The role of graduate recruitment in the employability agenda: A qualitative case study of undergraduate business education at a London Russell Group university

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Abstract

The main aim of the study was to investigate the extent to which business education enabled graduates at a London Russell Group university to successfully gain employment in competitive roles at large corporate employers. The fieldwork was conducted in 2021 using a case study methodology comprising of qualitative interviews with six module leaders, four university support staff and seven graduate recruiters, combined with secondary qualitative analysis of 26 National Student Survey responses, module specifications and other documents/ websites. At the time, graduate employment was increasingly being seen as the principal meaning of higher education, to generate economic growth and enable social mobility. Increasing tuition fees, combined with the removal of student recruitment controls, resulted in universities competing for students, with an emphasis on graduate career outcomes.

The number of academic studies seeking to conceptualise employability and understand the needs of employers has increased considerably over the last 25 years, in line with the shift in government policy. However, empirical research has been too often positioned from the perspectives of students, academics *or* employers, rather than attempting to gain a holistic, integrated understanding of graduate recruitment as part of the wider employability agenda. This is the gap in the literature which this study seeks to address.

The study draws on an educational and sociological theoretical lens, including Bourdieu's conceptual tools of habitus and social & cultural capitals, Becker's human capital theory, Foucault's technologies of the self, and Young's analysis of meritocracy. The empirical findings of the study reveal that the role of human capital may be a diminishing factor in graduate employment and, instead, it is the accumulation of social and cultural capital that are frequently the differentiating factors in the complex and hyper-competitive recruitment arena.

The study contributes to the academic knowledge of sociology in higher education principally through the discovery that while existing research focuses on accessing university as a solution in itself for social mobility, discrimination is being shifted from university admissions to graduation, where social inequalities are being exacerbated in the recruitment arena. To overcome these barriers, less privileged students are required to *play the game*, reconstructing their identities to conform to the expectations of employers. For these students there is a possibility, albeit challenging, to gain a foothold in the elite capitalist class, via a conscious and intentional strategy of symbolic capital accumulation, developed by the individual and scaffolded by business school pedagogical interventions.

The study's contribution to policy and practice builds on this point, arguing that by maximising exposure to members of the dominant class in field-specific scenarios at university, less privileged students have the potential to beat the ruling elite at their own game. To accumulate social and cultural capital,

pedagogic strategies rooted in experiential learning and reflective practice are critical for graduates to successfully transition from students to quasi-professionals. The propelling power of privilege remains a major advantage, but this study presents a conceptual pathway for business schools to enable their students to level the playing field and achieve graduate employment.

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List of Abbreviations

BBC - British Broadcasting Corporation

BERA - British Educational Research Association

CABS - Chartered Association of Business Schools

CBI - Confederation of British Industry

DLHE - Destination of Leavers from Higher Education

EY - Ernst & Young Global Limited

FTSE 100 - Financial Times Stock Exchange 100 Index

GCSE - General Certificate of Secondary Education

HESA - Higher Education Statistics Agency

LGBTQ - Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and/ or questioning

NSS - National Student Survey

PwC - PricewaterhouseCoopers

QAA - Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education

RGU - Russell Group University

SME - Small to medium sized enterprise

STEM - Science, technology, engineering and mathematics

TEF - Teaching Excellence Framework

UCAS - Universities and Colleges Admissions Service

UK - United Kingdom

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1. Introduction

Drawing on a case study of an undergraduate business degree at a London Russell Group university, this study explores graduate recruitment through an educational and sociological lens. In this introductory chapter, the first section seeks to locate graduate recruitment in the wider academic discourse of employability, acknowledging the contested definitions and aligning the study to the current interpretations of politicians and university leaders. Building on this theme, the second section summarises the policy context, highlighting that the study emerges in a political environment that has, perhaps irreversibly, shifted the purpose of higher education from liberal ideals to marketised instrumentalism. Third, the chapter provides a rationale for the study, justifying the focus of this research on undergraduate business degrees, Russell Group universities, and large employers. Finally, the chapter details the aims of the study before providing a brief outline of each chapter to help orient the reader to the structure of this PhD thesis.

1.1 Locating graduate recruitment within the discourse of employability

This first section of the introduction locates the thesis within the complex mosaic of the wider academic discourse, recognising and interpreting the key conceptual distinctions between *recruitment*, *employment* and *employability*. Debates over the purpose of higher education, the utilitarian notion of 'work ready' graduates, and the economic contribution of expanding access to higher education has significantly increased over last 25 years (see section 3.1). Indeed, the term 'graduate employability' has become synonymous with the relationship between higher education and the economy (for example Bridges & Jonathan, 2002; Donald & Baruch, 2017; Knight, 2011; Morley, 2007; Römgens et al., 2020). Higher education policy has been shaped profoundly by the challenges of globalisation, including geopolitical competition from the East, with the universities perceived by successive governments as being integral to economic prosperity (Brooks et al., 2012; Haung & Turner, 2018; King et al., 2010; Li, 2016). Since the Dearing Report (1997), explored in section 1.2, the employability skills agenda has become ingrained in the vocabulary of universities and employers, with the strategic drive to produce 'employable' graduates. This evolving economic purpose of universities inspired the rise of employability units and roles, sitting alongside (and sometimes in replace of) the traditional careers service (Tomlinson & Holmes, 2017). The marketisation of the sector has also contributed significantly to the public perception of employability, with tuition fees changing the role of student to consumer, and degrees seen as an investment for which graduates should expect an immediate return (Bridges & Jonathan, 2002; Jonathan, 1997; Winch, 2002).

Indeed, the centrality of higher education to economic output has succeeded in raising the stakes for university staff. Through regulation by the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) and latterly by the Office for Students (OfS), the quality of teaching and learning is linked to employment soon after graduating (Helyer & Lee, 2014; Jackson, 2002; Scallan & Gallagher, 2003). Measurement through the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF), the National Student Survey (NSS) and the Destination of Leavers from Higher Education (DLHE) survey increased the pressures on universities through a public account of quality and effectiveness (Adams, 2022; Cheng et al., 2022; Scott, 2013). Therefore, 'employability' is seen as a proxy to the university's pedagogy and wider strategic interventions to bring about 'employable' graduates, firmly equating employability to graduate outcomes (Tomlinson & Holmes, 2017; Wilton & Jackson, 2017). This was reflected in the qualitative data in this study, with module leaders and professional services staff using the term 'employability' to describe the university's approach to developing 'employable' graduates (see chapter 5). On the other hand, graduate recruiters used 'employ-ability' and 'employ-able' interchangeably. Rooted in the traditions of social constructivism, the participants constructed their own realities that reflected the underlying structures, practices and conventions of their social worlds, both in universities and large private sector businesses (see for example Bryman, 2008; Hughes & Sharrock, 1990; Lichtman, 2013; Merriam, 2002; Miller & Glassner, 2016). There is little doubt that the discourse from government and the media, which has deeply permeated the thinking of universities, impacted the language used (for example Browne, 2010; Dearing, 2017; Department for Education, 2018; 2019). As Cole and Tibby (2013) point out, universities should define their own interpretations of employability in consultation with stakeholders, however the institution at the heart of the case has closely followed the government discourse. Consequently, for this thesis to retain maximum value for the academic community, it makes sense where possible to speak the language of participants and use the term *'employability' when discussing the curriculum, pedagogic approach and the wider university activities that are designed to produce 'employable' graduates.*

Notwithstanding this argument, the study recognises that employability should be seen as a lifelong challenge within a fast changing and competitive labour market (Cole & Hallett, 2019; Dacre Pool & Sewell, 2007; Moreau & Leathwood, 2006; Yorke & Knight, 2003). Gaining employment is clearly not the same as sustaining employment and a graduate's professional identity is constructed and honed over an entire career. The university experience is only one stage of the process, and while post-university stages are not explored in this study, they are equally relevant. Further, the employability skills agenda introduced in this section has perhaps been adopted by universities (including the case Russell Group university) in an "uncritical" fashion (Tomlinson & Holmes, 2017:17). Cole and Hallett (2019) reject the socio-political status quo of employability, stating:

> *Different timescales are at work: "employment" is very much about the now or a fixed point in the future; it concerns a defined "condition" of work and is therefore a relatively short term or circumscribed concept. Employability should, in contrast, be concerned with a long term, evolutionary condition, enabling an individual to progress in multiple, diverse and sometimes conflicting spaces of work and development.* (Cole & Hallett, 2019:120).

Similarly, a body of higher education research focuses on how to prepare students for the challenges and uncertainties they are likely to face throughout their careers (for example Knight & Yorke, 2003; Dacre Pool & Sewell, 2007; Bridgstock 2009; Pegg et al., 2012). Building on this theme, Fugate et al. (2004:16) introduce employability as “a form of work specific active adaptability that enables workers to identify and realise career opportunities”. Influenced by Fugate et al.’s (2004) approach, Forrier et al. (2009) identify four dimensions of what they call ‘movement capital’. Highlighting their deliberate avoidance of the term ‘employability’, because of a lack of consensus on the definition, Forrier et al. (2009:742) define movement capital as the “skills, knowledge, competencies and attitudes influencing an individual’s career mobility opportunities”. In accepting this longitudinal definition of employability, it is recognised that this study only explores the *graduate recruitment phase, a moment in time defined as the challenge of gaining a first graduate level job*, and this is reflected in the thesis title and research questions. This interpretation of graduate recruitment is distinct from *employment in this study, which has the potential to include aspects related to retention and promotion* which do not form part of this research. However, this PhD thesis framed within the discipline of education in the field of social sciences, does indeed speak to the lifelong successes and struggles of employability, and the author suggests that the findings may also be applicable to this broader post-university interpretation.

Unpacking this point, it is the case that higher education policy has been influenced by Becker’s (1993) human capital theory, who argues that the education system is fuelling economic growth. For Becker, human capital represents the supply side of the labour market, conceptualised as specialist knowledge and technical skills (Morley, 2007). In addition, this study argues that it is necessary for employability to be seen in the wider social context, particularly the structures linked to social class, gender and ethnicity (for example Bathmaker et al., 2016; Brezis & Hellier, 2013; Friedman, 2018; Heselwood, 2018; Reay, 2017). Strategies designed to enhance employability are tied to the cultural profiles and identities of individual students/ graduates, and it is the role of the higher education sector to enable potential to be realised (for example Bhagra & Sharma, 2018; Ledermuller, 2011; Raybould & Sheedy, 2005; Scott, 2013; Tomlinson, 2017). Indeed, this study finds that employability is at the intersection between the agency of actors and the constraints of social reproduction, and while the vision of educational meritocracy appears superficially appealing, it ignores the deep-seated social structures reinforcing divisions on the basis of privilege (Bukodi & Goldthorpe, 2019; Forrier et al., 2009; Friedman & Laurison, 2020).

Building on this theme, Bourdieu’s (1986b) concepts of symbolic capital contribute greatly to the theoretical framework, understood in this thesis as the key resources that equip graduates in transitioning to the labour market (Tomlinson, 2017). Symbolic capital ensures graduates are equipped to play the game, as a complementary fit within the field of elite companies. Less privileged students, this research finds, can accumulate symbolic capital during the intensity of undergraduate study, exposed to influential social circles potentially as a one-off opportunity to break the "class ceiling" (Friedman & Laurison, 2020:185). The possibility of an evolving or flexible habitus explored in this study, previously seen as a predetermined hereditary element of social reproduction (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990), allows graduates to learn the rules and reformulate strategies to meet shifting recruitment requirements (see section 5.4). Therefore, the role of universities and employers in further enhancing graduates' early career potential, lessening the fatalistic tone of social reproduction, is an important aspect of this study. In summary, while this study's contribution to knowledge and practice may be centred on graduate recruitment, the wider influence on employability as a lifelong effort should not be underestimated.

1.2 Policy context

The most significant feature of UK policy in higher education over the past 30 years has been the dominance of graduate employability (Tomlinson & Nghia, 2020). At the heart of the policy is the belief that the more skilled graduates a country can produce, the more private sector investment it will attract, fuelling economic growth (Scott, 2013). Equally, employability is at the heart of the 'third way' principles of inclusion and social justice, with a knowledge-based economy heralded as an opportunity to usher a golden era of social mobility, with the promise of well-paid graduate employment (Gordon, 2013). The approach was championed by the New Labour leader, Tony Blair, in his famous 1996 conference speech signalling a decisive repositioning of education into the centre of socioeconomic policy:

> *Ask me my three main priorities for government, and I tell you: education, education, education.*
> (Ball, 2008)

New Labour came to power in 1997 with a manifesto commitment to increase participation of 18 to 30 year olds to 50 per cent by 2010. While the Labour government failed to achieve this milestone by the time they left office, the participation rate passed 50 per cent for the first time in 2017 (Kershaw, 2019). In an effort to justify the policy, a landmark report eventually published in 2016 revealed that 20 per cent of UK economic growth between 1982 and 2005 came as a direct result of the increase in graduates (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2016:8-9). Consequently, it is no surprise that successive Conservative majority governments in 2015, 2017, and 2019 also looked to universities as a fundamental tool of the State's apparatus to develop the workforce and the economy (Tomlinson, 2017; HM Treasury, 2021).

In this period, there were two major reports that shaped the employability agenda. First, the Dearing report appeared in July 1997 during the third month of Blair's premiership. In his report Dearing warned that the British economy could not survive without expanding universities and aligning curriculum with employer demand. Dearing proposed that the expansion of university participation was funded, in part, by the students themselves through the introduction of tuition fees. Through the *Teaching and Higher Education Act 1998* annual tuition fees of £1,000 per student were introduced and in 2003 this policy was extended to allow higher education institutions to increase annual tuition fees to £3,000 per year (Machin & Vignoles, 2003). Second, the Browne Report (2010) was presented to a newly elected Coalition Government in 2010 following the global economic crisis in 2008. Its recommendations were a significant shift from the way universities had been financed previously. Students would pay full tuition fees through a loan from the government, with repayment linked to their post-graduation earnings. As a result, whilst the number of places in higher education would increase still further, universities and other higher education providers would have to compete for students and universities were challenged to "persuade students that they should pay more to get more" (Browne, 2010:4). Graduate employment was at the centre of the review, empowering the Higher Education Statistics Agency to collect more data in order for students to make informed decisions. Universities were challenged to provide "students with clearer information about employment outcomes [to] close the gap between the skills taught by the higher education system and what employers need" (Browne, 2010:14). In a damning assessment of universities' performance, Browne stated that "students are no more satisfied with higher education than ten years ago. Employers [reported] that many graduates lack the skills they need to improve productivity" (2010:23).

The Coalition Government implemented many of Lord Browne's neoliberal recommendations, removing controls limiting university recruitment, and encouraging institutions to compete for students, each keen to prove they can offer an employability package that represented 'value for money' (Scott, 2013). At the same time, they increased government regulation, driven by a political desire for transparency, creating an audit culture that shifted focus from academic rigour to graduate outcomes (Cheng et al., 2022). Accusations of grade inflation damaged the reputation of the sector, while graduate employment was seen as a measure that cannot be manipulated (Adams, 2022). Consequently, understanding how to successfully transition students into employable graduates is now a central narrative in higher education discourse, with an increasing number of studies attempting to discover the ideal employability curriculum (Bhagra & Sharma, 2018; Fugate et al., 2004; Ledermuller, 2011; Scott, 2013; Tomlinson, 2017).

This thesis frames employability - the knowledge, skills, and attributes of graduates - through the lens of Becker's analysis of human capital, and Bourdieu's concepts of cultural and social capital. Building on increasingly sophisticated models of employability, notably Tomlinson's (2017) capitals model, Donald et al.'s (2019) study of undergraduate self-perception, and Fugate et al.'s (2014) three-dimensional framework, it has become clear that academic credentials and technical knowledge are not enough to achieve tangible employment outcomes. This shift in the employability discourse was driven in part by the financial crisis in 2008, as studies began to recognise that widening participation through expanded access to higher education may not have had the intended impact on social mobility (Major, 2019; Sutton Trust, 2019). A combination of increasing the supply of graduates with falling demand amongst employers has created a sense of intense competition amongst graduates (Beardwell at al, 2004; Branine, 2008; Heaton et al., 2008; Sackett & Lievens, 2008). The competition has been exacerbated by a rapid shift in graduate recruitment practices at large employers, such that graduates are increasingly assessed across a multi-stage process that includes interviews, assessments, and group activities (Covaleski et al., 1998; Gebreiter, 2019). As degree content has become increasingly standardised due to the regulation of universities by the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) (Quinlan, 2016), employers now focus on so-called 'soft skills', a term which dates back from the 1972 United States Army training manual, and came into widespread use in the 1990s (Newman, 2006). Large employers are increasingly looking beyond qualifications and knowledge to differentiate between candidates, instead looking for qualities that meet the needs of the changing and challenging global business world (Branine, 2008).

