Whilst these practices may seem entirely logical and commonsensical, they were actually quite distinctive and are not mirrored in the accounts of the other participant groups. As will be seen later on, the British Business students, in particular, took a very different approach to their own learning.

When I asked them if there were any shortcuts to doing well at university, these students identified a number of strategic learning practices, ranging from making tactical relationships and 'networking' with certain members of staff, to selective revision. For example, Reggie described playing to his strengths and putting extra effort into modules in which he thought he could do well; Jill said that getting to know tutors and knowing who to work with in group projects was important; and Isobel suggested that it was possible to use notes from past students' projects as a model and 'try to tweak it a bit' according to perceptions of what the course convenors were looking for. The extent to which these students' learning was framed by the university reward and assessment system was also made visible in their discussions of additional reading. It was widely agreed that the rigours of the degree course impeded time for additional reading beyond what was required to excel in assessments. Students in this group told me that they tried to keep up with current affairs in Business, but that this often got relegated due to the time pressure of academic commitments. Extra reading tended to be directed by suggestions from lecturers. Even Jimmy, who told me that he spent 80-90 hours per week on work-related activities, said that although he did sometimes follow personal interests disconnected from the necessities of the degree, the demands of his course meant that the majority of his additional reading was material relevant to his course. These strategic learning practices support the argument that viewing education primarily in terms of certification for employment impedes learners' engagement with broader ideas beyond those that are perceived to be useful for employment (Lawson 2006). Students in this group frequently argued that the pressure to excel meant that they didn't have time to follow up on interesting material that did not contribute directly to assessment.

Students in this group largely attributed their strategic learning practices to pressures of workload and the inability to do 'everything'. As such they emphasized the importance of applying techniques to get the most out of the effort they put into learning. Many spoke about a competitive atmosphere within their department; most said that this pressure spurred them on, and only Reggie remarked that it was 'too competitive'. Students in this

group frequently made links between the level of competition within their department and the general economic climate in Singapore.

Whilst this tactical behaviour might be considered typical of the 'players' identified by Brown and Hesketh (2004), the participants in this group did not think that their approaches challenged meritocracy. Strategic learning practices were viewed straightforwardly as a more efficient and productive use of time and skills, undertaken in order to free up more time for study and self-improvement rather than to reduce the time spent studying overall. Indeed, like the 'purists' in Brown and Hesketh's study, students in this group described a satisfying and rewarding process of becoming leaner and fitter by honing their skills to the requirements of the system. For example, Isobel argued that taking 'easier' modules was likely to backfire in the long run, since you 'compromise on content' that might be called upon in an interview context or be required for certain jobs. Accordingly, Isobel chose 'harder' modules except for electives in Science or Art which were unconnected to her future goals. It is clear in these accounts that the Singaporean Business students were actively trying to develop their own human capital to the greatest extent possible, while the British students to be discussed in chapters six and eight were more focussed on the degree credential itself as an indicator of talent.

5.3 Definitions of success

Building on the Singaporean Business students' framing of education as the means to securing their future employment discussed so far, this section explores their future goals and the role that employment plays within them. To recap, these students did not have expectations for their education beyond equipping them for particular roles in the labour market. They distinguished between goals that were pragmatically useful and those that were personally valuable, to argue that it is important to be logical when making career decisions. Students in this group widely felt that it was not practical to follow your dreams because of the structuring of resources and the prevalent mentality in Singapore. They often framed studying Business as the sensible choice, suggesting that if employment wasn't such a prominent consideration, they might have enjoyed pursuing less practical interests instead.

In this section I detail the manner in which these students' employment goals and expectations were bounded by their in-depth knowledge about different labour market opportunities, the requirements of various jobs and their respective salaries. I also outline

the ways in which these students' accounts relate to broader cultural norms in Singapore. The majority of students in this group told me that they were aligned to societal views on success, which they defined according to money, status and material possessions. There was little space in these students' accounts for alternative conceptualisations of success outside of employment: work was central to their understandings of success as the primary source of social esteem, alongside family. As graduates, like Sung's (2006) developmental workers, they intended to work hard and gain prestige, recognition and high pay in return for their efforts.

5.3.1 Having the mind-set to succeed

Employability played an important role in the Singaporean Business students' accounts of success. Whilst they didn't exclusively equate having a 'good job' with being successful, these students believed that employment was an important foundational element that was necessary in order to feel successful in other areas of life. For example, Val explained that she was motivated by the sense of prestige and satisfaction that she would get from a high-status job. When asked how she would define success, Val described employability as a 'subset', arguing that success was also determined by your level of happiness and the quality of your relationships with people both inside and outside of work.

These students emphasized having a certain mind-set that pushed them forwards towards success. For example, Vernon defined success as a process of setting progressive goals and challenging yourself. He used the example of his involvement in a university drama group and his progression from acting, to directing, and finally to producing an entire drama piece: 'for me, that's the measure of success, where you challenge yourself to do more and more'. Similarly, Ben described success in terms of pushing yourself according to your personal interests, talents and aptitudes:

> [...] it's about finding what you're good at and making something out of it...it might not be the best, most high-paying job, but if it is something that is important to you, that's successful.

Jimmy also defined the different dimensions of success in terms of a particular mind-set that guided and disciplined his choices and efforts. Two key aspects of his understanding of success were 'membership in a very intellectual environment', naming a few top consultancy firms as examples; and the avoidance of what he called 'mediocrity', achieved through self-discipline and willingness to 'see things through and put in the required effort'. Alongside external markers of success, including aspects of the five C's, these students internalised

societal discourses about working hard, challenging themselves and progressing through the labour market, alongside being a good family member and enjoying leisure time as symbolic of success. In this sense they epitomised the disciplined developmental worker outlined by Sung (2006).

5.3.2 The importance of comfort, family and security

Whilst financial prosperity and the five C's played a role in these participants' longer term conceptualisations of success, they generally framed success in terms of being 'comfortable', rather than living a luxurious lifestyle. However, that did not mean that these students did not aspire to a certain level of affluence. For example, Ray told me that getting a well-paid job was central to his health and enjoyment of life. Within this group, Ben presented the least materialistic account of his future aspirations, telling me that 'money isn't everything'. However, Ben went on to explain that it was unlikely that he would ever have to test this perspective because having a degree means that you are 'actually guaranteed, more or less, a well-paying job'. All of the students in this group felt committed to providing for their family, and most emphasized the importance of having a lifestyle that would enable them to support their parents and their own children in the future. There is a strong link here to the notion of filial piety and the Confucian values outlined by Hill (2000). For example, Della described the desire to provide for your family as an 'innate need' and Val explained it as a 'form of appreciation and gratitude' for the support she had received herself. Some male students in this group also emphasized the role of traditional Asian values in this perceived need to provide:

> The guy is supposed to be the breadwinner of the family, so even if I get married and my wife is working, I will still want to be able to support the family…I think that culture is pretty ingrained in us. (Vernon)

There was also consensus in this group that your economic position and status relative to your peers is important, particularly amongst graduates: 'everyone compares the kind of salary they get' as a kind of 'benchmark', and 'all these things on the surface…define success' (Della). Interestingly, Vernon attributed this hierarchy of status according to career to the developmental state in Singapore. In an account that demonstrates an in depth knowledge of the developmental model outlined in chapter three (Green *et al.* 1999, Ashton *et al.* 2002), he argued that immediately after independence, when the government 'started to build universities and things like that', individuals were encouraged to go into engineering 'because those were the areas where they needed people to do more work to industrialise

the country and grow the economy'. Subsequently, at a time when many were 'struggling to find their place in society', those with engineering skills became associated with having more money, and therefore more power and authority. Vernon contended that a more recent focus on biotechnology as 'the new big thing' has led to a shift towards those skills being valued more highly. He went on to suggest that this shifting value structure that responds to supply and demand in the economy would socially reproduce itself and contribute to a culture where 'money drives things':

> I guess it carries on, like if your parents started from scratch and they were able to make money and they grew in social stature, then definitely they will want the same for their kids.

All of these students told me that societal understandings of success follow a model of expectations defined by material or 'physical' things: '[…] it's a good paying job, start a family and then, build your CPF[58], okay…buy a car first then prepare for your marriage and then buy a flat' (Ben). This model is stratified according to occupation, so a doctor, lawyer or accountant would be able to move along this trajectory swiftly, whilst individuals with other, less well-paid jobs would progress more slowly. These participants agreed that individuals were expected to have these things by the time that they were thirty so that they could start a family. Whilst they were reluctant to offer too materialistic accounts of their own orientations to success, and wanted to include things like family, friends and happiness, most of these participants agreed that their own conceptualisations were in line with wider societal understandings of success. These students sometimes told me that whilst money wasn't so important to them, the nature of society meant that it was pushed higher up their agenda than it might otherwise be. For example, Ray argued that your economic position in your social group shouldn't matter but conceded that it may have an impact on friendship groups because income 'determines the social activities that you engage yourself with' and may impact how often you see some of your friends. Della suggested that the small size of Singapore and the 'inherently competitive' culture based on 'money and material' contribute to comparisons between friends. These findings are in line with the depictions of the 'Singaporean dream' outlined in chapter three, and suggest that recent policy attempts to encourage citizens to refocus their attention away from 'cash, car, and condo' towards

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[58] Central Provident Fund: a compulsory savings plan for working Singaporeans to fund retirement, healthcare and housing needs.

'consideration' and 'charity' instead, (AsiaOne 2010), have not been realised amongst this group of participants.

5.3.3 A good job: challenge, prestige and enjoyment

Across the various descriptions of a 'good job' offered by students in this group, important elements characteristic of the knowledge work described by the human capital theorists (e.g. Reich 1992) ran through their accounts. These included prestige, job satisfaction, the ability to challenge yourself, and doing justice to your level of education. Students in this group weren't interested in earning lots of money straight away and valued progression over paycheque. For example, Val told me that she wasn't currently concerned with achieving the five C's, and was more focussed on getting 'the experience of a lifetime in an industry that I am interested in'. Similarly, Ben prioritised dynamism over salary:

> It's not just a static job, as in it challenges me to actually think, I meet new things every day, meet new people and I can grow and develop myself, and then beyond that it's comfortable pay to get by.

Most students predicted that elements of the five C's would become more important to them 'three or four years down the road', envisaging them as deserved rewards for the hard work they planned to put into their careers: 'I think I will have worked so hard, I do deserve a little pampering for myself' (Val).

Despite policy initiatives to stimulate entrepreneurialism in Singapore, none of these students wanted to start their own business enterprise. This could be due to the narrowly defined avenues to success in Singaporean society (Chua 1995), and the lack of a welfare safety net (Poh 2007) for those who choose to take a non-conventional path. Within this framework these students felt ill-equipped for entrepreneurialism. For example, when asked, Ray asserted that he lacked the 'entrepreneurial streak' and would prefer to be 'more sheltered' by a well-established company.

5.3.4 Little room for success outside of work

To a large extent, these students' conceptualisations of success didn't leave much room for understanding success outside of the labour market. For example, when I asked Val 'can you be successful in other areas of your life if you don't have a graduate job?' her reply was typical of students in this group:

> I can't think of any at the moment, because my aim now, the way I define success, is to increase my employability, and I don't think...I can be successful in any other

aspects. I mean there are people who excel at sport or something, or music, but I don't have any of those qualities so this is the…sole factor that I have.

Similarly, Ray told me that it would be very hard to be successful in other areas of your life if you didn't have a graduate job with a high level steady income, because money is so central: 'I think in every activity, more or less somehow it involves money…so to be honest, it's very hard, you really need a job, a good job'. Ben and Vernon were the only members of the group able to conceptualise success outside of high-level graduate work. Whilst they both told me that in theory it would be *possible* to be successful without a graduate degree, either by becoming an entrepreneur (Vernon), or by reconceptualising success and compromising on living standards in order to do something 'meaningful' like volunteering or social work (Ben), they both agreed that getting a degree was favourable as a safer route to success.

5.4 Post-graduation job-seeking strategies: perceptions of fairness and understandings of the self

In the previous sections of this chapter I illustrated the way in which these students generally oriented their own aspirations towards finding graduate level work. I have also demonstrated that they followed dominant societal norms: they perceived the graduate labour market as a competitive space and regarded building up different forms of human capital through higher education as the key to securing their own futures.

This section describes how these students' aspirations were reflected in their conversations about how to prepare for the search for a graduate job. Their perceptions of the graduate labour market and their place within it are bounded by a consideration of *structural* restrictions, i.e., the competitive nature of the (global) graduate labour market, and the scarcity of employment opportunities. This evaluation of their own chances of excelling within the economic system refracted back on the manner in which these students strove to maximise their attainment at university, but it also tempered their ambitions: they spoke about getting to know an organisation and working their way up into a position of responsibility and status. We shall see that these planned approaches contrast sharply with the British Business students' labour market strategies.

In this section I also demonstrate how these students' approaches to the labour market are also *morally regulated* by perceptions of job allocation according to a fair, transparent meritocratic procedure. Students in this group contended that the labour market in

Singapore, to all intents and purposes, operated according to skills and talents, and that individuals are selected for roles according to how well they match the job specification. Whilst students did acknowledge the role of social capital and family connections in a minority of cases, and expressed concern about the influx of foreign talent, they asserted that these practices weren't widespread enough to warrant undermining the whole system. They also argued that instances of unfair advantage - for example, leap-frogging the first stage of recruitment and going straight to interview - would not necessarily guarantee someone a job, since they would still need to 'prove themselves'. These students also thought that it would be irrational for an employer to hire someone based on who they know, since they might not be the individual who is best suited to the job. This evaluation of how the labour market operates was reflected in students' discussions of acceptable job seeking behaviour. In this sense, these students' job seeking practices were shaped by an understanding of the job market as fair and efficient. They argued that it would be illogical to try to subvert this system by pretending to be something that you're not, because the benign recruitment process would expose your fraudulence.

5.4.1 Perceptions of meritocracy

These Singaporean Business students viewed the job market as operating fairly and efficiently to select the right people for the right job according to their skills and aptitudes. This was elaborated both in terms of the way that education functions to provide a clearly ranked hierarchy of specialised workers, and in terms of the job recruitment process itself. Employability was viewed as a technical puzzle, a process of finding the right fit between job and applicant according to the latter's knowledge, personality and aspirations. Students tended to describe a strong connection between the supply of and the demand for graduates in the labour market, and generally described a benign matching process according to the proven abilities of the individual, divorced from their social background – 'they look at grades, the high-flying jobs, the top-paying jobs, the first criteria is a first class honours, that says a lot, whether you are dynasty or not' (Ben).

These students typically asserted that businesses were doing everything they could to 'attract the best talent' (Val). They tended to argue that employers use grades as a trustworthy marker of 'diligence and some kind of intelligence' (Ray). For example, Jill described how résumés are screened according to grades and experience, and believed that 'if you are a good candidate, they will be able to discover you, and then you will get a job out of it'. It was also widely held that with the exception of some elite private banking firms,

employers weren't interested in family background and assessed candidacy on the basis of individual abilities. Indeed, many of these students thought that 'unfair treatment because of personal relations' was unsustainable because these individuals would be 'found out':

> People will notice that these people are actually not good performers, yeah, they can't get away with it. (Ben)

A minority of students in this group did argue that connections and wealth played an important role in finding a job, but these personal connections were not seen to entirely usurp skills and aptitudes. For example, Ray contended that those with connections 'might be able to speak better' and display an additional skill set that made them more attractive to employers.

All of these participants agreed that networking and building up personal contacts was an important part of their search for employment. However, it was framed in terms of a meritocratic matching process in which both parties are able to find out more about each other, rather than as a system of personal contacts that may advantage certain applicants according to individual ties. For example, Ben argued that it is important to build a network so that people outside of your immediate circle or 'comfort zone' can get to know you and make judgements about whether you are appropriate for a particular role or not. Isobel also emphasized the importance of networking as part of a mutually beneficial mechanism for identifying a good fit between individuals and roles in the labour market:

> I network to let the person know me more and be more familiar with me rather than to get something out of it.

These students' perceptions of a fair and transparent labour market sometimes faltered on the topic of foreign talent, which was seen by the majority to upset the natural rhythm of the otherwise meritocratic allocation of jobs. This is partially because these students suspected that international graduates were able to 'leapfrog' indigenous graduates due to the reputational capital of the universities they had attended, rather than due to any superior capabilities. As such, these participants argued that reputational capital held by overseas graduates implicitly impacted hiring procedures in a way that disadvantaged Singaporean graduates, therefore undermining the meritocratic efficiency of recruitment procedures. These students were antagonistic towards the idea (advocated, as you will remember, by Rosecrance (1999), in his conceptualisation of head and body nations) that graduates from the West would be better-equipped to undertake high-skilled work in

Singapore. These students did not think that graduates from elsewhere around the world would be more highly skilled than indigenous graduates, but argued that foreign talent was favoured because of the superior *reputational* (rather than human) capital accrued in certain (particularly Western) countries. As a result, some students in this group suggested that the government could do more to address the tensions created by the influx of foreign workers.

However, despite this competitive climate and the issues of foreign talent, these students felt that, in general, the labour market in Singapore operated according to meritocratic principles and that jobs were allocated on the basis of talent and skills. Obtaining a job was described as a process of navigating a clear and rational system. Whilst networking, personal contacts and the way that applicants 'package' themselves all played central roles in these students' accounts of making themselves more employable whilst at university, they were not often seen to disrupt or contradict the meritocratic allocation of jobs according to talents and skills, signified by credentials. Instead, for most participants, social congestion was seen as part of the normal functioning of a meritocratic system which operates to select the best candidates for elite jobs. This legitimated their efforts at university and also underscored the belief that their knowledge and aptitudes would be recognised and put to good use once they graduated.

5.4.2 The importance of authenticity

Most students in this group said that paying attention to the way that they presented themselves went hand in hand with meritocratic ideals, since it is part of demonstrating the knowledge, skills and talents developed at university that can't be distilled into qualifications alone. They posited that given the limited amount of time applicants have to portray themselves favourably in an interview, thinking about the way that you want to come across was very important, and would play a big part in whether or not you got a particular job. For example, Val spoke about portraying a positive attitude and demonstrating interest during an interview, in order to show the interview panel that she is 'a motivated, committed, enthusiastic person who has eagerness as well as a capacity to learn'. Similarly Ray argued that the first round of assessments often begins in networking sessions where potential employers or clients assess what he calls 'the fluff': 'you know, the softer aspects of your personality'. Ray even suggested that the way you present yourself might compensate for a shortfall in technical knowledge, since it communicates a certain dynamic mind-set rather than a static gauge of skills accrued: 'if you're driven but you know you have certain weaknesses…then you'll still be driven to actually find ways to improve on them'. Vernon

argued that even if soft skills are not explicitly assessed as part of the job-application process, it is important to develop them because in most professions 'during your work you will probably need to give presentations or speak with clients'. In this respect, honing your soft skills was seen as part of preparing yourself for employment and becoming fit to work, rather than as an arbitrary hoop to jump through just for the purposes of the recruitment process and then shrugged off once settled into a job. Like these students' approaches to learning described earlier, this practice of maximising employability via developing soft-skills can be characterised as *engaged instrumentalism*. In both their approaches to learning and their strategies for securing employment, the Singaporean Business students directed their efforts towards accruing skills that would make them more valuable to employers.

Like the players in Brown and Hesketh's (2004) study, these students understood that the self must be presented as an expression of work. These students often told me that employers look for a certain type of personality and said that it was common practice to anticipate the kind of skill sets a certain employer is looking for and to adopt 'new behaviours' in line with their requirements:

> We all know what kind of skill sets they are looking for, like teamwork, drive, being able to present yourself well and speak well, so I think most of the time we feel compelled to kind of adopt some new behaviour during assessment centres. (Della)

However, rather than regarding this as self-alienating, many of these students viewed it as an exciting challenge. Qualities like determination, integrity, responsibility and drive were recognised as universally valuable to employers – 'definitely there are some traits that everybody wants…nobody wants a liar working for them, or someone that just talks and doesn't do any work' (Vernon). However, 'tweaking' aspects of your personality in line with employers' expectations was predominantly framed in terms of pushing yourself out of your comfort zone, or as the 'give and take' necessary to 'earn' a job (Ben), rather than as discontinuity or fracture with participants' 'true' selves. For example, Della said that she presents her 'true self' when being assessed, but might emphasize how 'people-oriented' she is, when actually she 'would prefer sometimes to be at my desk doing my work'.

These students sought to gain insight into what organisations are looking for, but unlike the 'players' in Brown and Lauder's (2004) study, they did not try to fit their narratives of employability entirely around the perceived expectations of prospective employers. Hence many of them said that they would find it difficult to change aspects of their personality to get a job:

I don't think I would really want to do that...I am a person who is pretty much upfront and pretty straightforward so it's very hard for me to say something or act in a way that is different from my usual self. (Val)

Instead, these students argued that whilst employers look for certain characteristics, this doesn't have to amount to changing aspects of your personality. For example, Vernon described the interview process as a 'tool to see whether your character fits the culture of the company', and asserted that 'even if you're able to fake a character, to fit the company even for that day, it might not last and you probably won't be happy working like that'. As such, Vernon argued that it is important to be true to yourself, both for the good of the individual and the good of the employer. These students therefore subscribed to the idea that the recruitment process represents a benign matching process in which both the employer and the candidate can both ascertain whether or not they 'fit' one another. It follows that an applicant's natural passion and enthusiasm for the job will colour how well they do. For example, Ben stated 'your personality must suit the job you're actually applying for' because this will enable you to be yourself. In turn, by choosing a job that you 'really feel a passion for', you will 'stand out' from the other candidates because you are able to relate to the role better (Ben). This framing of the recruitment process rendered 'faking it' an unnecessary and irrational approach to seeking employment. Instead, the recruitment process was seen as an opportunity to differentiate yourself and to become memorable to employers. Ben argued that it is important to build on the standard 'prototype' of what makes a candidate attractive, and to have your own style beyond this baseline, telling me that 'it's up to you yourself to personalise and create your own style'.

Della was probably the most pragmatic student in this respect. Like students in the other participant groups, she recognised that it may not always be easy to find a job that corresponds perfectly to your own talents and interests, and that a degree of emotional labour may be necessary to secure a job in the current labour market context. She was the only student in this group to suggest that there is an 'element of luck' in the recruitment process, and explained that students apply 'widely for anything and everything' without feeling a strong affiliation to the role or organisation. However, whilst she had applied widely to maximise her choices, she still saw job applications as a matching process between individual skills and the requirements of a job, and told me that she would not accept a position that didn't match her personal specifications, unless she really had 'no choice', in which instance she would take the position but 'look for opportunities in the meanwhile'.

This group of Singaporean Business students cannot straightforwardly be categorised as either 'players' or 'purists'. The fact that they believed the graduate recruitment system is fair, and that fraudsters would be found out suggests that they have much in common with the 'purists' identified by Brown and Hesketh (2004). These participants did not feel that they were commodifying themselves and did not perceive a difference between what they presented to potential employers and their authentic sense of self. Indeed, given their faith in the 'pure' and meritocratic nature of recruitment regardless of race, gender, age or social background, these students believed that a high level of self-disclosure was necessary for recruitment experts to assess their candidacy.

However, these students were also willing to make sacrifices to achieve job security and a career, which strongly resembles 'player' behaviour. They had internalised the need to become employable, and had built their identities, aspirations and approaches in line with that goal. In this sense, the understandings of success put forward by these students suggests that they had bought into a rational economic definition of the self, that entails a narrowing of the construction of who a person is for the requirements of the social system in Singapore. This was visible in the pragmatic trade-off these students presented in their decisions about coming to university. Whilst many in this group spoke of passions in areas like theatre, dance and food, they all decided to 'play it safe' and pursue a university education in a subject that they thought would provide them with a more certain return on their investment of time and money. They linked their decisions to the structuring of opportunities in Singapore – telling me that it is very difficult to become an artist or performer and survive in a country with minimal income support and a low value attached to these roles. In fact, these students were all adept in referencing examples from the media, or within their own social networks, of people who had studied Business and become successful and prosperous. The work-centred goals that they presented, and the need to be pragmatic in making decisions about what to study at university, often entailing relegating passions and interests to spare time, suggests that these students had been conditioned to 'play the game' from an early age. Interestingly, these students accepted the need for compromise and sacrifice in order to find employment, but unlike the graduates studied by Brown and Hesketh, they did not see this as alienating or duplicitous. What this means in terms of authenticity and understandings of the self is something I will return to in chapter nine.

Chapter 6: British Business Students

Introduction

This chapter details the understandings and expectations of the second group of participants: British students studying Business. The first section describes how these students primarily viewed education as a vehicle through which to realise gainful employment and understand more about themselves. In this sense they were broadly aligned to official British policy on the role of higher education in terms of increasing employment opportunities. Unlike the Singaporean Business students, participants in this group tended to perceive the value of a degree in terms of the possession of a credential rather than as the opportunity to build up a portfolio of relevant skills and aptitudes. Students in this group also discussed a process of self-development at university; but they were the only group of students in the study who didn't relate this to the content of their degree subject.

In section two I discuss how these orientations to education were reflected in these students' approaches to learning, which can be described as both highly instrumental and, in contrast to their Singaporean counterparts, largely 'disengaged', showing a limited understanding of the harsh reality of the labour market. Despite viewing higher education as the means by which they could secure high level employment, these students did not strive to maximise their achievements at university in the same manner as the Singaporean Business students. Instead, they shared the perception that a 2:1 degree classification would be enough to impress employers, and so tailored their learning practices to achieve this goal. The majority of these participants were not engaged in the wide range of additional CV-building activities described by the Singaporean Business students.

In the third section I explore the British Business students' goals and expectations for the future. Like the Singaporean Business students, they gave accounts of their own futures that were framed by the requirement of high-level graduate work, to match societal ideals. However, their expectations were not significantly regulated by an awareness of the competitive nature of the graduate labour market. Whilst the Singaporean Business students were prepared to work their way up to the best role that they were capable of, these

students had a weaker sense of trajectory and spoke instead about finding 'dream jobs' and 'having it all'. These students lacked the in-depth knowledge of various career paths that their Singaporean counterparts used to navigate labour market opportunities, and instead defined success in more generalised terms according to happiness, status and material wealth. Many of the students in this group intended to find minimum waged non-graduate work and defer the responsibility of a graduate job until they had a clearer idea of the best fit between their own personal specifications and a job that they would enjoy.

In the fourth section of this chapter I give an account of these students' labour market strategies in relation to their understandings of fairness and the importance of authenticity at work. Whilst these students didn't think the labour market operated entirely fairly, they presented individualised accounts of the need to become employable and didn't acknowledge structural barriers to success. These students' unrealistic labour market expectations meant that they didn't think it was likely that they would need to genuinely change aspects of their personality to find a job, but most said that they would be prepared to 'play the game' in order to maximise individual success if necessary.

6.1 What is higher education for?

6.1.1 What is higher education for?

Like their Singaporean counterparts, there was a strong consensus amongst these British Business students that the primary purpose of education is to prepare individuals for employment. As a result, they asserted that a degree should afford them greater choice in the future about their desired career path. In this sense these students were largely aligned to the human capital model of education. Whilst they valued the generic elements of their university experience, they struggled to think of ways in which the subject specific knowledge taught at university would benefit them in other areas of life outside of the labour market: '[...] ultimately people at a fundamental level go to uni to get a good job' (Jess). However, rather than emphasizing the processes of skill development and *specialisation* championed by the Singaporean students, these participants focussed on the value of the *general degree credential* itself in unlocking possible career paths. Hence, these students were concerned with obtaining the degree qualification, rather than building up particular skillsets relevant to specific jobs. They saw the degree qualification as an abstract signifier of motivation and effort, detached from the actual content of the course. Almost all of the students in this

group spoke about the degree as a 'label' that marks you out to potential employers. For example, when asked which aspect of going to university would be most helpful in the labour market, Pete said 'just the fact of having a degree', and Mike told me that it is 'the paper most of all', because it symbolises motivation and organisation. Glynn argued that obtaining a degree wouldn't necessarily equip an individual with the necessary skills for the workplace, but suggested that it works to distinguish graduates from non-graduates:

> I'm not sure how much extra knowledge I'm actually going to come out of university with compared with three years ago. I think literally it's something that you put on your CV.

Alongside the qualification itself, when asked about the most valuable element of their time at university, these students emphasized the importance of general transferrable skills, listing things like time management, communication skills, and becoming more organized. They argued that aspects of higher education like 'teaching people to be responsible for themselves and independent' (Pete) were important beyond employment, only sometimes relating these personal and emotional skills to their employability. For example, Pete compared himself to a friend who hadn't been to university to illustrate the sense of responsibility and independence that he had developed:

> My friend stills lives at home, and she still gets her parents to phone in sick for her to work whereas I wouldn't dream of doing that now.