The challenging recruitment process at large employers has the potential to offer opportunities for social mobility, if less privileged graduates are able to meet the exacting demands of the global marketplace. The literature review (see section 3.3) explores these requirements which, in the existing empirical studies, are primarily focused on the subjective elements of appearance and behaviour (Anderson-Gough et al., 2000; Michaels et al., 2001; Pollard et al., 2015). Therefore, the role of universities to support the transition from student to quasi-professional is seen as pivotal to enable graduate recruitment (Servant-Miklos, 2015). If employers have attempted to level the playing field through a process built on merit, it is then the role of universities to enable graduates, as Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) conceived, to 'play the game'. However, the ability of universities to be a transformative experience for less privileged students is in doubt, with many institutions criticised for the lack of graduates gaining high paid jobs (Havergal, 2020). In Young's (1961:94) satirical essay, he argues that merit requires motivation and intelligence which, within a meritocratic system, succeeds in exacerbating inequalities. Goldthorpe (2001) goes further by denying the existence of educational meritocracy, viewing university education as a route to legitimise social stratification and maintaining social injustice. This study begins to unpack the extent to which the concept of educational meritocracy exists within a business school at a Russell Group university, or whether a university education simply maintains the nepotistic career trajectories of the privileged few (Tate, 1997). In this context, Foucault's (1995) technologies of the self is a helpful concept to explore the extent to which less privileged graduates have the power to adapt their personalities to reflect the hiring managers, and consider the success of large employers in normalising subjective judgements of cultural fit (Covaleski et al., 1998; Gebreiter, 2019).

In light of the socio-political context, this study is centred on analysing the optimum balance of human, social and cultural capital required for a graduate recruitment, to discover if university pedagogy can trump privilege. As the purpose of higher education has shifted, pedagogic strategy has needed to keep pace, with universities under pressure to actively involve employers in the development of the curriculum. Building on Dewey's (2009; 2011) seminal theory of reflective thinking, first published in 1910, undergraduate degrees are required to provide a bridge between academic theory and professional practice (Healey et al., 2014). Employability pedagogy has evolved from Harvard's innovative case method in the 1920s, to Kolb's experiential learning theory (1984), frequently incorporating employer-led capstone projects and simulations, alongside substantial work placements and internships (Cutts et al., 2015; Kalfa and Taksa, 2015; Pegg et al., 2012; Tomlinson, 2017). As university leaders and academics are the primary audience for this study, the conceptual framework and recommendations will consider what practical steps institutions can make to improve the graduate employment of less privileged students.

The next section of this introductory chapter explores the rationale for this study, placing the spotlight on undergraduate business degrees and large employers, through the single qualitative case of a Russell Group university.

1.3 Rationale of the study

The rationale for studying the graduate recruitment of undergraduate business degrees is a combination of the political, professional and personal. Following on from the previous section, graduate recruitment is a key discourse in higher education as a result of the clearly defined relationship, established through successive governments, between university funding and economic growth (Browne, 2010; Dearing, 1997). In short, the financial sustainability of the sector depends on universities preparing thousands of students for professional employment that sustains inward investment in the UK. This study is intended to contribute to the growing body of research and wider debate around employability policy and practice across the higher education sector. Second, these policies have resulted in a new profession in the sector, with university managers overseeing the academic portfolio for alignment with employer need and student demand. I am one such professional, seeking to advise and influence the academic community to develop or adapt degrees that achieve graduate recruitment outcomes. This study has been sponsored by two institutions with a requirement to disseminate the research to help inform the approach to employability at these universities.

The personal considerations of this study, developed over a four year period alongside full time employment, stems from my educational experiences as a university manager at two higher education institutions. The first was a former polytechnic, commonly known as a 'post-92' university following the *Further and Higher Education Act 1992*, and more recently at an institution which is a member of the elite 'Russell Group' of research-intensive universities. In both roles I observed an increasing focus on the employability of students, and particularly graduate outcomes. Responsible for the development of new degrees informed by the labour market, I noted a frequent disconnect between the priorities of senior leaders and the academic community. Moving from a post-92 institution to a historic Russell Group university, I witnessed a significant difference in resources available to students, with countless extracurricular student groups and societies, and advanced employer links thanks in part to a successful global alumni community. It led me to ponder how the Russell Group institution deployed its vast resources to achieve graduate employment?

Further, the role of the business schools as a 'cash cow' was significant, achieving a greater contribution to university profits than other schools or faculties, for example arts, humanities, and particularly health. When travelling around the world speaking to prospective students, I was frequently struck by students being drawn to business education, not because of passion for the discipline but the instrumentalist, transactional outcome of well-paid employment. The success of the business schools were intimately linked to the success of the institutions as a whole. The measures of success were two-fold: first, the financial sustainability of undergraduate education; and second, the overall ranking of the institution with regards to student success, satisfaction and graduate employability. In the past, most business graduates would progress to professional and managerial jobs, but evidence suggests that a decreasing proportion of graduates enter traditional occupations, with more graduates overqualified for paraprofessional, auxiliary roles to which they are recruited (Bukodi & Goldthorpe, 2019). There is an emergent hierarchy within the graduate labour market, with different salary structures, benefits and career opportunities. The relationship between business education and the graduate labour market is thus much changed from its historical relationship. I argue that the employability of undergraduate business degrees is a critical litmus test for the sector. Therefore, it is in this policy and labour market context that this research is located.

In the next sections, I summarise the justification for the case to be studied. In the methodology (chapter 4), I define the sampling strategy of participants within the case.

1.3.1 Rationale for a Russell Group university

The study is centred around a Russell Group university, based in London. The Russell Group represent 24 “leading” universities, that produce two-thirds of the United Kingdom’s research output, and “supply highly qualified and highly motivated graduates to the local workforce” (Russell Group, 2020). The Russell Group is the most recognised membership group within UK higher education, named after the Russell Hotel in Bloomsbury, London, where their vice-chancellors first met in 1994 (Bathmaker et al., 2016). Throughout this thesis, the case institution will be known as ‘Russell Group University’, abbreviated to ‘RGU’. The case institution itself is one of the oldest in the country and consistently features in the top ten UK universities according to international rankings (QS World University Rankings, 2020), and the top 20 universities targeted by top employers (High Fliers, 2020). Compared to non-Russell group universities in London, RGU is more likely to have graduates who are employed in roles with higher salaries (table 1). The Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA), reporting on the Graduate Outcomes survey for students graduating in the 2017-18 academic year, stated that 12 per cent of graduates at RGU are working in roles with a minimum salary of £39,000 and 49 per cent with a minimum salary of £30,000, 15 months following graduation (HESA, 2020a).

University	**Salaries greater than £30,000**	**Salaries greater than £39,000**
RGU	*49%*	*12%*
London South Bank University	28%	9%
University of Westminster	21%	5%
University of West London	20%	4%
Middlesex University	18%	3%
London Metropolitan University	18%	2%
University of East London	15%	2%

Table 1: UK domiciled graduates who obtained first degree qualifications and entered full-time paid employment in the UK by provider and salary band (HESA, 2020a)

Therefore, the decision for a Russell Group university is justified because we know that, compared to other institutions, RGU is more likely to have graduates who are employed in roles with higher salaries. The decision combines a purposeful approach with pragmatic insider accessibility enabling an information rich case to be developed (Patton, 1990) (see section 4.1.4).

1.3.2 Rationale for undergraduate business degrees

The selection of undergraduate business degrees is principally due to the sustained popularity of the discipline, which has featured in the top three subject areas for UK domiciled students since 2014-15 (HESA, 2020b). Indeed, it has become even more popular in recent years, with the most recent published enrolment statistics from 2018-19 indicating that it has become the most popular subject for UK undergraduate students (table 2).

Subject of study	**Total UK**
Business and administrative studies	*173,600*
Biological sciences	169,735
Subjects allied to medicine	160,190
Social studies	148,510
Creative arts and design	126,305
Engineering and technology	87,850
Computer science	74,825
Languages	66,945
Physical sciences	63,085
Law	58,740
Historical and philosophical studies	57,500
Education	53,215
Medicine and dentistry	41,205
Mass communications and documentation	31,380
Mathematical sciences	31,190
Architecture, building and planning	28,515
Agriculture and related subjects	9,375
Veterinary science	4,740

Table 2: HE student enrolments by subject of study and domicile 2018-19 (HESA, 2020b)

Although undergraduate business degrees are popular, their employment rate is slightly below the average of other subjects. In the last published figures from HESA (2018), related to individuals who graduated in 2016-17, the employment rate was 94.0 per cent six months after completing their degrees, compared to the average across all graduates of 94.6 per cent. The data does have limitations, however, in particular not specifying the level of employment. The graduate outcomes longitudinal data is more comprehensive, analysing graduate salaries ten years after completing their programmes, providing time for careers to have advanced and the full benefits of the degrees to be realised (Department for Education, 2019). While business and management competed well against humanities subjects in 2019, it lagged behind scientific and mathematical disciplines, including economics (table 3). Therefore, while there are more students studying undergraduate business degrees in the UK than other subjects, the employment outlook for graduates is weaker than traditional science and mathematical disciplines. As a result, this warrants further investigation as part of this study.

Subject	**Median earnings by subject ten years after graduation**
Business and management	*£32,400*
Medicine and dentistry	£53,300
Economics	£49,800
Engineering	£41,200
Mathematical Sciences	£40,400
Physics and astronomy	£39,200
Architecture, building and planning	£37,000

Table 3: Median earnings by subject studied ten years after graduation (Department for Education, 2019)

Turning to RGU, there is one degree that includes the term ‘business’ in the title of the award, namely a Bachelor of Science degree in Business Management. According to the government’s *Discover University* reporting (2020), 90 per cent of RGU Business Management graduates have been employed in relevant roles six months after graduation in 2016-17 (table 4).

Job type	**RGU Business Management graduates**
Business and public service associate professionals	35%
Business, research and administrative professionals	30%
Administrative occupations	15%
Managers, directors and senior officials	10%
Media professionals	5%
Customer service occupations	5%

Table 4: Graduate jobs six months after the course 2016-17 (Discover University, 2020).

However, the seniority of these roles varies, with 45 per cent having reached the threshold of ‘professional’ status which is classified as “highly skilled” (HESA, 2020c). The combination of published data makes this degree an intriguing selection for the case study, in particular to determine the extent to which employers’ views are taken into account in the design and execution of the programme. In making this selection, I have deliberately excluded postgraduate degrees. This is because graduates’ employability cannot be sufficiently tied to the degree course itself, due to individuals frequently having developed professional identities that are already established (Davis, 2010). While it is possible that undergraduate students are mature and have gained some professional experience, postgraduates will be more likely to have done so due to their advanced age range, as by far the largest proportion of undergraduates are aged 20 years and under (Universities UK, 2018).

1.3.3 Rationale for large employers

The focus of this study on large employers over, for example, small to medium sized enterprises (SMEs), is to discover how the UK's leading employers evaluate graduates, to help analyse and inform the employability curriculum in business schools. In doing so, the study distinguishes lower professional occupations such as nursing, teaching and social work from elite 'professional and managerial' positions (Bukodi & Goldthorpe, 2019). Graduate positions with these employers earn on average £45,000 a year, while graduates in early career working class occupations can earn as low as £15,000 (Friedman & Laurison, 2020). These roles, therefore, are enormously competitive for business graduates. Organisations such as SMEs are perceived as less attractive by new graduates (Gallagher et al., 2015), with significant challenges in recruitment and retention, while graduates who are recruited more likely to move to a large employer if an opportunity arises (Gillezeau & Fowler, 2019). Expectations about promotion and reward systems have a direct impact on graduate and job search strategies, organisational choice, and longer-term career expectations (Jackson et al., 2021).

Equally, these employers have been vocal in their challenge to the higher education sector, questioning the curriculum of universities and even the importance of undergraduate degrees as a gateway to graduate' employment, including Google, Apple and IBM (Connley, 2018). At the same time, several large employers have published their own perspectives on the future of employment and the role of continuing professional development (Deloitte, 2017; EY, 2018; McKinsey Global Institute, 2016; PwC, 2018). The role of universities is frequently absent from these articles, with multi-national employers positioning themselves as the solution to the gaps in knowledge and skills. The ownership of knowledge in regards to employability has shifted to employers, with the academic community accused of being out of touch with reality (Hudson & Mansfield, 2020). Due to the scale of investment and their contribution to the reputation of 'UK plc', these employers have become powerful lobbyists of government (Urry, 2000). The threats to shift their operations overseas, especially following Brexit (CBI, 2018), give large companies extraordinary power to shape tax and education policy to meet their strategic requirements. Consequently, the perspectives of these employers are critical to gain a holistic understanding of how business schools embed employability in their curriculum and the extent to which the university experience provides a passport to an elite graduate role.

More broadly, the methodologies of empirical studies exploring employers' requirements of business graduates has focused on narrow quantitative surveys, each with a similar selection of skills-based conclusions that fail to unpack how they are measured in recruitment practice (Bublitz, 2018; Fugate et al., 2004; Lazear, 2003; Ledermuller, 2011; Maxwell et al., 2009; Raybould & Sheedy, 2005). At the same time, students and graduates are positioned at the heart of studies examining the employability credentials of their business degrees (Allen & Van der Velden, 2001; Bathmaker et al., 2016; Higdon, 2016; Thorpe, 2016; Williams et al., 2016). While these studies contribute greatly to the growing body of employability discourse, none to date have sought to combine the perspectives of module leaders, university support staff and graduate recruiters, the individuals whose daily decisions and judgements shape the futures of their students. Critically, the use of in-depth interviews allow me to delve deeper into the plurality of perspectives to understand "the story behind the numbers" (Mayan, 2009:10). The design of modules, the pedagogic approach, and the wider university experience on one hand, and the hyper-competitive, multi-layered, and subjective recruitment process of large employers on the other. At the same time, the findings of this study seek to unpack the role of privilege in graduate recruitment, in particular the extent to which there is social closure in elite occupations, or whether an undergraduate business education can overcome these hurdles. Indeed, the free text responses in the NSS analysed in this study, provide a useful snapshot of the hopes and fears of graduating students. Underpinned by Bourdieusian (1986) concepts of social and cultural capital, it is important to note that this thesis refers to social *privilege* throughout (rather than descriptions of class or traditional/ non-traditional students), not only to reflect differences in social status but, as Maxwell and Aggleton (2014) explained in their study, to capture the wider socio-cultural resources available to different groups of students.

Building on the rationale, the next section details the aims of the study, its role in contributing to teaching and learning policy and practice, and contribution to the knowledge of sociology in higher education.

1.4 Aims and objectives of the study

The main aim of the study is to explore a single undergraduate business degree, and the extent to which it enables graduates to successfully gain employment in competitive roles at large corporate employers. In doing so, the study questions the belief that business education offers opportunities to improve social mobility, and that the labour market value of a degree can transcend social differences. It explores how privileged graduates are able to deploy non-academic resources to secure a positional advantage, and the extent to which social and embodied cultural capital are subjective measures of 'talent'. The specific objectives are to:

- Examine how a Russell Group university prepares graduates for employment in its undergraduate business degrees.
- Investigate how large employers evaluate business graduates to inform recruitment decisions.
- Identify what social factors limit recruitment of business graduates at large employers.
- Analyse what forms of human, social, and embodied cultural capital are required in business graduate roles.
- Contribute to the growing body of research and wider debate around employability policy and practice in higher education.

While the research objectives outline the general focus of the thesis, the study is greatly influenced by the social context at the time the fieldwork was carried out in early 2021. Undertaken at the height of the global health crisis (Covid-19), and during the rise of social movement, Black Lives Matter, the study becomes much more alert to the intersections of ethnicity and social class in shaping the employability of business graduates than was originally planned in the research proposal. In doing so, the findings appear to show that privileged students are able to maximise their university experiences to sustain their elite positions, while a lack of personalised support and robust learner analytics potentially results in less privileged students not accumulating the social and cultural capital they need to compete with their peers for graduate jobs. Importantly, this conclusion is not just as a result of the interview data from graduate recruiters and module leaders, but the eye-catching feedback from students in the NSS. Although most pieces of the employability jigsaw are present at RGU, the study argues that less privileged students are not supported to understand and access the opportunities available. The literature review notes that the effects of an out of habitus experience at university, being a fish out of water, are well researched (Bathmaker et al., 2016; Brezis & Hellier, 2013; Friedman, 2018; Heselwood, 2018; Reay, 2017). However, this study argues for the flexibility of habitus, unpacking the extent to which business students can divorce themselves from a less privileged upbringing, creating new professional identities through a multi-dimensional university experience to meet the expectations of the hyper-competitive recruitment arena.

The next section provides an overview of each chapter, culminating in the conceptual framework for graduate employment, recommendations for teaching and learning policy and practice, and demonstrating a powerful contribution to the knowledge of sociology in higher education.

1.5 Outline of the thesis

Chapter 2 frames the study through a sociological lens, considering and contrasting the theoretical underpinnings, arguments, and assumptions about employability. In doing so, it considers the conceptualisation of social mobility and meritocracy in the knowledge economy, focusing on the relationship between business education and the graduate labour market. The chapter interrogates components essential for graduates to secure a job and thrive in their chosen career: human capital, social capital, and cultural capital, drawing on the seminal studies of Bourdieu and Becker. Finally, the author argues for a new view of graduate recruitment - as a deliberate transition from student to quasi-professional - drawing on Foucault's philosophical concepts that intersect knowledge and power.