Many of these students described a disconnection between university and 'real life' to explain why they focused on the degree credential rather than course content. Some argued that a degree doesn't necessarily prepare graduates in a practical sense, suggesting that it doesn't truly reflect an individual's skills and aptitudes (Mike), or that it has no 'practical element that you'd use in real life' (Sarah). Most students in this group also expected that most occupational roles would require on the job training, thus diminishing the value and relevance of what they learnt at university: 'I think you just get trained again so it doesn't really matter what you study to be honest' (Gavin). These students were less clear about how certain degree specialisations linked with various professions compared to the Singaporean Business students. In this respect, their evaluations of what a university education is for could be said to reflect the more 'open' economic context in Britain described in chapter three.

6.1.2 Decisions about coming to university

Just like their Singaporean Business counterparts, these students framed going to university as a 'norm', and as the clearest route to gaining high-level employment. This was expressed universally, from Cherry who told me that 98 percent of the cohort at her private school went on to university, to Sarah who went to comprehensive school and whose father was a lorry driver. Even those from low-income backgrounds argued that there was no alternative to university. However, students in this group showed a much weaker sense of focus when articulating their decisions about what to study and where. Given that these students saw going to university as a natural progression, and the degree qualification as more important than course content, it is perhaps unsurprising that some told me that they had little idea of what to study. For example, when talking about her decision to come to university Emily said 'everybody else seemed to be doing it'; and when discussing his decision to study business, Gavin admitted 'I didn't know what else to do, to be perfectly honest'.

Business was largely seen as a sensible choice that would help students to become more employable in the future without restricting them to working in a specific area. For example, Sarah explained that she originally sought to pursue a teaching career but felt that Business would give her a better offering of jobs and 'better options' in the future. Even those who described a longstanding interest in Business spoke about becoming more employable whilst keeping their options open. There was little in-depth knowledge of the different career pathways open to Business graduates or the developed career plans displayed by my Singaporean participants. Indeed, when asked, almost all of these students told me that they were not explicitly thinking about what job they would get upon graduating. In line with Brown and Lauder's (2001) conception of 'defensive expenditure', most asserted that Business is general enough to contribute to employability in an undefined manner and would therefore enable them to defer career decisions until later on. There was also little sense of the pragmatic compromises described by the Singaporean Business students. Indeed, despite the higher proportion of young people enrolling at university in the UK compared to Singapore, and the more congested graduate labour market outlined in chapter three, these students seemed less troubled by the need to adequately plan for their futures, and few had a clear conception of the shape they would like their future careers to take.

Given the emphasis these students placed on the degree qualification over the skills and knowledge they were exposed to, the reputational capital of the degree-giving institution was seen to be paramount. Students in this group stressed the importance of getting a

degree from an established university rather than a post-1992 institution, and hoped that it would give them a 'little bit of a step above the rest' (Jess). Whilst financial incentives for Welsh students encouraged Sarah and Glynn to remain within Wales, most students in this group described having a relatively open choice of where to study. Unlike the Singaporean students, these participants emphasized the symbolic role of going to university as a rite of passage. This was apparent in their discussions of choosing where and what to study beyond factors like entry requirements, the reputation of different institutions and what financial assistance was offered that featured in the Singaporean Business students' accounts. Students in this group also spoke more broadly about what the city had to offer, where their friends were going, and the kind of social life they envisaged having. That the British Business students drew on more informal, non-academic or 'lifestyle' factors when making decisions about university suggests that they framed university differently to their Singaporean counterparts: they privileged the role of university as a rite of passage and an opportunity for self-development alongside augmenting their career prospects.

6.1.3 Reflections on the value of the degree

Whilst these students unanimously believed that the primary role of education is to enable graduates to manoeuvre advantageously in the labour market, when looking back at their time at university they also emphasized the social and personal value of embarking on a degree. They spoke about the ways in which their time at university had enabled them to become more independent, more confident, and find out more about themselves and other people. This sense of the value of university was usually located outside of academic course content and wasn't explicitly linked to employability. Instead, it encapsulated a broader ethic of self-realisation that might be linked to the wider cultural heritage of higher education in the UK. Indeed, when asked about the most valuable aspect of their time at university, participants frequently identified things 'outside of the academic stuff' (Gavin), like living away from home, meeting a range of people, and taking on adult responsibilities. For example, Pete said that his education would benefit him in terms of personal relationships in the future, because time away from home spent mixing with different people had made him 'more well-rounded'. Similarly, Glynn explained that since he was from 'a really rural background [where] everyone knows each other', the opportunity to get to know people from different backgrounds had been invaluable to him:

> Last year I was living with someone from Gibraltar, someone from China who's been living in England for 15 years, and two people from England... *that's the biggest thing you can take out of university*...just knowing people from all over [my emphasis].

These elements all played a crucial role in students' accounts of the transformative nature of their time at university. Moving out of the parental home frequently came up as exemplary of the kind of challenges overcome by students. For example, Kurt said 'it's hard enough knowing that you've got to cook pasta twelve minutes before it's ready to eat, let alone having to go to lectures and figure out a timetable'; and Mike spoke about the importance of developing time management skills:

> I think learning to live on your own and things like that are almost bigger than actually the degree you choose to do…like learning to cook…and…just filling your time with what you want to do and making sure it's constructive I guess.

This sense of development through independence led most students in this group to talk proudly about their maturation at university. For example, when asked about the most valuable aspects of her time at university, Jess stated triumphantly: 'I've lived in a whole different city by myself, I've not died of salmonella poisoning or anything, I've achieved so much just as an individual'. Similarly, Pete described looking back through old Facebook photos and thinking 'I was a mess…I wouldn't get like that anymore', concluding 'I've definitely grown up quite a lot in the last two years'. Glynn told me that becoming more independent had enabled him to 'feel a lot more comfortable' with himself than he did three years previously. The idea that the university experience is 'so much more than an education' was visible in the common assessment that it wouldn't be the same if you were living at home:

> I wouldn't be getting as much out of it because all I would have is that twelve hours a week contact time then I would come back to the same life as before…I think part of it is the completely new experience, new city, new people, new everything really. (Jess)

Some students spoke about becoming more critical and more aware of current events, but this change in mind-set was usually articulated in terms of their general time at university rather than the specifics of their course of study. Only a small minority of students in this group explicitly linked this change in mind set to their course material. For example, Glynn told me that he had become more critical about how things are portrayed in the media thanks to a module on ethics and morality in Business which 'looks beyond what we see'. Similarly, Gavin suggested that his time at university had allowed him to develop his own opinion about 'what's going on in the world' and consider how social and political issues shape 'how society is run'. Beyond making them more employable, going to university

seemed to play an important role in these students' transitions into adulthood. Whilst advocates of the liberal-arts model of higher education have expressed concern that business-oriented degrees may be starving society of properly educated and publicly-minded citizens, what is interesting about this group of Business students is how much the non-academic aspects of their university experience seemed to have contributed to their maturation and sense of personal responsibility.

6.2 How does higher education work?

Introduction

Like their Singaporean counterparts, the British Business students framed their university education as a means of obtaining high-level graduate employment. However, whilst they did speak about the competitive nature of the graduate labour market, there was a widespread belief that employers look for graduates with 2:1s, so gaining anything more than this was considered wasteful. These students therefore tailored their learning practices according to their projected overall grade, redoubling their efforts if they thought they were slipping into the 2:2 zone, but easing off if they felt they were comfortably in 2:1 territory. For example, Sarah said that she felt panicked when she narrowly missed an overall 2:1 mark in her second year, but had worked harder in the first semester of her third year and felt that it had paid off so felt more able to relax. Only a small minority of these students were engaged in the range of 'CV-building' endeavours that were prevalent amongst their Singaporean counterparts. Instead, these students often spoke about using shortcuts to minimise the time they had to put into their studies.

6.2.1 Knowing enough to get the qualification: learning as having

These students' approaches to learning can therefore be categorised as *disengaged* instrumentalist, which bears close resemblance to Fromm's (1979) conception of the instrumental learner who is 'learning to have'. These students' practices contrasted sharply to the practices of the Singaporean Business students: they did not focus on the future use-value of the skills and knowledge they were learning. Nor were they preoccupied with differentiating and 'signaling' their level of attainment to prospective employers by trying to get the best marks they were capable of (Kroch and Sjoblom 1994). Instead, they were concerned with achieving a generalised degree qualification in line with the rest of their peer group. This *disengaged instrumentalism* was almost entirely instrumentally *acquisitive*,

compared to their Singaporean counterparts who were instrumentally *inquisitive* and used their experience of different course material to discover their interests and aptitudes and to narrow down possible career options. In accordance with Fromm's *acquisitive* or *disengaged* model of instrumental learning, these students structured their learning practices according to a rational conversion of effort into favourable assessment grades, with as little 'leakage' or time wasted learning things that would not ultimately contribute to assessments: 'I don't really want to learn stuff that I don't need to know' (Mike).

Most participants in this group estimated that they would only remember aspects of material learnt at university if it was directly applied in their future work context. Many described a process of memorising knowledge in order to pass assessments and then forgetting it once the test was over. For example, Mike explained that whilst he sometimes understood material well, at other times he relied on 'parroting' information: 'I don't understand it but I'll…whack it down in the exam and hopefully get a good mark'. They also described adapting their work patterns to meet the demands of assessments. For example, Glynn explained that for the 'month and a half leading up to exams you've really got to put the work in', but stated that in general during term time 'I can't say I've worked very hard'. Similarly Glynn asserted 'you can get away with not putting the work in, because you're not being monitored that heavily', as long as you 'ensure that you get a good mark' during the assessment period. These students also moulded their learning practices to the expectations of teaching staff and the practices of their peers. For example, Kurt decided whether or not to prepare for a tutorial depending on how 'full on' the lecturer was and how likely they were to single people out and ask direct questions.

The British Business students also outlined a number of different strategic practices to reduce their overall workload according to assessment requirements. Glynn explained: 'you can get away with not revising certain things' because teaching staff would often 'hint' at what would come up in exams: 'if you can get away with doing half the work and you're still going to do just as well then it makes no sense to do all that revision'. In fact, some students in this group argued that selective revision was more beneficial than covering all potential questions because the reward structure favoured depth over breadth. However they also outlined the risks of selective revision: indirect 'hints' given by lecturers could turn out to be misleading. As such, some students in this group wanted to make more effort to prepare 'properly' for their third year assessments to avoid the potential pitfalls of strategic revision.

So whilst both the British and Singaporean Business students spoke about the pressures of workload and the inability to do everything, for the British students this was framed more in terms of getting away with the bare minimum in order to pass and get their desired grade. This contrasts with the Singaporean Business cohort who felt that the rigours of their course inhibited their engagement with interesting material that they would otherwise have enjoyed exploring. In fact, some of the British Business students actually spoke about the work required to obtain the degree qualification as a barrier to enjoying university life. Academic practices were often positioned as cumbersome hurdles to overcome in order to realise a successful social identity.

These students were reluctant to admit to spending much time studying beyond their scheduled hours at university, generally telling me that they didn't supplement their core hours (16-18 hours per week) with much additional reading. For example, Kurt argued 'reading isn't really a strong part of my education', and Nicole said that she 'hates' reading and found it boring. A number of these students positioned learning as secondary to the 'university experience' – socialising and enjoying yourself. For example, Pete only attended around 60 percent of his lectures and 'kind of missed the first two weeks of term' because he was 'going out quite a bit' with friends. Jess went further to argue that the necessity of learning, writing coursework and sitting assessments was a frustrating inconvenience, and told me that she wished she could be guaranteed a 2:1 so that she could enjoy her time at university: 'it's supposed to be the best three years of your life'. It seems clear that Jess, amongst others, had disengaged from the learning process. The viewpoint that time spent at university had been an *intellectually* transformative process was therefore much less visible in these participants' approaches to their own learning.

6.2.2 We're all in the same boat: the normative pressure to get a 2:1

There was widespread evidence that, like their Singaporean counterparts, these British Business students shaped their learning practices according to the reward structure, both within the university and beyond to job allocation in the graduate labour market. However, unlike in Singapore, there is no publication of students' end of year grades, and the majority of these students shared the conviction that employers look for graduates with a 2:1 degree classification. So whilst they were motivated by wanting to augment their career prospects, the majority felt that obtaining a 2:1 would suffice. For example, Glynn claimed 'most places are looking for 2:1s now' and explained that he was committed to this goal: 'if I don't put in the work now and get a 2:1 I'll probably regret it for the rest of my life'. Pete felt he 'could

probably do better' than a 2:1 but said that he was happy 'coasting' so long as he didn't come out with too low a grade:

> [..] I don't want all that work to be nothing if I come out with like, a 3rd, or a fail. It would be a good experience, but then I'd be like, I've spent all this money and then actually it's worth nothing.

These students didn't tend to differentiate between themselves and other students or speak about the rest of their cohort in a competitive manner like my Singaporean students, telling me instead that they were 'all in the same boat'. They did, however, compare themselves favourably to non-graduates. Whilst the perceived earnings differentials between graduates and non-graduates in Britain was less clear-cut than in the accounts of the Singaporean participants, for the most part these students believed they would eventually reap the rewards of their investment in higher education, and wouldn't be subject to the same upper earnings limits as non-graduates. This perspective is supported by the empirical evidence outlined in chapter three. Students in this group also tended to differentiate between the mentalities and lifestyles of graduates and non-graduates, arguing that 'graduates have a different outlook' (Jess).

6.2.3 Relating higher education to employment

Students in this group did not have a clear picture of how their learning at university would relate to graduate employment, and tended to speak in general terms about the transferrable skills that they had developed. For example, Pete spoke about presentation and communication skills, joking that his grammar had improved and that his time at university had 'de-chavved' him. Similarly, Kurt believed that his education should benefit him in terms of being able to connect with a broader range of people, because 'the more intelligent you are…you're more likely to have things in common with people'. There was a greater sense of flexibility in these students' understandings of possible routes to success compared to the Singaporean Business students: many were able to reference prominent business people who had become successful without a degree, for example. However, going to university was seen by the majority as the most practical and available way to become successful. For example, Nicole told me that education was still the 'most logical way for me to get to where I want to go'.

Whist it was universally understood by these students that having a degree *should* make them more employable, and their time at university constituted an investment into better earnings potential in the future, they were less certain about how much of an advantage

having a degree would *actually* afford them in the labour market. During the course of their time at university many had come to realise the returns on their personal investments of time and money into education were less secure than they initially thought. Like the participants in Brown and Hesketh's (2004) study, it was widely acknowledged amongst these students that a degree qualification might not be enough to help them to secure graduate level jobs. This was broadly understood to be due to increasing numbers of graduates, and the rising number of applicants for a small number of graduate positions. Indeed, Gavin suggested that the number of young people going to university had diminished the value of a degree: 'it's kind of just natural that everyone goes now so maybe it's at the same level that A Levels were about twenty years ago or something'. Similarly, Kurt said that his degree would help him to find an appropriate job, but 'not nearly as much as it would have done twenty years ago'. These students commonly argued that employers are able to exploit this mismatch between supply and demand to their advantage:

> Graduate recruiters must be having a field day because they're getting really talented individuals really cheaply and they can make them work hard as they know they want it. (Jess)

As a result, like the Singaporean Business students, those in this group universally saw having a degree as the minimum requirement. Without this qualification, these students felt that they would have difficulty in the labour market because employers 'won't even consider you' (Pete). Like the Singaporean cohort, these Business students emphasized the importance of the degree credential primarily for 'getting your foot in the door' (Pete). Subsequently, these students recognised that with increasing numbers of graduates, they faced becoming indistinct from one another. Pete asserted that Business graduates were 'all going to be generally the same'.

In the face of this competitive climate, these participants frequently highlighted the importance of extra-curricular activities, like work experience. However, only a minority were engaged with voluntary work and just two had undertaken internships. It is interesting that while these students shared the beliefs of the positional conflict theorists that the rising number of graduates would contribute to heightened competition and the de-valuing of the degree credential (Brown *et al.* 2012), this did not seem to have prompted them to approach their education in terms of human capital development more proactively. Ironically, the British Business students complained about their degree's irrelevance to real life, but made little effort to acquire other forms of knowledge or experience with greater practical value.

Some participants in this group suggested that graduates often have inflated expectations, because the qualification might not always translate into a better job. Sarah was perhaps the most disillusioned about this predicament, telling me that she used to think that her degree had been a worthwhile investment of time and money, but had recently discovered that graduate unemployment rates were the same as for school leavers (ONS 2012) and now felt defeated. She told me that she had become resigned to thinking 'I'm going to be on the dole when I graduate'. Nicole told me that 'sometimes people are out of a job for a couple of years after they graduate trying to find something…that justifies the three years'. However, as will be seen in the following section, despite describing the graduate labour market as highly competitive, the majority of students in this group still felt entitled to a reasonable return on their investment into higher education in the longer-term. For example, Cherry said that leaving university 'without a graduate job and without having money in the future and without a high earned status' was 'unthinkable'.

6.3 Definitions of success

Introduction

This section addresses the British Business students' future goals and understandings of success. So far, it has been argued that the British Business students portrayed higher education as an opportunity for self-discovery and as a ticket to better employment prospects. They described their time at university as enjoyable and transformative; however this was mostly discussed in terms of the social elements of the *university experience* and rarely featured in their accounts of learning and engagement with academic material. These students' disengaged instrumentalist approaches to learning were framed by the perception that employers look for graduates with a 2:1 qualification, and assessments were positioned as a necessary hurdle to overcome in order to realise a successful graduate identity.

In this section I explore these students' definitions of success in terms of employment, status, self-discovery and wealth. Like the Singaporean Business students, there was little space in these students' accounts for conceptualisations of success outside of employment. They saw employment, status and lifestyle as central to success and happiness, and were particularly conscious of how they would be viewed by others. However, these students offered unfocused and open-ended accounts of their futures, and lacked knowledge of the entry requirements and salaries of certain positions in the fields that they wished to pursue. I argue

that relative to the Singaporean Business students, these students' employment goals and expectations were not bounded by a realistic appraisal of the challenges facing graduates in a congested labour market.

6.3.1 Success as: having it all

The British Business students presented highly idealised accounts of success that were detached from a realistic assessment of their own skills and aptitudes in relation to labour market opportunities. All of the students in this group contended that their degree would eventually enable them to secure high level employment in an area that interested them, reflected their personality, and would provide them with the elevated levels of status and material comfort that they aspired to. Running through all of these accounts was a strong link between success, money and career: like their Singaporean counterparts, these students framed work as the primary source of social esteem. However, unlike the Singaporean Business participants who emphasized the importance of pragmatism when forming career goals, these students' expectations were less bounded. In addition to seeking work that matched their skills and aptitudes and provided them with a certain level of challenge, development, material comfort and status, many of the British Business students anticipated that work would take a central meaning in their lives.

Students in this group emphasized the importance of finding work that allows you to be authentic and express your identity. Some went further to describe work as a vehicle for self-realisation that would help them 'find' themselves. All of these participants emphasized the importance of 'fit', and being well-suited to a career, and argued that this could not be rushed. They told me that they were looking for the perfect opportunity, the dream job, and the ideal match between their personality, an organisation, and a certain role within it. For example, Cherry spoke about 'having it all', and pursuing a 'fairy-tale'. She explained that she would prefer to wait for the ideal job rather than settle for something that she wouldn't enjoy: 'at the end of the day I don't want to sit down at a desk and think "wow, this is it for the next 30 years"'.

These aspirations were often married with the expectation of certain levels of material consumption and status recognised by others. These students were reluctant to present overly materialistic accounts of their career aspirations – often telling me that it was more important to find interesting than well-paid work. However, financial imperatives were clear in their discussions of what makes a person successful or not. For example, Jess explained that whilst enjoying your job is important, 'if I can't keep up financially in life because I'm

enjoying my job and I'm not earning enough I'd have to make a switch'. Pete also suggested that whilst money might only be a moderately important factor in his definition of success while he was a student, it would become more critical later on. He explained that whilst he would be happy 'just getting a job on twenty four grand or twenty five grand a year' initially, he would feel less accomplished later on in his career if he hadn't progressed beyond this threshold.

6.3.2 The 'good life': Status, lifestyle, self-discovery and wealth

Ironically, the British Business students, who were more focussed on self-realisation at university compared to their Singaporean counterparts, had little sense of what they wanted to do or where they wanted to go after university. They didn't share the same sense of projectivity or masterful navigation of occupational structures that guided the trajectories of the Singaporean Business students. Instead, they framed their goals loosely according to lifestyle and status rather than aspiring to a particular job or role. Accordingly, these students' accounts of a 'good' job didn't typically include much detail about the area of work that they might want to go into, and instead were generally expressed in terms of the kind of lifestyle and respect commanded from others that certain jobs would afford. For example, Jess stated 'I'm not sure what the plan will be yet. But I definitely want a proper job and a career'. Similarly, Gavin told me that a good job can be defined by whether or not 'you're happy doing it' and said that this is down to factors like getting on with the people you work with. Having a good job was considered to enable individuals to choose the way they want to live their lives. I will consider how these attitudes relate to Bauman's (2000) assertion that individuals have become 'disembedded' from traditional identities formed through work towards those based on consumerism, lifestyle and leisure activities in chapter nine.

Like their Singaporean Business counterparts, most of these students emphasized being comfortable rather than living an extravagant lifestyle, however they did tend to suggest that they wouldn't be happy to be earning below a certain bracket. For example, when I asked Pete if he would still be happy if he wasn't able to buy all of the things that he wanted, he responded 'I wouldn't be depressed…but I think I probably would be happier if I could afford…the television or the car I wanted'.

These students all tended to argue that success is subjective and defined individually according to personal preferences, with no reference to a commonly understood hierarchy of professions according to status. So whilst the Singaporean Business students argued that everyone is aiming for similar positions in society, guided by collective understandings of

success, these British participants asserted that success is defined individually. For example, Cherry described success as 'whatever makes you happy', and Nicole explained that 'success is so personal it can mean two different things to two different people'. So, whilst these students framed their own ambitions in terms of wanting to achieve a certain salary and status level, they argued that other members of society might not orient themselves to the same life-goals. For example, when Gavin talked about 'success' enabling individuals to 'pick a lifestyle, whether that be a quite rich one or not so rich', he implied that some individuals would actively aim for 'not so rich lifestyles'.

However, when asked to consider how understandings of success are shaped by society, these students did identify a strong normative element: all participants agreed that the dominant definition of success in society was tied to material wealth. So, whilst their individual conceptualisations of success were subjective, they were also sensitive to what they saw as the dominant societal view, which was that money, employability and success go hand in hand:

> Everyone's really money driven…what car you drive, what house you have, where you live, it all has an impact on what people think of you. (Sarah)

> We measure people's success by how much money they earn…if people see someone driving a really flash car or people see that your salary is six figures, people think you're successful. (Glynn)

6.3.3 Little room for success outside of work

Although students in this group all tended to argue that success is subjective and defined differently by individuals, they all oriented their own goals towards a certain salary and status level. Echoing the Singaporean Business students, these participants argued that employment was a key foundational element for realising their own success. For example, Jess explained that having a 'good job' is important because it takes up such a big part of your life. Similarly, Pete said that being on a lower income 'causes stuff like arguments…and it can lead to bad health as well if you're stressed out at work'. This led him to argue that 'having a good job is going to make other aspects of your life easier'. A couple of students did argue that it was possible, in theory, to be successful without a degree or a graduate job. For example Glynn asserted that university wasn't the only route to success for those who 'work hard and make the most of the opportunities that they can'. However, successful non-graduates were seen as the exception rather than the rule.

When pushed to identify factors outside of work that would contribute to a sense of success, some students cited things like general wellbeing and happiness gleaned from leisure activities. For example Gavin rejected a completely materialistic conception of success, and argued that material possessions aren't the 'be all and end all' of happiness and that 'stuff that you can't buy is probably worth more, like friends…like experiences, and memories'.

6.4 Post graduation job-seeking strategies: perceptions of fairness and understandings of the self

Introduction

In the previous sections of this chapter I described the manner in which these students oriented their own aspirations towards finding graduate level work. However, despite sharing the understanding that the labour market is competitive and precarious, these students presented very different strategies to the Singaporean Business students. Whilst the Singaporean students tended to be engaged in human capital boosting activities targeted at maximising their employability profiles, my British cohort spoke instead of lowering their short-term expectations, settling for a non-graduate job, and acclimatising to the likelihood that the benefits of getting a degree might not be immediate. Just like their learning practices, these students' approaches to finding employment can be characterised as *disengaged instrumentalist.* Their lack of engagement with the processes of graduate employment enabled these participants to maintain more idealised accounts of their longer-term future careers in a manner that was disconnected from their current situations.

The majority of students in this group were deferring their entry into the graduate labour market. For some this was framed in terms of riding out the economic storm and waiting until they were in a position to achieve a greater fit between their perceived talents and an appropriate graduate level job, rather than making do with something imperfect. For example, Cherry and Mike both planned to find low-skilled or unpaid work-experience and do some travelling for a year after graduation. After applying unsuccessfully to a couple of graduate schemes, Jess had also decided to take 'another gap year'. Some told me that finding low-waged and low-responsibility work was favourable because it would enable them to continue to enjoy the carefree lifestyle that university had afforded them whilst providing a break from the rigours of the hard work endured in order to obtain a degree. Others planned to travel in order to spend more time thinking about what they would like to do long

term. For many, deferring serious job-seeking was simply a reflection of their uncertainty about what they would like to do.

Even those who had applied for jobs and attended assessment centres were very unsure about what path to take. For example, when asked what he would like to be doing in a year's time, Gavin exclaimed 'oh goodness knows! No idea! Um, hopefully have a job coming up [laughs], maybe do a bit of travelling, I'm really not sure'. Similarly, Pete told me that he had looked at 'three of four graduate schemes' but the only thing that he had established was that he didn't want to work 'in some stuffy office'. Pete intended to move back home and continue with his retail job on a part-time basis 'until I can find out what I want to do…until I just sort my life out basically' (Pete). He described a fruitless meeting with a careers advisor to explain his predicament:

> […] they asked me 'what are you interested in?' and I don't know. I know that sounds stupid but I don't have many interests that's [sic] going to help me decide what I want to do. So, I like running, but that's not going to help me get a job unless I become a running coach or something. There's not really anything, I just think once I find something I'll just be 'this is what I wanna do' and I'll just, well hopefully, do it.

As a consequence, most of these students planned to conserve their efforts until they had a clear conceptualisation of what job would best reflect their personality. For example, Jess told me that it was important not to rush things, explaining 'I have 40-50 years to be in the job, so another year out might not hurt'. Common in the British Business students' accounts was the idea that once they knew what they wanted to do, they would mobilise their skills and motivations and engage with the graduate recruitment process to work towards that goal. For example Cherry explained that once she had found a job that suited her personality:

> […] you'd hope that I'd research that and show that I'm driven towards it, that I want to be successful and do well in that company.

6.4.1 Perceptions of meritocracy

The majority of students in this group believed that the British labour market operates meritocratically and argued that jobs are allocated according to skills and talents. For example Emily saw 'no major injustices' in the labour market and Jess stated 'it's a ridiculously competitive system but it's as fair as its going to be'. Drawing on his experiences at an assessment centre, Glynn commented that the job allocation process seemed to be fairly based on talents and experience because he had encountered 'a lot of people…from different backgrounds' during the recruitment process. In this sense, in chorus with the

Singaporean Business students, these participants argued that the allocation of jobs in the labour market justified differences in income and prestige amongst different members of society. As a result, the students in this group framed getting a job as an individual responsibility. However, unlike the Singaporean Business students, these participants also characterised the graduate labour market as precarious and unpredictable. They often contrasted the mixed fortunes of peers to support this perspective. For example Nicole compared the experience of a friend who graduated a few years ago but was 'still in the same call centre to while he was studying', to another friend who 'got a starter job of 50k being a broker'. She concluded 'it just varies so much nowadays'.

Unlike the British Sociology students whom I will discuss in chapter 8, these participants rarely linked the 'unpredictable' nature of job allocation to structural inequalities in society. Inequalities were largely depicted in terms of subjective differences and preferences rather than structural imbalances of power and wealth. This view was particularly prevalent amongst the privately educated members of this group, who argued strongly that there were enough opportunities for all members of society if they were prepared to work hard enough. For example Emily argued that those from ethnic minorities struggled in the labour market because, in general, they weren't as educated as indigenous workers. She explained that whilst this could look like discrimination, it was more about lack of qualifications, the attainment of which would be no more problematic for those from ethnic minorities than for other members of society. Jess offered the most strident account, describing job allocation as a process of natural selection. She argued that it is possible for anyone to change their personal circumstances, but that some people lack the determination necessary to maximise their own career trajectories. Jess therefore regarded the benefits system as a barrier to motivation: 'people can earn more on benefits than the job that they're capable of'. Jess went further to argue that equal opportunities policies damage a meritocratic system, and, aligning herself to neoliberal discourses, asserted that business leaders should make decisions based on what is best for the company rather than what is fair:

> […] a company wouldn't choose a lesser candidate just because that was the fair thing to do…they would want the best candidate no matter what.

The idea of individualised responsibility was also apparent in the accounts of those participants who identified as working class, but some of these students did talk about the role of structural constraints on choices. For example Pete felt that the middle class friends he had made at university were the product of a different set of expectations – 'their schools

were driving them' – whereas in his own school 'it was just like, get your GCSES…that's the best we can do for you'. Sarah gave a more concrete example of the way in which the choices available to her as a graduate were limited compared to a friend who wasn't from a 'low income family':

> […] to me…any employment is better. You can't be picky; you've just got to take what you can get. I don't think she'd see it that way. She'd just be like 'Daddy!' and they'd get her in…she's essentially on her feet already.

Whilst the working class students in this group were more adept at identifying the structural constraints operating against those from low income backgrounds, they often spoke about being 'resigned' to the situation as 'just the way things are'. They tended to argue that the precarious position of those on low incomes was not fair, but were quick to absolve themselves of any complicity and distanced themselves from taking any action to reduce inequalities. For example, when I asked Nicole how she made sense of inequalities in society, she expressed sadness about the level of poverty in the UK - 'to struggle for money or not be able to feed your kids…it's my worst nightmare', but explained that she didn't want to 'waste [her] time waiting around trying to do something' and was unsure what to do to improve the situation. As a result, Nicole said that she tried to blank it out:

> What the hell do you do? For me the way to get over it is to just not think about it. I can't think about people like struggling, it really makes me sad.

Students in this group were ambivalent about the use of personal contacts or patronage to get ahead in the labour market. For example, Gavin didn't see any 'harm' in building up rapport with people he knows and trusts, but took issue with 'parent-wise' networking because 'you haven't really developed that relationship'. Using personal contacts to network was largely seen as an 'in', a way to sponsor your application to a particular job, or a kind of backing that may even prompt the creation of a suitable role. This can be contrasted with the Singaporean students' understanding of networking as a way to make visible and showcase your skills, rather than to propel you forwards on the grounds of a particular relationship.

The privately educated participants expressed the most positive appraisal of networking via personal contacts. For example, Jess argued that it would be silly not to use contacts and had asked her parents to actively keep a look out because they have got a lot of friends 'in high places'. Jess admitted that she would feel 'bitter' if someone got a job that she applied for

on the grounds of a personal connection, but only if it affected her directly. Other participants in this group described the use of personal contacts in the recruitment process less positively. For example Sarah asserted that 'who you know is essentially how you get a job these days', disadvantaging those who lack personal contacts. Similarly, Nicole argued that employers advertising vacancies often already had someone in mind for the position – 'they've already got a face for the job' and were only pretending to consider others for the role: 'I don't think it's fair. I think it's about who you know really which is a shame but it's true'.

However, even those students in this group who didn't agree with the principle of using personal contacts to get ahead told me that they would seize any opportunity they could if it would provide them with an advantage. For example, Glynn said 'if I knew someone in a company and I knew that it would give me an advantage then I'd use that'. Many rationalized this approach with the assertion that it's just the way things are: 'it's how it's been for a while and it's what it's like in all sorts of work' (Glynn). These participants also argued that they would be disadvantaging themselves if they failed to use any means available to get ahead. For example, Nicole explained that a survival of the fittest mentality was necessary to play the system, stating 'it's not fair but its reality'. She added that she would use any options available to her: 'if I know this person has access to something that I need, I'm networking'. There was no discussion in these students' accounts of whether or not an individual is suitable for a particular role; instead like the players identified by Brown and Hesketh (2004), these students framed recruitment as a game in which it is necessary to marshal resources to achieve the best outcome. Unlike their Singaporean counterparts, these students didn't often consider the role of work experience or internships in helping them to develop professional relationships that might help them to find work later on, and rarely spoke about establishing contacts via official channels.

6.4.2 The importance of authenticity

These students all echoed their Singaporean counterparts in arguing that the way you package yourself is important alongside skills during recruitment and frequently asserted that it is important to 'present yourself well' to be considered for a job (Glynn). They also emphasized the importance of soft skills in terms of 'emotional intelligence', or being a 'people person'. For example, Cherry stated 'what people want is EQ not IQ', and went on to argue that in the business context, particularly in areas like sales, your personality and soft skills are more important than technical skills. Unlike the Singaporean Business students,

these participants didn't make strong links between the soft skills necessary to do well in the workplace and the kind of training they had received whilst at university.

Like their Singaporean counterparts, students in this group emphasized the importance of displaying certain personal qualities like confidence, initiative, motivation and enthusiasm. Some said that these qualities didn't come naturally to them. It was common for students in this group to argue that it is easy to 'fake' certain desirable qualities during the recruitment process. This suggests that the British Business students did not share the Singaporean students' understanding of the benign matching process between skills and employment roles. For example, Glynn described looking at job adverts for 'what kind of characteristics they want from you' and then moulding his persona to the requirements of a particular organisation during the interview: 'you're going to act in that way and show those skills even if it doesn't reflect your true personality'.

Glynn went on to argue that it makes sense to 'tweak' aspects of your personality in order to 'tick all the boxes' and get a 'decent job' even if 'it's not really a true reflection of an individual'. For Sarah, whose belief in getting a 'good' job that matched her skills and personality perfectly had been undermined by the uncertainty created by the financial crisis, the need to suppress your true personality had become increasingly important: 'you have to adhere to the things that they want'. Both Glynn and Sarah were optimistic that once they had been recruited, they would be able to revert to a more authentic sense of themselves. Glynn explained that in general, 'faking it' was only necessary during the recruitment process, and that 'once you're in there', you would be able to 'stamp your own mark on the job regardless of what they've seen in the assessment centre'. Sarah also predicted that she would be able to 'sort of let myself go a bit and let the person out that I am normally'. Neither of these participants thought that they would be able to maintain an unnatural persona once in a role. For example, Sarah said that she would 'hate to think that a job would expect that of you all the time', and argued that 'your outside life is important as well as what you can offer to a company'. What these 'player' attitudes might entail for these participants as they entered the world of work will be explored in chapter nine.

As a result, the majority of these students argued that it was much better to avoid applying for graduate jobs that may require you to change aspects of your personality or challenge your sense of authenticity. For example, Nicole explained that she wouldn't apply for a job in an area she wasn't interested in if it meant she would have to 'act like I care about all this stuff'. In Nicole's eyes, it would be better to 'go into what you're interested in' both because

it would allow you to be more authentic, but also because 'how much you like it will determine how successful you are'. This links to prevailing conceptualizations of the link between work, enjoyment, personality and success amongst these students. It often meant that participants were not prepared to put effort into work that they didn't think would be personally rewarding.

Whilst all of these participants stressed the importance of ensuring a good fit between personality and work, there were subtle differences in the degree to which they were willing to compromise on this. So, as seen in Sarah and Glynn's accounts above, most of the working class students spoke in one way or another about a sense of compromise, either in terms of lowering their career aspirations, becoming more flexible, or presenting themselves in a way that doesn't come naturally in order to impress graduate recruiters. Conversely, middle class students, especially those who had been privately educated, were more rigid in their expectations. This second group of students talked about 'holding out' for their dream job - something which they felt passionate about and captured their imagination: '[…] that's what I'm looking for… something that I truly believe in' (Cherry).

These middle class British Business students told me that they were only prepared to adapt aspects of their personality for a job that they really wanted. For example Cherry explained that she would tweak aspects of her personality to a minor degree, giving the example of sounding more enthusiastic in an interview, but only for a job that suited her. These students explained that changing or adapting their personalities to fit the requirements for a job would not be necessary, since they envisaged a positive relationship between enjoyment and productivity. Indeed, Jess told me that employers want passion and confidence because 'people who are passionate work harder, and earn higher profits et cetera'. So whilst it might be necessary to 'market yourself' and 'add value and come across well' in order to convince people that you are able to do a certain job (Jess), it was also really important to be yourself. This sub-group of students demonstrated a range of 'player' oriented attitudes, but they didn't think that they would have to resort to 'playing the game' to get their dream job.

Chapter 7: Singaporean Sociology Students

Introduction

The first section of this chapter outlines the Singaporean Sociology students' understandings of the role of higher education. Unlike the British Business students, they were critical of what they saw as the 'official' framing of higher education: preparing individuals for employment. Instead they argued for a more holistic understanding of education in terms of fostering human potential and enabling individuals to be more critical and analytical. Those in this group were also distinct from the Singaporean Business students, since they did not describe carefully planned pathways to university and most spoke instead about having some kind of struggle or rebellion lower down the education system. They also reported being less concerned about the job that their degree would lead to, and more interested in the subject itself, the associated learning experiences, and the opportunities for self-development that their time at university had afforded them.

In the second section I explore these students' approaches to learning. In contrast to the Singaporean Business students who argued that it is important to 'know where you're going', the Singaporean Sociology students emphasised the open-endedness of their learning experiences and the value of opening their minds to new and unanticipated ideas. Many of them said that as a direct consequence of what they had learned, they had become more critical, more self-aware, and better able to understand inequalities in society. In contrast to the British Business students, these participants struggled to identify any shortcuts to doing well at university, but said that they sometimes found it difficult to balance the rewarding and enlightening aspects of their learning experiences with the requirement to do well in assessments. These students were ambivalent about taking an instrumental approach to their learning.

The Singaporean Sociology students' goals and perceptions of success are discussed in the third section of the chapter. These students contrasted success with employability to argue that personal identity, freedom and independence are more important than having a high-level job. Unlike the British and Singaporean Business students, they did not align themselves to mainstream societal narratives of success, and instead spoke about pursuing a 'simple life'

in order to be happy. As a result, many of these students identified tensions between their aspirations and the material necessity to secure their own future. A significant number of students in this group were pessimistic about their chances of pursuing their goals in Singapore.

The final section of this chapter outlines these students' post-graduation job-seeking strategies in relation to their perceptions of fairness and understandings of authenticity. Unsurprisingly, given their degree subject, these students identified numerous barriers to the meritocratic functioning of the graduate labour market, and offered structural accounts of prevailing inequalities. While they all argued that it was desirable to present an authentic version of yourself at work, they also recognised that many roles would require a degree of emotional labour, and were doubtful that the kind of critical abilities that they had developed at university would be valued in the labour market. I have categorised this group of students as 'ambivalent instrumentalists', since they wanted work that would allow them to express their personality and to follow their interests, but many were resigned to the likelihood that they would have to 'play the game' given limited labour market options in Singapore.

7.1 What is higher education for?

7.1.1 What is higher education for?

Like all of the participants I spoke to, students in this group agreed that the 'official' purpose of a university education is to make young people more employable. For example, Rudy told me that 'it's a really taken for granted fact that education is something for employability'. Steve went further to suggest that the Singaporean education system is explicitly organised to prepare individuals for the workforce: 'there are tonnes of career talks all the time on campus…everything is about gearing you to the workforce'. Felix added that the education system also functions to socialise students into disciplined 'hardworking Singaporeans'. Like their Singaporean Business counterparts, these students traced a strong economic thread right through the education system:

> […] in primary school do well…get to a good secondary school do well and…go to a good college and get a distinction with A-levels and then find a good degree and then you get a good job. (Brigit)

However, unlike the Singaporean Business students, these participants were critical of this official framing of the role of university. Brigit argued that the economic focus means that

there isn't much room for 'personal exploration in terms of really learning'. She explained that whilst students 'do have a lot of moral education classes' they are 'always side-lined for the fact that you need to get a good degree to get a good job'. These students' personal evaluations of the purpose of university therefore contrasted sharply with official discourses. For example, when asked to describe the main purpose of higher education, Sadie stated that she didn't see education solely 'in terms of future employment', but in terms of 'human potential'. Echoing the advocates of education as a public good introduced in chapter two (Holmwood 2011, Olin Wright 2010, Barnett 1990, 2013), she argued that beyond transmitting academic material, education should enable individuals to learn how to solve problems, to think critically and analytically, to 'build people up to be aware of others around them' and to be aware of 'issues in the world' in order to tackle them. Sadie expressed disappointment that the education system in Singapore isn't geared towards this broader sense of education as human flourishing. This critical stance to the 'official' purpose of higher education was visible in these students' decisions about coming to university and their reflections on the value of higher education.

7.1.2 Making decisions about coming to university: compromise and serendipity

When asked about their decision to study Sociology, students offered accounts of divergent paths to university that were framed but not encapsulated by employability. They tended to talk about having some kind of struggle, rebellion or refusal of work during their pre-university education. For example, Steve spoke about being ostracised at school by other students for not enjoying 'normal' activities and feeling frustrated by parental pressures:

> I feel I have been following a path that has been set out for me before I was even born so I can't even decide for myself.

Similarly Sadie spoke about being 'stifled' by the pressures of going to a prestigious school. For some, Sociology was positioned as a backup or last resort, since the grade requirements are lower than those of other courses. Indeed, Felix referred to it as an 'unconscious decision': he intended to study chemistry but didn't get the grades. Lily spoke about being distracted by her first teenage relationship when she was taking her A levels and subsequently getting 'terrible results' which limited her options for going to university. She explained that she always saw herself becoming a doctor or lawyer and anticipated 'going to university to get a good job and stuff'. As such, studying Sociology was initially a 'disappointment'. This was explained in terms of the lowly status afforded to Sociology in

society: 'people think there are no prospects, like you'd just be a teacher or social worker' (Violet). However, other students, particularly Rudy and Abel, the two non-Chinese males in this group, spoke more positively about developing an interest in people whilst at school and wanting to take this interest further.

Coming to university was seen as a norm for the majority of students in this group. Only Rudy and Abel said that they didn't expect to go to university. However, given that Sociology was often a second or third choice, these students didn't describe the same careful deliberations about what to study that are a main feature in the Singaporean Business students' accounts. When asked, they reported being less focussed on what job they could get afterwards when thinking about university. For example Felix said 'I didn't plan that far ahead,' and argued that 'university should be something that you care about rather than is financially motivated'. Sadie also told me that she 'wasn't too concerned' and 'just wanted to do something that I was more or less interested in'.

7.1.3 Reflections on the value of a degree

When reflecting on the value of their degree, despite the initial doubts of some, all of these students were glad that they had enrolled on a Sociology course. Most said that their time studying Sociology at university had exceeded their expectations and had been very enjoyable. For example Rudy said 'for the past few years it's been great, finding out about things and looking up things'.

An important element in these students' accounts was the broadening of horizons and gaining new understanding through the academic content of their degree. For example, Violet told me that although she had 'some rough idea about wanting to study a bit about family and gender and stuff', she didn't expect to 'really get my views broadened and to get more open minded'. She added that she was 'very grateful' for the ability to 'understand things a lot better', and gave the example of becoming more tolerant of homosexuality since coming to university. Students emphasized the importance of being able to think critically, more autonomously or 'outside the box' (Brigit), as a valuable aspect of their time at university. Most described a shift in mind-set as a result of both the mode of learning and the substantive content on their course. For example Sadie spoke about having a 'keener awareness of the kind of social issues in the world today'.

All of these students told me that their degree would benefit them in areas of their lives outside of employment. Some expressed this in terms of being able to have more interesting

discussions with others: 'I guess it's interesting to talk to people about these things because nobody else sees it' (Violet). Others spoke about becoming more altruistic and more content with their own personal circumstances. For example Brigit explained that by being 'forced' to confront disturbing issues like poverty and starvation, she felt compelled to 'be a better person…treat other people better, to understand what's happening to them and offer help in…whatever way that I can'. These accounts are in concert with the educational ideals put forward by Robbins (1963), Barnett (1990, 1997, 2013) and others, and, in line with Nussbaum's (2010) assertions, suggest that studying Sociology has the potential to make students more 'social' – more tolerant, open-minded, more interested in others and better able to engage in conversation and debate. The perspectives of these students can be contrasted with the more competitive ethos displayed by the Business students in both the British and the Singaporean context. Interestingly, Rudy was scornful of the Business students, whom he argued act within a bounded sense of autonomy. He was critical of the fact that the skills Business students develop were all framed by the need to become attractive to employers:

> I have always thought of those Business students as training to become a con man, to go out and cheat people out of their money.

Female students in this group emphasized the benefits of learning about gender both in their own personal relationships and at work. For example, Sadie said that if she was thinking of starting a family she would expect that she and her partner would have 'equal roles in the family', and asserted 'I'm not going to be the one who takes care of the child all the time'. She also linked this sense of empowerment to the workplace, and said that if faced with sexual harassment she 'wouldn't stand for it'.

These students also identified opportunities for self-development at university that were not linked to academic content, including gaining maturity, being able to socialise and trying new things. Brigit surprised herself when she reflected that some of the most valuable elements of her time at university had been non-academic: 'it is the strangest thing because you go to school to learn things for academic purposes'. She described a number of different social and emotional factors that had helped her to develop as a person, and explained that 'it's really four years of a lot of being exposed to the way people are'. Some students identified the opportunity to go on exchange as a valuable element of their time at university, enabling them to broaden their horizons and develop social skills. For example, Lily described a trip to Canada as 'the highlight' of her university career because she was 'able to connect with

people from different cultures' and to move beyond small-talk to get 'really engaged in a proper conversation'. Kate explained that going overseas forced her to become more independent because for the first time she had to wash her own clothes, and cook her own food rather than relying on help from her mother.

In general, students located the value of their degree in ways that didn't directly correspond to employability. As will be seen in the next section, they emphasized the importance of developing a different outlook and becoming more critical, self-aware and understanding of others over specific skills and knowledge. However, the tension between this form of learning and the necessity to secure a future through employment after graduation also ran through these students' accounts. In this sense, they reluctantly succumbed to the hope that their degree would make them more employable. When asked to identify elements of their degree course that would be useful in the future, these participants identified aspects like writing, research and analytical skills. They also spoke about developing a different mind-set and becoming more confident. For example, Brigit was optimistic that the ability to 'look out of the box' would be valuable to employers: 'the idea of being able to propose something different is very important'. However, some students were less confident about being able to apply the substantive elements of their course to real life situations. For example Kate stated 'theory is not that practical', and Abel told me that the 'ability to think critically' might not be utilized in the workplace.

Indeed, when talking about becoming more employable, these students distinguished between Sociology and more professionally oriented degrees, arguing that employment options for students of the latter would be better than the prospects for Sociology students. For example, Brigit conceded that whilst 'Sociology is useful in helping us understand society at large'; it is 'probably not as useful as a banking or engineering degree'. Despite some concerns that the relative use-value of a Sociology degree might not lend as much positional advantage as degrees in areas such as Business or Law, the majority of these participants said that their time at university had been a worthwhile investment.

7.2 How does higher education work?

Introduction

These Singaporean Sociology students gave a broader account of the role of higher education than the Business students in both Britain and Singapore. However, they also recognised that

a degree qualification was importantly connected to their future prospects. Whilst they were critical of the economic focus in higher education, many admitted that they were motivated to achieve a certain GPA score in order to be able to apply for 'good' jobs. For example, Brigit explained that 'society is quite geared towards people with qualifications and everybody knows that you need a certain level to achieve a good job'. She added that the need for a 'paper qualification' acts as a 'driving force' for students. These students were also motivated to do well by wanting a sense of 'personal satisfaction' (Felix), of personal pride from proving that you are capable, and by the desire for intellectual stimulation:

> I think it's just the pleasure of knowing something new, I just like it, you know, the spark when you form something new, you've read something interesting then you can relate it to society, it's just very interesting. (Rudy)

7.2.1 Not knowing where you're going: learning directed by curiosity and critique

All of these students argued that it is important to enjoy learning, otherwise 'there's really no meaning in it' (Lily). A significant number also spoke about the importance of having freedom to think and to open their minds to new and unanticipated ideas. For example, Rudy spoke about enjoying a module in which students were encouraged to 'discover on our own' and to ask a series of questions without a sense of closure. He particularly liked the sense of independence that this approach to learning afforded him:

> […] you are given criteria, of which you need to meet, and…from there you are left to your own devices to discover.

Similarly, Felix was particularly enthusiastic about the 'critical thinking aspect' of his course. He explained that he had been encouraged by lecturers to think for himself, which had enabled him to 'question my realities'. Felix argued that this was especially important in the Singaporean context where in general 'you are fed what to think, you are not asked what to think'. Students in this group also spoke about the value of exchanging different ideas with people at university. For example, Brigit explained that whilst studying 'mainstream' subjects like Maths and Science at secondary school and college, 'you don't get to realise that there are different perspectives, you think that everyone is like you'. Once at university Brigit discovered these different perspectives and became interested in discussing them:

> […] you take in the views of others, you really start hearing what other people think…and you know how you can talk things out, how to convince people and how to be not so critical.

Brigit suggested that this discursive approach is unique to Sociology. She contrasted her own experiences to those of her friends in other departments who had 'black or white' views on most things, arguing that Sociology students were able to develop more nuanced views on the various political parties and to make more complex voting decisions. This ties in well with Nussbaum's (2010) arguments about the importance of the humanities in enabling students to develop critical and empathetic capacities.

A significant number of students in this group also reported that they had discovered a different, less-instrumental type of motivation to study whilst at university. For example, Felix observed that his desire to work hard at university had shifted from being 'merely based on grades' to 'genuinely wanting to learn more'. As such, Felix had been able to follow his passion for languages alongside studying Sociology: 'I found that taking languages seems to excite me the most. I took Spanish, French, Italian, the basic levels but I like taking them'. Similarly Rudy said that compared to his 'earlier days' when he 'did everything the teacher asked' and was 'a sucker for grades', he had begun to value 'a culture of self-studying and self-discovery'. Indeed, unlike both sets of Business participants, the majority of students in this group told me that they did additional reading or internet searches on topics that interested them. For instance, Violet read about environmental issues and migrants, Brigit followed her interest in GM food, Sadie learned about birth order and life chances, Steve read about consumerism and Felix read Philosophy. This is interesting because it suggests that students' attitudes towards education, and the level of instrumentalism they adopt, may be changed by the learning experience itself.

7.2.2 Learning as central to the university experience

These students all positioned learning as the most important element of their university experience. When talking about how their outlook had changed as a result of studying Sociology, students commonly spoke about becoming more critical about everyday events and practices, and being able to see 'underneath' taken for granted norms (Violet). For example, Felix told me that he questions things that he previously took for granted or saw as normal: 'it's like *The Matrix'*. He recalled deciding to help his mother with household chores after reading Hochschild's *The Time Bind* (1997). Violet argued that her course had made her more aware and critical of inequalities: 'if I didn't do Sociology I wouldn't be able to notice certain things'. These students commonly reported that this sense of critique spilled over into their social interactions. For example, Steve enjoyed 'irritating' his friends by

questioning 'common sense' consumerist values, and teasing those who were 'starving themselves' in order to buy the latest gadgets or clothes.

Alongside becoming more critical and more intellectually 'active', some students spoke about becoming more sensitive and aware of different perspectives and more understanding of those from minority groups. This holds for both students who identified themselves as part of a minority group (e.g. in terms of ethnicity or subverting traditional gender roles), and those who didn't. For example, Brigit told me that she was 'very grateful' that as a result of her course she was able to be more sympathetic to others: 'there are a lot of things that result in one person's character [that] you need to actually understand'. Studying Sociology had also enabled some participants to reflect back on their own past from a different perspective, giving them a different way of understanding their personal history. Most notably, Steve confided that when he was younger 'there were a lot of things that I got very angry about but didn't know how to explain', but once he came to university he 'started to understand'. He remembered being coerced into playing rough physical games at school and often being 'ostracised' for not fitting into 'the stereotypical male formula'. This problem was perpetuated in classes where students were told 'the man should be the master of the house'. For Steve, being able to understand these practices from a sociological perspective had led to a sense of empowerment:

> I understand things that are happening around me more…now I see all these social processes going on…it helps me understand people.

Gender is a key theme in these students' accounts of their changed outlooks. For example, Lily said that studying the Sociology of Gender, taught by a feminist professor, had 'really changed [her] outlook on female oppression'. Abel also spoke about becoming more aware of the ways in which ethnicity is represented culturally: 'I see in [the film] G.I. Joe…the black guys get the sergeant rank while the white guys are officers'. Whilst most participants spoke about a sense of liberation or empowerment as a result of this changed outlook, some also described friction with family members. For example, Kate said that as a result of her new outlook, she sometimes argued with her mum because of their clashing perspectives: 'she has a very sciency [sic] way of seeing things…sometimes she doesn't agree with me so we quarrel a lot'.

Most students argued that what they had learnt during their time at university had altered their mind-set and had developed them into a different 'kind of person'. For example, Steve explained that he doesn't see the value of university in terms of remembering everything

you learn, but in 'training you to…analyse things and…question things'. He argued that these 'ways of thinking and talking' critically would outlive his knowledge of particular theories or coursework titles:

> Now, thanks to Sociology, every time someone says something, I always double think and triple think, are you sure that's what you really mean? What kind of conclusions are behind the statement you just said?

Rudy argued that the value of his university education cannot fully be expressed in terms of skills or knowledge alone: 'what I have learnt here is something that really ignites my passion to help other people…I feel that…as idealistic as it might sound, I have a mission to effect change'. Similarly, Sadie argued that having a 'keener awareness of the kind of social issues in the world today' and understanding 'the roots and the consequences' means that Sociology graduates are well placed to work towards solutions to some of these issues.

7.2.3 Balancing learning with the requirements of the system

Most students in this group identified a tension between balancing their own learning according to curiosity, with the requirements of the educational system and the pressure to do well in order to support themselves financially upon graduation. Despite their obvious and deep engagement with their Sociology course, the need to distinguish themselves from others in order to become employable also ran through these participants' accounts. The Sociology department was depicted as less competitive than other faculties, for which students were thankful. For example, Lily recalled going to a networking event and realising that most of the other attendees were 'cut-throat' Business students or Engineers. However, a number of students discussed the pressure of needing to graduate with a certain degree class. For example Abel referenced the Bell Curve (Herrnstein and Murray, 1994), to argue that 'inevitably you are competing with everyone else'.

The majority of students in this group told me that it would be very difficult to find a job without a degree. For example, Abel stated that in the context of a 'degree culture' in Singapore, it is the only way to 'legitimate your stance'. Some were positive about the power of their degree to help them find a job: 'I mean in Singapore, once you have graduated, you are kind of consecrated to be the elite few, at least the 20 to 25 percent of your [age] cohort' (Rudy). They were also confident that the reputational capital of their university would be helpful in the labour market: 'there will always be a bunch of companies outside that recognise the name' (Steve). However, these students were less sure about whether or not a Sociology degree, or the skills it has equipped them with, would be as well recognised by

employers as other degrees courses. Steve said it was common to joke about the prospects of Sociology graduates, and remembered being told by one of his professors 'you don't study Sociology for the money'. The need to do well was therefore framed by the belief that a Sociology degree doesn't have as much reputational capital as other subjects.

Whilst these students didn't feel any direct pressure from their parents, tutors and friends, they often spoke about internalising the expectations of others and didn't want to 'let down' any of those people that they were close to. Some of the students in this group described being negatively influenced by those around them. For example, Steve said that spending time with friends who were concerned about their GPA had a detrimental impact on his approach to learning: 'even though I don't want to believe these things are so important, I think after a while…it kind of seeps into me'. Similarly, whilst Felix told me that he liked his learning to be directed by curiosity, 'everyone is saying on a daily basis grades matter, studies matter, if you don't study you won't become anyone', meaning that the pressure to do well was sometimes inescapable:

> The rat race starts from primary one[59]; even if you could try to resist the pressure…eventually it will always get to you.

Similarly, although Abel reported feeling altered and moved by the content of his degree, he described a tension between this sense of awakening and the more pragmatic need to provide for himself, his parents, and his future family. Whilst he still preferred engaging with sociological material, Abel had also elected to study minor modules in economics and business finance. He explained that coming from a modest background it was especially important to equip himself to 'think economically' and safeguard his future. Abel's account demonstrates the ambivalence that the Singaporean Sociology students felt about the level of instrumentalism with which to approach their studies.

All of the Singaporean Sociology students agreed that to do well required a lot of effort and hard work. However, since the vast majority enjoyed their course, they reported that it was easy to stay motivated. Unlike those studying Business, these participants struggled to identify any shortcuts to doing well, explaining that their course was about understanding and making arguments rather than following a formula. As a result, they tended to argue that the 'mugging culture'[60] in Singapore isn't appropriate for Sociology because it is about

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[59] The first year of primary school.
[60] The practice of intensive, last minute revision the night before an exam; akin to 'cramming'.

interpretation rather than regurgitation. Some of these students spoke about studying smart by trying to think of a unique angle. For example, Abel said that being able to express his own viewpoint on his own terms had been rewarded with good grades. However, more generally, the shortcuts identified by the British Business students, and the techniques of efficiency outlined by the Singaporean Business students, were absent here. In fact, Steve criticised the higher education system for being 'too efficient' and told me that he would rather 'stop and do a little more research and read more about it':

> They're constantly pushing you towards the next thing. So its education, but they're still trying to shuffle you towards the door.