Chapter 3 is the literature review, analysing published studies from the twenty-first century, in English from the UK. Where the published body of research is limited, for example employability pedagogy, the geographic range has been extended, particularly to the United States. The research has also extended beyond business education, due in part to the limited volume of research, but also to enable the review to critically analyse the different methodologies and findings across a range of disciplines. The studies were found using a combination of the following databases: EBSCO; Emerald; ProQuest; Wiley Online; and JSTOR.

The literature review is split into four sections. The *meaning of higher education* section charts the decisive shift in purpose of the sector to utilitarian neoliberalism, driven by government policy of marketisation, concluding that employability skills discourse is now the dominant scholarly narrative (Bhagra & Sharma; 2018; Bublitz, 2018; Fugate et al., 2004; Lazear, 2003; Ledermuller, 2011; Maxwell et al., 2009; Raybould & Sheedy, 2005; Tomlinson, 2017). The *pedagogic strategies* section views the empirical research through the lens of a Kantian constructivist philosophy, arguing that Kolb's (1984) experiential learning framework forms the backbone of employability pedagogy (Artess et al., 2017; Bassot, 2016; Kalfa & Taksa, 2015; Kolb et al., 2000; Lage et al., 2000; Pegg et al., 2012; Yorke, 2006). The *recruitment and selection* section highlights the competitive contemporary approach to graduate recruitment, analysing the limited range of empirical studies. It argues that individuals are able to succeed through a deliberate process of professional socialisation, viewed in the context of Foucault's technologies of the self (Gebreiter, 2019; Pollard et al., 2015). Finally, the *social justice and meritocracy* section unpacks the case for educational meritocracy and social mobility through an intersectional lens, arguing that widening participation policy has exacerbated the two-tier system in UK higher education. It defines social factors as the fractured identities used to define social differentiation, including social class, ethnicity and gender (Bradley, 1996; Butler & Watt, 2007; Crenshaw, 1989; 2017; Hill Collins 1990; McRobbie, 1991). The section concludes by positioning business education in the context of hyper-globalisation, claiming that the rise in international recruitment at large companies in London has made competition for graduate roles even more intense (Bradley, 1996; Brooks et al., 2012; Haung & Turner, 2018; King et al., 2010; Li, 2016).

Chapter 4 sets out a methodological framework for how the research was carried out, closely aligned to Merriam's approach to an interpretivist, qualitative case study. The chapter demonstrates how this decision was informed through the author's ontological and epistemological assumptions, setting out a constructivist approach that acknowledges the intersubjectivity of social actors with competing interests. The principal method of in-depth, semi-structured interviews is also explained, arguing for a purposeful approach to the sampling of module leaders, university professional services staff, and graduate recruiters. The necessary thick description that characterises the case study is further enhanced through incorporating the perspectives of graduating students through the free text responses in the NSS, in addition to thematic analysis of key academic documentation (including module specifications and quality assurance policies) and employers' websites. The chapter goes on to argue for a multi-phased thematic data analysis approach, enabling useful connections to be drawn from the data. The final section considers the ethical issues, taking into account the added complexities of the Covid-19 pandemic and the shift from face-to-face interviews to online.

Chapter 5 presents the data collected from the participants and discusses the major findings of the research. In doing so, this study gains an understanding of how employers interpret their experiences of recruiting graduates, and how module leaders engage with, and interpret, the needs of employers. The chapter is split into four sections. The first section interprets the perspectives of module leaders, student support staff, and students about how the RGU business school embeds employability in their undergraduate degrees. The section argues that pedagogy centred on ideas around experiential learning is effective in achieving graduate employment, but a combination of increasing academic workload, weak data sharing and poor communication, has resulted in a lack of integrated employability support. The second section focuses on the perspectives of graduate recruiters, discovering that the recruitment process is highly manual and pressurised resulting in subjective and impulsive shortlisting procedures. In the third section, the analysis turns to the impact of two seismic events: the social movement, Black Lives Matter, and the global health crisis, Covid-19. The findings show that Black Lives Matter has increased employers' focus on producing a more diverse shortlist of candidates, however this is not being reflected in the final recruitment decisions. Regarding Covid-19, the findings show that less privileged students are unable to sufficiently develop their employability as a result of the switch to online learning, while students with family ties in large employers have taken advantage of nepotistic social reproduction. The chapter culminates in a conceptual framework for graduate recruitment, arguing for the importance of social and cultural attributes, and the central role that can be played by business schools to provide the experiences necessary to enable social mobility.

Chapter 6 draws conclusions from the empirical evidence and considers the implications for existing theory, policy and practice. It argues for the importance of the wider university experience in the accumulation of social and cultural capital, enabling graduates to realise the labour market value of their degrees in relation to prestigious professional and managerial graduate positions. It highlights the importance of business schools responding to the challenges of employability through intersectional lens, treating students as individuals through a personalised, multi-dimensional approach. Finally, building on the empirical findings of this PhD thesis, the chapter also considers the limitations of the study and areas of future research, including the legacy of the pandemic on intersectional discrimination.

2. Theoretical framework

This theoretical framework chapter sets out “the underlying structure, the scaffolding or frame” for the study of graduate recruitment in business education (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016:85). The chapter argues that the relationship between business education and graduate recruitment is most usefully considered through the lens of Bourdieu’s theories of social and cultural capital and Becker’s theoretical and empirical analysis of human capital. Whilst it is uncommon to find research that seeks to position Bourdieusian social philosophy alongside Becker’s economic analysis there are similarities, as both challenge established interpretations of human behaviour and the ordering of social groups into interchangeable classifications such as social class. In doing so, the chapter seeks to structure graduate recruitment through a unified model that brings together the social and economic arguments from both approaches. Next, Foucault’s philosophical interpretation of human capital theory is analysed as a critical tool in this thesis to connect the theories of Bourdieu and Becker to the study’s recommendations for teaching and learning. Finally, the chapter positions the employability debate in the context of Young’s theory of meritocracy, as a platform on which to question the contemporary neoliberal consensus on the role of higher education as the fuel of social mobility. In short, the chapter creates a lens to critically analyse published research in business education and graduate recruitment.

2.1 Bourdieusian analysis: the role of habitus, field and capital in social reproduction

This study argues that the concept of graduate recruitment requires a Bourdieusian theoretical lens to address the strengths and limitations of undergraduate business education. The concepts of habitus, field, and most significantly, capital, enables the study to understand the role of embodied, often invisible, attributes and resources that a business student must accumulate in order to compete for exclusive graduate jobs. Specifically, the theoretical framework focuses on Bourdieu’s scholarly collaborations with Passeron (1990) and latterly with Wacquant (1992), on French higher education, and its role in the reproduction of class relations. Bourdieu and Passeron (1990:4) are concerned to expose the sustained domination and control exercised by the existing social order, what they call “symbolic violence”. This social order, or preserved hierarchies, define relationships between individuals in society. Bourdieu and Passeron define the fundamental problem in society as the ways in which systems of domination persist and reproduce themselves without conscious recognition or rebellion by the people (DiMaggio, 1979). Higher education is an example of a social structure that is designed to maintain symbolic domination, argues Bourdieu, through the accumulation and control of capital by a rich and powerful elite (Bourdieu, 1977).

Before discussing Bourdieu's three forms of capital, however, it is necessary to introduce the concepts of habitus and field, due to the interconnections that make up Bourdieu's intellectual endeavours. The concept of habitus is important to this study as it questions the extent to which the university experience in isolation can overcome a privileged childhood (Reay et al., 2009). Habitus underpins the creation of class lifestyles, which become significant to individuals by the way in which social perception influences how individuals are judged in different social settings (Gordon, 2013). Habitus begins from what Bourdieu (1977) regards as an ingrained social conundrum. As Maton (2014:49) states, we all feel that we are "free agents", able to make everyday decisions, yet society is categorised by retaining the status quo. As Willis (1977) emphasised in his empirical study, it is a world in which working class people get working class jobs. However, there are no rules which define this scale of mass obedience. It is the structure of an individual's past and present, their upbringing and their educational experiences, that result in a systematic rather than a random approach to social mobility (Bourdieu, 1990). Bourdieu frames the self in a "habitual state" (1977:214), transferring social memory from one encounter to the next. For Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992:20), the "social world is the body", with higher education acting as a three year crescendo to an orchestrated childhood of privileged preparation.

Informed by the concept of habitus, this study begins to explore the extent to which business education has a potentially transformative effect on less privileged students, or if their childhoods have left working class individuals to struggle in an "out of habitus" experience (Reay et al., 2009:1110). Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) argue for the latter, positioning the individual as a player in a game, using past experiences to develop the best strategy for survival and, significantly, to gain an advantage over less privileged competitors. On the other hand, the notion of habitus is seen by critics of Bourdieu as being rooted in "pessimistic determinism" (Jenkins, 2002:10). In the context of the research, there is no greater game than when competing for a graduate role, with business education potentially providing an individual with the tools he/ she/ they need to take part (Bhagra & Sharma, 2018; Ledermuller, 2011; Raybould & Sheedy, 2005; Scott, 2013; Tomlinson, 2017). This study will contend that through the hundreds of small, unremarkable exchanges that take place between a student, their peers, and the academic community, individuals are shaped by their university experiences. Put simply, it appears that an evolving habitus can enable graduates to use their university experiences to gain graduate roles, helping to shape the way they feel, think and act (Maton, 2014).

Extending the argument, Bourdieu points out that habitus does not act alone; it is an unconscious relationship between habitus and field, summarised through the following equation (1986a:101):

$$[(\text{habitus})(\text{capital})] + \text{field} = \text{practice}$$

Bourdieu defines field as the social space in which interactions and events have occurred (Thomson, 2014). Habitus and field are acutely interlinked, as the social spaces an individual occupies are similarly structured and controlled (Maton, 2014). Bourdieu and Wacquant summarise this relationship as a "fish in water" (1992:127), in other words a social situation in which an individual feels comfortable, as opposed to one in which we "make our excuses and leave" (Maton, 2014:56), forcing an individual's past and present to collide. For Bourdieu (2005:7) therefore, the underlying social logic of habitus and field is deeply embedded into everyday events, with individual fields like "a separate universe" where the rules of the game are different. Individuals are taken out of their comfort zones without the tools required to win, for example, being the first child in a family to take on the challenge of an undergraduate business degree, or the fierce competition of contemporary graduate recruitment processes (Beardwell at al, 2004; Branine, 2008; Heaton et al., 2008; Sackett & Lievens, 2008). We can thus see business education and the graduate recruitment process as a series of semi-autonomous fields, defined around specific social and economic interests built around social congruence (Gordon, 2013). In summary, this study argues that for business graduates, large employers are setting the rules of the game, in which habitus and capital are frequently the "trump cards" (Mahar et al., 1990:12).

2.2 Forms of capital: economic, social and cultural

One of the theoretical cornerstones of Bourdieu's sociology is the idea of society as a "plurality of social fields" (Siisiäinen 2003:194). Forms of capital - economic, cultural and social - are the core factors defining positions of the various actors in any field. Every field, for Bourdieu, is an arena of conflict; for an individual it is a constant struggle for position to navigate around the formidable constraints of the social structure (DiMaggio, 1979). In the context of this study, an example is the recruitment process for a graduate position; a field which can start with hundreds of candidates and where there is frequently only one winner. To compete in the game, however, an individual must first accumulate different kinds of capital. Bourdieu (1986b:47) defines economic capital as being "immediately and directly convertible into money", before crucially extending the concept of capital beyond the economic and into the symbolic: social and cultural capital. In doing so, he seeks to define symbolic capital as assets that bring social disadvantage, reproducing a system of inequality (Gordon, 2013). While Bourdieu determines that the social structure is immoveable, this study ultimately argues that agents in universities (including module leaders and the careers service) can alter the social conditions of the field, making it more difficult for a dominant social group to monopolise the accumulation of capital.

Symbolic capital exists in three forms: habitus, objectified, and embodied. The formation of habitus is an "accumulated history" (Bourdieu, 1986b:46) principally within the family, but an important agency of habitus is education, where capital assumes the institutionalised form of certification (Moore, 2014). Objectified capital is materially represented, for example art and books. In contrast, embodied capital is incorporated within the individual, including personality, language, and lifestyle (Bourdieu, 1986b). The formation of embodied capital requires “prolonged exposure” to social habitus; the time required to learn the rules of the game (Moore, 2014:107). While Bourdieu (1986b) draws attention to socially conservative structures such as the military, this research will focus on the three year journey of university business education. In each case, the structure of social norms acts to reproduce capital in an “identical or expanded form” (Bourdieu, 1986b:46). For Bourdieu, whilst the ability of the working class to accumulate symbolic capital is seen as possible, hope will persist. The spin of a roulette wheel, he says, could change an individual’s social status “quasi-instantaneously”, which he describes as a “miracle [of an] imaginary universe” (ibid). As Fabiani (2021) points out, some of Bourdieu’s language was deliberately rebellious, seeking to bring about social change. This study argues for the power of business education as a revolutionary force if it can empower the less privileged through the rapid acquisition of cultural and social capital.

2.2.1 Cultural capital

> *Instruments for the appropriation of symbolic wealth socially designated as worthy of being sought and possessed.* (Bourdieu, 1973:73).

Cultural capital is defined as the attitudes, preferences, knowledge, behaviours, goods, and credentials used for social and cultural exclusion, including careers or high-status groups (Lamont & Lareau, 1988:156). Bourdieu (1986b) maintains that embodied cultural capital can be acquired, to a varying extent depending on time, often unconsciously. It can be subject to “hereditary transmission” and achieved quickly, from the outset, for families with strong cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986b:49). For Bourdieu, the objectified state is defined by property, such as technology, books, and paintings. However, the extent of the objectified state of cultural capital is determined by the embodiment. For example, to possess a piano only takes economic capital, but to play it well takes embodied cultural capital. Agents, such as business academics, maintain mastery of objectified capital and, with it, social reproduction of the embodied state. Further, in the institutionalised state, cultural capital takes the form of educational credentials and qualifications, through the currency of the degree certificate and the institution from which it was gained (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). Put in the context of this study, the undergraduate business degree will form the institutionalised state of cultural capital, but it will be the embodiment of cultural knowledge, tone, appearance and interview technique that will enable an individual to compete for graduate roles (Covaleski et al., 1998; Gebreiter, 2019; Pollard et al., 2015; Tomlinson, 2017). There is clear overlap here with social capital, characterising Bourdieu’s fluid approach.

2.2.2 Social capital

> *Social capital is the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalised relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition - or in other words, to membership of a group - which provides each of its members with collectively-owned capital.* (Bourdieu, 1986b:51)

Bourdieu's concept of social capital (1986b) is defined as the relationships and networks that enable individuals to retain or develop credit or capital. They may gain these relationships via their family, school, university and elsewhere, and they are maintained through proximity, geographical but also economic and social. For Bourdieu, social capital is measured through the size of the network of connections, and the volume of capital possessed by each of the members. The reproduction of social capital is centred on the networks maintaining exclusivity and social exclusion, held together by a common desire to maintain and enhance members' collective reputations. The "old boys' network", as Bourdieu puts it, enables "string-pulling" and "a helping hand" (1986b:58). Analysing the power of social capital in universities, Bourdieu cynically claims that membership of the right networks "tends to correct the effect of academic sanctions" (ibid). In the context of business education, these networks also include the events, societies and work placement opportunities that frequently reinforce degree programmes and enable students to build their professional contacts (Artess et al., 2017; Bathmaker et al., 2016; Heaton et al., 2008; Knight & Yorke, 2003; Pegg et al., 2012). Going further, an individual having good manners may also be an element of social capital rather than cultural capital, claims Bourdieu, as they are acquired, or at least "point to", membership of a prestigious group (1986b:57). Social capital is ubiquitous and continually transmitted, concludes Bourdieu, and accumulated in ways that reinforce existing social structures.

2.2.3 Symbolic capital and business education

Positioning symbolic capital firmly in the context of this research topic, it is noteworthy that Bourdieu was among the first to identify the system of mass higher education as a fundamental institution in the social reproduction of class inequality from generation to generation (DiMaggio, 1979). Together with Passeron (1990:65), Bourdieu describes higher education as a route for social mobility as an "illusion". While acknowledging that sound theoretical knowledge enables a worker to move from practitioner to expert, it is the wider aspects of social, cultural, and economic capital that differentiates society. For Bourdieu and Passeron (1990), university lecturers are agents that control the transfer of knowledge and sustain social norms. "Educational streaming" by social class, they argue, is an established feature of higher education, with working class students more likely to be admitted on to degrees in "modern" subjects like business rather than established fields such as classics, law and medicine (1990:93).

On the other hand, Bourdieu (1986a) does acknowledge that cultural capital can be acquired, often subconsciously, and higher education can be at the heart of this acquisition. Furthermore, Bourdieu argues that universities are good vehicles to develop networks and connections that will enable graduates to gain social capital (ibid). It is also worth pointing out that contemporary scholars, employing Bourdieu and Passeron's theory, have found that business programmes are positioned firmly within the 'premium' category, alongside medicine, mathematics, computing, and law (Davies et al. 2013; O'Leary & Sloane, 2005). Indeed, far from a mechanism to retain the status quo of social reproduction, the goal of business education can be to equip graduates to compete effectively in the contest for social mobility (Labaree, 2006; Barker & Fowles-Sweet, 2018). Section 3.1 of the literature review critically analyses empirical studies that have applied Bourdieu's theories of symbolic capital to the field of business education.

In the next section, this multidisciplinary theoretical framework turns from sociology to economics, with Becker's human capital theory and the concept of the knowledge economy.

2.3 <u>Becker: human capital theory and the economics of knowledge</u>

A Nobel Prize winning economist, Becker's theory of human capital, first published in 1964, is a major contribution to the study of the economic impact of education (Teixeira, 2014). Indeed, it has developed into one of the most powerful theories in modern economics, driving the West's agenda to increase access to higher education (Gillies, 2011). Becker, associated with the Chicago School of neoliberal thought, sought to prove that there was a financial return for the time and resources dedicated to education (Lazear, 2015). This analysis persuaded governments, families and individuals to interpret business education as an investment which would pay dividends later in the form of higher earnings (Blaug, 1976). However, for the employability curriculum, critics of Becker highlight that human capital theory reduces business graduates as simply "a bundle of technical skills", raising moral questions about the conceptualisation of humans as assets to be exploited for economic gain (Brown, 2001:13).

Becker originally defined human capital as the "knowledge, skills, health [and] values" of an individual (Becker, 1993:16), extending to incorporate "information" and "ideas" in 2002 (Becker, 2002:2). Capital is gained through investment, Becker argues, of time and money, by individuals, companies, and the state. According to his theory, investment in an individual's education is similar to business investments in equipment, enabling Becker to determine the cost and returns of school and university education. Citing published economic reports and comparing them to education spending, Becker concludes that countries with persistent economic growth have also had large increases in investment in education and training (Becker, 1993). The growth of knowledge in these countries, embodied in people, generates economic progress, shown in the United States, Japan and Europe over the past hundred years. For example, in 2002 Becker calculated that 70 per cent of the total capital in the United States was human capital. If developing countries are able to do the same, Becker argues, the global spread of human capital will transform the world economy. Rather than referring to capitalism, Becker (2002:2) determines that it should be a "knowledge capital" economy as, whilst financial capital is important, "human capital is the most significant". New businesses such as the technology sector, Becker (ibid) determines, are driven by human capital and the ability of entrepreneurs to formulate innovative ideas. Equally, it is up to these individuals to maintain their lifelong learning, in order to retain and increase human capital, as the dynamics of the global economy change. Therefore, there is more pressure than ever on business schools to prepare students with the knowledge, skills and competencies required to obtain graduate employment (Morley, 2007). As Gordon (2013:13) neatly surmises, "learning is earning", with a neoliberal consensus that graduate recruitment is a problem of supply, which can be solved through a greater commitment to skills-based vocational education.

2.3.1 Education and training

> *Education and training are the most important investments in human capital.*
> (Becker, 1993:17)

The original aim of the Becker's scholarly activity in the 1960s was to calculate the return on investment on college and high school education in the United States, however, Becker later realised that there were other, often more informal, aspects of education and training that were just as significant. Thirty years later, Becker (1993) expanded his definition of education to include on-the-job training, formal and specific training, and other knowledge. Becker's broader interpretation becomes important in the context of this thesis, which discovers that extracurricular experiences are a critical differentiating factor in graduate recruitment, beyond the core academic study. However, Becker is critical of employers' motivations, breaking down this training into two types: general training and specific training. General training is transferrable to other companies and roles, Becker states, whilst specific training is exclusive to that company's products and processes. Becker's conclusion is that employers will only invest in firm-specific skills to avoid the threat of other companies poaching members of staff. Employers' focus on firm-specific skills over transferrable knowledge raises doubts over their commitment to helping universities shape the future of business education (Martinaitis, 2014). As a result, Becker is positioning business educators as autonomous figures in creating and developing human capital, with employers largely absent from driving the employability curriculum (Gilles, 2011). Within this argument, the academic community is positioned as primarily at the service of the modern economy, while the larger political and social role of higher education is in danger of being lost (Galbraith, 1996).

Developing this argument, human capital theory is intrinsically linked to the ‘graduate premium’, an effective political device used by successive governments (Gordon, 2013). In 2006, a UK government-sponsored report found that the average graduate premium was £160,000 (Blair, 2007) and more recently the Department for Education stated that graduates earn £10,000 more per year than those who don’t go to university, “proving that a degree continues to be a rewarding investment” (Department for Education, 2019). Applied to business education, it appears that students need to possess an entrepreneurial mindset, seeking to maximise the economic value of their investment in knowledge and skills development. This has led students and their parents to make decisions on higher education based on economics, utilising market information to make a balanced and informed assessment of likely recruitment outcomes (Donald & Baruch, 2017). In fusing human capital with rational choice theory, Becker (1993) begins to explore its explanatory potential of sociology in economics, in particular the role of the family.

2.3.2 The role of the family

Becker (1993) acknowledges that parents have a significant impact on their children’s ability to secure human capital, starting from when they are young. Parents with low education, welfare dependence and marital instability are more likely to pass these traits to their children. Earnings of poor parents and children, therefore, are “strongly related” (Becker, 1993:22). Families with more children, Becker argues, will spend less on each child than they would otherwise have with fewer children, such as progression to university. Comparing the United States with the previous one child policy in China, Becker highlights a generation of “emperor” children, pushed towards “outstanding educational achievement” (ibid). Countries with higher human capital and advanced education systems have lower fertility rates, Becker states, making it difficult for poorer countries and communities to compete.

Moving beyond monetary investment in education, Becker and Tomes (1993:260) analyse the impact of both “biology and culture” in a family, one encoded in DNA and the other embodied in the culture of the parents. With strong links to Bourdieu’s concept of habitus, Becker and Tomes (1993:262) highlight that childhood is crucial to acquiring basic human capital, including personality, appearance and reputation; the scholars refer to this as "genetic infrastructure". For example, children born into families with a particular ethnicity, religion or caste can suffer from market discrimination and earn less than families without these characteristics. In addition, they argue that some children have an advantage because they are born into families with greater ability and motivation to succeed. Parental investment in quality elementary and secondary education, whether accumulated by parents or borrowed, can enable children to acquire the foundations of human capital, prior to university. This is crucial, argues Becker (1995), as it is unlikely that a school drop-out will ever be able to acquire sufficient human capital to achieve a high professional status. Parents' limited access to capital, Becker and Tomes (1993:291) conclude, deeply impacts on the "degree of intergenerational mobility" that can be achieved through higher education.

2.3.3 Human capital and business education

Despite Becker considering the role of parents in limiting social mobility, the core criticisms of his work are centred around an oversimplification of employability, with universities acting as neoliberal knowledge factories, producing "human cattle" equipped with specialist knowledge to serve the economy (Tan, 2014:431). Business education is being deployed, it is argued, to build human capital and fuel inward investment, in what became known as the "knowledge-driven economy" (Knight, 2011:79). Skills policy in the UK is based on the premise that greater participation in higher education produces greater productive capacity in the overall workforce (Rhodes, 2018). One criticism of Becker's human capital theory is his interpretation of data, in particular the link between the number of graduates in relation to earnings. As Brown et al (2011) point out, median earnings have stagnated in the UK in real terms since the 1970s, so whilst graduates may still be earning more than non-graduates, an increasing proportion are earning less due to under-employment (Walker & Zhu, 2010). Indeed, between 2011 and 2019, an average of 48 per cent of UK graduates were working in non-graduate jobs (Hartmann, 2021). Moreover, it is possible that the expansion of higher education has over-selected those who would otherwise have been recruited to higher paid non-graduate roles (Gordon, 2013).

Second, in collaboration with Murphy, his Chicago School colleague, Becker argues that higher education needs to be "specialised" (1993:308). Graduates should be experts in a smaller range of skills, they point out, especially as technology advances. Indeed, the so-called "jack-of-all-trades" (ibid) is much less useful to a company than a specialist in economics. Moreover, Becker (1993), argues that on-the-job training is currently driving the specialisation agenda, as employers are forced to build on the limited human capital generated by generalist university degrees. This focus on specialisation is important to this study, with regards to the enduring tension between education and vocational training as the purpose of business education. Kennedy (2019:19) laments the rise of universities as "wholly instrumental corporate institutions training workforces" to serve the economic system. Equally significant is the moral critique of Becker that employable graduates should be more than "inanimate objects" to deliver specific tasks for powerful employers (Zula & Chermack, 2007:248).

Employability discourse is beginning to shift from this narrow perception, with the realisation that employers are seeking the complete package of knowledge, skills and personal attributes (Tomlinson, 2017). Specialist knowledge is just one piece of the 'job ready' jigsaw, with the focus extending to transferrable skills and attributes to form a corporate, professional identity. The next section turns to Foucault's (1979:230) sociological analysis of human capital and the role of the graduate as an "entrepreneur".

2.4 Foucault: technologies of power and the self

French philosopher, Foucault (1995), provides an important perspective to frame this thesis, in particular his work on the technologies of power and the self. The data that emerged from this research combines human capital theory with a behaviourist approach, where graduates are able to evolve and adapt to meet the expectations of employers through planned and systematic conditioning at university, such as by increasing exposure to employers. For Foucault (1979), in human capital theory the individual is considered an enterprise seeking to maximise his or her selling points. Therefore, business students can be seen as active economic subjects with human behaviour as a form of investment expected to generate a return (McKenzie, 2010). In his analysis of the moral implications of human capital theory, Tan (2014:432) draws a comparison with Azzi and Ehrenberg's (1975) study of religious conduct, concluding that adapting human behaviour is seen as morally acceptable when treated as "afterlife investments" for access to heaven. In the context of this study, framed in Foucauldian terms, a business student can be interpreted as "an entrepreneur of himself, being for himself his own capital, being for himself his own producer, being for himself the source of earnings" (Foucault, 1979:226). Therefore, any activity that increases the capacity to earn more, from the acquisition of an undergraduate business degree to purchasing a new outfit, is an investment in human capital (Read, 2009).

Foucault's (1995) technologies of power and the self was first derived during his research into the judicial system and institutions such as prisons and asylums. His seminal work, *Discipline and Punish*, first published in 1975, argues that technologies of power normalises subjective judgements and examinations, by means of a domineering hierarchical structure that is seen by scholars to reflect today's recruitment practice (Covaleski et al., 1998; Gebreiter, 2019). Analysis has taken an expansionist route, Foucault contends, judging more than actions but the "soul" of the individual, adding greater levels of procedure and investigation (1995:19). There is a "common matrix", evolved from a process of "epistemologico-juridicial formation" with the result of humanising decisions that were previously concrete, and creating a dynamic "social phenomena" with the intention to "repress, to prevent, to exclude [and] to eliminate" (1995:23-24). At this stage in Foucault's intellectual journey, individuals are portrayed as "passive victims", with their lives dominated by changing rules and decisions which determine their subjectivities (Gebreiter, 2019:237). "The political economy of the body" (Foucault, 1995:25) means that individuals can be forced to carry out tasks and perform ceremonies, dancing to a tune of power relations and the enforcement of discipline. Citing the "infinite segmentation of the body" under the extreme justice of the Ancien Régime in the fifteenth century, Foucault (1995:227) makes the comparison to the "indefinite discipline" of an enduring domination from the elite; "an interrogation without end" and a "file that was never closed". Indeed, the expanding process and heightened competition in graduate recruitment reflects the exorbitant utilitarian power in the hands of employers which, in Foucault's allegory, "resemble prisons" (1995:228).

2.4.1 Professional identity

However, Foucault (1995:26) does begin to describe how individuals can exercise power, not through the "privilege […] of the dominant class" but via a strategic approach that maximises his/ her/ their strengths. The strategy is conscious, deliberate and rehearsed, Foucault deduces, in an ultimate act of self-discipline that transforms an individual into the type of subject "they aspire to be" (Gebreiter, 2019:236). By 1981, Foucault is increasingly fascinated by how an individual can turn him/ herself into a subject. In his seminars at the University of Vermont, Foucault defines four technologies comprising: technologies of production; technologies of sign systems; technologies of power; and technologies of the self. The latter, he argues, enables individuals "by their own means or with the help of others […] to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection or immortality" (1988b:18). This transformation is beyond "the obvious sense of acquiring certain skills" but also by adopting a different attitude, a professional persona which, to echo Bourdieu, enables an individual to play the game through "politicking and manipulation" (Gebreiter, 2019:236). In order to achieve this, Foucault, argues, an individual must engage with the "Delphic principle, gnothu sauton", or 'know yourself' (1988b:19), stating that, "in the modern world, knowledge of oneself constitutes the fundamental principle" (1988b:22). The "cultivation of self" does not occur until just before death, Foucault states, achieved through a process of self-examination and lifelong learning, in order to accumulate a final professional identity (1988b:31).

Section 3.3 of the literature review analyses the very limited range of empirical studies analysing how graduate behaviour is prescribed, standardised, and normalised through a system that "punishes non-conformality" (Gebreiter, 2019:237). The recruitment process can be seen as a performance, in which individuals are responsible for the creation of their own professional identities. The extent to which such a process is meritocratic is an important dimension of this thesis. The next section scaffolds this concept through Young's (1961) satirical essay.

2.5 Meritocracy, social mobility and hereditary cognitive ability

> *Educational injustice enabled people to preserve their illusions, inequality of opportunity fostered the myth of human equality.* (Young, 1961:85)

Merit can be interpreted as having two definitions: first, it can be seen as referring to formal qualifications, specifically outward demonstrations of inner capacities and skills (Parsons, 1954; Parsons & Bales, 1956; Bell 1973). Second, merit can be interpreted within the concept of meritocracy, first coined in 1958 by the sociologist Young (1961) in his satirical essay, *The Rise of the Meritocracy*. In the text, Young (1961:94) argues that merit combines "intelligence and effort" and, within a meritocratic system, succeeds in exacerbating inequalities. The book is cast in the form of a thesis set in the year 2033, in which it had become apparent that the UK could not compete in the global production race if it allowed well-born mediocrities to inherit the best educational opportunities. In Young's fictional account, the government decided that the remedy was to determine higher education participation by first identifying intelligent children in school and then by making sure, through scholarships, that they received the best education. This part of the analysis reflects the ongoing debate in England over the rebirth of selective grammar schools as a vehicle for social mobility of the working class (Furedi, 2016).

On one hand, it is argued that meritocracy can act as a vehicle to social mobility with the belief "that all can achieve" regardless of background (Black & Wiliam, 1998:8-9), while students are more "confident of success, believing they can do it if they try" (Weeden et al., 2002:53). Driven by morality as its underpinning argument, meritocracy is seen as a positive notion that "anyone can", as long as they work hard, mirroring the enduring notion of the American dream (Lampert, 2013:51). In his article on the subject, Allen (2011:2) states that meritocracy "takes the form of an abstract ideal against which one can judge the present imperfection of a particular society". Building on Young, Allen's definition comes in the form of an idyllic formula (ibid): "merit = ability + effort". Applying Allen's view to graduate recruitment, competition for jobs is meritocratic, based primarily on differences in education and motivation. However, as this study goes on to discover, the labour market is not simply delineated along measures of academic performance; in contrast, it is socially and culturally bounded.

Young begins to explore this shift in his article in 2001, making the point that it makes good business sense to appoint graduates based on merit alone, as this will lead to increased profits. However, without going into specifics, he suggests that those "judged to have merit of a particular kind harden into a new social class without room in it for others" (Young, 2001). In the context of graduate recruitment, the thesis will identify that merit is largely embodied through personal attributes and beliefs that align with the capitalist business meritocracy (see section 5.4). For Young, universities are consciously taking part in a social revolution that maintains and controls social reproduction through educational selection. His son, the conservative commentator Toby Young (2016) agrees, adding "the unwelcome truth is that the underlying rate of social mobility in meritocratic societies is bound to be quite low" due to the hereditary nature of cognitive ability. In this thesis, module leaders remain motivated by the prospect of meritocratic graduate recruitment and the impact that teaching and learning has on the life chances of their students (see section 5.1). Therefore, the implications of educational meritocracy being a myth, with "hidden mechanisms" (Friedman & Laurison, 2020:4) propelling forward the privileged elite, has profound meaning for this study and wider employability discourse (see sections 3.4 and 5.3). The role of undergraduate education in the fight for social justice appears in doubt, with universities instead partially responsible for the reproduction of the establishment. The next section concludes the theoretical framework by introducing the wider implications for the study.

2.6 Implications of the theoretical framework for the study

This study is scaffolded by the sociological theories of Bourdieu and Young, the economics of Becker, and Foucault's philosophical concepts around knowledge and power. The chapter has demonstrated significant relationships between the theories providing an underlying structure to the study of graduate recruitment in business education. The authors have frequently been critical of each other's work, which if anything adds value to this study, as it seeks to interpret a holistic understanding of graduate recruitment. For example, Bourdieu states that Becker has failed to account for the "hereditary exchange" of cultural capital, focusing instead on the "monetary investments and profits" of education and training (1986b:48). In return, Becker says that those who have launched "bitter attacks" on human capital theory, "deny the economic importance of education" and "the circumstantial evidence in its favour" (1993:12). In fact, these views do overlap. Bourdieu states that, although with the odds stacked against them, students can acquire cultural capital, especially at university. Equally, Becker spends a great deal of time focusing on the impact of family, not simply economic factors but also personality and motivation, traits of

Bourdieu's cultural capital. He also identifies social discrimination as a barrier to social mobility, highlighting issues of race, religion and gender.