Like participants in other groups, these students identified significant differences between graduates and non-graduates in terms of job opportunities, earnings potential, lifestyle choices and status. For example, Lily explained that because so many people have degrees in Singapore nowadays, 'if you don't have one you're really lagging behind'. Many spoke about a 'saturation' of graduates, but contended that graduates still have 'a big edge over non-graduates' (Felix). Students in this group also identified a significant divide between graduates and non-graduates in society. For example, Kate described the manner in which the status of graduates and non-graduates is signalled within the civil service: 'it's quite obvious because graduates have high tables…and bigger chairs [whilst] non-graduates have low tables and quite small areas'.

7.3 Definitions of success

Introduction

Building on these students' broader understandings of the role of higher education beyond contributing to employability, this section explores their goals and definitions of success. Unlike the Singaporean Business students, these participants differentiated between success and employability, and described success in terms of personal identity, freedom and independence, things that they argued might be compromised by the agendas of employers. These participants did not align themselves to mainstream societal narratives of success. Some were opposed to the 'good life' defined by material wealth and status, and argued instead that living simply would allow them the freedom to pursue their interests and spend their time meaningfully. Whilst they located a sense of meaning in some forms of work, they

were reluctant to become part of 'the system', and argued that the majority of jobs in Singapore would not provide them with the autonomy and stimulation they desired.

However, whilst these students told me that they weren't particularly driven by the goal of prosperity or career progression, they did want to be able to provide for their families and support their parents in old age. Some of the students in this group felt constrained by the need to make a living in Singapore in a manner that contrasted with their own personal goals and beliefs, and were worried about losing their way and forgetting their ideals.

7.3.1 Success as independence and freedom to live alternatively

Compared to the Singaporean Business students, the Singaporean Sociology students tended to give more individualised accounts of success that expressed personal preferences rather than dominant social discourses. For example, Violet maintained that 'doing what you like doesn't necessarily mean you have to go up the corporate ladder'. Kate, who said that her understanding of success was influenced by the opinions of her friends and family, regretted her tendency to conform: 'I wish I didn't think like that…I shouldn't be so influenced by what other people say or think, I should have my own thinking'. Their definitions centred on personal enjoyment, opportunities for personal growth, making a positive contribution to society and being financially independent. Felix defined the source of 'authentic' success as 'something that you find enjoyment from doing'. Abel prioritised financial independence, and explained that for those like him from a working class background, success means 'a good career, which not only gives you security, but gives you enough income to save'. Sadie framed success in terms of being able to 'do what I want to do' and making a positive contribution by responding to 'what other people need' and being able to 'create solutions'.

In general, unlike the British and Singaporean Business students, these participants made a distinction between success and employability, arguing that success should be self-defined rather than determined according to employers or 'the system' (Felix). For example, Sadie said 'the word employability suggests that you have to fit someone else's requirements of what it means to be a good worker' and conform to other people's expectations. Steve was adamant that success isn't the same as employability. He defined success in terms of being able to wake up and think 'I'm really glad about what I have to do today'; working on things that 'really mean something' to him and feeling connected to those around him, rather than completing tasks for 'some faceless organisation or corporation'.

These students were also more likely than their Singaporean Business counterparts to emphasize the importance of work-life balance and spending time with family alongside working. For example, Brigit argued that being close to your family matters more than wealth: 'you can have everything in the world, all the money and all the luxuries, but if you're not happy and are lonely, what does it mean?'. Violet suggested that becoming 'wildly' wealthy may separate individuals from their parents because they 'don't get each other anymore'. All of these students were aware of the five C's[61], but didn't particularly subscribe to them. For example, Sadie said 'I kind of generally know what they are, [but] they're not very important'. Whilst these students were not generally uninterested in the five C's, some of the female participants were enthusiastic about owning a car because of the independence it would afford them.

For a significant number of students in this group, success was framed around leading a 'simple life' reminiscent of Soper's (2008) alternative hedonism, directed away from hyper-consumerism and hierarchical status-seeking. Steve championed this perspective: he described a basic lifestyle of using public transport, eating the 'simplest kind of food you can get', and said that as long as he was able to feed himself and 'occasionally…buy a book or a film to watch' or spend time with friends 'in the local coffee shop', he would be happy. He explained that this kind of lifestyle free from the stresses of wealth would be liberating:

> I don't really want to own a car, or have a huge house, I just want to live in a place where I can hang out with the friends I like and my family, and still have time to read and think about things rather than worrying the whole time about money.

Like Steve, Sadie stressed the importance of being able to take part in 'café culture' and to have interesting discussions with other people. Rudy was also enthusiastic about leading a simple lifestyle, and expressed the intention of becoming a Freegan[62]: 'it's really neat…you don't spend money and you don't waste food'.

7.3.2 Leading a simple life: success beyond the confines of work

Those students who spoke most prominently about wanting to lead a simple life were particularly critical of official framings of the 'good life' in Singapore. Steve argued that all of the images of the good life circulated by the media and the state centre on being able to 'afford to buy more things'. He referenced a government campaign that encouraged wealthy

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[61] Agreed status symbols in Singapore: Cash, Car, Condo, Credit, Country Club.
[62] Freegans reclaim food that would otherwise be discarded; Freeganism is linked to broader anti-consumerist movements.

families to have 'two kids or less' in order to 'afford to…give them more stuff' to illustrate his point. He said that although studying Sociology had solidified his intention to lead a 'simple' life, he 'kind of already felt that way before'. He argued that studying Sociology had 'boosted and enhanced' what he was feeling and gave him a sense of direction: 'it just made me more sure that, okay I don't want to be part of this anymore.'

These students recognised that their views were different to those of the majority of their peers who planned their lives according to when they would get married, have children and pursue each of the five C's. Felix contended that his idea of success was different from the mainstream view in society because 'it comes from what you do rather than what you get out of it'. Steve said that he was often told that his alternative plans wouldn't make for an 'easy life', but argued that it depends on your definition of easy: 'living in an air conditioned home and having a car to ferry you everywhere', or 'not having to worry about paying for all of it'. Sade argued that a subcultural 'undercurrent in society' with alternative ideas about success in terms of being a 'good person' was gaining momentum, and wanted to be a part of it.

7.3.3 A good job: independence and self-fulfilment

A significant number of students in this group emphasised the importance of finding work fulfilling, over financial remuneration. For example Rudy said 'I don't see myself trying to achieve the condo, the car, the cash and what have you. For me what's important is that I do whatever I want to do'. Steve told me that it was important to find work that didn't make him feel 'dead and soulless after a couple of years'. Felix was perturbed by course mates who said 'the job doesn't matter as long as the money is good', and argued that this approach wasn't sustainable: 'eventually you'll get sick of it and go'. Indeed, when talking about the importance of money, these students tended to emphasize what it could afford them, rather than the possession of money itself. For example, Kate said that she would like to have enough money to travel but didn't care about 'bags and stuff'; Sadie wanted to earn enough money to pursue her creative endeavours, and Abel wanted enough money to feel financially secure and autonomous.

However, the need to provide for parents and family in the future meant that these participants, like those in other groups, estimated that the economic aspect of their work choices would become more pressing in the future. For example, Felix said that if he found work fulfilling 'salary wouldn't be as important', but that if he wanted to start a family or had to support his parents he would 'probably need some development salary-wise'. These

students were also somewhat pessimistic about reaching a high level of income with an 'arts degree' (Brigit). Felix explained that 'in terms of the credentials you have in Singapore, it's all geared into the sciences', so for 'arts students, you need to be really good in the Singaporean sense, technical skills and everything'. A significant proportion of students in this group told me that maintaining a certain standard of living in Singapore into the future would be difficult because 'the cost of living is rocketing up' (Lily).

7.3.4 Tensions between aspirations and the material necessity to secure your future

A minority of students in this group were optimistic that Sociology had prepared them well for their intended career paths. However, most argued that Sociology isn't typically geared towards getting a job. For example, Sadie argued that it tends to attract those who want to satisfy their curiosity rather than those who are focussed on gaining employment:

> I guess the kind of people who want to study Sociology, they're not doing this because they want to get ahead of the system or anything, they're really doing this because they're interested.

Similarly, despite praising the critical element of his course, Felix was unsure how these critical thinking abilities would be received by potential employers. He argued that in Singapore 'everything is top-down, the government doesn't want too much outside the box thinking', and joked that even initiatives designed to get individuals to think more independently are restrictive: 'they want you to think outside the box within another box'. Felix added that whilst the state wants graduates with some creativity and intellectual independence, 'some questions you don't ask, you just follow the system blindly'.

Consequently, a significant number of students in this group were unsure whether they would be able to pursue success on their own terms, and find meaningful work in Singapore in a way that also enabled them to support themselves financially. For example, Sadie told me that she might have to do a job that she didn't enjoy in order to facilitate her passions:

> I might someday have to resign myself to working at a job that I might not love but might give me the money that I can use to pursue, say, documentary film-making.

As a result of this tension some of these students talked about safeguarding their career path by embarking on Masters degrees in 'practical' areas like journalism or PR. Others were more oppositional to the standard career routes available to graduates. For example, Sadie explained that she would be happy working for the civil service or an NGO but that she didn't

like corporate culture and would prefer to work for herself: 'I don't just want to be a cog in a machine'. Similarly, Steve told me that ideally he would like to be writing or making a film with his older brother, arguing that it is more important to be creative than wealthy. He spoke about wanting to take the perspective that studying Sociology had given him to write a book or make a film to share with others in order to 'show people what they are missing in their everyday life, and make them stop and think about things'.

However, those wishing to pursue 'alternative' careers and lifestyles also recognised the constraints of living in Singapore. For example, Steve said 'if you're living in a place like this, you have to work to survive, which kind of sucks'. When balancing aspirations with material needs, an important consideration was being able to look after parents and pay off educational debts[63]. For example, Rudy described feeling trapped in the system because of the need to get a job to support his parents. While he ultimately intended to 'get out of Singapore', he knew that he wouldn't be able to for the next few years. In this sense, Rudy spoke about his degree as 'a ticket out of Singapore'. Similarly, Steve conceded that living the kind of simple life he aspired to would be especially difficult in Singapore, but explained that it would also be difficult to leave his parents, because he wanted to care and provide for them. As such, Steve planned to find a short-term job to pay off his loans and support his parents for a while in order to enable him to 'do something with my life rather than work all of it'.

Those in this group like Steve, who planned to get a stop-gap job to pay off their loans in the hope that it would contribute to greater freedom in the future, were worried about losing their way. They argued that many get 'sucked into' jobs to pay off debts and can get stuck doing something unfulfilling. Felix used the example of a friend who was determined to move to Canada and 'start afresh' doing something that he loved, but was still in a 9-5 job in Singapore, and lamented 'he seems like he is on the road to forgetting what he wanted to be doing'. Others said that it would be difficult to reject the Singaporean mind-set that you 'have to buy what you want to be happy' (Lily).

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[63] Graduates in Singapore who have used CPF to help fund their degree are not able to pursue employment abroad until they have settled their debts.

7.4 Post-graduation job seeking strategies: perceptions of fairness and understandings of the self

Introduction

The Singaporean Sociology students were much more adept than their Singaporean Business counterparts at identifying barriers to the meritocratic allocation of jobs. In accordance with the literature on social closure and social capital (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977, Weber 1978), most argued that certain members of society were able to exercise their privilege through various different practices right through the education system and into the labour market, including the use of personal networks and patronage. However, despite being critical, all of the students in this group told me that if they were given the chance, they would employ similar tactics to get ahead in the labour market. This suggests that unlike the Singaporean Business students, who believed that the labour market worked in a benign way to select the right person for the job, these students viewed the graduate labour market as operating unfairly, and as a result, a game to be played (Brown and Hesketh 2004).

These students also recognised that the way they presented themselves to employers was important. Whilst many were seeking work that would enable them to feel authentic and allow them to express themselves, they were pessimistic about the opportunities for doing so. Most were resigned to the fact that they would have to 'play the game', and intended to maintain a separation between their self-at-work and their self-outside-of-work in order to maintain an authentic sense of self in their leisure time. Others questioned the value of working towards a goal that they didn't believe in and articulated a deep tension between their own goals and the lengths they would need to go to in order to secure their own future. They therefore had a more complex and ambivalent attitude towards work, fulfilment, and definitions of success than the Singaporean and British Business students.

7.4.1 Perceptions of meritocracy

Like their Singaporean Business counterparts, these students unanimously argued that labour market conditions are very competitive in Singapore. They asserted that the degree qualification had become 'the minimum to get anywhere nowadays' (Steve). Many spoke about the impact of credential inflation (Brown *et al*. 2012) on job prospects. For example, Steve argued that job requirements are 'inflating all the time', and explained that whilst his parents 'could just take O levels and be okay', this was no longer the case. These students

also told me that the competitive climate for jobs was exacerbated by the influx of foreign talent.

When asked, these students commonly asserted that there aren't enough jobs available for everyone to find work that they enjoy. Brigit argued that as much as 90 percent of the population were in jobs that they didn't like. She gave the examples of some of her friends at university who 'don't really like Engineering but know that it's where they are going to be for the rest of their lives'. Similarly, Felix spoke about a friend who was deterred from her dream of becoming a vet by her parents who told her that if she didn't study a Business-related course they would not pay for her education, and consequently, didn't seem to be 'finding any joy' in her accountancy job. Like their Business counterparts, some students in this group suggested that social congestion around certain jobs is exacerbated by the fact that some industries are much more popular than others, and that as a result many graduates end up 'settling' for something 'just to get by' (Brigit).

These students largely agreed that official discourses about job-allocation in Singapore are based on the principles of meritocracy. For example Sadie said 'everyone tries to get a good degree' because 'they believe that if they [do] they will be given the jobs that they want'. Whilst a small minority in this group (predominantly those from privileged backgrounds) completely subscribed to these tenets of meritocracy, most were more critical of the 'fetish for scholars' (Abel). Many of these students argued that in practice, other factors mediate meritocratic mechanisms in the labour market. Some based their criticism on the role of networks of patronage in the allocation of jobs which they argued benefit the privileged and undermined fairness. Others went further back to critique the idea of equality of opportunity at an educational level – something that, as we shall see, was shared by the British Sociology students. For example, Lily remarked 'as you go further the percentage of people from lower-income families decreases'. Similarly Sadie suggested that families 'within different income brackets could have different access to resources', meaning that whilst the system tries to reward students based on how well they do, 'they are already kind of disadvantaged if they don't come from a family with enough money'. In this sense, these students were well-versed in the structural nature of inequalities in education put forward by Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) examined in chapter two.

These students were also critical of the job applications and interview process. For example, Lily commented on how artificial and 'pretentious' networking sessions are, making a distinction between how you present yourself and how you actually feel. Kate echoed this,

telling me that 'interviews are one of the most fake situations'. Felix was critical of interviewers' abilities to identify people with the right qualities for a particular job because definitions are vague and ambiguous. He also argued that you are able to 'mask your real self during interviews', meaning that employers may only 'find out how you are' after a few months in the job and realise too late 'oh we've got the wrong person'. These views strike a contrast with those of the Singaporean Business students who did not think it would be possible to rig the allocations process in their favour.

Unlike the Singaporean Business students, these participants commonly argued that allocating jobs according to 'charisma and the way you present yourself' (Sadie) undermined fairness, since these qualities are mediated by your position in society. For example, Sadie posited that soft skills are learnt differently 'according to what kind of schools you go through, so it's just a never ending loop'. In addition, Lily suggested that grades may not be an adequate measure of how well-suited someone is to a job. Abel was the most vociferous critic, exclaiming 'meritocracy is bullshit!' He argued that cultural capital has a role to play in sustaining inequalities, since those without relatives who have studied degrees 'don't have such a luxury of knowing what to expect or how to choose modules'. He added 'these are the things that you know through your own social relations'. Abel argued that this injustice is replicated in the labour market:

> Meritocracy fails in so many perspectives, so when it comes to a job as well, I don't think they deserve what they do, it's how you play the game.

Whilst these students were able to identify industries in which networking was unavoidable (for example in the fledgling Singaporean film industry), most argued that practices of patronage undermined fairness. The majority of students in this group gave examples of friends who had been in an advantageous position relative to other job applicants because of who they knew. For example, Felix had a friend whose father is a senior partner in a prominent accounting firm: 'she didn't even have to give her resume, she just filled out a form and she was in'. Some were critical of the advantage that those with certain social connections had over others on the grounds that it undermined the efficiency of the job-allocations process. For example, Felix said that with connections you would be successful 'even if you can't do the job as well as another person'.

Despite being somewhat critical of the use of personal connections and networking, since they believed that they were living in a society of players and that the job allocations process did not operate fairly, few saw the point in playing by the rules: these students' evaluations

of the labour market as unfair contributed directly to 'player' behaviour (Brown and Hesketh 2004). In fact, all of the students in this group told me that if they had the chance they would use personal connections to get ahead in the graduate labour market. For example, Kate said that even though 'it's not fair', you 'might as well' use any contacts that you have: 'if you have the advantage, you should use it'.

7.4.2 Being yourself, authenticity and emotional labour

Like the British and Singaporean Business participants, all of the students in this group agreed that the way that they presented themselves to employers was important. For example, Sadie suggested that in certain sectors it is important to display 'a certain amount of aggressiveness…to show that you've got enough grit to get through'. She contended that this is particularly true in the Business sector and added that in the context of a competitive economy, applicants 'can't afford to be too sympathetic to social ideals' because 'if you really want to make money, you kind of have to be a bit brutish about it'. Beyond recruitment, these participants argued that it is normal for graduates to have to suppress or alter their personality in the workplace. For example Brigit told me that it is important to be 'thick-skinned' and suggested that an element of performance or emotional labour is needed to survive at work. She explained that during an internship a supervisor once told her to 'give whatever is required' at work, 'whether you feel it or not'. As a result, she made a distinction between her 'office personality' and her personality outside of work, arguing that it is important to maintain a divide between the two:

> […] when I'm in the office and we are required to be like that, that's my office personality, I am true to my office personality, when I am back home I turn that off, and I go back to complaining about it.

Indeed, a significant number of participants discussed the importance of delineating between the self-at-work and the self-outside-of-work. Abel, Rudy and Felix all drew on experiences of internships in the public sector to argue that it is important to suppress your sense of self to some degree because employers don't want 'loose cannons' or 'free spirits'. Rudy described a significant divergence between his inward thoughts and outward performance whilst undertaking an internship. He explained that during his interview he presented himself 'as a very immaculate person, who is really…passionate about things' even though in reality he didn't 'give a damn about what they're doing'. During the internship he coped with the fact that he 'hated' the nature of the work by plugging into his laptop, listening to music and keeping to himself: 'I kept on telling myself that this is something that

I'm just doing for the sake of doing…there's no conviction, no compassion to it, and it's really meaningless for me'. At the end of the three month placement he felt grateful to be able to leave. Interestingly, after the internship, despite his internal cynicism, he 'played the game' and wrote a reflective report in the manner that was expected of him:

> I presented it in a very flowery way, oh this is very useful for me and all that stuff, but I was laughing my way through it and I was thinking oh my gosh, if they really buy into all this bullshit then they are really stupid.

Felix argued that 'you must come across as independent to some degree, but not too independent', and described having to 'keep yourself in a box'. He described the ideal government employee as 'the sort of person when he speaks to you he will read from a script' and who wouldn't expose too much of his or her own views. Both Felix and Abel argued that the tension between authenticity and performance at work is symptomatic of the fact that employers are not interested in the individual beyond what they can deliver to the organisation. Abel asserted that employers are only interested in 'how you add value to the organisation, not yourself', and Felix explained that whilst 'they want you to think a bit for yourself', ultimately 'your interests are subsumed by the interests of the organisation'.

Although these students seemed resigned to the necessity of 'player behaviour', they all conceded that having to change aspects of your personality and 'perform' work in a particular way would get more difficult over time. They were therefore very ambivalent about the level of instrumentalism that would be required to 'play the game'. For example, Sadie said that she 'wouldn't survive for long' if she had to change aspects of her personality for a job, and Brigit predicted that she would struggle to enact changes on a long term basis. Kate explained that during an internship she had tried to be more confident but after a while 'gave up' and returned to being herself. As a result she had decided that she wasn't suited for 'super outgoing confident kind of jobs' and so wouldn't apply for them. Altering aspects of your character were also seen by some to carry a more serious risk: temporary changes may become entrenched. For example, Steve spoke about friends working in Raffles Place[64] who he felt had lost their way: 'they are giving a little piece of themselves over time, the longer they stay there'. He explained that the concerns of making money meant that these friends had forgotten 'what they wanted to do when they were young'. I asked Steve if this was an inevitable part of growing up, and he responded: 'it's [only] inevitable because people choose to see it that way'. He went on to argue that if people focussed less on the need for

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[64] Raffles Place is an area of Singapore commonly referred to as the financial quarter.

material comforts, 'then there wouldn't be a problem living that dream that you wanted'. Sadie also lamented the fact that 'the way it works in Singapore is that people don't really find jobs that suit their personalities' but are instead guided by what will earn them money.

Students in this group also described personal tensions arising from the necessity to portray a certain character, and reported feeling conflicted as a result of this schism between inward thoughts and outward actions. For example, Steve said that he 'hates' having to perform in a certain way during internship interviews:

> I have to…act very enthusiastic about why I want to get this opportunity so that I can have a future, but I also felt like I was lying, okay I am lying, why am I doing this?

Although Steve understood that he would probably have to repeat this process in order to get a job, he told me that he wanted to do everything he could to avoid it. Steve was hopeful that he would be able to find a way to stay true to his ideals and find a way to support himself financially. Rudy was less optimistic, and described a fundamental tension between what he had learned at university and the labour market options for graduates in Singapore:

> I think it's useless for me to just do well in school and then after that I go into fields like HR or corporate communications, that doesn't necessarily fit what I have learnt you see.

Rudy went on to describe his experiences at an internship for a multinational corporation doing market research, telling me that whilst he was applying some elements of his course, for example his research skills, he felt conflicted about the broader meaning of his role:

> I am asking myself, why am I helping big MNCs? Trying to find where are the loop holes where they can go to increase their market share, it is a contradiction you see. In school I have learnt about capitalists as being rotten, and right then when I was doing my internship, every day I was helping out major corporations…doing all kinds of things.

Rudy argued that if he were to carry on in this mind-set he wouldn't be 'a valuable asset' to his employer. Subsequently, Rudy felt that he was at a crossroads, faced with the decision to either 'follow the normal path…get a degree and then just forget about Sociology and move on with your life' because everyone else is doing it, or pursuing an alternative goal, with the risk that it doesn't work out. Rudy later discussed his ambivalence about locating his goals inside or outside of the system, asking himself:

Which is worse? Knowing that you're embedded in the system, and being critical of it but at the same time you do whatever you have to do to please the system…or being totally embedded in the system and thinking that all this is the right way, the correct way?

Chapter 8: British Sociology Students

Introduction

This final findings chapter is dedicated to the British Sociology participants. In the first section I attend to these students' understandings of what higher education is for. Like the Singaporean Sociology students, these participants were critical of the 'official' framing of higher education as contributing to employability, and argued that education should be understood more broadly in terms of maximising individual potential in a more open-ended manner. A number of students in this group disapproved of the mainstream emphasis on the functional role of education and asserted that a focus on the financial returns of a degree in the context of a congested graduate labour market is misleading. Like the Singaporean Sociology students, those in this group often said that they weren't thinking about what job they would be able to get after graduation when deciding what to study. They also spoke about the valuable aspects of their time at university in a manner that directly related to their course material: becoming more critical, having a different perspective and becoming more understanding of others.

The second section of the chapter explores these students' approaches to learning. Participants in this group shared the perception of the British Business students that employers seek graduates with 2:1 qualifications, but whilst this shaped their approach to assessments, it did not encapsulate their approaches to learning. These students spoke about being moved and stimulated by their course material and the mode of learning that the discipline encourages. As such, they tended to approach their learning in an open-ended manner, led by their own curiosity. For these students, learning was central to the university experience, but had to be balanced with the need to get a credible degree classification in order to keep employment options open. I have characterised the learning approach of these students as 'inquisitive instrumentalism'.

In the third section I describe the manner in which most students in this group defined success in terms of opportunities for self-development. Rather than offering unfocussed accounts of their future occupation in terms of the kind of lifestyle it would afford them, most of these students intended to pursue an interest in a particular field. They also

emphasized the importance of altruism and personal fulfilment. Like the Singaporean Sociology students, those in this group seemed less concerned by status and material wealth than their Business counterparts. These students' depictions of the 'good life' bear resemblance to those of the Singaporean Sociology students; they prioritised freedom and breadth of experience. Unlike the Singaporean Sociology students, however, they were more optimistic that they would have the space to be able to explore an open future.

The final section of this chapter outlines the British Sociology students' post-graduation job-seeking strategies in relation to their perceptions of fairness and understandings of the self. Like the Singaporean Sociology students, those in this group gave a structural critique of job allocation in the labour market. They recognised the importance of presentation and soft skills, and argued that it would be possible to 'fake it' to employers. However, the majority of participants in this group intended to try to be themselves in order to find a job that suited their own personality. Whilst they had a keener sense of the kind of compromises that might be necessary to secure paid employment than the British Business students, these participants were also hopeful about the possibility of finding work that would allow them to retain a sense of authenticity whilst providing financial stability.

8.1 What is higher education for?

8.1.1 What is higher education for?

Like almost all of the students I interviewed, participants in this group generally agreed that the official purpose of higher education is to prepare individuals for employment. For example, Joe explained 'you're pressured to go to university to get a good job and they always say it will give you a better salary'. Similarly, Alice argued that there is a 'massive focus' on employability at university: 'all the way through we are assessed, trained, prepared…and we come out with something to identify us so that we can put in for jobs basically'. However, unlike the British and Singaporean Business students, a significant number of these participants were critical of this framing of education. For example, Xena lamented the fact that 'the system is all geared towards passing tests' and that as a result 'everyone's motivations is [sic] just for the labour market' rather than 'learning for learning's sake'. Annie was also critical of the economic focus in higher education:

> I think people forget to enjoy their education…I think it shouldn't just be about passing exams; I think you should be doing it because you're interested as well.

Similarly, Rhys argued that education 'should be designed to bring out your potential and mould you as a person', giving you 'greater knowledge and depth' alongside preparing you for the workforce so that you can be a 'credit to…the way that society is working'. Gwen suggested that whilst employability is central to subjects like Medicine, for those in the humanities the focus should be on the learning experience rather than the end point.

Like the positional conflict theorists introduced in chapter two, a number of students in this group also criticised the economic role of education from a functional perspective. For example, Joe argued that graduates can't necessarily expect to 'get a better job and a better wage', and stated 'the system's founded on lies'. Annie was also critical of the link between education and work, claiming 'they don't teach us really anything to do with how to get a job'. She argued that as a result, students 'think they're going to be able to get an…amazing job' but 'don't even understand the job market'. She suggested that universities are complicit in the misleading of prospective students because they fail to inform them of congestion in the graduate labour market. In addition, Ted highlighted the 'large stratifying purpose' of higher education, and said that 'predominantly its middle class students that end up at university'.

8.1.2 Decisions about coming to university

A significant number of students in this group arrived at university through non-standard routes. Beyond the fairly typical gap-years that many eighteen year olds in Britain take, some of these participants switched to studying in the Social Sciences after embarking on a different degree course. For example, Xena originally arrived at university to study a joint honours Business and Languages course. She explained that this initial decision was 'completely driven by economic reasons'. However, at the end of the first year Xena had a change of heart: 'I just decided that I'd rather do something that I enjoy than carry on doing this for three years'. As a result, Xena's decision to study Sociology was 'entirely based around doing something that I enjoy rather than my job'.

Other participants in this group were unsure about coming to university at all, undermining the idea of university as a norm that is present in the accounts of British and Singaporean Business students and most of the Singaporean Sociology students. Annie, Alice and Joe all told me that they didn't initially intend to apply for university. Annie originally wanted to pursue a qualification in cosmetics, Joe aspired to join the police force, and Alice worked and travelled after leaving college, telling me that at the time she had 'no intention of going to uni'. All three attribute their changed decision to both developing an interest in Sociology,

and an appraisal that their work prospects would be augmented if they studied for a degree. For example, after eighteen months out of education Alice found that she was becoming 'a bit intellectually bored' and felt like her mind had 'started to slow down' because she wasn't challenging herself. Her decision was also framed by the realisation that 'in a generation where everyone has degrees', they are vitally important, especially for those who aren't 'entirely 100 percent sure' what they would like to do: 'I think I was going to block a lot off by not doing a degree'.

Like their British Business counterparts, students in this group showed a relatively weak sense of focus when deciding what to study and where, compared to those in Singapore. Most argued that their chosen university had a strong reputation, especially for the Social Sciences. The majority of these students spoke about a pre-existing interest in Sociology or related fields, but didn't think explicitly about what kind of job they would be able to get upon graduating. Indeed, Gwen suggested that 'people who do Sociology tend to be the people that don't really know what they want to do after uni' because the discipline tends to 'attract the indecisive'. With the exception of Vincent, who had been encouraged to undertake a degree by his employer, these students told me that the link between their studies and their future aspirations was fluid and changeable.

8.1.3 Reflections of the value of the degree

Like those participants studying Business in the UK, when asked what had been the most valuable aspect of their time at university, these students emphasised the personal value of gaining independence, mixing with different people and becoming more confident whilst at university. Moving away from home was a key element in these accounts. For example Gwen, who grew up in a small Welsh town, said moving to a city was a 'big eye opener' because you have to be 'more aware of stuff' like remembering to lock the front door. Similarly, Beth reflected that she had become more confident whilst at university and that her degree had helped her to 'take initiative' and 'develop as a person'. Similarly, Annie spoke about 'growing up' whilst at university:

> Before I came to uni...I couldn't cook, I couldn't clean, I could barely look after myself, and it's just helped me mature.

Being able to mix with people from different backgrounds was also important to these students. For example, Gwen shared her experiences of 'coming into contact with people who have money', and her surprise at meeting students who didn't have to get a loan to fund their studies. These students also argued that their time at university had provided them

with opportunities to try new things. For example, Xena described experimenting with different clubs, sports and societies, and had done lots of volunteering which would have been more difficult if she had a full-time job. Xena argued that university contributes to 'wanting to do so much because you get things thrown at you, all these opportunities'.

Unlike their British Business counterparts, these students were inclined to talk about the transformative or personally valuable aspects of going to university in terms of their actual degree course and the knowledge and skills that they had acquired. In fact, Alice told me that the content of her course was the main reason she had enjoyed her time at university, explaining that she 'didn't come to uni to be social'. Like the Singaporean Sociology students, these participants told me that they enjoyed taking responsibility and directing their own learning rather than just reading 'what was given to you' (Beth). Gwen described becoming more self-motivated during her time at university because of her interest in the subject.

More specifically, a significant number of students in this group spoke about being able to see things from a different perspective as a direct result of studying Sociology. For example, Alice said 'you look at things more critically' and consider 'where power is coming from'. She added that she had enjoyed learning 'how to explore things a bit deeper' and 'knowing what to see', which she didn't think she would have been able to do before studying Sociology. Like the Singaporean Sociology students, those in this group spoke about being more open minded and being able to 'see underneath things'. Unlike most of the British Business students who described a needs-must, arms-length approach to their learning, many of the students in this group said that they wanted to continue this process of self-development after university. For example, Alice intended to 'carry on reading and taking an interest in these things' and was pleased that her degree had 'equipped' her with the skills to do so. Annie explained that continuing to read about her 'favourite subjects' would help her to make decisions about how to bring up her children and would guide her 'future beliefs'. In general, the male students in this group were less likely to express an intention to carry on reading sociological material once they had left university, unless it directly related to their work.

Unlike the British Business students, those in this group did not focus on the particular skills that they had developed at university in relation to becoming more employable. Instead, they tended to talk about having the time to explore their interests and experiment with new ideas. For example, Annie said that spending time at university 'gives you that time to think of what you want to do before you get stuck in something you don't want to do'. Even

Vincent, who was perhaps the most instrumental member of the group, argued the things he had learnt had been worthwhile beyond making him more employable. Gwen told me that even if her degree didn't help her to get a graduate job, the experiences and opportunities for self-development it had offered her were worth it alone: 'I didn't do Sociology for a job; I did it because I love Sociology'.

However, despite finding Sociology interesting and enjoyable, a number of male students suggested that with hindsight, they might have preferred to do a different degree. For example, Rhys posited that it would have been better to study something more 'established' like 'Politics, History or Economics'. Similarly, Ted talked about doing something 'a bit more practical' that would give him 'more direction afterwards' like Journalism. However, Ted also recognised that he might not have been able to discover and foster his interest in Journalism without coming to university. It seems that for some of these students, as they drew close to completing their degrees and were faced with contemplating their next steps, the lack of a vocational link between Sociology and a certain career path was unsettling. Indeed, whilst many of the students in this group argued that the experiences, knowledge and change in outlook they had gained at university were worthwhile alone, like the Singaporean Sociology students, most were also influenced by the material concerns of needing to secure their own futures.

8.2 How does higher education work?

Introduction

Like the Singaporean Sociology students, those in this group gave a wider account of the role of higher education than its contribution to employability alone. They emphasised the value of opportunities for self-development and personal discovery that their time at university had afforded them, and often linked these opportunities to both the content of their course and the mode of learning, alongside non-academic aspects of their time at university like socialising and meeting new people.

As detailed in the previous section, unlike the Business participants in both national contexts, the majority of these students didn't frame their education solely as the means to the end of obtaining high-level graduate employment. Instead the need to become employable sat alongside curiosity and interest in the content of the degree. Despite their different perspective on the purpose of higher education, the British Sociology students shared a

similar understanding of the way that education works with the British Business students. They experienced the same sense of pressure and precarity, but this did not translate into a fully rational instrumental approach to learning. Students in this group did share the belief that employers seek graduates with 2:1s, and achieving higher than this for the purposes of employment was seen as wasteful. However, whilst the British Business students approached assessments with a spirit of efficiency in order to spend more time on non-academic activities like socialising and playing sport, students in this group minimised the importance of striving for particular marks, in order for their learning to be guided by curiosity rather than 'grade-chasing'.

8.2.1 Not knowing where you're going: learning directed by curiosity

Students in this group lacked the careful diligence and sense of project displayed by the Singaporean Business students. Like the British Business students, they tended to have less of a steer on their educational trajectory, and often described piecemeal or incidental accounts of their own employability. It wasn't that these students didn't think their degree would be useful or valuable to them: in fact, they thought that it would be incredibly beneficial *regardless* of what kind of job they got. As long as they left university with a 2:1 credential, these students felt that they would have room for manoeuvre to explore different ideas, activities and experiences whilst at university. In general, they were happy to go with the flow and didn't describe a sense of urgency to differentiate themselves from other graduates. These students were also engaged in more extracurricular activities than the British Business students, but these endeavours were rarely motivated by the perceived need to build their CVs and tended to be directed by curiosity and enjoyment.

The British Sociology students' approaches to learning bear a strong resemblance to Fromm's (1979) *learning as being,* since participants in this group spoke about being changed or altered by the material they had come into contact with, and described assimilating it into their own systems of knowledge to gain a different perspective on the world. They endeavoured to hold on to the knowledge that they had accrued at university. For example, Annie was particularly captivated by her dissertation project: 'I'll be telling my great-grandchildren about it'. Unlike the British Business students who linked their learning practices exclusively to the desire to perform well in assessments, these Sociology students made a distinction between *learning* and *getting the best mark*. For example, Xena said 'I do like to learn for my own benefit outside my degree', but that because of the need to do well, she often had to 'spend my time doing the stuff that will get me the best mark'. However,

the pressure of the assessment structure sometimes meant that these students delayed reading additional material until the exam period. For example, Rhys said that he would find certain topics interesting but wouldn't get around to exploring them further 'until I need to do it for the exam'. By this point, the strain of assessment meant that 'instead of gradually reading through', Rhys was more inclined to 'just skim things but forget about them and just smash [them] out at the end'.

Some of the students in this group were able to identify shortcuts to make learning for assessment more manageable. A common example was to look at secondary texts in order to access 'reasonably good summaries', and then to reference the original text (Joe). Some students said that it was possible to prepare for assessments on some modules based on 'just one lecture', without having to attend all of them (Beth). However, most of the students in this group chose to go to all of the lectures, because they were interested in the topics, and because it provided them with more options: 'at the beginning you don't really know what you want to do' (Beth). Even Xena who said that she didn't always find lectures useful, and sometimes chose to spend her time reading instead, explained that this approach wasn't intended to minimise the amount of work undertaken overall, but to make a more direct connection with interesting material: 'You could never write an essay just from going to the lectures…it's all about the reading'. This stands in stark contrast to some of the British Business students in chapter six who argued that reading was not an important element of their university career.

Indeed, in contrast to the British Business students, most of those in this group argued that there aren't any major shortcuts for doing well, and that attainment largely rests of the amount of effort applied. For example, Alice said that whilst 'you do hear of the odd person doing it in a night and getting a first', in general 'you can't genuinely get high grades without doing hard work'. Like many of the others in this group, Alice took pride in her own work:

> I would rather go into an exam or hand in an essay feeling I've done it to my best even if I've spent weeks when I could've spent half a day on it. That's just what I'd rather do.

These students were often critical of others who did well by 'regurgitating knowledge' without fully understanding it. For example, Rhys complained that some students didn't turn up to lectures and only skimmed key readings but 'still do well on the day'. However, he argued that this was a risky strategy, and that the 'best people' would prepare extensively and 'wouldn't leave a stone unturned'. Rhys told me that he would rather 'get my hands

dirty' and do all of the required readings 'because you get more out of it'. Since these students were less instrumental than both sets of Business students, and described learning approaches characterised by curiosity that were less coloured by the need to become employable, I have categorised them as *inquisitive instrumentalists.*

8.2.2 Learning as central to the university experience

The students in this group were overwhelmingly positive about their learning experiences at university. The female participants were particularly enthusiastic about the course content, and even Vincent, who had low initial expectations, had 'enjoyed it more than I first thought'. In contrast to the British Business students who made a distinction between learning and enjoying themselves at university, these students described a deep connection to the substance of their course as central to their enjoyment of university. Like the Singaporean Sociology students, these participants also discussed the actual process of learning as rewarding and fulfilling. For example, Rhys said that learning about historical changes had been a stimulating process: '[…] the bits that, when they fit together in your mind it just really starts to, I don't know, the cogs really start turning'. Similarly, Gwen savoured the process of approaching a challenging text and building on her understanding of it until she could begin to relate it to things in the 'real world':

> I like sitting down with a primary text and then just going through it and then first of all being like 'oh I don't understand this' and reading it again and being like 'oh, I actually get this, and I can relate it to my life'.

Almost all of these students told me that studying Sociology had changed their own personal outlook and empowered them in some way. Annie described quite a fundamental shift in her own perspective on family and personal relationships. She explained that she has 'quite a traditional family', and always thought that she would 'get married and have kids and be a housewife'. However, despite being 'the least feminist person' when she came to university, during her course Annie had decided that it is important to be independent and have her own career:

> It's changed everything. Because I didn't know any different, and now I do….I think if I hadn't come to uni I think I'd still be at home with my mum, and probably still be with my boyfriend, and that would be that.

A number of students also reported being more empathetic to the plight of others as a result of their course. For example, Xena said that she had become more sympathetic towards the less fortunate in society, and wanted to understand and help people as a result. She argued

'Sociology is all about the underdog' and 'makes us on the side of what most people hate in society, like people on benefits'. Similarly, Joe said 'I prefer to help people a bit more now'. He related this to being more accepting of difference, and said that he had learned 'not to be too judgemental' and 'take everything on board'. Ted gave the example of youth re-offending:

> […] you learn a lot about the reasons behind it. People readily assume that people who are in and out of prison deserve it, whereas they don't realise that people can get stuck in a vicious cycle of re-offending, and you get caught up in the culture of it.

These students often told me that it was rewarding to be able to make links between theoretical or empirical work and their own lived experiences. They frequently recounted instances of applying the material they had been considering as part of their degree into 'real life' situations with friends. For example, Gwen discussed being invited to 'Hooters'[65] by her housemate, explaining that despite being 'ideologically against it', she wanted to 'see what it was like and make an informed decision'. She was surprised by 'how the boys' attitudes changed' at the bar: they complained amongst themselves about the waitress that they had been assigned, saying 'uh we got the one with the lisp' and expressing disappointment that they weren't served by someone better-looking. Gwen pointed out that 'if we were in any other restaurant they would never ever complain about getting a waitress who has a lisp would they?' She suggested that this change in behaviour was due to Hooters' patriarchal culture of permissiveness – 'they see it as being allowed'.

8.2.3 Balancing learning with the requirements of the system

Like the Singaporean Sociology students, those in this group described a tension between balancing their enjoyment of open-ended learning with the necessities of assessment. Most perceived it necessary to achieve a 2:1 qualification in order to impress employers and make good on their investment of time, effort and money, and to secure their own futures: 'with today's labour market you kind of have to be a graduate if you want to get a good job' (Beth). Some of these students were optimistic that their degree qualification would enable them to 'fast track' into particular roles and 'progress a lot faster' than non-graduates (Annie). Most spoke about the value of having a credential from an established university. For example, Alice said that the most 'useful' element of her degree is 'the label, definitely'. Some even thought that the reputational capital of the university might compensate for the

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[65] A sports bar in which customers are served by female waitresses wearing revealing clothes and roller-skates that briefly opened in the city during my period of fieldwork.

lower status of their degree course. For example, Ted said that whilst 'people think that Sociology can seem a bit like nothing really', 'at the end of the day employers look quite highly on a degree from this university'.

However, others were less convinced that a Sociology degree holds enough reputational capital to be useful in the labour market. For example, Gwen suggested that employers think 'Social Science is fluffy', and that they would normally prefer something a bit more 'solid' like Science, Maths or Business: 'I don't know whether employers are looking for Sociology graduates'. When asked, the majority of participants in this group could pick out skills and experiences that would be generally useful in the workplace. For example, Alice suggested that being able to think critically and consider power dynamics would be useful in a range of employment roles. However, others argued that their course wasn't vocational enough to lead them towards a particular employment path, and that it had only been useful in enabling them to develop general and transferrable skills.

More broadly, some of these students were unsure about how much having a degree in any discipline would enhance career prospects, and described a less linear distinction between graduates and non-graduates than the Singaporean students. For example, Annie knew both school-leavers and graduates who had 'ended up working in Tesco'. However, in line with the national statistics discussed in chapter three, most of these students anticipated that the value of having a degree would increase over time (ONS 2012). For example, Gwen described a kind of deferred gratification in terms of better career progression for graduates longer-term, explaining that whilst 'people just out of university' could have the same jobs as non-graduates, those with a degree would eventually be able to reach levels that those without 'could never actually get to'. Similarly, Vincent suggested that non-graduates 'progress less' and don't have the stability that graduates are afforded.

8.3 Definitions of success

Introduction

Whilst a minority of students in this group shared similar definitions of success with the British Business students, most offered accounts of success and wellbeing that were linked to altruism, personal fulfilment beyond the normative expectations of others, and breadth of experience. Work was often positioned as an important foundational element that was necessary to enable individuals the stability and financial means to pursue their goals. Rather

than offering unspecific accounts of future occupation in terms of the kind of lifestyle that it would afford them, the majority of these students spoke about wanting to pursue an interest in a particular field. Indeed, these students described a range of diverse ambitions and goals that were more heterogeneous than those of the British and Singaporean Business students who both spoke about achieving a certain amount of status and material wealth. The British Sociology students wanted to experiment and try different things out in order to better inform themselves about a suitable career, and emphasized the importance of having a personal connection to your work.

8.3.1 Success as opportunities for self-development

These students asserted that it is important to be personally satisfied by what you are doing, rather than looking to others for affirmation. For example, Joe said 'if you in your own right feel like you've done something positive then you won't really care what other people have to say'. Similarly, Annie told me that she already felt 'pretty successful' regardless of the views of others because she had done things that she didn't ever think she would do and had surpassed her own expectations. Similarly, Gwen argued that success should be based on 'personal pride' and 'come from within'. An element of altruism ran through some of these students' accounts. For example, Joe defined success as when you 'feel you've done something positive', and argued 'you get a lot from helping people'. He explained that in addition to being good for the recipient, altruistic acts are also beneficial for the giver: 'your self-respect and esteem is going to be good so you're going to feel like you've succeeded because you'll be happy'.

It was also common for these students to cite the importance of having a range of experiences over the life course. For example, Rhys spoke about reflecting on his life when he is older and being able to see 'how much stuff I have done'. He explained that 'things outside of where you're employed' are important, and posited that even if you were fortunate enough to 'spend twenty years in some amazing career', and felt like it was the 'backbone of your life', it would still only be 'a small part of the big wide success', and earnings would be 'just a small speck' of the overall picture. For Rhys, having a typical office-based graduate job was the antithesis of success because it would mean being 'stuck in a rigid cycle'.

Like the Singaporean Sociology students, many participants in this group argued that personal fulfilment and enjoyment are more important than status and material wealth or 'just accumulating lots of things' (Joe). For example, Alice stated 'you're a successful person

if you're happy, not if you've got loads of money'. She explained that because you spend 'a lot of time in a full time job, it can affect your happiness', but argued that this doesn't have to mean that your level of happiness is defined by work alone. Accordingly, Alice argued that she would like to earn enough money to 'not hugely worry about it all the time', to 'have a mortgage rather than rent', to sustain her hobbies, and perhaps to 'put away a little bit of money for the future…so that having kids would be an option one day'. Above this financial baseline Alice spoke about being outdoors and maintaining relationships with those around her. With the exception of Vincent, these students tended to argue that comparing their earnings to those of peers wasn't important. For example, Rhys argued that he wouldn't necessarily be envious of friends with high salaries because it is more important to 'do something [you] enjoy than take a lot of money home and not enjoy it'.

Unlike the British Business students, these participants spoke about wanting to work towards a particular position in the future incrementally, rather than finding a dream job that also incidentally paid extremely well. For example, Rhys said that within the armed forces 'you have to start at the bottom and work up'. Joe anticipated having to 'go with the flow' in order to earn the money that would enable him to follow his dream later on: 'you wouldn't be able to do what you really wanted to do straight away…it's a longer process than just instant'. Indeed, these students' future aspirations were infused with an understanding of the structural constraints on the labour market. They were more realistic than the British Business students about being able to find work without compromising their ideals. Many spoke about having to work hard to build their career rather than happening on the perfect match between their skills and personality and a particular role.

These students offered more realistic appraisals of what kind of work they might be able to pursue, and were more adept than the British and Singaporean Business students at identifying non-economic elements of success and wellbeing that they viewed as relevant and important to their own futures. This might be a consequence of what they had studied as an analysis of work and inequalities is characteristic of studying Sociology. It might also be linked to the fact that the majority of students in this group had experience of paid employment. I will return to student expectations in chapter nine.

8.3.2 The 'good life': freedom and breadth of experience

Unlike the British Business students who explicitly connected ideas about success and a 'good' job to material wealth, status and consumption, a significant number of these Sociology students were more post-materialist in their accounts of the 'good life' (Inglehart

1990). For example, Xena argued that whilst she used to be focussed on earning a lot of money, after studying Sociology she felt that as long as she could 'live comfortably', work-life balance and enjoyment were more important to her. Xena anticipated having to balance earning with enjoyment, but stated 'there is a point where I'm not willing to sacrifice other things for money'. Joe, whose long term plan was to create a refuge for young offenders, explained that he is 'not particularly motivated by money' and would be happy as long as he had 'just enough to get by'. Indeed, the vast majority of these students told me that money was not a priority for them:

> I don't really want a huge house. I don't want a fancy car. I want to get by. (Gwen)

Students in this group drew a distinction between their own understandings of success and those prevalent in society. For example, Joe claimed that the collective definition of success in society is 'to live up to the Jones, having a nice house…having a nice car, having a telly, going on holiday'. Similarly, Ted argued that 'society is increasingly looking at the individual' and framing success 'in terms of wealth and place in society'. When asked how society defines success Xena said 'I think you have to have all the material objects that go along with success', and Alice stated 'there is more of a focus on owning things'. Annie argued that the societal framing of success is ultimately unsatisfying because 'people expect too much and then don't ever feel successful because there is always something more that you can have'. Rhys drew an additional distinction between the understandings of success at different class levels. He asserted that for those in the middle classes 'it tends to be jobs…money, moving up, whilst for the 'lower class', it tends to be about family and 'getting by'. However, some of these students qualified their responses by arguing that a certain amount of money is important to enable individuals to pursue their dreams: 'you need some kind of financial backing to do exactly what you want' (Rhys).

8.3.3 A good job: self-development, exploration and making a meaningful contribution

These students' conceptualisations of a 'good job' were shaped by their current interests or involvement in work. Unlike the British Business students who focussed on the lifestyle that they would like their career to afford them, these participants often spoke about the importance of being able to develop or pursue a particular interest. For example, after working at the student newspaper, Ted was considering pursuing a career in Journalism.

Students in this group all anticipated that work would be an important and meaningful part of their lives. They hoped that it would be expressive of their personalities and identities. For example, Beth argued that work is important for 'the status of your self' and how others relate to you. She explained that when people meet you they often ask 'what do you do?' and then view you in a certain way depending on how you answer. Xena said that she would hate to have to work in the service sector or in any role that doesn't require qualifications because you have to work really hard and get 'no recognition' in terms of either pay or respect from your employer: 'people can talk to you like crap'. She added that the hours are antisocial and the work tends to be 'mundane'. Similarly, Gwen spoke about her mother's experiences working in a supermarket and feeling as though 'to them she is just a number'. Beth explained that enjoying your job is important because otherwise 'you would be just stressed out all the time', and 'wouldn't want to wake up in the morning'. These students were therefore invested in the idea that graduate employment would protect themselves from mindlessness and lack of autonomy at work.

In their general conceptualisations of what factors contribute to a 'good job', these students spoke about similar traits to the British Business students. They emphasised independence, work-life balance, enjoyment, good colleagues, being challenged, opportunities for learning and self-development, and pay to reward hard work. Unlike the British Business students, they also underlined the importance of being able to make a positive contribution to society. For example, Alice was drawn to teaching because she felt it was an area in which she could 'make things better' in a practical way: 'education makes such a difference to people's lives and it's such an obvious place for [tackling] inequalities'.

Indeed, for some in this group, studying Sociology had illuminated the degree of unfairness in society, and inspired them to want to do something about it. This is visible in Alice's account of wanting to become a teacher and Joe's ambition to provide a refuge for young offenders. Unlike the Singaporean Sociology students, many in this group felt that they could pursue these altruistic goals without positioning themselves as counter-cultural outsiders, and could continue to feel part of mainstream society. However, by revealing the structural nature of inequalities, and the entrenchment of power, studying Sociology had left some students in this group feeling powerless:

> When I got into Sociology and decided I wanted to do Sociology as a degree the main thing I wanted to do, this is going to sound so cheesy, but actually make a difference. But now I kind of feel like I can't. (Gwen)

Gwen's account suggests that she felt overwhelmed by the scale and depth of inequalities and other problems in society, and as a result, was unable to tackle any of these issues in a way that felt meaningful to her.

8.3.4 Space to explore an open future

Like the British Business students, these participants tended to divide their aspirations into short and longer term goals. This was either described in terms of wanting to wait until the graduate labour market was more forgiving, or wanting to spend more time experimenting and enjoying the open-endedness of youth, travelling, and finding more about themselves before settling into a serious job. During this transitional period, many were hoping to rely on their parents to loan them money or allow them to move back home. All of these students agreed that the labour market is competitive and asserted that they would need to begin in a low or unpaid position. For example, Beth anticipated having to do 'volunteering work or something' in order to gain experience 'before actually getting into a well-paid job' and working her way up. In fact, many of these students intended to obtain or continue to work in minimum wage jobs.

Unlike the Singaporean Sociology students who articulated a tension between their aspirations and the perceived necessity to secure their own futures, many of these students were more positive about being able to experiment with different roles as a graduate. Whilst they did anticipate a certain return on their investments of time and money at university, and felt that others expected them to 'aim high', they felt no immediate pressure to get a graduate job, and described having the freedom to build a range of experiences before settling into a career. For example, whilst Gwen said 'it would really bum you out if you didn't get a graduate job' a few years after university, she was more than happy to continue working in her retail job for the time being. Some students were actively planning to delay their entry into the graduate labour market. For example, Annie expressed a desire to work in Disneyland America as a Disney princess before 'getting on the career ladder' at home:

> I just think it would be something really fun and completely letting my hair down for a year before I do something serious for the rest of my life.

Whilst Annie's plan seems to clash with her account of becoming more attuned to feminist ideas whilst at university, given the context of her own background it can also be read as an expression of independence and ambition. Similarly, Alice planned to move to France and pursue her passions of skiing and climbing. She had been learning French in the hope that she would be able to find an interesting and challenging job in France, but explained that if

she ended up doing bar work then she would probably stay just 'for a year or two for the lifestyle' before moving home to pursue more fulfilling employment. Notably, she had already started looking into the grade requirements for a PGCE[66]. Similarly, Xena planned to travel and pursue a Masters degree upon her return to the UK, in order to achieve her longer term ambition of working in environmental or ecological marketing: 'that's what I'd really like to be doing'.

Whilst these students lacked the clear sense of strategy displayed by the Singaporean Business students, they were more proactive relative to the British Business students. For example, Annie had already discussed the potential of taking a break with her current employer and Alice was learning French in anticipation of her intention to move to France. In general these students were optimistic that they would be able to find work that matched their expectations, which were more modest compared to the British Business students. They recognised that the graduate labour market was competitive, but since they were not focussed on reaching a certain level of salary, they were content with the idea that, as graduates, they would have lots of opportunities to find interesting and fulfilling work.

These students all believed that as graduates, they would have more freedom and more opportunities to find fulfilling work than non-graduates. They commonly asserted that graduates are more likely to be satisfied with their work, both because the type of work is likely to be more stimulating, and because 'you've got more opportunity to do things that you enjoy rather than taking what you can get' (Xena). For example, Gwen argued that while non-graduates 'probably live from hand to mouth', graduates are less likely to have to 'worry about stuff like that'. The life of non-graduates was painted as hard going and precarious, with little agency and more need for escapism from the humdrum of daily life. For example, Joe said that without a degree 'you're quite limited in the jobs that you can actually get' and are restricted to a more repetitive routine:

> […] going to work, coming in, having dinner, watching telly or going on the internet, going to a friend's house and then coming back.

Some of the students in this group also identified differences in lifestyle and outlook between graduates and non-graduates. For example, both Rhys and Xena suggested that their time at university had enabled them to talk to people from different social groups and had contributed to a broader outlook. Rhys summed up the difference between non-graduates

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[66] Post Graduate Certificate of Education.

and graduates as 'a two week holiday in Spain or travelling'. In this sense, these British Sociology students felt confident that their experiences at university had contributed to a broader sense of wellbeing linked to self-development, which would contribute to greater employment prospects and also benefit them outside of work.

8.4 Post-graduation job-seeking strategies: perceptions of fairness and understandings of the self

Introduction

This section explores the British Sociology students' approaches to job-seeking in relation to their perceptions of fairness and understandings of authenticity. Like the British Business students, these participants argued that the manner in which jobs are allocated in Britain is not transparent or equitable. However, students in this group were more likely to articulate the problem of unfairness in structural rather than individualist terms. Like all of the students interviewed, those in this group argued that they would do anything they could to get ahead in the labour market. Some identified tensions between this approach and their understandings of inequities.

Students in this group also recognised the importance of presentation, and argued that it is possible to 'fake it' to employers by demonstrating characteristics like competitiveness and assertiveness in the interview context. However, whilst they thought that this approach was possible, they unanimously agreed that it was much better to 'be yourself' and to try and find a job that matches your personality and temperament. Although these students conceded that a degree of emotional labour might be necessary in the world of work, they were far more optimistic than the Singaporean Sociology students that they would be able to find work that enabled them to express themselves whilst providing financial stability.

8.4.1 Perceptions of meritocracy

These participants believed that a rising number of graduates meant that the graduate labour market was more crowded: 'there's not enough jobs for everyone so everyone's fighting for those jobs' (Rhys). Like the Singaporean Sociology students, these participants argued that factors like family background, social class, and personal connections all undermine fairness in the labour market. In addition, some argued that an emphasis on

degree qualifications is unfair because of the way that the education system prioritises some individuals over others:

> […] the people who are coming out with the…best educational qualifications are the ones who have support and help getting them…they have other things playing in their favour. (Alice)

They also suggested that it might be unwise to discount individuals for certain jobs on the basis of qualifications alone because they may possess a 'specific quality' (Joe) relevant to the job that isn't captured by their credentials alone. Similarly Alice argued that having a good degree doesn't necessarily mean that you'll be 'good at any job', and that in addition you've 'still got to have a personality that applies to it as well'. Some of these students also argued that the reputational capital of different higher education institutions can act to undermine the efforts made by students at less prestigious universities: 'people get jobs based on their university rather than their grades' (Annie). Annie went on to explain that employers discriminate according to the perceived status of a particular university:

> We were told in first year that if we got a 2:1 from [this university]…we'd get the job above someone who went to [a post 1992 institution] and got a first.