Figure 1 summarises the *theoretical framework* which scaffolds this research. The graphic sets out the key theoretical concepts or tenets that inform the study (Silverman, 2016), defined by Miles and Huberman (1994:17) as "intellectual bins". The *propositions* act as thinking tools to analyse the interviews, rather than seeking confirmation. The *conceptual framework* (see section 5.4) which is the culmination of the study, builds the level of sophistication by developing the key concepts with comprehensive working definitions that are applicable to the specific context of the research (Kumar, 2014). Accordingly, figure 1 sets out the theoretical scaffolding of graduate recruitment, with *human, cultural, and social capital* as the dominant components. Equally, this framing is largely dependent on whether graduate recruitment practice is *meritocratic* or, alternatively, whether nepotism or other social factors can come into play, limiting the potential impact of business education as an enabler of social mobility. Finally, Foucault's *technologies of the self* are included as the vehicle for capital accumulation, with individual students empowered to mastermind their deliberate transition to from novice to quasi-professional. The study begins to explore if students can indeed be masters of their own destinies, or if the hereditary power of habitus is too great a barrier for higher education to overcome.

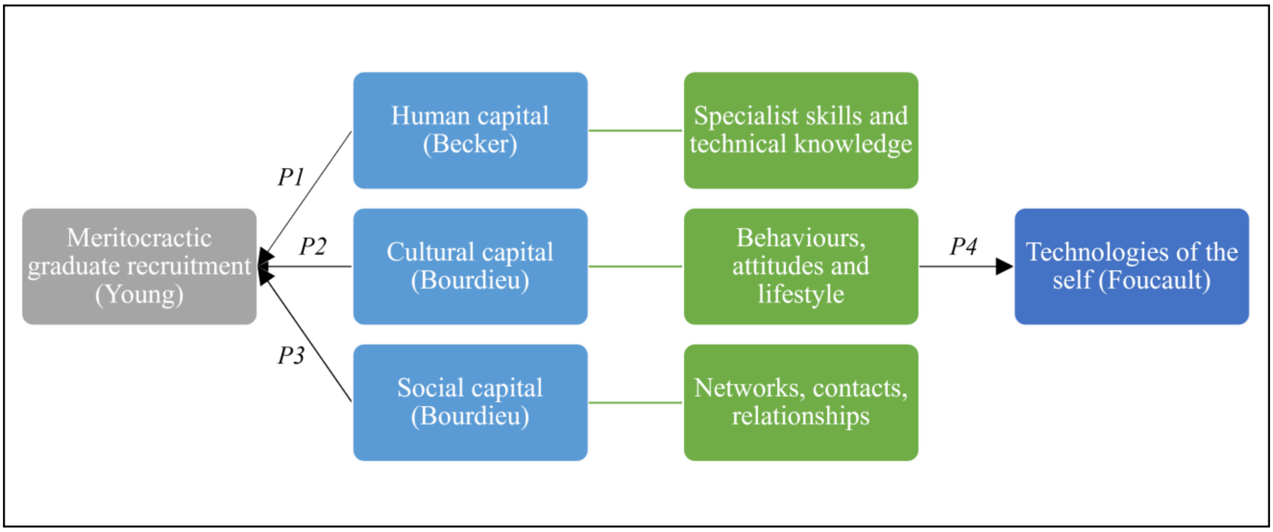


Figure 1: Graduate recruitment theoretical framework

Proposition labels:

- *P1, P2 and P3: A combination of human (Becker, 1993), cultural and social capital (Bourdieu, 1986b) is required to compete for graduate roles as part of a meritocratic (Young, 1961) process.*

- *P4: To accumulate cultural capital, students are required to develop a professional identity (Foucault, 1995) aligned with the expectations of the employer.*

2.7 Chapter summary

Bourdieu and Becker's theoretical approaches of education and social mobility offer a unique vantage point from which to understand graduate recruitment. They build upon the different interpretations forwarded in the literature review and offer a multi-dimensional framework that resolves some of the contradictions of the existing research. Through his unifying theories, Bourdieu offers a way of firmly situating graduate recruitment within broader social processes. Moreover, Becker's economic analysis of human behaviour provides a neoliberal dimension to the evolving purpose of higher education and potential student motivations. These aspects are especially valuable for this study concerned with education, social mobility, and the reproduction of class privilege. Equally, if readers are to understand how, and to what extent, students become socially and psychologically located by their backgrounds, then Foucault's interpretation of the self as entrepreneur becomes an important lens in which to view employability strategies in business education. Indeed, to have a deeper and richer understanding of how graduate recruitment is experienced and realised, the study seeks to dig beneath the political narrative and move into the social world, by discovering what key actors (specifically module leaders, students, university support staff and graduate recruiters) think, feel and do.

In summary, graduate recruitment can be framed through the lens of capital, comprising human capital, cultural capital, and social capital. Human capital is defined, in the context of this research, as knowledge and expertise, incorporating both specialist and technical skills. Cultural capital is represented by the behaviours and attitudes of the individual, including cultural awareness and motivation. Social capital, finally, are the networks and contacts built by the individual, so he/ she/ they have an understanding of what opportunities exist and who are the agents or gatekeepers. It is only by positioning the three types of capital together, and understanding the relationships, that graduate recruitment can be fully understood. In the next chapter, the literature review seeks to understand the range of published studies on this topic and identify where gaps exist in how the subject has been researched.

3. Literature review

The literature on graduate recruitment is broad, complex and multidisciplinary. Empirical research is rooted in social sciences (including sociology and psychology) and economics, representing a range of perspectives and contributions to knowledge, including teaching and learning, social justice, public policy, and economic policy. The great majority of literature analysed can be positioned in two camps: first, seeking to shape the employability curriculum in higher education (for example Bakhshi et al., 2017; CABS, 2019; Ledermuller, 2011; Pegg et al., 2012; Yorke, 2006); and second, to influence government policy and public opinion (for example Aspin, 2013; CBI, 2018; Deloitte, 2017; Kennedy, 2019; Reay et al., 2009). Indeed, the volume of the research largely responds to the political landscape of the time. The connection between higher education policy and economic growth, established by the Dearing Report in 1997 and strengthened by the Browne Report in 2010, inspired the academic community to interpret and question the disputed concept of graduate employability. At the same time, large employers were producing studies that sought to put pressure on universities to produce graduates with the right balance of knowledge, skills and attributes. Through analysing this discourse over the past 25 years, the literature review showcases the complexities of graduate recruitment which, this study determines, requires in-depth and rich qualitative analysis rather than many of the studies which can be perceived to skim the surface of what it means to be 'employable' through the use of quantitative surveys (Donald et al., 2019). Further, interesting concepts and models of graduate employability are often not empirically grounded and instead respond to existing literature and government data (for example Coldham & Armsby, 2016; Cole & Hallett, 2019; Dacre Pool & Sewell, 2007; Fugate et al., 2004; Tomlinson, 2017). Finally, studies that were empirically grounded, were too often positioned from the perspectives of students, academics *or* employers (for example Bakhshi et al., 2017; Donald et al., 2019; Gordon, 2013; Ledermuller, 2011; PwC, 2018), rather than attempting to gain a holistic, integrated understanding of graduate recruitment. This is the gap in the literature which this study seeks to address.

While gaps in the literature exist, the is no doubt that the field of employability is well established. Scholars have examined the evolution of the discourse providing a critical overview of the key concepts and interdisciplinary development over the last 25 years (see for example Bridgstock, 2009; Cheng et al., 2022; Cole & Tibby, 2013; Fakunle & Higson, 2021; Fugate et al., 2004; Römgens et al., 2020; Small et al., 2017; Tomlinson & Holmes, 2017; Williams et al., 2016). An indication of the rich variety of scholarly activity is the review of Williams et al. (2016), who identifies 88 components from 16 conceptualisations of employability in their search of publications from 1960 to 2014. A unifying factor in their conceptualisations of employability is the emphasis on graduate outcomes, underpinned by human capital theory (Becker, 1993), which emphasises the importance of education to develop a skilled and productive workforce for the purpose of economic growth (Fakunle & Higson, 2021). Indeed, Römgens et al. (2020:2589) determines that "all definitions" of employability come down to an individual's ability to obtain employment. More specifically, Small et al. (2018:161) define employability as a graduate's "knowledge, individual skills and attributes", which Fakunle & Higson (2021:531) determine requires a "competency-based education". Drawing parallels with this case study of a single business school, Cole and Tibby (2013) address the plurality of conceptualisation head on, proposing that universities define their own interpretations of employability in consultation with stakeholders, recognising that a single model should not be prescribed but developed flexibly and collaboratively with internal teams and external partners. It is not the intention of this literature review to repeat the work covered by more experienced scholars. Instead, it unpacks the evolution of employability discourse through a holistic journey that connects teaching and learning with graduate recruitment and social justice. Grounding each section in a historical context, the literature review attempts to combine scholarly rigour with engaging readability, to ensure the finished thesis meets the needs of its sponsors and the wider academic community.

The literature review is divided into four sections. Each section highlights how the contemporary research has shifted in response to government policy over the last 25 years. It makes sense, therefore, to begin with the *meaning of higher education*, expanding on the policy context section earlier in this thesis (see section 1.1). It is positioned within a context of the traditional approach to liberal education, derived from Plato and Aristotle and endorsed by Newman (1996) and Peters (1970). It shows a shift towards utilitarian neoliberalism, driven by government policy, concluding that employability skills discourse, in particular the accumulation of human, social and cultural capital, is now the dominant scholarly narrative (Bhagra & Sharma; 2018; Bublitz, 2018; Fugate et al., 2004; Lazear, 2003; Ledermuller, 2011; Maxwell et al., 2009; Raybould & Sheedy, 2005; Tomlinson, 2017). Building on that discourse, the *pedagogic strategies* section views the empirical research through the lens of a Kantian constructivist philosophy, concluding that Kolb's (1984) experiential learning framework forms the backbone of a sound employability pedagogy (Artess et al., 2017; Bassot, 2016; Kalfa & Taksa, 2015; Kolb et al., 2000; Lage et al., 2000; Pegg et al., 2012; Yorke, 2006). The *recruitment and selection* section highlights the competitive contemporary approach to graduate recruitment, analysing the limited range of empirical studies. It argues that individuals are able to succeed through a deliberate process of professional socialisation, viewed in the context of Foucault's technologies of the self (Gebreiter, 2019; Pollard et al., 2015). Finally, the *social justice and meritocracy* section unpacks the case for educational meritocracy and social mobility through an intersectional lens, arguing that widening participation policy has exacerbated the two-tier system in UK higher education. It concludes by positioning business education in the context of hyper-globalisation, claiming that the rise in international recruitment at large companies in London has made competition for graduate roles even more intense (Bradley, 1996; Brooks et al., 2012; Haung & Turner, 2018; King et al., 2010; Li, 2016).

3.1 The meaning of higher education in the United Kingdom

This section explores the ideological shift in the meaning of higher education from the romantic ideals of liberal education, knowledge for its own sake and development of the whole person (Hager & Hyland, 2002; Newman, 1996; Ozolins, 2013; Peters, 1970), to the contemporary neoliberal, utilitarian model of serving the knowledge-based economy through the rapid acquisition of occupation-specific human capital (Bridges & Jonathan, 2002; Kennedy, 2019; Winch, 2002). Building on the introduction chapter (see section 1.1), this section examines the recent history of higher education, using key policy documents to frame the empirical narrative of the time, from the Robbins Report in 1963 to the Augar Report of 2019. It reveals how the nature and purpose of higher education have changed, led by rapid expansion and marketisation (Scott, 2013). This section charts the shift in the normative discourse of higher education towards a socio-economic imperative and an audit culture. There is a particular focus on the knowledge economy, strongly linked to Becker's theoretical and empirical analysis of human capital (see section 2.3). The increasing influence of large employers on employability skills discourse is also reviewed (Deloitte, 2017; EY, 2018; McKinsey Global Institute, 2016; PwC, 2018). In short, this section juxtaposes education philosophy with political and economic reality; the 'grand narrative' of Aristotle and Plato has been eroded, substituted for short-term policy fluctuations. However, as the section concludes, the tipping-point between the liberal and free-market approaches has long since gone and, therefore, employability skills is now the dominant higher education discourse.

3.1.1 The traditional approach of liberal education

The traditional, or perhaps romantic, approach to the meaning of education is derived from the "grand narrative" of Plato and Aristotle, positioning theoretical knowledge as "superior to both practical and productive knowledge" (Hager & Hyland, 2002:273). This view was endorsed by Newman (1996:170) in the nineteenth century, who set out his vision for liberal education in *The Idea of a University*, in which he states that the purpose of higher learning is "the cultivation of the intellect as an end which may reasonably be pursued for its own sake". For Newman (1996:76), the university is an arena where "learned men, zealous for their own sciences" are brought together, working together and sharing ideas, to create a sense of "universal learning". Newman's argument is that students will be brought together as a community of intellectuals, exposed to a broad range of ideas and philosophies. This helps to expand the mind through the transmission of knowledge for its own sake. Newman's vision was for a system whereby specialised training was subordinate to the pursuit of a broader liberal education. These ideals became the basis of a characteristic belief in the United Kingdom that universities should aim at "producing generalists rather than narrow specialists", and that traditional subjects, through their development of the whole person, could train the mind in ways applicable to a wide range of careers (Anderson, 2010).

The Robbins Report, published in 1963, sought to defend the central purpose of higher education defined by Newman, stating "the aim should be to produce cultivated men and women" and "promote the general powers of the mind" (1963:6). However, Robbins did open the door to vocational outcomes, asserting that "there is no betrayal of values when institutions of higher education teach what will be of some practical use" (ibid). The Robbins report saw the first crack in the traditional view of higher education, and it was one that prominent scholars were keen to counter. In support of Newman were Reid (1969), Barrow (1999) and more recently, Aspin (2013) seeking to defend universities from encroachment of what they saw as capitalist marketisation. Providing a perspective from the arts, specifically literature and drama, Reid (1969:278) points to education as a "voyage of cultural discovery", beyond the contrived utilitarian concerns of capitalism. Barrow (1999:139) concurs, stating that being educated is to have a "developed mind", able to "exercise judgement, critically and creatively". It is inevitable, Barrow argues, that individuals will remain uneducated in at least some disciplines, but it is the fundamentals of critical thinking, problem solving and creativity that are the cornerstones of graduate excellence. Aspin (2013:233) concurs, charting an "overwhelming crusade" on the meaning of higher education, away from a pursuit of truth, discovery and curiosity.

One of the key education philosophers of his generation, Peters, concurs with his traditionalist peers, stating that being educated "is incompatible with being narrowly specialised" (1970:4). Peters is concerned with the breadth of knowledge, in particular between different disciplines and how they interact. This distinguishes true education from vocational training, Peters contends. Ozolins (2013:153) produces a highly engaging critique of Peters, emphasising what he sees as "the intrinsic value of education" and how this has been lost in "modern market-driven conceptions". Education is not about careers or maximising income but about acquiring "the perquisites for leading a meaningful and fulfilled life" (Ozolins, 2013:154). The "interconnectedness" of ideas and values, Ozolins (2013:156) writes, is what defines "wisdom". An educated individual, Peters (1973:18) points out, is to be able to understand "the reason why", in other words the theoretical knowledge that underpins the practical application of the skill. Indeed, in the context of business education, theoretical context is a fundamental part of degree level education, because the scaffolding creates more rounded and confident business professionals. Peters, however, goes further, asserting that it is not possible for education to be "intrinsically good" if it benefits both the development of the individual as well as contributing to the growth of the economy (Ozolins, 2013:158). He concludes that education is principally about personal development, enabling graduates to play full and active roles in society (ibid).

The traditional view of education is beginning to be eroded, with enquiry and curiosity being replaced with a narrow instrumental focus. However, as Anderson (2010) points out, at the time of Robbins, university education still "reached only four or five per cent of the age group and led chiefly to the professions or public services. It was not until the 1980s that the participation ratio passed 15 per cent, which is generally seen as the tipping-point between elite and mass education". Reforms of higher education since the Robbins Report have widened the gap between the idyllic, traditional view of higher education and the view of universities as corporate bodies, "training workforces for the prevailing economic systems rather than educating them for life" (Kennedy, 2019:19).

3.1.2 A shift towards utilitarian neoliberalism and economic value

The Robbins Report is considered the landmark of the post-war expansion of higher education, beginning the shift to a utilitarian neoliberalist approach to higher education. Bourdieu defines neoliberalism as a powerful economic doctrine driven by the state, aimed at "reducing labour costs, reducing public expenditure and making work more flexible" (1998:1). Anderson (2010) succinctly defines neoliberalism as dismantling "all barriers against the operation of pure market forces". Similarly, Self (2000:159) views neoliberalism as a "rational system of resource allocation and as a dynamic engine of prosperity in an increasingly globalised world". Neoliberalist discourse, scholars argue, reaches beyond rhetoric and is positioned at the heart of UK policy. The Robbins Report is an important example, defining four "objectives essential to any properly balanced system" (1963:6). The first objective, utilitarian in nature, was "instruction in skills" which for too long, Robbins argues, has been "ignored and undervalued" (ibid).