Whilst some students in this group were positive about the role of networking and proactively developing relationships with potential employers, most were critical of the use of personal contacts to sponsor entry into a job, which they saw as widespread and detrimental to the fairness of job allocation. For example, Beth contended that success in the labour market 'depends [on] what background you're from' and whether you have 'connections'. She added that 'if your father or mother works high up in a company they'll be able to get you in easier'. Gwen explained that these practices put people like her at a disadvantage because '[we] don't really have any of those sorts of networks'. Xena was the fiercest critic of patronage, arguing that jobs are 'completely' arranged according to 'who you know and not what you know'. She gave the example of a friend who was privately educated and went to an Oxbridge university and now works in the finance sector in London. Xena exclaimed 'he did sport [at university]; he didn't even do anything to do with finance!', concluding 'I don't think it's fair in the slightest'.

Most of these students argued that the way society is organised contributes to some of the problems surrounding finding employment. For example, Xena was critical of the manner in which individuals are encouraged to think that employability is an individual responsibility

and that they have 'failed' if they cannot find work. Gwen echoed this critique, but said that having 'grown up in this kind of neo-liberal mind frame', she also felt that it would be her own personal failure if she couldn't find work:

> […] a part of me that I'm not particularly proud of thinks it's my responsibility, but then my rational side thinks the government should help as well. It's all a bit conflicted.

Like the British Business and Singaporean Sociology students, whilst none of these participants felt that prevalent practices of job allocation are fair, they all tended to argue that it is a fact of life. As such, they argued that they would use any opportunities available to them to secure a job. For example, Beth told me that 'if people had the networks and connections they would be silly not to use them', adding 'it's not necessarily fair…but I suppose it's what people do'. Rhys explained that whilst he would 'probably be angry…if someone who wasn't as good' got a job instead of him 'because they had a closer link with the company', he would soon get over it in the knowledge that if the situation was reverse he would do the same thing. These accounts indicate that the Sociology students were more familiar with structural constraints in society operating on members of certain social groups relative to the Business students. However, they also suggest that recognising structural constraints in society might not necessarily protect these participants from the individualising discourses of neoliberalism since they still internalised responsibility for their own success and felt compelled to behave in ways that maximised their individual advantage. This is something I will return to in chapter nine.

8.4.2 Being yourself, authenticity and emotional labour

These students all argued that whilst qualifications are important to get you through the door, soft skills and how you present yourself are important when applying for a job. For example, Beth argued that 'some people can big themselves up' more than others which can 'tip the edge of whether you can get the job or not'. Annie went further to suggest that 'sometimes personality wins employers over', and posited 'I think personality can get you further than academics can'.

These students all agreed that it is important to display certain desirable qualities that may not come naturally in order to get a job, and outlined various character traits that employers look for. These included ambition, enthusiasm, self-assuredness, and confidence. They also emphasised the importance of being proactive and assertive. For example, Annie argued that you need to prove that you're not 'one of those people that will just sit back and see where

things take you'. Similarly Beth said that 'rather than sit in a quiet corner, you've got to fight to get jobs'. It was also common for students in this group to suggest that you need to exaggerate your level of enthusiasm for a particular role and 'pretend that you really, really want' a certain job (Gwen).

In general, these students thought that it would be harder for those who are naturally shy or reserved to get a job. This understanding of what employers look for led some of the students in this group to conclude that they wouldn't be able to be themselves and succeed in the competition for jobs. For example, Gwen said that she would 'have to change quite a bit' and 'put on a front' in order to match what employers were looking for. These students therefore believed that a certain amount of impression management (Goffman 1990) would be necessary in order to impress employers.

A couple of students in this group said that they would try to emphasize 'middle class' aspects in an interview setting. For example, Xena said that she would 'try to be a lot more middle class in an interview' and to suppress her regional accent after one of her housemates pointed out that it might restrict her chances of finding work. However, most said that there was a limit to the amount of impression management that they felt comfortable with. When asked, Xena was doubtful that she would go as far as concealing elements of her working class background to appeal to potential employers:

> My mum did come from a council estate …I don't think I would lie if I was asked because one of the things that I am quite proud of is…that it hasn't held me back.

Indeed, most of the students in this group argued that whilst it is possible to cheat the system and try to fake it to potential employers, it is far better to try and be yourself in the interview situation if at all possible. For example, Rhys said 'you need to be yourself' in order for recruiters to make an accurate assessment about your candidacy. He added that trying to change your personality would be too 'risky', and suggested instead that a diligent candidate would prepare well without 'cheating' or 'lying'. Similarly, Joe spoke about tailoring his responses to match the job description in a way that would also enable him to remain authentic. He described being very upfront in his application his part time job, and told the managers that he is 'a bit of a jokey person'. As a result, Joe was able to enjoy 'having a bit of banter with the managers' whilst at work. Like Joe, Xena felt that being yourself in a work environment can 'get you quite far'. She explained that allowing herself to be 'quite cheeky' at work had enabled her to build rapport with her manager: 'I feel like my manager does really like me because I have got a personality and I'm not just a robot'. In line with Gorz's

assertion that work increasingly demands more from individuals, both Xena and Joe's accounts suggest that a significant part of themselves was invested in the low-skilled work that they had been undertaking part-time during their studies (Gorz 2010).

Whilst the British Business students ambitiously believed that they would be able to find an ideal match between their individual qualities and a job without having to compromise or change aspects of their personality, these students were more cautious in their claims. They unanimously agreed that they would rather not have to alter aspects of their character to fit the requirements of a job, but conceded that in some cases it might be unavoidable. The majority of students in this group told me that while they would 'bend the truth' or 'go quite far' for a job that they really wanted, they would not want to change any fundamental elements of their character for the purposes of recruitment. Most said that they would only change elements of their personality if they considered it to be a positive improvement to their character. For example Alice told me that she would be willing to try to become more patient if that was required, but 'if it's really different from your personality then it's probably not the best thing for you'. Of this group, Joe presented an account most aligned to Brown and Hesketh's (2004) 'purists'. He told me that he wouldn't like to 'create the impression' that he is something different:

> I quite like that idea of not shying away from anything, you just talk to them as a genuine person….I always behave what I am and what I believe each day.

Joe went on to explain that being inauthentic would make him feel guilty because he would be letting people down. Beyond disappointing your employer by being 'no good' at your job, Joe perceived that 'faking it' also carries the risk of alienating colleagues with whom you 'develop a close relationship', and letting down 'the friends that you've just made by pretending to be something else'. This account supports Gorz's (2010) claim that when work contributes to the way we define ourselves, it becomes difficult to sabotage work without feeling contempt for ourselves and feeling the contempt of others.

Whilst they were less prepared to 'fake it', these students had a keener sense of the compromises that they might have to make to get a job that they really wanted compared to the British Business students. For example, Annie said that if she really wanted a job that required lots of travel, then she would compromise her ideals of wanting to stay at home with her family. These students tended to suggest that it would be easier to alter their positions on practicalities like this, rather than trying to augment their personas. Crucially, even those who recognised that they might have to make compromises or portray

themselves in a certain light to get a job that they wanted, envisaged being able to be themselves after the interview stage. For example, Annie said that she would find it very difficult to 'fake it' on a day-to-day basis.

Whilst elements of instrumentalism ran through the British Sociology students' accounts of their employment strategies, they were primarily guided by a sense of curiosity and self-development. In this sense, these participants shared a somewhat 'purist' approach to finding employment (Brown and Hesketh 2006). Even though they felt that the graduate labour market is rigged in favour of those from advantageous social backgrounds, they were not prepared to 'play the game' in terms of 'faking it', because they were concerned that this would damage their sense of authenticity. They were also more optimistic than the Singaporean Sociology students about the prospects of being able to find work that enabled them to express themselves whilst also providing financial stability.

Chapter 9: Discussion

Introduction

This final chapter comprises a discussion of my findings and makes some concluding points. It returns to the empirical material in chapter three to explore how my findings may reflect specific institutional, material and cultural conditions in Britain and Singapore. I also make links between these findings and the theoretical literature in chapter two in order to explore how sociological theory might shed light on students' understandings of education, employability, success and wellbeing. At the outset of this doctoral project I set out to explore how students approach their education in relation to securing their own futures post-graduation. The rationale of undertaking a cross-national comparative approach to the project was to ascertain how these approaches might be mediated by significant differences in the labour market and political economy of two different countries. These intentions are reflected in my research questions below:

> **Given the conflicting academic studies and discourses surrounding the expansion of higher education in many parts of the world, how do university students actually understand the role of Higher Education, the purpose of study, and the prospects for their own future work and well-being?**

> **Given that there are important differences in the British and Singaporean systems, how and to what extent is this reflected in the attitudes and expectations of students in these two countries?**

In chapter three I drew attention to the similarities and differences between the British and Singaporean states' approaches to education and national prosperity. Both nations have been expanding their higher education systems in a bid to produce more highly skilled workers. Both societies are highly unequal (in terms of wage polarisation and social mobility) but the role of the state is different in each one (OECD 2013a, 2013b, Chan 2007). There are fundamental differences in the labour markets and political economy of these two places. In Singapore, the developmental state model has given rise to an economically-driven education system in which there is a close correspondence between educational curricula and employer demand in the graduate labour market (Ashton *et al.* 2002). This 'closed' labour market is strengthened by state intervention and centralised planning orchestrated by a number of interlinked ministries which share the goal of fostering national prosperity

(Green *et al.* 1999). In Britain, a longer and broader cultural history of higher education, coupled with an individualised neoliberal approach to human capital development as a personal choice and responsibility, has led to a less rigid conceptualisation in public policy of the role of higher education and a more 'open' labour market context (Gewirtz and Cribb 2012). In this context there is a much weaker connection between what is taught at university and employment options for graduates.

Political faith in market mechanisms, and an emphasis on individual choice with little reference to demand from employers, means that state intervention in higher education is limited in Britain, relative to Singapore. For example, as discussed in chapter three, unlike Singapore, the British government has not set quotas for certain vocational subjects according to industry demand. Instead, state management of the supply of graduates according to the requirements of the British economy has been limited to redistributing government funding of higher education in favour of subject areas like science and engineering which are considered to be most instrumental to the success of the nation. Moreover, government funding now has less of a steer on the shape of higher education provision, with public money now making up less than a third of the UK's higher education budget[67] (OECD 2012b). Conversely, in Singapore, whilst the government encourages competition for funding between the two leading universities, it continues to spend a significant amount of money to stimulate research capabilities in particular areas (Matthews 2013).

Student choice therefore remains the key driving force that determines the number of applicants in particular subject areas in the British system. Indeed, despite increased emphasis on graduate employability from universities themselves in the way that they market themselves to prospective students (Evans 2005, McGettigan 2013), and calls from educational think-tanks for the expansion of 'STEM'[68] subjects in order to meet industry demand (e.g. NFER 2013), the majority of university students in Britain are studying non-vocational subjects (HESA 2014). In effect, whilst the rhetoric of corporatisation has led to the more business-like operation of individual higher education institutions (particularly in England) (Holmwood 2011, Gewirtz and Cribb 2012), the *policy* link between higher education provision and the perceived requirements of the economy is weak (OECD 2013a).

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[67] This figure may be somewhat obfuscated by the monetising of the loan book (McGettigan 2013).
[68] Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics

In summary, whilst both British and Singaporean policy-makers are committed to market competition, in Singapore individuals are not trusted to make decisions about their own human capital development and the state plays a stronger role in education and training provision. These fundamental differences in higher education provision, along with the different labour market and political economy of these two countries, form the backdrop to the attitudes and expectations of the students in my study. My findings showed that in various ways, and to differing degrees, all of the students I interviewed took an instrumental approach to their education in terms of enhancing their employment prospects. Although the relatively closed nature of the economic system in Singapore would make an instrumental approach to higher education a logical attitude for students in that country to take, it cannot be concluded that the Singaporeans are the most instrumental of my participants, because subject choice adds another layer of complexity to the comparison.

Whilst the students' I spoke with universally understood the economic role of higher education in terms of becoming more employable, those studying Sociology (in both national contexts) were more likely to value aspects of their university education that were not related to future employment. This was reflected in broader notions of success beyond employability. The type of instrumentalism attributed to the British and Singaporean Sociology students is therefore less total or all-encompassing than the approaches of the British and Singaporean Business students. Inquisitiveness about their subject, or ambivalence about the rewards of graduate work, seem to have tempered the level of instrumentalism with which the Sociology students in Britain and Singapore approached their studies. It can therefore be argued that in addition to national context, subject choice played an important role in participants' approaches to education and their understandings of employment and wellbeing. I have summarised the four ideal types of participant according to how they understood education and how they conceptualised life post-graduation in the following typology (table five, p.182).

Table 5: Typology of ideal types

	Singaporean Business	British Business	Singaporean Sociology	British Sociology
1. What is education for?	To get a good job	To get a good job	Not just to get a good job	Not just to get a good job
2. How to approach education and future employment	Engaged instrumentalist	Disengaged instrumentalist	Ambivalent instrumentalist	Inquisitive instrumentalist
3. How to approach learning at university	Making sure you stand out Knowing where you're going: learning as equipping	Fitting in with the rest Knowing enough to get the qualification: learning as having	Learning guided by curiosity and critique Not knowing where you're going: learning as being	Learning guided by curiosity and critique Not knowing where you're going: learning as being
4. Attitudes towards taking shortcuts	Possible but illogical	Possible and favourable	Impossible and unfavourable	Possible but unfavourable
5. Assessment goals	As high as possible	2:1	As high as possible	2:1
6. How to be successful	Need a certain mind-set	Need to have it all	Need independence and freedom to live alternatively	Need opportunities for self-development
7. The 'good life'	A challenging job, comfort, family, stability	Status, lifestyle, self-discovery and wealth	Simplicity, independence, freedom	Freedom and breadth of experience
8. How does success relate to work?	Little room for success outside of work	Little room for success outside of work	Tension between the good life and the material necessity to secure a future	Work should provide an avenue to explore an open future
9. Understandings of meritocracy	The labour market operates fairly and transparently	The labour market doesn't operate fairly or transparently	The labour market doesn't operate fairly or transparently	The labour market doesn't operate fairly or transparently
10. Attitudes to inequalities	Individual	Individual	Social/structural	Social/structural
11. Labour market strategies	Take a purist approach to employment, but frame life goals in a manner that suggests they have internalised the rational economic mind-set characteristic of players	Prepared to play the game but think that it will probably be unnecessary (becoming a player as a back-up plan)	Seeking work that reflects their personality and interests (purists) but resigned to the likelihood that they will have to play the game given limited labour market options	Seeking work that reflects their personality and interests (purists) but prepared to undertake other work to reach this goal.
12. The importance of authenticity at work	Vital and probable	Desirable and probable	Vital but unlikely	Desirable and possible

Beyond the common approaches adopted by the Singaporean students, there were striking differences in how those studying Business and Sociology understood the meaning of education and conceptualised their futures. As we have seen, the Singaporean Business students were closely aligned to the original tenets of human capital theory and seemed to have internalised the developmental state model, taking an 'engaged instrumentalist' approach to their education and their plans for the future. The Singaporean Sociology students, by contrast, reported becoming less instrumental and developing a more critical outlook whilst at university. This led some of these students to identify a tension between their university experience and the need to get a job, a tension that resulted in an attitude I have called 'ambivalent instrumentalism'.

Similar distinctions can be made between the British Business and Sociology students' understandings of the role of education and future goals. The British Business students shared the same understanding as the Singaporean Business students that the primary goal of higher education was to enhance employability. However, as we have seen, in the more open labour market context of the UK this seems to have led to a focus on the degree credential itself rather than the development of a set of skills and knowledge relevant to future employment. The British Business students' understanding of the degree qualification as a general signifier to employers led me to categorise them as 'disengaged instrumentalists', since they approached both their learning and their future goals in a way which, while obviously instrumental, lacked the energy, commitment, and entrepreneurial spirit of their Singaporean equivalents. The British Sociology students, like their Singaporean counterparts, had a broader conceptualisation of the role of higher education and were critical of those who took a solely acquisitive approach to learning. More optimistic, and less ambivalent about their prospects than the Singaporeans, I have characterised them as 'inquisitive instrumentalists'.

The first section of this discussion chapter is dedicated to exploring participant attitudes and aspirations in relation to national differences. The second, third and fourth sections discuss differences across my ideal types according to subject area, in terms of how predetermined students thought that their learning could and should be, and to whether they had a social or individualistic outlook towards knowledge and learning. The fifth section of my discussion draws on both national context and subject area to consider my participants' aspirations for the future and their perceptions of work, wellbeing and authenticity. This chapter draws to a close with a brief examination of the limitations of this study and areas for further research.

9.1 Understanding different human capital development strategies according to national context

9.1.1 Singapore: navigating a rational hierarchy of pathways

As we saw in chapters five and seven, the Singaporean students in my study strove to maximise their achievement in order to develop useful skills that would be valuable to them in the labour market, and to differentiate themselves from other individuals with whom they would be competing for jobs in the future. Students in this group endeavoured to achieve the highest GPA score and degree classification that they were capable of, because this would enable them to demonstrate their achievements to employers via a standardised and rankable system. This approach was informed by perceptions of the way in which the university system and the graduate labour market operate. These students recognised that they could and should work on their own individual project of employability, both as part of their academic studies, and beyond, by accruing relevant work experience, internships, overseas exposure and voluntary positions. These endeavours, in turn, were rewarded according to the highly stratified nature of the university system which systematically identifies certain achievements to make a detailed hierarchy of talent visible to potential employers. The Singaporean students therefore identified a strong link between the skills taught at university and those relevant to their own career trajectories, and were confident that their credentials were accurate indicators of employability.

The diligence, determination and vigour with which the Singaporean Business students, in particular, approached their studies was notable: they were single-mindedly narrowing in on their future career, energetically collecting as many relevant skills and experiences as possible in order to maximise their fitness for the labour market. These students fit the developmental model almost exactly. They had a strong rationalist conception of what meritocracy might consist of, and believed that there is a strong correspondence between their efforts (both academic and extra-curricular) and labour market requirements. I have therefore characterised them as 'engaged instrumentalists'. The Singaporean Sociology students also strove to maximise their achievement at university, but identified a significant dislocation between the ideas they were developing at university, and labour market realities. As this expressed itself in terms of a more cautious, less optimistic outlook on their future prospects, I have called this group 'ambivalent instrumentalists'.

9.1.2 Britain: the degree as a general signifier

The British students lacked the clear framework extended to the Singaporean students that both helped them make their achievements at university visible to employers, and guided their career decisions according to predicted employment opportunities. They therefore tended to prefer to 'go with the flow' and moderate their efforts in line with the belief that most employers seek graduates with 2:1 qualifications. The tendency to 'coast' complemented the desire to fit in with peers, identify with one another and share similar attainment levels. These students' approaches to assessment were strategic in a different way to their Singaporean counterparts, because they were framed around doing what is required to achieve the 2:1 classification. For the Business students discussed in chapter six, this was often due to the fact that they would prefer to be socialising: the work required to obtain the degree qualification was treated as a barrier to enjoying the university experience. These students therefore described trying to make an efficient conversion of effort into favourable grades, minimising the time expended on non-essential or non-marked areas of learning. These students can therefore be classified as 'disengaged instrumentalists'.

The British Sociology students in chapter eight also argued that aiming no higher than a 2:1 allowed them to spend time pursuing their own interests and undertake additional reading that was unconnected to assessment. Displaying greater intellectual curiosity than the British Business students, they fall into the category I call 'inquisitive instrumentalists'. For both sets of British students, achieving a 2:1 was seen as sufficient to signal their attractiveness to employers, despite higher levels of social congestion in the graduate labour market relative to Singapore, and despite the evidence that some employers disregard graduates without a first class degree (Targetjobs 2012). These British students were therefore focussed on achieving a universally recognised benchmark of acceptability rather than striving to maximise their individual capabilities and opportunities.

9.1.3 Human capital development strategies and national context

This contrast between the British and Singaporean students, visible in points three and five in my typology (table five, p.182) might be explained by a number of factors. Crucially, the more open or weakly classified nature of the labour market in Britain may make it more difficult for students to see the relevance of what they are learning to their occupational futures, since these futures are, by definition, more uncertain. Whilst the Singaporean participants gave me detailed accounts of what skills and proficiencies they believed would be necessary to pursue a certain career in the labour market, the British students lacked this

confidence. As a result, they had a looser understanding of the value of the degree qualification, regarding it as a signifier of a certain calibre of individual, rather than proof of the acquisition of employable skills and knowledge. The Singaporean students understood that the degree credential signified both specific and general skills, but the British students were unable to connect the specificities of their course to particular employment roles in a meaningful way, and so framed the exchange-value of a degree in terms of generalities that would be applicable to a range of different occupations and sectors. This, in turn, had an impact on the British students' learning practices: viewing learning as the means for non-specific ends, the Business students in particular found it difficult to engage effectively with material in an instrumental way when they weren't sure how it would relate to their own futures.

Although it may be tempting to pathologise the more disorganised and piecemeal approaches of my British participants, and conclude that they lacked the motivation and self-determination of my Singaporean cohort, it is important to consider the various contextual elements that contributed to a different framing of education as the means to employment. In the British context there are fewer mechanisms at university to differentiate students from one another, whilst these students shared an understanding that the labour market is competitive and that they *should* be engaged with supplementary activities to boost their CVs, they tended to be less certain on where to focus their efforts. The British students had an overwhelmingly open sense of what their employment trajectory might look like, and had less of a long-term overview of what skills and experiences might be beneficial to them in the future. This 'openness', which is characteristic of the system I described in chapter three and which was part of the rationale for the comparative analysis, can be attributed to the longer history of higher education in Britain, the manner in which HEIs organise themselves, how policy links educational credentials to the graduate labour market, and how the wider, more pluralistic cultural understandings of success in the UK somewhat dilute the emphasis on education as solely a means to finding high level employment.

From my analysis it seems clear that the social structure in Singapore invites students to forge their aspirations in a way that is closely linked to socio-economic conditions. Because the strong classification in Singapore provides individuals with a framework for pursuing particular roles in a highly regulated market, my Singaporean participants were able to be rationally and proactively engaged in practices to maximise their chances of securing employment, in ways that weren't available to the British participants. The Singaporean

Business students had internalised the necessary messages about the differential status of different career paths, and as a result equipped themselves with the relevant skills and knowledge to get a job and progress. Indeed, even those Singaporean Sociology students who reported that they were not personally aligned to the traditional route to success in Singapore displayed an in-depth knowledge of these processes and knew how to navigate the system to their advantage. It can therefore be suggested that these students are better-equipped than their British counterparts to secure their futures in a material sense.

For British students, by contrast, successful manoeuvring in the graduate labour market is more difficult because of the more loosely structured, more 'open' socioeconomic system. Weaker connections between education and employment mean that there is a less visible hierarchy of career paths. In this context, being employable is more likely to entail a high level of adaptability and flexibility, and a commitment to developing individual human capital via networking, doing voluntary work, and learning to treat oneself as an infinitely accommodating, malleable commodity. On the one hand, my British Business participants appeared to be particularly maladapted to the socio-economic context in Britain, since they did not engage with any of these practices and were more concerned with being one of the crowd rather than differentiating themselves. On the other hand, the less-strategized approaches of the British students could be characterised as a logical response to the 'open' or weakly regulated labour market in Britain. Faced with labour market uncertainty, fixating on a single career, skill or qualification may not be a rational economic strategy for many UK students. This would suggest that the less-planned strategies of the British Business students might be an adaptive response to the labour market they're in: they are doing what they need to in an uncertain situation by keeping their options open and not committing to a narrowly defined goal. This is reflected in the fact that the majority of my British participants had little idea of their future career path when deciding what to study at university, and tended to construct higher education as a means to keeping their options open. It also supports Brown and Lauder's (2001) assertion that students increasingly construct their university education as a kind of 'defensive expenditure': treating a degree as a general qualification which prevents them from falling behind in a competitive society, but displaying little sense of direction or connection to the substantive material they are studying.

The more imaginative accounts of the open economy in Britain would stress that to be successful in the labour market you have to be well-rounded and not fixated on a single career, skill, or qualification, and recent commentators have argued that more general 'soft'

skills are more valued in a knowledge economy (Gorz 2010). However, it can also be argued from a national skill-development perspective that a lack of commitment to specialised skills could be detrimental economically. For example Green *et al.* assert that 'since the downside risk of mistaken investment in human capital is high, individuals minimise that risk by restricting their investment and concentrating it on general academic skills' (1999:86), and explain that this 'low-investment' approach, whilst rational for individuals, does not necessarily benefit society at an aggregated level and is likely to lead to a shortage of vocationally specific skills (1999). These concerns are echoed by the OECD (2013a).

The delaying approach to entering the graduate labour market of the British Business students could therefore be read as a pessimistic but rational response to competitive conditions. It may be the case that these students were pragmatically abstaining from committing effort until a future career path became more clearly apparent. These students were accurate in their estimations that being a graduate would not immediately result in increased earnings, and that they might have to wait for a while before the graduate premium kicked in (ONS 2012). This finding might also help to enhance our understandings of the high initial graduate un- and underemployment rates in Britain (ONS 2012). Whilst it can sensibly be suggested that this is the manifestation of a less streamlined system in which matching skills to graduate positions takes longer than in the Singaporean context, the fact that some British students in my study *planned* to delay entry into the graduate labour market suggests that the graduate underemployment rate (47 percent in 2013 (ONS 2013)), should not necessarily be read as the number of graduates actively seeking graduate work and *unable* to find employment equivalent to their skills.

All of the students I spoke with conceptualised the graduate labour market as fiercely competitive. In this sense, to varying degrees, these students shared the concerns of the positional conflict theorists like Hirsch who argued that the relative value of a degree would diminish as more people obtained the same level of education. Unsurprisingly, the Singaporean students, with the more visible hierarchy of achievement within the university assessment structure, seemed to be more aware of the relative nature of credentials, and talked more explicitly about being in competition with those around them. In contrast, the British students, despite their understanding of the competitive nature of the labour market, did not seek to think that this justified a high level of effort and engagement with their studies. Given the developmental discourse of survivalism prevalent in Singapore (Olds and Yeung 2004), it is also worth noting that the Singaporean students had a more global

understanding of the competition for jobs, relative to the British students who were more local in their accounts of competition and trying to 'make it'. Indeed, the Singaporean Business students talked about the risk of being 'out-educated' and the need to maximise their competitive edge in relation to a global competition for jobs both in Singapore and abroad.

9.2 Knowing where you're going vs. being guided by a sense of open exploration

A critical difference between the Business and Sociology students' accounts pertains to how important they thought it was to 'know where you're going' (point three in table five, p.182). Whilst the Singaporean cohort were more proactive than their British counterparts, the majority of the Business students in *both* countries had arrived at university to pursue a predetermined goal: high level graduate employment. Both of these sets of students therefore approached their learning on a 'need to know basis'. The British Business students, who had a less clear idea of what particular kind of high-level employment they wanted to pursue beyond the kind of lifestyle they hoped it would deliver, shaped their learning according to obtaining the 2:1 degree classification they believed would make them attractive to employers. The Singaporean Business students, on the other hand, felt that they 'needed to know' as much as possible, because the more they knew the more attractive they believed they would look to employers.

This led me to build on Fromm's (1979) 'learning as having' to distinguish between 'engaged' and 'disengaged' instrumentalist approaches to learning amongst the Singaporean and British Business students respectively (point two in table 5, p.182). Whilst the engaged instrumentalists sought to *have* knowledge in order to equip themselves with the appropriate skills for the graduate labour market, the disengaged instrumentalists wanted to *have* the degree credential as a (somewhat empty) signifier of their worth to employers. In both instances, learning practices were shaped by the desire to become more employable. This goal was both predetermined and unquestioned – students in both groups reported that their aspirations had remained largely unchanged throughout their university career. So whilst these findings support the assertion that instrumental learning entails focussing on the end product of the degree rather than seeking higher education as a transformative intellectual journey, the level of engagement with educational material was much greater among the Singaporean Business students than among their British counterparts.

Conversely, the attitudes of the British and Singaporean Sociology students were less determinate and more sympathetic to the open-ended intellectual journey central to the liberal public construction of higher education (Holmwood 2011, Olin Wright 2010). Many of these students spoke of the joy of being guided by their own curiosity and having the freedom to approach their studies in a manner of their own choosing. This second point was a departure from the more traditional forms of rote learning for students in Singapore. In this sense these students' approaches to learning are more akin to Fromm's 'learning as being', or even learning as *activating*: they responded in an 'active' and 'productive' way to new ideas (Fromm 1979:38). In their discussions with me these students frequently linked lecture material to their own thinking processes, and were keen to explore tensions arising from encountering contrasting ideas and values.

Some Sociology students described a shift in their own learning practices during their time at university, becoming less acquisitive and more inquisitive. This was particularly notable amongst the Singaporean Sociology students who spoke about having their eyes opened to a different way of approaching learning compared to the rote practices that they had encountered earlier on in the education system. They described an unanticipated shift away from 'grade-chasing' towards seeking to understand material. This suggests that the mode of learning and/or the substantive material of a Sociology degree can, to some extent, alter student approaches to learning in a dynamic way – even amongst those students who have been socialised into an educational system that rewards rote learning and emphasizes the importance of education's role in equipping individuals to become employable. In addition, unlike the Business students, a significant number of both the British and Singaporean Sociology students told me that their studies at university had significantly altered their world view and had made them question their own plans for the future. There is evidence in this project that studying Sociology can change students' motivations and promote not just a diligent engagement with the means, but an exploration of what their ends should be: politically, morally, socially and personally.

These differences in 'directionality' can be linked to Habermas' (1984) distinction between communicative and instrumental rationality. The approaches of the Business students can be identified straightforwardly as instrumentally rational, since they were aiming for the most efficient realisation of largely predetermined and unquestioned ends. The Sociology students, on the other hand, saw higher education partly as an end in itself, as a space for thinking, questioning and communicating. These students described their time at university

as providing a forum for debate and the exploration of values and ends. This distinction between the instrumental rationality of the Business students and the communicative rationality of the Sociology students can be linked to the argument made by Crick and Joldersma (2007) that I outlined in chapter two. They assert that the spread of instrumental rationality in the education system limits opportunities for discussion and communicative action and so damages students' capacity to understand others and suppresses the qualities necessary for a flourishing civil society[69]. It is therefore necessary to move on to considering the assumed relationship between instrumental learning and individualistic attitudes.

9.3 Individualistic vs. social motivations

An important sub question that this project sought to answer pertains to how students relate to broader ideas about the role of higher education and the social or collective benefits of learning. A key argument in the literature was that an instrumental approach to education impedes learners' engagement with forms of knowledge that are not perceived to be immediately useful for employment (Lawson 2006). In my study, regardless of national context, the Business students, who took a more instrumental approach to learning compared to the Sociology students (outlined above), tended to present competitive and individualistic accounts of success and civic responsibility, whilst the Sociology students were more social, altruistic and collectively-oriented (points nine and ten in table 5, p.182).

9.3.1 Business students

Both sets of Business students, who framed university primarily in terms of getting a good job, tended to understand inequalities in society in individualistic terms. Despite prevailing class inequalities in Britain (Causa and Chapuis 2009, OECD 2013a), increasingly restricted intergenerational mobility in Singapore (Ho 2007), and increasing wage polarisation in both countries (Brown *et al.* 2012, Chan 2007), these students largely did not recognise structural injustices and did not appear to empathise with those in less fortunate positions than themselves. It is interesting that the Business students in both national groups shared an individualistic understanding of success and civic responsibility *regardless* of whether or not

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[69] However it is worth noting here the different socio-political contexts in Britain and Singapore to qualify this point: what happens to those students driven by communicative rationality whilst at university if the public sphere in society is limited? Crick and Joldersma's (2007) critiques are premised on the idea that there is an active public sphere to contribute to – something that is not certain in Singapore. This is an issue that I want to pick up again later on in the chapter.

they felt that the labour market operated fairly. The Singaporean Business students viewed the labour market as operating meritocratically and emphasised the importance of being 'fit' to compete in this arena: they assumed that an individual's position in the occupational hierarchy 'simply reflect[s] differences in ability and effort' (Sayer 2011:12). These findings are in concert with the work of those who argue that the appearance of a meritocracy, and the subsequent encouragement of individuals to see success and failure in individualistic terms, leads people to have little sympathy for those in less fortunate circumstances than themselves (Tilly 1998, Sayer 2011, Sennett 2003). Although by contrast, the British Business students did not perceive the labour market to be operating fairly and identified many flaws in the job allocation system in Britain, only a minority of them linked this critique to structural inequalities (these were the students from working class backgrounds), and even when structural inequalities were recognised, most argued persistently that becoming successful was a matter of individual choice and determination.

So whilst the Singaporean Business students argued 'it's a meritocracy!' and the British Business students asserted it's 'dog eat dog!', both sets of students framed getting a job as an individual responsibility. As might be expected, they did not focus on structural issues and presented individualistic accounts of social problems in society. Despite their different understandings of the labour market, the result was the same: there is little that the government could or should do to make the system fairer, and it is down to the individual to make the best of their own situation. Both of these groups of students seemed to be aligned to the ideology of what Brown and Lauder dub 'primitive capitalism': de-regulation, anti-welfarism, minimal state interference and a 'demand for acquisitive behaviour in all areas of social life' (2001:4).

The perspectives of the Business students in my study support Tilly's (1998) claim that the individualisation of success and failure according to personal effort rather than recognition of the role of family background and other social factors denies inequalities in society and legitimates self-interestedness. It also lines up with Sayer's (2011) argument that widespread subscription to the fallacious idea of 'opportunity for all' encourages individuals to focus on being fit for the competition, and steers attention away from the zero-sum fact that there aren't enough 'good' quality jobs for every member of society. This encapsulates the sentiments of some of the British Business students who told me that they were aware of inequalities but preferred not to think about them, and focussed instead on trying to avoid being in an unfortunate predicament themselves. These individuals were struggling for

position but did not seek to challenge the nature and structure of the positions themselves (Sayer 2011). The fact that the Business students in my study presented individualistic and competitive accounts of how to get ahead in society is at odds with OECD research that investing in human capital leads to increases in civic participation, voluntary work and charitable giving (OECD 2001). In fact, whilst the original proponents of human capital theory argued that widening access to education would contribute to enhanced social justice and alleviate the circumstances of the less-fortunate in society, these students presented accounts that were highly competitive and at times elitist.

9.3.2 Sociology students

In contrast, and perhaps unsurprisingly given the content of their degree courses, the Sociology students in both Britain and Singapore often referenced structural inequalities when discussing how the labour market operates. This was especially true of the British Sociology students who had studied a course specifically modelled around exploring labour market opportunities and inequalities. But even the Singaporean Sociology students who, to my knowledge, had not experienced a module directly dedicated to these issues, were aware of the structuring of opportunities for individuals in the education system according to gender, social class and ethnicity.

The Sociology students in both national contexts were more able to identify structural problems with the competition for jobs that undermined the idea of individual responsibility. As a result, unlike the Business students, when asked, these students didn't think that there were enough jobs for everyone who was looking. They were less likely to argue that finding work is an entirely individual responsibility. This suggests that the Sociology students might be more protected than the Business students from the injuries to self resulting from un- or under-employment upon graduation identified by Cassidy and Wright (2008). However, even though these students were able to talk in a theoretical or abstract sense about the various barriers to finding employment and the non-meritocratic factors that may impede individual trajectories in the labour market, they had difficulty applying these ideas to their own situations and still felt morally vulnerable to the stigma of possible unemployment. These students also tended to assume personal responsibility for their own employment, despite being able to identify structural barriers to material success. This suggests that although you can have socially or politically enlightened insights into inequality, to rid yourself of more deeply entrenched ideological notions of individual responsibility you need to be involved with other social actors, and to be connected to some movement for social change. This tells

us something interesting about structure and agency, and can be linked to Marx's philosophy of materialism which prioritises actions over ideas and posits that people only really gain a true understanding of the world when they change it (Marx 1976, Marx and Engels 1970). The most stubborn ideological notions feed of people's sense of individual powerlessness: ideology is 'a resolution in the mind of contradictions which are not practically resolved' (Larrain 1992:112).

In the literature I identified a tension between different accounts of the relationship between culture and class in education. Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) argued that non-vocational education (for example, in the humanities) allowed the upper middle classes to demonstrate their dominance because they were less restricted by the material demands of making a living, and so could invest more time in impractical activities of self-perfection through culture. In this study, I identified a sub-group of female Singaporean Sociology students who could be described as a 'leisure class' (Veblen 1994). By virtue of their parents' situation, and the anticipation that they would marry a male breadwinner in the future, these students were somewhat protected from the pressures of long-term employment and the fear of not being able to find work that was well-remunerated and meaningful to them. Their enjoyment of the course seemed to be greater as a consequence. This suggests that studying a non-vocational course like Sociology might be more attractive to those less pressed by financial imperatives, and those with sufficient social capital to compensate for doing a degree that is less coveted in the graduate labour market[70].

However, there is also evidence in my research that studying Sociology can itself lead to a sense of empowerment, especially for working class students as they become more aware of structural inequalities. This seems less connected to the fact that Sociology is non-vocational, but suggests that the content and character of Sociology itself might help to activate students to become more critical of the class system. This is interesting given that a typical criticism of Sociology – and one which certainly feeds the perception that it is a low-status degree - is that it is 'just common sense' (Watts 2011). Conversely, it has been argued from within Sociology that 'common sense' shares much with the ideology of utilitarian individualism, and that the classical roots of Sociology were formed in opposition to this (Fevre 2000, 2003). Accordingly, these students positioned Sociology as an antidote to common ideological understanding, and a lens through which to better grasp the injustices

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[70] This assertion is somewhat supported by the greater sense of urgency amongst the British students who identified themselves as working class, (and attended state comprehensives) relative to those who identified as middle class (and had been privately educated).

of society. Of course, as discussed in my findings, whilst some students felt empowered by this discovery, others felt overwhelmed by the ubiquity of these structures.

In addition, female students studying Sociology in both Britain and Singapore spoke about having an enhanced understanding of gender politics which they described as emancipatory. This included feeling more empowered in their own personal relationships and being more able to recognise when they were being discriminated against. These realisations tended to have a more revelatory character in Singapore where cultural norms surrounding gender are more traditional and stereotyped, and where it is still commonly expected that women will take minor roles in the labour market before returning to the domestic sphere to raise children (Hodal 2013). Whilst the male Singaporean Sociology students were not able to apply this insight to their own lives in quite the same way, many spoke about revising their own views and approaching their own personal relationships differently.

9.3.3 Explaining the differences

It would appear, then, that an individualised, instrumental human capital approach to higher education in terms of the attainment of a credential goes hand in hand with an individualised understanding of social inequalities. Building on this, it seems reasonable to suggest that there is a relationship between these participants' understandings of inequalities and the methodological and epistemological bases of Business and Sociology as disciplines. Historically, Sociology and Economics (of which, arguably, Business is a more recent off-shoot) have taken different methodological approaches: economics as a scientific discipline grew out of the classical political economy of the 18th and early 19th centuries, and was intimately tied up with the bourgeois revolutions and the growth of individual freedoms; sociology arose partly in response to the pathologies of competitive individualism, the discovery of 'the social' making plausible the idea that human life as a whole could be rationally controlled and improved. Despite the fact that ethical concerns and notions of corporate social responsibility have begun to permeate the study of business, the dominant paradigm in economics is an individualistic one[71]. This might help to explain the link between

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[71] Interestingly, in the wake of the recent financial crisis, an international group of economics students has mobilised to critique the 'narrow' manner in which their subject is being taught and call for a broader conceptualisation of economics beyond free-market theories and a strengthening of links between economics and social science disciplines, in order to tackle the challenges facing society (Inman 2014).

the individualistic attitudes of the Business students and the more social attitudes of the Sociology students[72].

We saw in chapter two that universities are operating increasingly according to a financialised logic and that trends of financialisation and corporatisation are more advanced in Business Schools, characterised by Beverungen *et al.* (2013) as the 'testing group' for financial innovations in the higher education sector. The consumerist attitude towards education and the lack of social responsibility amongst students which Beverungen *et al.* argue is a consequence of this financialised logic, does seem to be evident in the Business students I studied. However, whilst they took an instrumental approach to their own learning, my 'disengaged' British Business students lacked the ruthless ambition and drive described by Beverungen *et al.* They saw the labour market as unpredictable and positioned themselves as relatively passive compared to the aggressive students in Beverungen *et al.*'s account. Moreover, I don't think it is accurate to describe the Singaporean Business students as 'ruthless' in their approach either; rather, it is more apt to say that their framing of the graduate labour market led them to believe that they were acting rationally and diligently, and that the choice to act in this manner was equally available to all citizens. Although these students were competitive and aspirational, they had a strong sense of fairness. They did not want to make an exception for themselves, or to profit from others' failings and misfortunes. Instead, they wanted their skills and talents to be measured transparently against the skills and talents of others.

The perception of the personal ownership of successes and failures (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, Sennett 2003) may have particularly bleak implications for those British Business students who had unrealistic expectations of the fruits of the graduate labour market. There is a contradiction in the British Business students' accounts between their beliefs and actions. On the one hand, they argued that since society is aggressively competitive and the graduate labour market is 'dog-eat-dog', you need to do everything you can to get ahead. However, when it came to their own learning practices, rather than maximising their attainment at university, these students commonly talked about 'coasting' and limiting their involvement with academic material in order to enjoy the social aspects of their time at university. Perhaps it is the case that these students' perceptions of an unfair labour market led them

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[72] I am aware that there is a chicken and egg issue here: the data from this study cannot tell us whether the Sociology students experienced an awakening during their studies, or whether they held particular values that prompted them to pursue a degree in this area. This will be considered in more detail presently.

to think that it didn't really matter if they excelled or not at university. It might also be possible that some students thought that things outside of their education, for example their family background and personal connections, would determine their employment outcome as long as they managed to get a 2:1. This second interpretation is somewhat supported by the fact that amongst the British Business cohort, the two students who presented the most strategized plans for post-graduation both strongly self-identified as working class (Sarah and Glynn). Being from a working class background appeared to contribute to a sense of both urgency and realism, since these students felt less able to rely on their parents for financial support, and were therefore less likely to pursue travel plans or hold out for a dream job.

As already noted, these findings suggest that studying Sociology engenders a greater awareness of injustices and inequalities in society, and a desire to help the less fortunate. Conversely, Business seems to reinforce individualistic perspectives based on the idea of the survival of the fittest. In this sense my findings support the critique of the implementation of human capital theory in higher education policy on the grounds that an emphasis on equipping individuals for their role in the labour market restricts the broader purpose of learning and limits student consciousness of the civic role traditionally played by universities. They support Nussbaum's argument that the arts, humanities and social sciences help to develop empathy and critical thought. As such, my project calls into question the market-based prioritisation of subjects according to how directly they contribute to individual employability and national economic productivity, and the subsequent marginalisation of the arts, humanities and social sciences. Diminishing these subjects, both in terms of funding and status on the part of universities and educational policy-makers, and appealing to prospective students on the grounds that certain degree courses make them more employable than others, may limit opportunities for young people to engage with subjects that help to foster social responsibility, autonomy, and critical thought. Indeed, Nussbaum might categorise the Singaporean Business students as 'useful machines' rather than 'complete citizens who can think for themselves, criticise tradition, and understand the significance of another person's sufferings and achievements' (2010:2). Nussbaum might also question the utility of the British Business students' approaches to their education on the grounds that they have missed the opportunity to develop their human capital at university and do not appear to have developed the critical abilities or capacity for empathy that come through more strongly in the Sociology students' accounts of their time at university. This brings the value of a utilitarian approach to learning in an open labour market

context into question. Conversely, studying Sociology seems to be associated with a greater consciousness of one's civic role.

9.4 Student or subject?

When accounting for these striking differences between the perceptions and attitudes of participants studying Business and Sociology, it is vital to consider the extent to which it is the content of the degree course or the type of student (including their social background) that is attracted to studying it, that is the driver of competitive or social attitudes. There is some evidence in the Sociology students' accounts of feeling critical of 'the system' prior to choosing their degree. Some students from both countries said that they were drawn to Sociology as they hoped it would help them to explain some of the things that they were experiencing. However for others, Sociology was positioned as a default or second choice because they had failed to achieve the grades necessary to get into a more well-respected degree course.

There is strong evidence amongst the Sociology students in both countries that studying Sociology helped them to develop new ideas and changed their learning practices away from acquisitive towards inquisitive learning: many spoke about a transformative experience of changing views or becoming more aware of different perspectives. Changed perspectives were less evident amongst the Business students in each national context. These students tended to talk about how the substantive material of their course confirmed their world views. For the British Business students, transformative elements of their university career were articulated in terms of the social elements of moving away from home, meeting new people and becoming more mature. It is notable that they did not relate any of these transformative elements to their degree course.

A minority of British and Singaporean Business students described an affinity with Business prior to commencing their degree, however the majority spoke about deciding to study business in terms of 'playing it safe'. Business was regarded by these students as a pragmatic and practical choice that would maximise their employment opportunities upon graduation. It is therefore plausible to suggest that those who take a predominantly instrumental approach to their learning might be more inclined to study business or science-related courses than the arts/humanities courses.

As most of my Business students chose their degree subject for explicitly instrumental reasons, my findings do not really test Frank *et al.*'s claims that studying Economics (and, to extrapolate, Business) encourages self-interested behaviour. What was evident, however, is that studying Business offers little incentive to change or challenge instrumental behaviour. Even though in both the British and Singaporean Business syllabuses there were modules on corporate social responsibility and business ethics, it does not seem that these topics prompted my participants to question their motivations or to consider their broader civic role. If these students already took a competitive rather than a social approach to their own learning, then studying Business failed to address this, and may in some cases have reinforced it. It is difficult to know, in the case of the British Business students who displayed such disengaged learning practices, whether their unchanged view was to do with their course material itself or their lack of engagement with it.

Social class could also play a key role here. My British Business cohort included a number of privately educated participants, whereas the British Sociology students were predominantly from working class or lower middle class backgrounds and commonly attended comprehensive schools. This might help to explain why the former placed more emphasis on individual responsibility whilst the latter pointed to a number of different structural barriers that might restrict individual trajectories in the education system and the labour market: if you have not personally come up against these barriers, perhaps it is harder to see that they are there. Equally, it is probably easier to argue that you and your forebears have reached prosperous positions due to your own efforts and talents rather than due to the system being 'rigged' or succeeding at the expense of others. This discrepancy might also help us to understand the different levels of instrumentalism displayed across the two groups: It could be the case that working class students reject a purely instrumental framing of education because they predict that they are ill-equipped for this function, and therefore need to garner other rewards from it. This is the opposite of Bourdieu's (1977) argument that those in a privileged economic position are more able to glean enjoyment from learning about impractical things that cannot be readily linked to employment than those from a lower class background who feel the pressure of economic imperatives more strongly.

Amongst the Singaporean Business students, social class did not seem to have any significant bearing on the views and sentiments expressed. Whether they came from a prosperous family and lived in landed property, or grew up in a HDB flat, all of these students told me that they wanted to find well-paid work in order to be able to look after their parents in their

old age. Social class seemed to play more of a decisive role amongst my Singaporean Sociology students. Unsurprisingly, those from working class backgrounds were much more critical of meritocratic principles, the government and various social mechanisms.

9.5 Work, well-being and authenticity

Building on the distinctions made in the previous section between the more instrumentally rational and individualistic perspectives of the British and Singaporean Business students and the more social and open-ended or communicatively rational outlooks of the British and Singaporean Sociology students (points 3 and 10 in table five, p.182), I want to return to the national context to explore and explain their different expectations of work, well-being and authenticity (points six to twelve). This section reconnects students' perceptions of higher education and attitudes towards learning to their plans for the future and their hopes of realising them within the British and Singaporean labour markets. It is important at the outset to establish the parameters of this discussion, since the data I have is on students' *plans* for the future, and since this is not a longitudinal study I haven't traced their *actual* employment trajectories. However, relating my participants' reported employment strategies to the national empirical data in chapter three allows me to make some comments on how realistic their expectations are. I therefore seek to argue that an instrumentally rational approach to higher education is of greater benefit to the Singaporean Business students than to their British counterparts (because of material constraints); whilst the more open-ended forms of learning that foster critical abilities may be more beneficial for Sociology graduates in the British labour market relative to the Singaporean labour market (because of sociocultural constraints).

9.5.1 Business students and the regulation of material expectations

All of the Business students that I spoke to were confident that their degree had equipped them to become more employable. As we have seen, the Singaporean Business students were more likely to frame their employability in terms of the skills and knowledge that they had developed than the British Business students who focussed more on the value of the credential itself as a signifier of talent. This translated into different kinds of post-graduation strategies – whilst the Singaporean cohort were enthusiastically pursuing internships, interviews and networking sessions in order to build up their experiences in preparation for the hunt for employment, the British cohort were less strategic: many intended to delay

entry into the graduate labour market and to pursue low-skilled jobs in order to prolong their care-free student lifestyle.

However, both sets of Business students' longer term goals centred on a high-status job, financial security and status. In fact, the British Business students seemed to be *more* ambitious than their Singaporean counterparts in their expectation that, in addition to providing financial security and furnishing a certain kind of lifestyle, work should also be a vehicle for their own self-development. These two groups of students also had different conceptualisations of 'fairness' in the graduate labour market: whilst the Singaporean Business students argued that the labour market operated meritocratically, the British Business students were more likely to argue that in the British context it is 'dog eat dog'. These distinctions relate to how these students constructed their own sense of employability and authenticity.

9.5.2 Singaporean Business students: thriving in a work-centred society?

The Singaporean Business students universally argued that the graduate labour market was highly competitive and that they would have to do everything within their power to maximise their employability. When discussing their employment plans, unlike the British Business students, these participants made strong links between their current skill-sets and their potential for employment in various fields, and were prepared to 'work their way up' in an organisation. During their time at university they had also worked towards filling any gaps in their knowledge and experience in order to 'hit the ground running' and to be as attractive as possible to potential employers. These students' accounts also suggested that they would not feel comfortable taking on a role unless they had the requisite skills and qualities. I have argued that this approach to employability is strongly related to the more tightly structured nature of educational and economic policy in Singapore, and to socio-political discourses of survivalism (Olds and Yeung 2004). In this sense, they are the fulfilment of the ruling PAP's initiatives to foster knowledgeable, diligent and hard-working citizens.

The Singaporean Business students presented work-centred understandings of success and, as a result, wanted to present themselves as favourably as possible: for many of these students, success and employability were the same thing. However, whilst these students argued that success at interview was determined, in part, by the demonstration of 'soft' skills including personality and enthusiasm, they tended to frame this as a positive opportunity to enhance their connection with a particular role. In fact, the Singaporean Business students were the only group in this study to speak about the recruitment process as operating in a

'pure' fashion, viewing the recruitment process as a benign tool for accurately matching employment supply and demand. In this sense, the Singaporean Business students had much in common with the 'purists' identified by Brown and Hesketh (2004), since they stressed the importance of maintaining a sense of authenticity throughout the recruitment process and believed that the labour market operates fairly according to meritocratic principles.

However, the fact that these students had tailored their educational trajectory according to beliefs about what would make them most employable, had engaged in numerous CV building exercises, and identified success primarily in terms of employability with little room for aspects that did not relate to work, is all suggestive of 'player' behaviour. This is especially apparent in their decisions to 'play it safe' by opting for a degree in a subject with a fairly 'certain' and 'stable' return on their investments of time, effort and money. These students had absorbed societal messages about the importance of skills in a knowledge-based economy, and had built their identities and aspirations around the goal of becoming employable. Indeed, many of these students described constructing their whole sense of self in terms of ensuring a smooth fit with the labour market.

The Singaporean Business students cannot straightforwardly be categorized as either 'players' or 'purists'. One possible interpretation of the attitudes and approaches of these students is that the encouragement of a rational economic construction of the self in Singapore leads to a subtler form of player behaviour that allows students to form attachments and a sense of authentic engagement with their chosen degree subject and career path. Brown and Hesketh (2004) used players and purists to refer to the 'means' adopted by graduates in order to find employment, making a distinction between those who were prepared to 'play the game' in order to obtain a graduate job and 'purists' who strove to retain a sense of personal authenticity. However, the behaviour of the Singaporean Business Students suggests that they constructed their own sense of authenticity according to economic rationality; this meant that while they experienced themselves as purists, further back in their educational trajectory they had prioritised economically rational ends over personal interests in areas like philosophy and theatre. These students therefore presented a largely one-dimensional sense of self that bears strong resemblance to the socially committed 'developmental worker' in Singapore described by Sung (2006). In Brown and Hesketh's (2004) study, the growth in player behaviour was seen to be the result of increasing positional congestion that required graduates to sacrifice their authentic self in order to get a decent job. However, in Singapore it might be argued that the 'player'

elements of these students' behaviours is a manifestation of the societal definition of (individual) success, rather than a result of intensifying social congestion in the labour market.

Since these students' aspirations were regulated by an in-depth understanding of labour market opportunities for graduates, it seems reasonable to suggest that their risk of 'anomie' – that is, of pursuing unattainable goals - is small. However, their early adoption of rational-economic interests and their focus on 'useful' knowledge might also suggest that they are at risk of over-identifying with work-centred goals. Their narrow conceptualisations of success might entail some costs in terms of limiting their ability to develop a 'contemplative habit of mind', to engage with issues beyond their own immediate utility, and to be resilient in the face of work that isn't as challenging, interesting or fulfilling as anticipated (Russell 2004:34). From this perspective, it might be argued that a one-dimensional approach to learning, in which an individual's critical capacities are not developed, has limited these students' conceptualisations of the shape that their life could take, and has undermined their capacity for communicative rationality and critical engagement.

9.5.3 British Business students: anomic expectations?

The British Business students understood the graduate labour market in Britain as fiercely competitive. However, this did not result in a lowering of their ultimate career expectations: they were optimistic that an 'ideal' job was out there and many argued that it would be unwise to compromise and commit to something which seems less than perfect. This suggests that these students' goals were only weakly bounded by an appreciation of the economic structuring of opportunities. There was very little discussion in these students' accounts of the pragmatic trade-off between personal interests and rational, sensible career choices that was present in the accounts of the Singaporean Business students. Neither was there much discussion about the need to work one's way up within an organisation. These students' ambitious visions of their future 'dream jobs' therefore revealed a stark dislocation between their current positions and future imaginings. The majority of these British Business students had chosen to defer future occupational decisions in favour of more short-termist, often hedonistic pursuits. The British Business students sustained the ideological discourse of individual prowess and self-determined success by separating present and future: by delaying their entry into the graduate labour market and talking about their 'dream' job in a way that was disengaged from their current circumstances and skill-sets.

Like their Singaporean counterparts, the British Business students viewed the graduate market as competitive. They recognised the importance of 'soft skills' but, unlike the Singaporean Business students, they argued that it was possible to 'fake it' to employers in order to get ahead. These students did not view the labour market as operating fairly and, though generally prepared to 'play the game', they thought that it would be unnecessary. These students were less aware of the positional nature of their credentials and were optimistic that they would be able to find work that was challenging, rewarding and well-remunerated without having to alter aspects of their personality or undertake emotional labour to suit the role.

Whilst these students were optimistic about their futures in the long-term, they did not make much of a connection between their current skills and knowledge and their desired employment roles. In fact, they defined successful futures largely in terms of lifestyle rather than occupation. It could be argued that these students were suffering from what has been called the 'anomie of affluence', since more abundant access to higher education (as the supposed means to be able to pursue a 'successful' life) had not translated into a clear evaluation of ends (Simon and Gagnon 1976). For Simon and Gagnon, abundance (rather than scarcity) of means leads to the devaluing of ends:

> Attainment of goals ceases to provide such confirmation precisely when the objects or experiences that have symbolised achievement become part of the easily accessible and therefore unspectacular, everyday quality of life that characterises, as it were, "the anomie of affluence"'. (1976:361)

This chimes well with Bauman's (2000) assertion that liquid modernity engenders a new type of uncertainty in which individuals know the means but not the ends. Bauman has argued that under these circumstances 'the world becomes an infinite collection of possibilities' and the impossibility of exploring all of these options fosters a 'state of perpetual anxiety' (p.61). From this perspective it might be suggested that the British Business students in my study were 'agonising about the choice of goals', which stunted their ability to focus on the means necessary to pursue them (2000:61). This might help to explain why, these students found choosing a career path problematic. The fact that these students' labour market expectations were out of kilter with graduate employment rates in the UK also indicates that they are vulnerable to the deleterious effects of underemployment outlined by Cassidy and Wright (2008). It seems reasonable to suggest that these students might struggle to realise their expectations given the current levels of social congestion in the graduate labour market in Britain. From a Durkheimian perspective it would be argued that these students need to have

their appetites dampened in order to regulate their potentially anomic expectations and bring them back into line with labour market realities.

9.5.4 Sociology students: striving for authenticity through, or in spite of, work

Whilst the Sociology students in both Britain and Singapore shared the same open-ended orientations to education and gave similar accounts of their learning being guided by curiosity and interest rather than concerns about employability, their perspectives diverged on the subject of what comes next after university.