At the same time as Robbins, Becker was building a strong argument linking higher education investment and economic growth in the United States. In his theory of human capital, first published in 1964, Becker calculates that countries with persistent economic growth also had large increases in investment in education and training (Becker, 1993). Highlighting case studies in the United States, Japan and Germany, the growth of knowledge in these countries, embodied in people, generated sustained economic growth for over a hundred years. There are similarities in Becker's findings in relation to Germany with that of Anderson (2010), who highlighted the German structure of higher education in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, focused on national priorities such as engineering, and widely admired because their scientific research could be mapped directly to Germany's economic success.

Building on Robbins and Becker, a range of scholars in the UK and United States are keen to embrace the economic outputs from higher education (Bridges & Jonathan, 2002; Jonathan, 1997; Winch, 2002). The fundamental change in the values of higher education, Jonathan (1997) points out, are built on both government and consumer pressures. In particular, the role of higher education as central to economic policy is taken up by Winch (2002:101), concluding that the "economic aims of education are as legitimate as any other". Indeed, the change in direction of educational policy since the 1960s, should not be regarded as "bolts from the blue" but a "slow build-up" of changing attitudes, ideas and values (Bridges & Jonathan, 2002:137). These values shaping higher education have shifted radically, from the interests of the individual to the "needs of society" (Bridges & Jonathan, 2002:141), as the sector swings towards a socio-economic imperative, driven by a state imposing a market imperative that serves utilitarian individualism and personal wealth.

3.1.3 Meaning of higher education in the knowledge economy

The shift to marketisation of higher education is closely linked to the growth of knowledge economy discourse. In the theoretical framework chapter (see section 2.3), this study framed the knowledge economy through the lens of Becker's analysis of human capital, first published in 1964, driving the West's agenda to increase access to higher education (Gillies, 2011). Becker, sought to prove that there was a financial return for the time and resources dedicated to education (Lazear, 2015). This analysis persuaded governments, families, and individuals to interpret business education as an investment which would pay dividends later in the form of higher earnings (Blaug, 1976). Distancing himself from traditional interpretations of capitalism, Becker (2002:2) determined that it should be a "knowledge capital" economy as, whilst financial capital is important, "human capital is the most significant". In the UK, the knowledge economy doctrine was particularly helpful for governments to explain a deliberate shift from state-subsidised traditional manufacturing (such as the coal industry or automobile manufacturing) to new professional services industries (Machlup, 1962; Noyelle 1990; Powell & Snellman, 2004; Stanback, 1979). It was brain power rather than brawn that would power economic growth, as Wallace (2007:93) pointed out in his study, defining the knowledge economy as the "effective acquisition, dissemination and use" of knowledge. Focused on the finance and technology sectors, Wallace (ibid) found that universities are critical for the success of the acquisition phase. In short, knowledge is being regarded as a critical economic asset and the basis of national competitive advantage and, accordingly, higher education is seen as the "global panacea" to economic policy (Peters & Humes, 2003:1).

As set out in the *policy context* (see section 1.1), the advancement of the knowledge economy as the principal tool for growth in the post-industrial age reached a crucial stage when the Conservative government appointed a committee in 1996, chaired by Dearing, which reported following the general election in July of the following year. The university system, Dearing (1997) concluded, should "sustain the UK's economic competitiveness and to meet the legitimate aspirations of its citizens to improve their qualifications and employability". Higher education plays a "central role" in all sections of the economy, the report states, shaping "individual lives, the economy and society" (ibid). Universities are seen in the report as a generator of knowledge, designed to equip graduates for the world of work. The significance of this strategic shift is acknowledged in the report, as universities are key to the "economic survival" of the United Kingdom through their ability to develop "well-educated, high skilled workforce" for a "fast-changing global economy" (ibid). In summary, there is "an increasing emphasis on the role of higher education in serving the needs of the economy" (ibid). While Dearing highlights the multiple functions of higher education, and reasserts many of the classic principles, he repositions the purpose of higher education as being primarily economic.

Arguably the most significant proposal of the Dearing Report was the introduction of tuition fees to be paid directly by students based on their income level following graduation. The proposal that students should make a direct contribution to their education represented a new approach which opened the floodgates on higher education marketisation. The UK prime minister, Tony Blair (1997-2007), swept to power promising a new 'third way' approach, with principles of inclusion and social justice, and a knowledge economy heralded as an opportunity to usher a golden era of social mobility (Gordon, 2013). The third way was heralded as a "new pragmatism", not defined by either the market solutions of the Right nor just the interventionist state expansion of the Left (Martell, 2004:4). Strongly endorsing Dearing's findings, Blair argued they made higher education more accountable to consumers, who were able to make decisions based on a cost-benefit analysis (Kennedy, 2019). This utilitarian approach enabled students to assess the perceived benefits and justify their debt, introducing the concept of 'value for money' into the sector.

The marketisation of higher education was accelerated by the Browne Report (2010), *Securing a Sustainable Future for Higher Education: An Independent Review of Higher Education Funding and Student Finance*, which was presented to a newly elected Coalition Government in 2010. Like Dearing, it was commissioned by the previous government, this time by the Labour prime minister Gordon Brown (2007-2010) following the global economic crisis in 2008. Indeed, the Browne Report is interpreted by Lunt (2008) as a legacy of the Labour government (1997-2010), which decisively shifted higher education to a marketised system, in which global competitiveness is the primary driver. Lord Browne's recommendations were a significant shift from the way universities had been financed previously. Instead of the block grant, students would pay full tuition fees through a loan from the government, with repayment linked to their post-graduation earnings. As a result, whilst the number of places in higher education would increase still further, universities and other higher education providers would have to compete for students and universities were challenged to "persuade students that they should pay more to get more" (Browne, 2010:4). Graduate employment was at the centre of the review, empowering the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) to collect more data in order for students to make informed decisions. Universities were challenged to provide "students with clearer information about employment outcomes [to] close the gap between the skills taught by the higher education system and what employers need" (Browne, 2010:14). In a damning assessment of universities' performance, Browne (2010:23) stated that "students are no more satisfied with higher education than ten years ago. Employers report that many graduates lack the skills they need to improve productivity". This review was damaging to the reputation of universities in the United Kingdom, as "market discourse [is] irreversibly lodged in mainstream policy thinking" (Scott, 2013:52). Universities, it is suggested, are now providing a service to 'customers', on an "entirely financially transactional basis" (Scott, 2013:69).

Indeed, the increase in tuition fees, currently £9,250 per academic year for UK students (at the time of submission), has created what Sam Gyimah, the former Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation, described as "the age of the student" in 2018 (Department for Education, 2018). Universities are challenged to "listen, engage anew and lead the change to deliver for our students […] in other words, making sure students get what they pay for" (ibid). Two years prior to the speech, the Conservative government had published its white paper, *Success as a Knowledge Economy*, making the case for increased competition to incentivise universities to produce "better quality products [at a] lower cost" (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2016). The white paper sought to open up degree awarding powers to more private providers and further education colleges. It also endorsed strong accountability, with success defined through transparent measurement via public audits, including the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF), the NSS and the Destination of Leavers from Higher Education (DLHE) survey. Consequently, what could not be measured would inevitably be dropped as the traditional, liberal view of education was replaced by costs, efficiency and competition.

The white paper was seen as a fresh opportunity for the beleaguered further education sector to increase the volume of vocational degrees, and begin to level the playing field with universities (Doel, 2016). The vision is comparable with the peak of the polytechnics, in the 1970s and 1980s, which made a virtue of their differences from traditional universities (Anderson, 2010). They argued that the priority of polytechnics was not the pure pursuit of knowledge but solving practical problems and helping their students to gain qualifications from a wide range of backgrounds. This dual system is firmly established in the German education system, with powerful vocational schools, linked by law to small and medium size companies (Federal Ministry of Education and Research, 2005).

In the United Kingdom, however, vocational education is often devalued by students, parents and scholars. As Lewis (1991:96-97) points out, vocational degrees are traditionally viewed in class terms, "unworthy of the elite and more suited to the oppressed and unprivileged classes". The fundamental objection of scholars is the so-called dumbing down of degree-level study, characterising the "failure" of the system in the United Kingdom to "integrate the academic and the practical" (Maclure, 1991:28). Hager and Hyland (2002:273) develop this notion further, stating that the role of universities is for "general education" and further education colleges for "technical education". The role of further education colleges to develop technical skills remains a persuasive argument, with universities, arguably, having to fill a void of sustained underinvestment. This view is reflected, for the first time in decades, in the Augar Report published by the Conservative government in 2019, accepting the "essential" role played by further education and proposing closer ties with universities to create a "national system of higher technical education" (Augar, 2019:9-10). Since the report, there has been significant political turmoil, and it remains to be seen whether the report will ever be implemented. Three prime ministers lost their jobs between 2019 and 2022, with Theresa May (2016-2019) resigning during the Brexit negotiations with the European Union, Boris Johnson (2019-2022) being ousted following a series of indiscretions including so-called 'party-gate' during the global pandemic (Jones, 2022), and Liz Truss (September to October 2022) resigning after just 44 days in office (Parker et al., 2022). By the end of 2022, Rishi Sunak was the prime minister and the Labour party under the leadership of Sir Keir Starmer had surged to a significant lead in the polls (Helm & Savage, 2022).

3.1.4 Dominance of the employability skills discourse in contemporary scholarly activity

Regardless of the government in power, however, employability skills discourse remains a central narrative for the purpose of higher education. Moreover, the dominant concepts shaping that discourse are built around the accumulation of human, social and cultural capital (see chapter 2). The Confederation of British Industry (CBI) published a report in November 2018 with the title *Educating for the Modern World*. Critically, two-thirds of the employers surveyed are concerned there will be a lack of skilled people to fill high-skilled jobs (CBI, 2018:8). In addition, with this low level of confidence in mind, businesses are threatening to transfer operations overseas where there is a "more reliable skills supply" (CBI, 2018:20). Inevitably, therefore, the dominance of employability is particularly evident when reviewing published material on the subject of business education. As Bhagra and Sharma (2018) state, all sides are united in their objective to boost the employability of graduates but the methods to achieve this are subject to debate. The scholarly discussion centres around what knowledge, skills and attributes are required for graduates to be classified as 'job-ready'.

The UK-based Chartered Association of Business Schools (CABS) (2019) and a Pearson-commissioned study by Bakhshi et al. (2017) analyse these skills for an academic audience. Both issue warnings to business educators across the higher education sector: to maintain relevance and credibility in the business community, business schools must show greater agility and a willingness to change. This powerful conclusion is, in part, due to a series of empirical studies originating from influential large, multi-national companies (Deloitte, 2017; EY, 2018; McKinsey Global Institute, 2016; PwC, 2018). It is noteworthy that universities are almost obsolete in these publications, only mentioned on four occasions combined, and left exposed to a dynamic private sector that is adapting to boost the human capital of its workers through postgraduate competency-based training. Economists and business academics are also exploring these topics in their research, grounding their scholarly activity in human capital theory, whether citing Becker or other related theorists such as Schultz (Bublitz, 2018; Fugate et al., 2004; Lazear, 2003; Ledermuller, 2011; Maxwell et al., 2009; Raybould & Sheedy, 2005). These cited studies analyse what skills large employers are looking for in graduates, focusing predominately on so-called 'soft skills', a term which dates back from the 1972 United States Army training manual, and came into widespread use in the 1990s (Newman, 2006). Viewing this term through the lens of the theoretical framework, soft skills can be compared to Bourdieu's (1986) theory of embodied cultural capital, as they often comprise of personal attributes and behaviours.

Analysis by CABS (2019) outlines the threats to the traditional university business school. Failure to meet the demands of large, successful employers has resulted in consulting companies such as KPMG and EY offering their own executive programmes, in effect becoming a competitor to established postgraduate qualifications such as the MBA (ibid). The study also highlights LinkedIn Learning, Coursera and others, offering both microlearning and fully online qualifications at a "fraction of the price of a traditional business school" (2019:3). However, CABS (2019:8) do point out that business schools are beginning to respond, with 59 per cent of deans in its online survey targeting online growth over the next 10 years. On the other hand, taught degrees currently make up the great majority of the business education market, the authors acknowledge, and business school deans are keen to maintain the relevancy of the learning objectives for the labour market. In the same survey, 80 per cent are adding new modules to degrees in order to "fulfil employer demands for knowledge and skills" (2019:10).

Like CABS, education services provider, Pearson, has a significant interest in the success of the higher education sector. In 2017, they commissioned a study by Bakhshi et al., who set-up a series of workshops with industry leaders to generate a set of 30 occupations and the future demand prospects of each. The researchers then used this sample to extrapolate skills, abilities and knowledge for 120 occupations using machine learning. The study was conducted for the United States and United Kingdom, looking ahead to 2030. Bakhshi et al. (2017:14) concurs with Deliotte and EY, pointing to creativity and creative thinking as the key components of employability. In the United Kingdom, the researchers also point to what they call "sociotechnical systems", defining this attribute as the ability to manage relationships between humans and technology in the workplace. This skillset includes a combination of human and cultural capital; the ability to articulate complex technological infrastructure/ processes to a range of audiences, as well as achieving mastery of the systems themselves (ibid). In their conclusion, Bakhshi et al. state two important caveats in the context of this study. First, that business school systems are agile enough to develop and evolve their approach to developing 'job-ready' graduates and, second, that policymakers have access to good information on skills needs.

Several smaller studies over the past 20 years seek to understand employability by identifying the precise combination of skills and competencies, representing an intersection of human and cultural capital, with a particular focus on communication (Andrews & Higson, 2014; Donald et al., 2019; Fallows & Steven, 2000; Ingram & Allen, 2018; Maxwell et al., 2009; Raybould & Sheedy, 2005). Donald et al. (2019) carried out a quantitative survey of 1,355 undergraduates in science, technology, engineering and maths (STEM) subjects, finding that graduates' perception of employability centred around transferrable skills including communication, problem solving and time management. Similarly, Maxwell at al (2009) explored employability skills needs with a survey of 26 postgraduate human resource management students and 12 interviews with the students' line managers. The authors concluded that communication and problem-solving were the two core skills most important to employers. Fallows and Steven (2000), in another UK-based study, identify communication and presentation, planning, problem solving and communication as the most important skills sought by employers. Raybould and Sheedy (2005), researchers working for graduate recruiter, *Graduate Advantage*, highlight a similar range of attributes, adding commercial awareness and negotiation. In a set of 60 semi-structured interviews with students across four European countries including the UK, Andrews and Higson (2014) find that communication and presentation skills are critical. In these studies, once again human and cultural capital combine, with technical knowledge alongside communication. Ingram and Allen (2018:738-739) define this combination of skills and performance as "social magic" in their content analysis of Google and PwC websites and social media, while accepting that their methodology does not get to the "truth" of the recruitment process.

Elsewhere in Europe, Ledermuller's (2011) research reviewing job specifications in Austria is significant as it provides a strong framework to analyse the skills employers require for graduate roles. He also positions his theoretical framework within human capital theory, basing his approach on the work of Schultz (1961) and the idea of a knowledge economy. Ledermuller also incorporates Bourdieu's thinking tools of social and cultural capital and, although approaching the concepts from an economic angle, the author acknowledges that time and social status are required to accumulate capital, and that education represents an important route to acquire it. Competencies of graduates, Ledermuller argues, should match the requirements of the job market. It is this central factor, he suggests, that defines "educational quality" from the perspectives of graduates and employers (2011:28). Turning to his fieldwork reviewing job advertisements, he utilises software called JobReader, a tool developed at the Vienna University of Technology, to review 1,489 job vacancies over one month in Austria. Using text mining techniques to find patterns in the high volume of data, Ledermuller creates word clusters/ groups to create linkages, for example IT skills (also Excel, Word, Office) and commitment (also engagement). He is then able to create a series of graphics to support curriculum planning, incorporating human and social capital. Concluding, Ledermuller (2011:155) declares labour market information as a "black box" for universities; if institutions want to offer programmes that make students more employable, then job market information is an essential component. The study is a useful contribution to the topic, however it fails to ask to what extent universities are already responding to this agenda and how his recommendations should be implemented in practice.

In their studies, Lazear (2003) and more recently, Bublitz (2018) take the labour market intelligence and categorise it in contrasting ways. Grounding her article in Becker's human capital theory, Bublitz explores what she defines as three layers of knowledge comprising "industry-specific", "occupation-specific" and "firm-specific" (2018:511). The author determines that there are portable skills on the career path, but these vary between occupations. On the other hand, Lazear (2003), suggests that all human capital is general, and it is the weight an employer places on particular skills that makes the difference. Using an accessible case study of a start-up firm in Silicon Valley, Lazear suggests that the arrangement of skills into firm knowledge is unique through their combination. If a firm requires tax, economics and Java programming, the author states, it will be almost impossible to find a firm that requires those skills in exactly the same proportions. Personal adaptability, therefore, highlighted in the employability model of Fugate et al. (2004), becomes essential for career success. In particular, the study highlights embodied cultural capital such as positivity and confidence to enable individuals to negotiate the challenges of 'fitting in'.