The British Sociology students were optimistic that their degree had equipped them well for life post-graduation: whilst they did not think their degree would be as valuable in the graduate labour market as more vocational or more highly-regarded subjects, as per Russell's defence of 'useless' knowledge (2004), they seemed content that studying Sociology had equipped them with the values and mind-set that would enable them to live happier and more fulfilled lives. The majority of these British Sociology participants were confident that the skills and knowledge they had developed at university would continue to be relevant and important to them. They spoke about having the tools to be critical, curious and creative, and enjoying having a different way of looking at the world. Over half of the students in this group felt that it would be possible to achieve positive social change through their future work. These students did not focus on how they would use specific skills from their course in future work environments, but instead argued that studying sociology had enabled them to develop a certain mind-set that would help them to understand and respond appropriately to a range of different scenarios. These qualities included being more critical, being more empathetic and understanding towards others, and recognising cultural differences. Given that these students' conceptions of success were less materialistic than those of the British Business students, with the opportunity to engage in a range of experiences valued higher than the acquisition of wealth and status, their goals may be realistic and sustainable in the British labour market context.

Whilst the Singaporean Sociology students described developing the same qualities and also spoke about the personal value of becoming more critical and empathetic through their studies, they were less confident that their degree had equipped them with skills relevant to or valued in the graduate labour market. These students were doubtful that they would be able to find work that would capture their interests and ambitions, or work environments that would allow them the freedom and autonomy they desired. This difference can be linked to socio-cultural differences and the structuring of opportunities in Britain and Singapore.

9.5.5 Singaporean Sociology students: struggling for authenticity in a work-centred society

The Singaporean Sociology students sought work that reflected their personality and interests but were doubtful that they would be able to pursue their dreams given the need to make a living and support their families (point twelve in table 5, p.182). Unlike their Business counterparts, these students were sceptical of the role of knowledge workers and identified exploitative tendencies amongst employers. They were concerned about how their work would be designed and managed – and how much space they would be allowed for autonomy. As a result, many were resigned to the likelihood that they would have to 'play the game' given limited labour market options in Singapore, and described an acute tension between the need to perform in a particular manner at work and their own personal orientations: many anticipated having to resort to acting inauthentically at work. In order to manage this tension, these students often spoke about undertaking work that was discordant with their own personal views in order to pay off debts and save money in order to afford greater freedom later on. In order to cope with this type of unfulfilling work, like the players identified by Brown and Hesketh (2004), these students endeavoured to maintain a dislocation between their work-selves and their selves outside of work.

Whilst the Singaporean Business students presented success and employability as analogous to one another, the Singaporean Sociology students perceived a dichotomy between success as self-realisation, and employability. They believed that it would be very difficult for them to find work whilst maintaining a sense of authenticity. It can therefore be suggested that the Singaporean Sociology students were at a much higher risk of alienation and isolation than their Business counterparts. The perception that they would not be able to express themselves at work led some of these students to question the value of cultivating a sociological frame of mind without the environment to let it flourish in the workplace, or beyond in the public arena. They were critical of public order and sedition laws in Singapore that place limits on freedom of speech and the public expression of alternative viewpoints on the grounds that they pose a threat to social cohesion and national security (AGCS 2012, 2013) and argued that there were few avenues for progressive socio-political debate. As a result, they felt that the mind-set they had developed at university could only be beneficially applied to their own relationships with family and friends. It might therefore be argued that the Singaporean Sociology students were suffering from 'over-regulation', but their expectations could also be seen as anomic since their degree has raised their expectations of what their futures should be like.

When considering the longer term costs of this approach to employment in the context of a work-centred society in Singapore, some of these students suggested that there was a risk of losing their way and becoming part of the 'rat race'. Indeed, many of these students said that given the need to provide for their own families and pay off student debts, the 'rat race' was inescapable. It might therefore be the case that this study has captured transient moments of idealism amongst these Sociology students that will be washed out gradually through the repeated cycle of work-earn-spend-work. Indeed, it might be argued that the mind-set these students had developed at university is less sustainable in a hyper-consumerist and rigidly hierarchical culture where success is primarily defined according to occupation, wealth and status. However, the fact that these students had developed a critical voice also suggests a threat to the hegemonic social cohesion cultivated through the developmental state model. This can be linked to a sense of dynamism and change in Singapore identified in the literature. The realisation of the PAP that they need to do more to engage young voters (Leyl 2011), a proliferation of political blogs online that have democratised media reporting (e.g. the Online Citizen, the Temasek Review and Singapore Dissident), and growing unrest in society about levels of immigration (BBC News 2013) polarising fortunes and a rigidifying class structure (Chan 2007, Vadaketh and Low 2014), all suggest that these students might be well-placed to contribute to discussions about the future of Singapore.

9.5.6 British Sociology students: seeking authenticity through work and beyond

Like the Singaporean Sociology students, the British Sociology students were seeking work that reflected their sense of self and their interests, but were more optimistic that they would be able to pursue roles that suited their own outlooks. There was also more space in the British Sociology students' accounts for non-work related aspects of self-hood, suggesting that they were able to draw on a wider cultural palette to forge their identities.

Most of the British Sociology students were prepared to undertake other work, not connected to their long-term aspirations, in order to reach their goals, and recognised that a degree of performance management would be necessary in most forms of work, suggesting that they were more realistic than the British Business students. Compared with the latter, the British Sociology students placed less emphasis on earnings potential, focussing on the importance of enjoying your work and doing something 'worthwhile' instead. It would seem that the British Sociology students who were able to look at their learning in a less

instrumental way were in a good position for their own self-development *and* future employment, especially compared to the British Business students whose instrumentalised approaches to learning limited their capacity for self-development and gaining skills relevant to the labour market.

Many of the British Sociology students argued that in the context of increased competition for jobs, they might struggle to find work because of the lower status afforded to Sociology graduates compared to those with more vocational or more esteemed degree qualifications. This is somewhat supported by some of the empirical evidence in chapter three (ONS 2012, Walker and Zhu 2013). However, the prioritisation of authenticity and the sense of curiosity developed by the Sociology students in Britain and Singapore may also be valued in the labour market, particularly in jobs that recognise ongoing learning. For example, Gorz (2010) has argued that the post-Fordist economy favours workers with openness, flexibility and communicative as well as technical ability. It might also be argued that in a networked economy we need innovative people who can cooperate with a range of different people and be sociable (Leadbeater 2009), so the Sociology students who are more social in their approaches are better equipped than the Business students who can be characterised as competitive and individualistic. This sentiment is echoed in Frank *et al.*'s assertion that 'in an ever more interdependent world, social cooperation has become increasingly important'; meaning that 'the ultimate victims of non-cooperative behaviour may be the very people who practice it' (1993:170). On behalf of both the 'social good' and the well-being of students, Frank *et al.* therefore suggest that 'economists may wish to stress a broader view of human motivation in their teaching' (1993:171).

9.6 Conclusions

The literature explored in chapter two suggested that instrumentalism has become the dominant prevailing ideology of higher education students. This is an argument made by both critics and supporters of the human capital model of higher education. It is present both in educational policy initiatives and university advertisements to prospective students, and in the accounts of critics focussing on the detrimental effects of instrumental learning. Whilst my findings support the assertions of those critical of human capital approaches to education on the grounds that it is linked to a restricted and individualistic view of education as the means to certification, they also undermine the idea that *all* university students take an

entirely instrumental approach to their education, and that the types and degrees of instrumentalism are always the same.

Importantly, this study has demonstrated that significantly different national socioeconomic systems do seem to produce different types of instrumental motivations amongst students. The cross-cultural component of this research therefore enables it to make an important contribution to the literature by distinguishing between different types of instrumental learning according to economic and socio-political context. This project has also revealed a degree of uniformity amongst those participants studying the same subject. Whilst it cannot assess causality, this study's findings are consistent with Nussbaum's (2010) claim that those studying in the humanities and social sciences are better-placed to develop empathy and critical abilities. That participants studying Sociology in both Britain and Singapore emphasised the importance of these elements of their learning strengthens the assertion that something about the content of the discipline, or those attracted to studying it, plays a decisive role in the development of these traits.

An analysis of these students' post-graduation plans has enabled me to draw comparisons between the British students preparing for a relatively 'open' or even chaotic graduate labour market, and the Singaporean students who were faced with a 'closed' and more highly regulated labour market post-graduation. For the British Business students who had taken a more wholesale instrumental approach to their university education, their response to the open labour market context ironically restricted the effective development of their own human capital. Their 'disengaged instrumentalism' also seemed to limit their ability to engage with the material on their course in a non-instrumental way. In contrast, the British Sociology students had taken a less-instrumental approach to their learning, and their 'inquisitive instrumentalism' had enabled them to identify benefits of their education beyond finding employment. These students viewed the open labour market context more favourably, and felt confident that the more rounded mind-set they had developed would enable them to find happiness in the future.

Conversely, in Singapore, the closed labour market context worked well for the Singaporean Business students whose plans for the future were closely aligned to the 'Singaporean Dream' of high level employment, justifying engaged instrumentalism and the effective development of human capital. However, for the Singaporean Sociology students, a tightly regulated occupational hierarchy and cultural rigidity meant that they were doubtful that

they would be able to find work that allowed them to provide for their families whilst retaining a sense of authenticity; theirs was an ambivalent instrumentalism.

I have therefore suggested that whilst a rational economic approach to higher learning in Singapore (where there is strong articulation between educational and economic policies and where the risk of un- or under-employment is low) can be beneficial to students, it does not benefit students in Britain. Indeed, my research indicates that encouraging students to take an acquisitive approach to higher education in the context of an open labour market actually *inhibits* human capital development. This supports Green *et al.*'s (1999) assertions that the bounded nature of individual student rationality leads to decisions that result in generalised low-level investment in human capital. It could therefore be economically counter-productive since it is likely to contribute to gaps in specific vocational areas, leading to the requirement of more on-the-job training, work experience or unpaid internships. This entails costs for organisations, the government, and personal costs for graduate workers themselves.

In consideration of Beverungen *et al.*'s (2013) assertion that trends of corporatisation and financialisation are spreading throughout higher education, and are merely more advanced within Business departments, it is somewhat unsurprising that when assessing their employment options, a number of Sociology students in both Britain and Singapore argued that they might have been better off studying Business. Many perceived that the Social Sciences are afforded a lower status in the graduate labour market compared to Business and STEM subjects and expressed concerns about their onward trajectory. This suggests that the pressure to view education as a vehicle for enhancing employability encouraged these students to understand learning as 'first and foremost an investment in human capital' (Beverungen *et al.* 2013:114) and made them more susceptible to Dore's (1976) 'diploma disease': viewing university as the means of certification for work.

In the British context, the danger is that the 'user-pays' model (McGettigan 2013) coupled with mounting pressures to maximise employability will deter students (especially those from working class backgrounds) from studying in the humanities in the future, and undermine the idea that the benefits of higher education are more than just private. There is also evidence that the more inquisitive approaches to education are being eroded by a conflictual focus on assessment and employability rather than on self-discovery and the exploration of knowledge whilst at university. The marketing of university courses to British students on the grounds of enhancing employability from a rational economic perspective is

therefore revealed as problematic. Appealing more broadly to the fuller range of student motivations represented in this study (including curiosity and a desire to better understand the world), on the one hand, and greater honesty about the nature of social congestion in the graduate market place, on the other, might help universities and educational policy makers to discourage the development of a narrow economic instrumental mind-set amongst students. This could, in turn, encourage students to engage with their learning in a different way and to minimise the risk of frustrated expectations or anomie amongst graduates.

9.6.1 Limitations and directions for future research

As with any given project, it is necessary to limit the scope and employ a certain amount of compromise in the name of moving forward. There are, then, a number of limitations to the project and a number of areas for future research that can be identified. A key limitation of this research was the finite amount of time and resources available. It would have been hugely beneficial to carry out follow-up interviews with my participants once they had graduated in order to find out whether their attitudes and aspirations changed with their experiences of work, but this was not within the scope of the project.

Another important limitation to this study is the sampling of participants. Given the nature of opportunity sampling it is difficult to ascertain the extent to which the views and experiences captured in my research are generalizable to the wider student population in Britain and Singapore. Further research is therefore necessary to strengthen and triangulate these findings. Another key sampling issue is the fact that I had to pay the British Business students in order to take part in the project. It is difficult to know how to interpret this – did I attract those students who had spent all of their money partying? Were the more studious members of the cohort too busy to speak with me? I must therefore be mindful when drawing conclusions. The barriers to collecting straightforwardly comparable data on participants' social class backgrounds across national borders in two different socio-economic contexts were outlined in chapter 4. Using housing and schooling as imperfect but workable proxies for class has raised some analytically interesting points which bear further exploration, perhaps with the aid of larger scale quantitative methods to situate individual accounts more robustly within the emerging social class landscape in Singapore, and the more established and widely reported on class hierarchies operating in Britain.

Given my sample it is very difficult to make even tentative claims about the role of ethnicity in my findings. I did not identify any significant differences between the accounts of the

Welsh and English students that I interviewed. Given that the vast majority of Singaporean students I interviewed were Chinese-Singaporean, and I only spoke to one Indian-Singaporean, and three Malay-Singaporean participants, it would be irresponsible to try to generalise from these findings. However, in illuminating some interesting facets to student approaches to education from a cross-national and cross-discipline perspective, this project raises further questions and opens up a number of avenues for future research. One such avenue might be to consider the pedagogical and substantive differences in the same subject in different national contexts in order to ascertain how similar the curricula and experience of studying, say, Business, is in two different universities in different parts of the world. Broadening the comparison to include other Asian countries, or undertaking a European comparison, for example with Germany where there is a different attitude towards vocational training, might also be relevant. An expansion of the study to include different degree subjects would enable further exploration of the relationship between subject choice and student attitudes and experiences.

In addition, as outlined above, a longitudinal study that followed students into the labour market in order to better understand how graduates manage their own employability in relation to their university experiences would be a fruitful endeavour. Equally, a longitudinal study which captured students' understandings and experiences prior to selecting a degree at university, and then revisiting these same questions afterwards, might help to further our understanding of the extent to which studying a certain subject creates a certain set of attitudes, or whether these students self-select according to pre-existing differences.

There is also scope for exploring this subject using different methodological tools. Participant observation might help to assess how students act (rather than how they say they act) at university, in order to tackle false modesty, for example. The use of Q methodology, a process that enables students to rate and rank the importance of certain values or experiences, might help to situate participants' accounts in a more robustly comparative manner. A more comprehensively resourced project might also seek to explore whether or not student views are linked to their level of attainment at university.

9.6.2 Concluding points

Notwithstanding the aforementioned limitations, this doctoral project makes a significant contribution to knowledge in my field, primarily by identifying different types and degrees of instrumentalism amongst students at university. The four ideal types I have developed reflect the circumstances and pressures operating on students and how they respond to

them. Importantly, the cross-national comparative element has enabled me to draw out some interesting differences in student perceptions of education and employability according to economic and socio-political context to argue that instrumentalised learning is more problematic in a flexible open labour market context, relative to the developmental model in Singapore. My research also reveals that student motivations and attitudes can be conflictual, and suggests that tension between the private and public roles of higher education fosters, for some, untenable aspirations. This is visible in the unrealistic and potentially anomic material expectations of the British Business students, and the concerns of the Singaporean Sociology students who feared that their education had set them on a path of disenchantment since they were unlikely to find work commensurate with their interests and critical abilities. In addition, these findings indicate that attitudes of instrumentalism are dynamic and can change during the course of a university degree. This suggests that particular student motivations and orientations to learning can be magnified or diminished by different pressures, prompts and interventions. These findings therefore highlight the importance of more nuanced understandings of student motivations in order to do justice to young people intellectually, and to help them to navigate the competing interests of open-ended learning and the need to secure their own futures whilst at university. This has implications for how universities motivate young people and how they mobilise their energy and commitment: if we do not understand the gradations and variations in instrumental learning, then we are not going to get the best out of students, and may indeed limit their potential for self-development. This project therefore builds on the existing literature on higher education, skill development and student attitudes to learning to provide a more nuanced conceptualisation of instrumentalism amongst students, and lays the groundwork for further research.

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Appendix 1: Participant Information Forms

The social construction of individual and educational 'success' in a context of economic uncertainty: A comparative study of Britain and Singapore

My name is Esther Muddiman, I am a PhD student at the School of Social Sciences at Cardiff University, Wales, UK; my research is funded by the Economic and Social Research Council.

I would like to invite you to participate in my research on student understandings of education, employment and success in Britain and Singapore. The following will give you a short overview of what this means for you and the information you decide to give me. Before you decide it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully. If you have any questions regarding the research, feel free to email me at muddimanek@cardiff.ac.uk I would be happy to discuss any aspect of the research and look forward to meeting you.

What is the purpose of the research?

The research explores students' understandings of success in relation to education. It includes participants from Britain and Singapore to find out if there are any significant differences in the attitudes and experiences of students in two countries with different approaches to education provision and graduate employment. I am particularly interested in how students feel about economic opportunities, and their definitions of success and wellbeing.

What is being researched and how is it being done?

I am hoping to speak to students in the final year of their undergraduate degree during the autumn semester 2011. The research will consist of individual interviews that will last for around one hour. The interviews will be audio recorded and transcribed.

What do you expect from participants?

You don't need to have any special knowledge of the education system to take part, as I am just interested in hearing about your experiences of education and hopes for the future from your own point of view.

What will happen to the records made of my interview?

All interviews will be transcribed, and then analysed using computer software. I will take steps to ensure that any things you say in interviews are in confidence. I will do this by removing identifying features from the records and by giving you a false name. All data will be kept in a secure, password locked file and great care will be taken with hard copies.

The unedited transcript will only be read and used by me and will not be used for any other purpose. The information from these discussions will be the basis of my PhD thesis, which will be assessed in order for me to gain the PhD degree. The transcripts might also be used to write and publish articles in academic journals. You are very welcome to see the final thesis and/ or a copy of the articles.

Do I have to take part?

No, participation is completely voluntary and your involvement or lack thereof is in no way connected to your studies, it is not a condition of your course at university and will not affect your grades in any way.

What if I want to withdraw from the project?

You can withdraw from the project at any time and you do not have to give any reason for doing so. All records relating to you will be destroyed. Participation in this project is not a condition of your study at university and will have no impact on your grades.

What if I am worried about any aspect of the project?

The research has been approved by the Cardiff University School of Social Sciences ethics committee, and adheres to the ESRC Research Ethics Framework. If you have any concerns at any point of your involvement in the project don't hesitate to contact me.

Please take some time to consider this information before deciding whether or not to participate in this research, and do not hesitate to contact me with any questions or concerns.

Many thanks,

Esther

muddimanek@cardiff.ac.uk

The social construction of individual and educational 'success' in a context of economic uncertainty: A comparative study of Britain and Singapore

My name is Esther Muddiman, I am a PhD student at the School of Social Sciences at Cardiff University, Wales, UK; my research is funded by the Economic and Social Research Council.

I would like to invite you to participate in my research on student understandings of education, employment and success in Britain and Singapore. The following will give you a short overview of what this means for you and the information you decide to give me. Before you decide it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully. If you have any questions regarding the research, feel free to email me at muddimanek@cardiff.ac.uk. I would be happy to discuss any aspect of the research and look forward to meeting you.

What is the purpose of the research?

The research explores students' understandings of success in relation to education. It includes participants from Britain and Singapore to find out if there are any significant differences in the attitudes and experiences of students in two countries with different approaches to education provision and graduate employment. I am particularly interested in how students feel about economic opportunities, and their definitions of success and wellbeing.

What is being researched and how is it being done?

I am hoping to speak to Singaporean students in the final year of their undergraduate degree during October 2011. The research will consist of a number of individual interviews that will last for around one hour. The interviews will be audio recorded and transcribed.

What do you expect from participants?

You don't need to have any special knowledge of the education system to take part, as I am just interested in hearing about your experiences of education and hopes for the future from your own point of view.

What will happen to the records made of my interview?

All interviews will be transcribed, and then analysed using computer software. I will take steps to ensure that any things you say in interviews are in confidence. I will do this by removing identifying features from the records and by giving you a false name. All data will be kept in a secure, password locked file and great care will be taken with hard copies.

The unedited transcript will only be read and used by me and will not be used for any other purpose. The information from these discussions will be the basis of my PhD thesis, which will be assessed in order for me to gain the PhD degree. The transcripts might also be used to write and publish articles in academic journals. You are very welcome to see the final thesis and/or any articles submitted for publication if you so wish.

Do I have to take part?

No, participation is completely voluntary and your involvement or lack thereof is in no way connected to your studies, it is not a condition of your course at university and will not affect your grades in any way.

What if I want to withdraw from the project?

You can withdraw from the project at any time and you do not have to give any reason for doing so. All records relating to you will be destroyed. Participation in this project is not a condition of your study at university and will have no impact on your grades.

What if I am worried about any aspect of the project?

The research has been approved by the Cardiff University School of Social Sciences ethics committee, and adheres to the ESRC Research Ethics Framework available at: http://www.esrc.ac.uk/about-esrc/information/research-ethics.aspx. If you have any concerns at any point of your involvement in the project don't hesitate to contact me.

Please take some time to consider this information before deciding whether or not to participate in this research, and do not hesitate to contact me with any questions or concerns.

If you would like to get involved with the project please send me an email outlining your availability during the week 3rd – 7th October and we can arrange a preliminary meeting.

Many thanks,

Esther

muddimanek@cardiff.ac.uk

Appendix 2: Participant Consent Form

Consent Form

I, _____ agree to take part in this research project exploring student experiences of education in Britain and Singapore in relation to employment, wellbeing and success, being conducted by Esther Muddiman from Cardiff School of Social Sciences, Wales, UK.

Please initial each box to confirm that you have read and understood each section

I understand that participation is entirely voluntary, and that if I wish to withdraw from the study, I may do so at any time, and that I do not need to give any reason or explanation for doing so.	
I understand that the study involves an interview that will be audio recorded.	
I understand that because of this study, there could be violations to my privacy. To prevent violation of my own or others' privacy, I will not talk about any of my own or others experiences that I would consider too personal or revealing.	
I understand that all the information I give will be kept confidential to the greatest extent possible, and that the names of all the people in the study will be kept confidential, but that there is a small chance that aspects of the things I say may be recognisable.	
I agree that I am over the age of 18.	
I understand that participating in this study is in no way linked to my university degree, it is not a condition of my course and my grades will in no way be affected.	
The researcher has offered to answer any question I may have about the study and what I am expected to do.	
I have read and understand this information and I agree to take part in the study.	

Signed...Date………………………..

Appendix 3: Initial Interview Schedule

At University

Tell me a little about your education…
>Where you went to school and college
>What subjects you particularly enjoy
>What you feel that you are good at.

How did you come to studying at this University?
>What factors helped you to make the decision?
>Did you think about what kind of job you could get when choosing what to study?

Do you still feel the same about your chosen area of study?
>Is it what you expected, more/less interesting?
>Do you enjoy it?

How do you feel about your performance in assessments?

What motivates you to do well in your studies?

Would you say that you are more or less ambitious than your colleagues?

How much time do you think you spend studying on average?
>How does this compare to time spent on extra-curricular activities?
>How does this compare to your peers?

What interests do you have outside of university?
>Are you involved in any extracurricular activities?
>How do you spend your free time?
>What do you feel is important to you?

Do you do much reading outside what is expected of you for your assessments and coursework?

Do you feel under pressure to do well at university?
>Can you tell me a bit about where you think that pressure might come from?

Do you think that male and female students experience university differently?
>Do they have the same motivations and perspectives?

Are male and female students equally successful at university?

Did you take a gap year before coming to university?
>Why/why not? To work? To travel?
>Is this something you'd consider doing after you graduate?

How have you funded your university education?

Entering the Labour Market

What would you like to be doing in one year's time?

What are your plans for after you graduate?
       How do you see your occupational future?
       Working for a company, government, start your own business?

Will you try and find employment related to your studies at university?

How have you prepared for the search for a job?

Do you think it will be easy to find a job doing something that you enjoy?

How will you compare to other job seekers?

How do you see your career developing over time?

What sort of salary do you hope to get this time next year/ in two/ five/ twenty years' time?
       What kind of lifestyle will that afford you?
       How do you expect to live?

Are you aiming to be in the top 20% of earners?
       Is it important to earn the same as/more than your peers?

How important is money to the lifestyle you aspire to?
       Would you still be happy if you couldn't buy all of the things that you want?

Is a graduate lifestyle different to the lifestyle of someone who doesn't have a degree?

What are labour market conditions like for graduates in your area of study?

To what extent do you see the competition for jobs as fair or meritocratic (based on talents and achievements)?

Do you think that there is anything that the government/businesses could do better/differently to make the competition for jobs fairer/more meritocratic?

Why is it important to you to get a good job?

What do you think you would get from a 'high status' job?

Do you think that it is easier for men or women to get ahead with their career?
       Can you explain why?

Employability and Success

What do you think you will find most useful from your university degree after you have graduated?

Do you think that a university education will help you find an appropriate job? How?

What is it about your education that would be helpful in finding a good job?

Is the primary purpose of education to prepare you for employment and your career?

Do you feel like your education will benefit you in other areas of your life outside of employment?
> (expand on these aspects…)

How would you define success? Is it the same as employability?

How would society define success? Is it the same as your definition?

How would your parents define success?
> Do you think that your views and attitudes towards education and employment are the same as those of your parents?
> To what extent are your circumstances and the opportunities available to you different to those of your parents?

Can you be successful in other areas of your life if you don't have a graduate job?

How much of the knowledge you learn at university do you think you'll remember?

What are the most valuable things you have learned at university?

In what way(s) do you think your university education has enhanced your employability?
> (technical skills/ qualifications/ interpersonal skills /confidence/ communication)

Approach to employability

Can you be yourself and still succeed in the competition for jobs?

Do you feel you need to play the game to get ahead?

Is it acceptable to use networking to get ahead?

Do you need to display a certain type of personality to succeed in the competition for jobs? (or is it enough to have the skills required)

Broader society

To what extent do you feel committed or obliged to providing for your family?

How free do you feel to pursue your own path in terms of making decisions about your occupational future?

Do you think it is your individual responsibility to get a good career or is this something you feel that should be provided for you by the government?

Are there opportunities in Singapore/Britain for people like you?

Do you think that your views on education and employment are shared by those from different ethnic groups/social classes in Britain/Singapore?

How do you relate to the project of Singapore described by the PAP?
How do you relate to the government's approach to young people and employment?

What do you think the government is seeking to achieve?

How do you view the 2008 crisis?

Do you think that civil engagement is important?
> Is it something that you are involved with personally?

Do you know anyone (else) who is politically vocal in Britain/Singapore?

How do you understand inequalities in society?

How important is it for society to be harmonious?

Is social harmony being achieved in Singapore/Britain?

Do you feel any less happy that there are people who don't have a lot in Singapore/Britain?

Do you feel that your generation has the power/potential to create positive social change in Singapore/Britain?
> Why/why not?

Appendix 4: List of Acronyms

AGCAS   Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Service (UK)

API   Age Participation Index

BIS   Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (UK)

BSA   British Sociological Research Association

CIA   Central Intelligence Agency

CPF   Central Provident Fund (Singapore)

CV   Curriculum Vitae

EANIEs East Asian Newly Industrialised Economies

ESRC   Economic and Social Research Council

FDI   Foreign Direct Investment

GCSE   General Certificate of Secondary Education (UK)

GDP   Gross Domestic Product

GII   Gender Inequality Index

GPA   Grade Point Average

HDB   Housing Development Board (Singapore)

HE   Higher Education

HECSU Higher Education Careers Service Unit (UK)

HEFCE Higher Education Funding Council for England

HEI   Higher Education Institution

HESA   Higher Education Statistics Agency (UK)

ICT   Information Communication Technology

ITE   Institute of Technical Education (Singapore)

MBA   Masters of Business Administration

MNC   Multi-national Company

MOE   Ministry of Education (Singapore)

MOM   Ministry of Manpower (Singapore)

NGO   Non-Governmental Organisation

NS   National Service (Singapore)

NTU   Nanyang Technological University (Singapore)

NUS   National University of Singapore

OECD   Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

ONS   Office for National Statistics (UK)

PAP   People's Action Party (Singapore)

PGCE   Post-Graduate Certificate of Education

QCA   Qualitative Comparative Analysis

R&D   Research and Design

SDF   Skills Development Fund (Singapore)

SIT   Singapore Institute of Technology

SMEs   Small and medium enterprises (Singapore)

SMU   Singapore Management University

SRA   Social Research Association (UK)

STEM   Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics

SUTD   Singapore University of Technology and Design

UCAS   Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UK)

UKCES   United Kingdom Commission for Employment and Skills

UNDP   United Nations Development Programme