3.1.5 Impact of automation on employability

The demands of the fourth industrial revolution, and the apparent dangers of automation to employment levels, have resulted in a body of scholarly activity focused on the structure of business education, to enable the workforce to become more agile (Deloitte, 2017; EY, 2018; Gibbons & Waldman, 2004; Maxwell et al., 2009; PwC, 2018). Reflecting Becker (2002), these studies expose the requirement of countries to build human capital, to maintain pace with technological development, as the key to economic success. If the university sector cannot respond quickly enough, the reports claim, the private sector has to step in to fill the void. Even more challenging is an analysis by global consultancy firm, Deloitte (2017), in which the authors examine the future of the metropolitan workforce. One striking element is view of the ageing population, stating that "70 is the new 50 in the future of work", projecting that workers over the age of 65 will be the fastest-growing demographic in the decades to come (Deloitte, 2017:5). Combined with the ageing population, Deloitte highlight the changing nature of jobs due to artificial intelligence and automation. This shift has the potential to create more graduate level roles, the study reveals, with communication, creativity and problem solving at the heart of the job descriptions.

The combination of extended careers and the continuous development of technology, results in a requirement for "lifelong learning", Deloitte (2017:8) concludes, with individuals required to refresh their skills at least six times during their careers. Indeed, an individual's skillset is likely to become "obsolete in less than five years" (Deloitte, 2017:9). Therefore, an agile, competence-based offer will be required if universities are to remain a credible option for tomorrow's postgraduate workforce. Similarly, the McKinsey Global Institute (2016) highlights the need for individuals to have agile knowledge, not only of technology, but of the changing motivations of consumers across the world, in order to maximise added value as global professionals.

Agility is also the theme of PwC's (2018) thought-provoking study proposing their vision of the 2030 workforce. The research is based on a specially commissioned survey of 10,000 people in China, India, Germany, the UK and the United States. Picking up on the theme of the ageing workforce, PwC also suggest that older workers will need to learn new skills and work for longer. "Re-tooling" (PwC, 2018:7), as the study describes it, will be essential for economies seeking to drive productivity. Workers who are sufficiently agile to respond to the changing labour market will be the most successful, as will the employers and governments who support them to do so. The PwC study (2018:8) argues that artificial intelligence is an opportunity, enabling individuals to spend longer on "high-level thinking", decision-making and creativity. Instead of looking to universities, however, PwC propose that "guilds" are established; groups of likeminded individuals who support, protect and train each other (2018:25-26). In the UK, this proposal can be compared with a trade union or a professional body such as the Chartered Management Institute, building a professional group that offers help and advice to others, in order to collectively build social capital. However, the guilds are not about retaining the status quo. In contrast, it is the adaptability of "organisations, individuals and society" that is essential, the researchers argue, "for navigating the changes ahead" (2018:31). Indeed, it can be argued that the rapidly changing economy has brought about a new human age. In order to take advantage of technological enhancement, human, social and cultural capital have become more important than ever. Consequently, as Cole and Tibby (2013:5) point out, maintaining employability should be seen as a "lifelong process".

3.1.6 Chapter summary

In summary, since the Robbins Report in 1963, the higher education sector in the United Kingdom has undergone a fundamental ideological shift. The role of universities has shifted from the traditional, liberal approach, encapsulated by the grand narrative of Aristotle and Plato (Hager & Hyland, 2002; Newman, 1996; Ozolins, 2013; Peters, 1970), to a utilitarian, output-driven sector, serving the needs of the economy and influential employers. This is due to successive governments implementing the findings of two major reports, Dearing (1997) and Browne (2010), forcing universities to compete for students, while introducing layers of regulation to quantify graduate recruitment outcomes. At its worst scholars have seen knowledge replaced with information, and a pursuit of wisdom replaced by a narrow occupation-specific curriculum, designed to maximise and accelerate the acquisition of practical human capital (Bridges & Jonathan, 2002; Kennedy, 2019; Winch, 2002). At its best, the extraordinary expansion of higher education in the United Kingdom has resulted in unparalleled opportunity for social mobility, with the dominant discourse of graduate recruitment built around the accumulation of human, cultural and social capital (Bhagra & Sharma, 2018; Browne, 2010; Dearing, 1997; Fugate et al., 2004; Ledermuller, 2011; Scott, 2013; Tomlinson, 2017). The next section will look closer at the pedagogy for employability, with a particular focus on business education, and how the sector is responding to the challenge of graduate recruitment.

3.2 Pedagogic strategies for employability in business education

The previous section, analysing the historic meaning of higher education, found that the successive governments and large employers have forged and then strengthened the political and regulatory bond between higher education and economic prosperity (Kennedy, 2019; Tomlinson, 2017). Indeed, since the Labour party's landslide election victory in 1997, participation in higher education has been presented as a springboard for individuals to gain graduate careers and achieve social mobility. The legacy of UK prime minister Tony Blair (1997-2007) was to implement a 'third way' approach to higher education policy (Martell, 2004). It resulted in rapidly increasing tuition fees, the marketisation of the sector, and a utilitarian approach to the value of higher learning, with a focus on competition, regulation and published graduate outcomes. The political narrative-imposed responsibility on universities for graduate recruitment, shifting the blame for gaps in the labour market to the academic community (Cheng et al., 2022). The focus on graduate recruitment, therefore, has become a lively area of scholarly debate, seen by some as eroding the liberal ideals of higher education, and by others as a "moral duty" for higher education providers, providing "political legitimacy" for the sector (Artess et al., 2017:8-9). This expectation plays into a discourse of the student as a consumer of higher education who feels entitled to demand a curriculum that will maximise their employment prospects (Scott, 2013).

Consequently, this section turns from the rise of employability discourse as the principal meaning of higher education, to finding out how graduate recruitment can be achieved and enhanced through adopting an employability pedagogy in business education. As a PhD thesis in education intended for an academic audience, the literature review deliberately moves from a conceptual vision of graduate recruitment to the practice of teaching and learning. The increase in studies seeking to define and shape employability pedagogy can be mapped to the changing political landscape over the past 25 years. As the introduction to this thesis sets out (see section 1.2), the increase in specific employability roles as a strategic response to government pressure has generated more capacity in universities for empirical research to be carried out. Therefore, it is no surprise that this section finds a lively academic debate into the optimum employability framework for teaching and learning.

From the origins of student-centred pedagogy, this section charts a significant shift in the approach of business schools, bringing together theoretical concepts and practical application, and preparing graduates for the workplace (Bonwell & Eison, 1991; Servant-Miklos, 2015; Thomas et al., 2013; Waring & Evans, 2015). This includes the reduction of so-called 'chalk and talk' and the rise of revolutionary active learning techniques, led by case method at the Harvard Business School in the early part of the twentieth century, advocating a Deweyan approach to reflective thinking (Baron, 2015; Dhar 2011; Gartland & Field, 2004; Maricle, 2017). Turning to contemporary practice, this section analyses the significance of experiential learning theory as the basis for employability pedagogy, from the 1980s to the present day, and how a multi-dimensional approach is required to ensure employability is fully embedded in the curriculum (Bassot, 2016; Kolb, 1984; Kolb et al., 2000; Yorke, 2006). Employer engagement, through internships, work placements and live projects, are now common pedagogical tools, which have the potential to accumulate significant human, cultural and social capital (Artess et al., 2017; Kalfa & Taksa, 2015; Lage et al., 2000; Pegg et al., 2012). The implementation of these experiential learning strategies, this section discovers, are motivated by political and regulatory pressures, through the audit of student satisfaction and graduate recruitment (Helyer & Lee, 2014; Jackson, 2002; QAA, 2019a).

3.2.1 Utilitarian regulation as an incentive for pedagogic research: the role of the QAA

The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) published Subject Benchmark Statements for the first time in 2000, demonstrating the government's intent to regulate the outcomes of higher learning (Jackson, 2002). The statements represent "the academic standards expected of graduates" and should be used in the "design, delivery and review of academic programmes" (QAA, 2019a). They are central to the regulatory approach of quality assurance in higher education, which has become increasingly systematic, reducing the differences between programmes and syllabi content at different institutions (Scallan & Gallagher, 2003). The combination of the Subject Benchmark Statements with the increased transparency of graduate recruitment, for example the Graduate Outcomes survey, means that students are highly likely to view learning as a route to meaningful employment and consequently have greater expectations of their university experience (Helyer & Lee, 2014). In a rare content analysis of the Benchmark Statements, Quinlan (2016:1,042) points out that they were subject to lengthy consultation and involved input from a panel of "disciplinary experts" including senior academics and employers. In addition, the official programme specification provided for each university degree course in the UK must reference one or more of these subject benchmark statements, helping to ensure a "common standard" (ibid) across universities within a given discipline. However, the study's principal conclusion is that there is "little attention" (Quinlan, 2019:1,044) paid to the development of social and cultural capital which are instead presented as generic statements of "transferable skills". Consequently, students are being prepared to play active roles in the economy, but not society, Quinlan deduces.

Indeed, the Benchmark Statement for undergraduate business degrees does force module leaders to have to read between the lines for references to social and cultural capital; however, there are sections seeking to stretch the curriculum beyond core technical knowledge. The QAA requires that degrees include:

> *Preparation for business, [which] should be taken to mean the development of a range of specific business knowledge and skills, together with the improved self-awareness and personal development appropriate to graduate careers in business with the potential for management positions and to employability in general*. (QAA, 2019b:4).

For master's degrees the QAA does go further, stating that:

> *Programmes [should] aim to prepare individuals for employment, either related to their first degree discipline or in a management role and may be linked to professional institute qualifications. In both cases, graduates will develop a sound understanding of business/ organisational contexts and thus should be able to make an early and significant contribution to their employer.* (QAA, 2015:7).

These expectations of employability, including personal attributes as a measure of the quality of business education, are a mechanism to hold universities to account during the formal quality and standards review process. However, the practical pedagogical strategies for achieving the benchmark are absent, enabling a vigorous academic debate to take place. Academics are now more exposed to pedagogic research than ever before, in part thanks to the QAA and increasingly the Office for Students, enhancing teaching quality and establishing "England as a leader in the professionalisation of teaching in universities" (Bacon & Sloam, 2010:346). Indeed, rather than seen as a "regulatory device", the statements should act as a "spur for pedagogic and intellectual debate" (Jackson, 2002:13).

3.2.2 The role of constructivist pedagogy in the employability agenda

The roots of employability pedagogy are found in Kantian social constructivism (Fry et al., 2009) and the educational philosophy of Dewey (2011, first published in 1910) in the early twentieth century. Dewey's approach to learning centred in problem solving has shaped the evolution of applied teaching and learning in higher education over the last hundred years. First, however, it is important to unpack the concept of pedagogy itself which both complex and disputed, highlighted by the uncertainty around the associated terminology and its numerous interpretations (Waring & Evans, 2015; Hall et al., 2008; Mortimore, 1999). The word 'pedagogue' comes from the Greek, "meaning a trainer or teacher of boys" (Inglis & Aers, 2008:140). For McDonald (1992) and Marland (1993) pedagogy is a craft rather than a rigid set of principles, while for Mortimore (1999:3) it is "a conscious activity by one person designed to enhance learning in another". This definition is developed further into the "four domains" of pedagogy, which are "subject and curriculum knowledge, teaching of skills and techniques, teaching and learning models and conditions for learning" (Inglis & Aers, 2008:140).

Fishman (1998) describes pedagogical theorists as frequently conflicting between two teaching styles: constructivism and behaviourism. Those who, like Herbart (constructivist approach), acknowledge the importance of engaging student interest for successful learning, and those who, like Harris (behaviourist approach), argue that successful teaching relies on students demonstrating effort, whether or not it engages their interests (ibid). The followers of Harris had a strong authoritarian view that induced students to work by the use of threats and punishments (Skinner, 1971; Thorndike, 1905). On the other hand, the Herbartians endorse a setting that is student-centred and recognise each student as possessing unique learning styles, focusing on the "dependence of education on experience" and "application to experience"

(Russell, 1905:64). Influenced by Genevan philosopher, Rousseau, Herbart highlights the combination of "experience and social intercourse", constituting a "circle of thought" (Russell, 1905:65). Waring and Evans (2015:29) concur, advocating a vision of student-centred pedagogy that celebrates the "fundamental and integrated relationship" between theorical scaffolding and practical application.

The origins of Herbart's student-centred constructivism can be found in the philosophy of Kant over 200 years ago, connecting experience to the formation of "concepts or constructs that are models of reality" (Fry at al, 2009:22). Learning involves a process of transformation, Kantian theory suggests, replacing previous understanding through active engagement and critical reflection. The transfer of information in itself does not change how a student sees the world, Tyler (1994) points out, instead it is what learners do. Biggs (1996, 2003) combines Kantian constructivist philosophy with student-centred pedagogy in his theory of constructive alignment, connecting learning objectives to the assessment methods. The constructive element, Biggs deduces, refers to the idea that students construct meaning through relevant learning activities. Indeed, meaning is not something imparted or transmitted from teacher to learner but is something learners have to create for themselves through discussion and interaction with others. Similarly, Marton and Saljo (1984), define the student-led approach as a deep, as opposed to surface, form of learning. Students are not simply remembering a list of facts, the researchers found, but understanding the meaning of what the author was trying to say, developing their criticality and beginning to connect thoughts and ideas. Teachers using the deep approach seek an active response from students, encouraging a positive, collaborative culture where mistakes can be made and learned from (ibid). Strategies in constructive alignment are particularly relevant for business education, Neumann and Becher (2002:406) point out, enhancing professional practice through the acquisition of "practically honed knowledge", where value is placed on evidence-based decisions and informed opinion. In addition, Kember (1997:266), highlights the strengths of the Biggs' constructivist approach, facilitating understanding, encouraging growth of independence, interpersonal skills and intellectual development, comparing this against the role of the "passive receiver" in the traditional teacher-centred model.

Biggs' theory is also supported by empirical research analysing the need to contextualise assessment in interesting, real life and authentic tasks, deemed to be a crucial element of programme design (Birenbaum & Dochy, 1996; Brown, 2005; Raymond et al., 2013). In a three year empirical study focusing on postgraduate students studying visual culture, researchers found that when constructive alignment is achieved, it encourages reflection, interpretation and critical analysis (Eales-Reynolds at al, 2013). In addition, it enables the student to demonstrate his/ her/ their learning outcomes so "as to reflect an authentic, real-life task which they might be expected to undertake in the workplace" (2013:6). Indeed, as Mueller's (2016) study finds, the student will be able to perform tasks that demonstrate meaningful application of essential knowledge and skills which the graduate will be able to communicate to an employer. McAlister (2000:23) proposes that this kind of creative thinking and application is best demonstrated through assessments that "require students to apply, integrate and synthesise knowledge and skill in a manner that reflects the real world and transcends the classroom". In a study analysing the training of nurses in the United States, Benner et al. (2009) also finds that students perform better when dealing with authentic situations, accompanied by a rubric for their assessment. Villarroel (2018) concurs, adding that the case should be based on a situation that has actually taken place, where students are asked to apply their knowledge and make decisions to solve the problem. A study by Thurab-Nkhosi et al. (2018:653) of human resource management programmes adds that assessment should not only be used to "evaluate learning but also to facilitate learning", so that summative assessment is driving the content of the module. Learning objectives and the mode of assessment are set out at the very start, with each individual lesson and workshop reflecting back on how they contribute (ibid).

Focusing on business education during the twentieth century, many educationists in the United States turned to the work of fellow constructivist Dewey, in particular his landmark text *How We Think*, first published in 1910, for a philosophical basis for the pedagogical critique of higher learning, and business education in particular. The essence of pedagogical developments such as case method can be seen as influenced by the education philosopher and his theory of reflective thinking. Problems are at the centre of the thinking process, highlights Dewey in what he eloquently describes as a "fork road situation" (2011:9) where, at the heart of the process, is "perplexity, confusion or doubt" (2011:12). This thinking process is best achieved through a "disciplined mind", achieved through practice to develop "intellectual initiative and control" without lecturer facilitation (Dewey, 2011:63).

In a similar vein, Russian social constructivist, Vygotsky (1986, first published in 1934) stresses the importance of active participation and social interaction in students' development. He defines two forms of experience, "scientific" and "spontaneous", comparing the structured study of scientific concepts with the spontaneous reflections of experience (1986:33-34). Learning begins by disrupting and questioning existing knowledge, Vygotsky argues, experiencing the world as it is, enabling critical reflection and self-development. Accumulated past experience may then be extended to new situations, a stage defined as "coherent thinking" (1986:22-23). A qualitative case study in Hong Kong found that applying Vygotsky's theory supported social inclusion (Qi et al., 2017); however, other scholars conclude that it is "not social enough" (Liu & Matthews, 2005:391). Lave and Wenger (1991:47), in their situated learning theory, disapprove of Vygotsky's concepts of learning, for they contain only "a small 'aura' of socialness that provides input for the process of internalisation, viewed as individualistic acquisition of the cultural given".

Whilst recognising that students should be challenged by their more experienced instructors, Dewey distinguishes "forced from voluntary effort" (Fishman, 1998:36). To be "genuinely interested" in a subject, students must have a voluntary interest or passion which will provide the motivation necessary to sustain interest over a significant period (ibid). Promoting a vision of hands-on learning, Dewey (2011:217-18) argued that "if knowledge comes from the impressions made upon us by natural objects, it is impossible to procure knowledge without the use of objects which impress the mind". This central idea went on to influence many other influential experiential models and advocates, from the early twentieth century to the present day. Indeed, Dewey's insights on pedagogy were "heavily referenced" by the Harvard Business School as the explicit theoretical underpinnings for the development of the case method (Maricle, 2017:14).

3.2.3 Student-centred pedagogic innovation: the Harvard case method

The launch of case method at Harvard Business School in the 1920s was significant because it succeeded in integrating learning with real world application in order to enhance students' employability (Dhar, 2011). Indeed, as the case studies are revised on a consistent basis, they maintain pace with business issues in a fast-paced, increasingly globalised world. The original case method was developed by Langdell, Dean of the Harvard Law School in 1870, who created a learning system for law based entirely on the use of case law, which is now the sector standard in the United States and the United Kingdom to this day (Servant-Miklos, 2018). The learning strategy, first called the 'problem method' when it was developed, involves students analysing a real-world business challenge from the perspective of an actual business leader confronted by it, with a view to providing solutions (Baron, 2015). Today, while the average amount of class time devoted to case method in other universities in the United States is typically around 30 per cent, at Harvard Business School it is more than 80 percent (ibid). Students do 85 per cent of the talking, facilitated by the lecturer, and class participation represents 50 per cent of a student's grade. During a typical Master of Business Administration programme, students study over 500 case studies. Over 80 per cent of cases sold throughout the world are written by the Harvard Business School, who produce "approximately 350 new cases per year" (Harvard Business School, 2019). The School describes its case method as "a profound educational innovation" (ibid) that includes large, non-profits and government organisations, reviewing case studies and placing the student in the role of the decision maker. Students are seen to enjoy their role as active participants in their education far more than the passivity of formal lectures, picking up on Deweyan philosophy (Servant-Miklos, 2018).

Through a process of exchanging perspectives, countering and defending points, students become adept at problem solving, "exercising judgment, and making difficult decisions", viewed as important competencies for today's business world (ibid). Indeed, case method can be classified as a type of experiential learning, because students treat the problem "as if it were real and immediate, even though events in the case occurred many months or years in the past" (Theroux, 2009:367). They should have "no right answers", scholars argue, allowing students to exercise judgement rather than apply strict rules, building problem-solving skills and giving students' the confidence to showcase their creativity (Gartland

& Field, 2004:30; Gragg, 1954). The ability to develop "well-reasoned" solutions to emerging problems is an "important goal" for professional education (Gartland & Field, 2004:32). Thomas et al. (2013:9) agree, contending that this style of business school pedagogy "moves education away from teaching students a collection of facts to teaching them how to think", therefore moving students towards developing cognitive ability as part of an engaged learning community.

The role of the lecturer in a dynamic learning community is picked up by several researchers (Charan, 1976; Servant-Miklos, 2015; Thomas et al., 2013). Success and failure of case method rests with the lecturer, it is argued, both in terms of their charisma and effective preparation (Charan, 1976). The lecturer should have a detailed knowledge of each case, considering many different issues and angles which may be explored. A popular approach is to develop a role-playing format, exposing students to different managerial roles as "quasi-professionals", facilitated by the lecturer to ensure a flow to the discussion (Servant-Miklos, 2015:164). However, the method can be time consuming and lead to a small number of individuals dominating the session (ibid). To be successful, the lecturer must take on multiple roles, comprising of "initiator, director, participant and motivator" (Charan, 1976:123). Thomas et al. (2013) concurs, highlighting that case studies require a regular refresh in order to keep the programme up to date. Professors who teach the same modules "year after year" become "boring, irrelevant and at a distance from practical challenges of the day" (2013:190). This is not only the fault of the academic, the scholars argue, but also "old fashioned governance" that delays changes to module design and limits the ability to retrain professors for new roles (2013:195).

Another challenge for lecturers is the nature of the case studies discussed in business schools, which are often exceptional, multi-facetted and highly complex. Dorn (1999:42) points out that this can also be problematic for graduates, who are typically faced with "less extraordinary, more mundane rhetorical situations". The author argues academics to reconsider the approach, since they may be inadvertently teaching students techniques they will rarely use. Case method may be ideal for executive education, but it could be problematic when transferring to other universities or to undergraduate level where students are less experienced. Maricle (2017:4) concurs, adding that by not altering, or updating the approach to case study pedagogy, "this once-effective tool is now becoming ineffective and obsolete". The former president of Harvard University, Bok (2011), recognises the issue, acknowledging that reliable methods of assessment are required to "determine which forms of instruction are most effective in helping students learn". Ultimately, however, Bok backs the Deweyan student-centred approach as best practice. Faculties should lecture less, he concludes, and experiment with new methods of active learning to engage students and help them to progress.

3.2.4 Evolution of active learning and the experiential framework

The implementation of case method at Harvard Business School helped to inspire other universities to pursue student-led case study or problem-based learning techniques, utilising published data and historical accounts (Servant-Miklos, 2018). Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, numerous scholars urged university academics to "involve and engage" students in the learning process (Bonwell & Eison, 1991:3). American researchers, Bonwell and Eison (1991), define active learning as students reading, writing, discussing and solving problems. More importantly, the researchers determine, the tasks must involve students engaging in high level thinking including "analysis, synthesis and evaluation" (ibid), creating clear parallels with the original goals of the Harvard Business School at the beginning of the twentieth century. Indeed, Bonwell and Eison (1991:53) acknowledge the strengths of the approach, going further by arguing that case method can also be used at undergraduate level "if the cases are presented carefully within students' experiential framework". The lecturer should incorporate a range of techniques, including role playing and dramatisation, with a "chronological or simultaneous" flow of analysis (ibid).

Going further, business simulations can take case method to a new level by extending the role of active learning in the classroom. They can be used to help students experience "stressful, unfamiliar, complex or controversial situations" by letting students develop and practice those skills necessary for coping in situations that appear real (Davison, 1984:91). They also promote teamwork and can generate high levels of motivation and enthusiasm. Indeed, working alongside lectures that define the theoretical approach, these sessions can, potentially, run effectively in parallel to explicate the theoretical material and help to form a bridge to professional practice. Concluding their influential work on the subject, Bonwell and Eison (1991:94) recommend that university academic committees "not only consider what will be taught but also give full and equal weight to how it will be taught", incorporating a range of teaching techniques. A coordinated effort, they state, will result in "an educational revolution" (ibid). In their case study, Healey et al. (2014:36) concur, adding that active learning is "the key to meaningful student learning". Not only gaining human capital, students also acquire "autonomy and independence", achieving a greater sense of partnership in their learning journeys (ibid).

Building on this theme, active involvement, in other words learning from experience, is also at the heart of scholars' theories of pedagogical practice, in particular the landmark work of Kolb (1984). It is Kolb's grounding as a psychologist and his interest in organisational behaviour that enabled him to develop this "seminal" work (Bassot, 2016:43). Significantly, Kolb goes further than case method and even business simulation, by advocating 'concrete' experience gained through work-based learning (Duke, 2017). This enables students to generate "an action theory from [their] own experiences, and then continually modifying it to improve effectiveness" (Kolb, 1984:53). Kolb successfully developed the experiential learning model (figure 2) illustrating a cycle of learning to develop and improve professional practice in education. He argues that his cycle can start at any point, however in the majority of cases it will start with concrete experience, as follows:

1. *Concrete experience: a new experience of situation is encountered.*
2. *Reflective observation: begin to analyse the experience.*
3. *Abstract conceptualisation: modifying existing knowledge or practices.*
4. *Active experimentation: begin to apply knowledge to new experiences.*
   (Kolb, 1984)

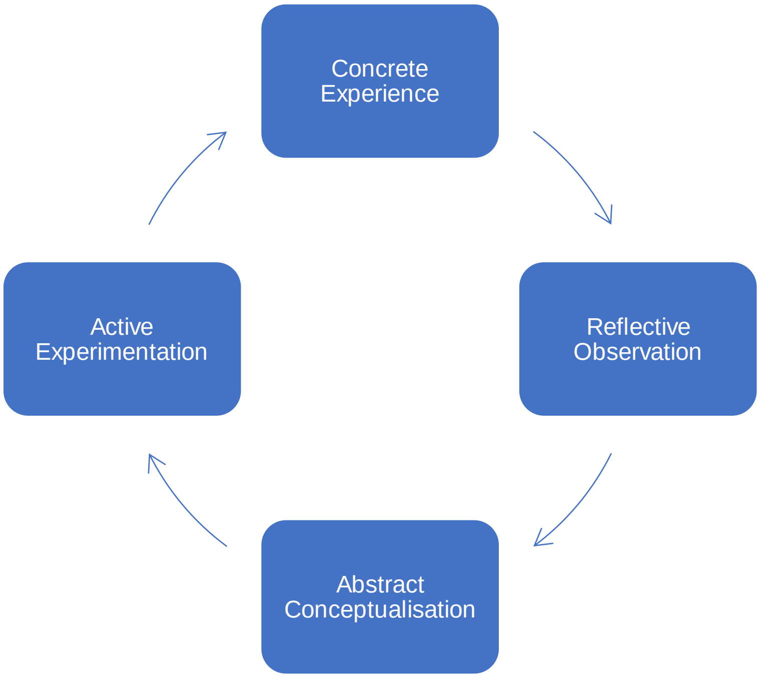


Figure 2: Experiential learning cycle (Kolb, 1984)

Kolb's accessible model defines learning as "the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience" (1984:41). Indeed, he is clear that the use of the term 'experiential' is to differentiate his theory from cognitive learning theories that "deny any role for subjective experience in the learning process" (Kolb et al., 2000:2). In order to maximise learning, Kolb positions concrete experiences as the basis for observation and reflection. These reflections are then "assimilated and distilled" into new or modified abstract concepts from which new conclusions can be made (Kolb et al., 2000:3). The role of reflective is, for Kolb, at the heart of the learning process. Wheatley (2002) agrees, stating that "without reflection, we go blindly on our own way, creating more unintended consequences, and failing to achieve anything useful". Indeed, we should "reflect often", the academic states, looking for "insights to emerge out of the messiness" (ibid). Gibbs provides a useful framework in which to develop this argument. Similar to Kolb, but arguably easier for students to use in practice, Gibbs reflective cycle comprises of six stages, proposing open questions, asking the reader what sense they can make from a situation, recognising that firm conclusions cannot be drawn from every experience of professional practice (Bassot, 2016; Gibbs, 1988).

In order to maximise the value of experiential learning, employability pedagogy in the modern business school needs to be "multi-dimensional" and fully embedded in the curriculum (Artess et al., 2017:5). Indeed, employability should not be seen as an optional extra but fully integrated into subject-specific learning (Pedagogy for Employability Group, 2006), enabling students to acquire sophisticated higher order skills and "professional behaviour" (Yorke, 2006:13). As well as case method, business simulations and work placements, Yorke (2006) points to a broad range of approaches to develop students' employability during their university study, including learning design and assessment practices, in the classroom, the workplace and online. In a study published in the United States, Gee (2003) showcases the role of computer-based simulations to develop problem-solving skills before being exposed to the real thing, particularly useful in high risk fields such as medicine. There is no single approach, therefore, that is currently emerging as best practice, however, evidence suggests that the development of students' employability is more successful when they take responsibility for the planning, evaluation and reflection (CBI & Universities UK, 2009; Coldham & Armsby, 2016; Helyer & Lee, 2014). Introducing a series of best practice case studies in the United Kingdom, Pegg et al. highlight "a lack of evidence and evaluation" as largely responsible for a more widely used single model (Pegg at al, 2012:23). Peterson (2020) agreed in his case study of transnational education, highlighting the lack of empirical data to link attainment of employability skills with career progression.

3.2.5 The transforming employability pedagogy: the role of work experience

Despite the range of approaches, there is evidence that pedagogy in modern business schools has, at many universities, changed significantly, embracing the shifts in government policy outlined in the previous section (see section 3.1). In the Dearing Report (1997) the government recommended that every student should be given the opportunity to undertake a placement and employers are increasingly playing their part. Almost three-quarters of the country's top graduate employers provided paid internships to penultimate year students during their 2019 summer holidays, while 40 per cent offer short-term placements. These opportunities provide students with "first-hand experience" of technical and commercial roles, according to an annual survey of *The Times* top 100 graduate employers (High Fliers, 2019:22). Going further, Pegg et al. argue (2012:45) there is "strong evidence" to indicate that authentic work experience contextualises learning, has a strong influence on graduate employment and "should be integrated into course curricula wherever possible". However, in order to maximise learning for employability, it is important that this should be a "pedagogically supported experience", which includes the ability to articulate the learning achieved, in order to adequately prepare graduates for job interviews (ibid).

Indeed, the role of credit bearing work placements as part of the business degree pedagogy, is becoming increasingly essential for graduate employment. Recruiters at the organisations featured in research by *High Fliers* (2019) were asked about the value of work experience when it comes to assessing students' applications for graduate roles. Over a third warned that, in today's competitive job market, it was either "not very likely" or "not at all likely" that a graduate with no previous work experience would be successful during their selection process and be made a job offer, "irrespective of their academic achievements or the university they had attended" (High Fliers, 2019:23). The National Centre for Universities and Business reported, following a survey of employers, that students who undertake work experience are more likely to find graduate level employment and do so faster than their peers (Artess et al., 2017). This is both at shortlisting and interview stage, where employers are increasingly relying on scenario-related questioning, linked to the reflective practice advocated by Kolb and Gibbs (Maricle, 2017). Heaton et al. (2008:278) suggest that work placements and work-based projects can provide the "bridge" necessary for new graduates to become effective employees, reducing the need for a lengthy induction period. Their study indicated that applicants with placements were able to exhibit superior cultural capital, with high levels of confidence, communication skills and commercial acumen, according to a UK study comprising of a series of interviews with HR managers and line managers from several departments (Heaton et al., 2008). Going further, the great majority of employers believe that graduates perform better, both in selection and at work, having completed a period of experiential learning. Indeed, the more such learning the graduates have undertaken, the better they perform (Pollard et al., 2015). The accumulation of social capital, through an enhanced professional network, alongside the work-ready attitudes, appearance and communication skills of cultural capital, are an inevitable outcome of a high quality employability pedagogy (Knight & Yorke, 2003).

Formal placements are also being supported by additional pedagogical tools to further embed employability into the curriculum. For example, the development of "inverted" classrooms, in which students learn the academic material traditionally covered in lectures prior to the class, using their university's virtual learning environment (Lage et al., 2000:32). Time in class is then spent on scenarios, problem solving or other experiential activities. The key to success is by linking the activities taking place out of the classroom with the practical taught sessions, highlighted by a study analysing student and instructor perceptions in the United States (Lage et al., 2000) and a similar study in the United Kingdom surveying professional services staff (Helyer & Corkill, 2015). For Coldham and Armsby (2016), the classroom-based sessions can also stretch beyond case study or simulation techniques, incorporating live projects or briefs set by employers and embracing external competitions to test entrepreneurship and creativity. Taking on the academic traditions of the dissertation, business schools are also offering business consultancy projects, or capstone, as an alternative. In these circumstances students work in small but diverse teams to carry out a project for an industry partner, often identified using staff and student contacts, as O'Leary (2016) notes in his case study at Regent's University in London. Placements within the university are also being introduced, usually not to develop industry or occupation specific human capital but to improve "general employability" skills, which can be interpreted as the accumulation of cultural capital (Coldham & Armsby, 2016:188). Similarly, Helyer & Lee (2014:369), analysing an internship scheme in Teesside through a series of interviews, concluded that internships provide a "catalyst for innovation, development and success".

Coldman and Armsby (2016) develop a visual summary of pedagogical techniques, adapted in figure 3 below. The model is influenced by researchers in Australia and the United States, home to an increasingly substantial body of research whose authors propose "practice-led curriculum frameworks" (Coldham & Armsby, 2016: 187). The diagram can be seen to build on existing non-business programmes designed to enable students to gain a licence to practice, including medicine, teaching and social work (Evetts, 2014). However, with the exception of work experience, there is little evidence that on-campus employability pedagogy such as simulations have a significant impact on graduates' competencies, as examined by Perkins (2007) with reference to medicine. Going further, positioned in a business education context, it is not yet "convincingly evidenced" that training of leadership ability in a simulated environment has a significant impact on business success (Breckwoldt et al., 2014:692). Therefore, rather than illustrating the superiority of a single pedagogic technique to drive graduate recruitment, a literature review by Williams et al. (2016) provides evidence for a need to combine the learning techniques to focus on outcomes, including human, social and cultural capital. In a study surveying current students and recent graduates at 23 UK-based universities, Higdon (2016:191) found that it is social capital that is the "crucial factor" which opens up work opportunities. This contemporary research concurs with other similar studies which find that social capital and cultural capital provide advantage for graduates in the job market (Allen & Van der Velden, 2001; Thorpe, 2016). Consequently, only through the consideration of the plurality of pedagogic strategies, aligned to learning outcomes, can universities successfully inform the design and measurement of employability interventions (Williams et al., 2016).

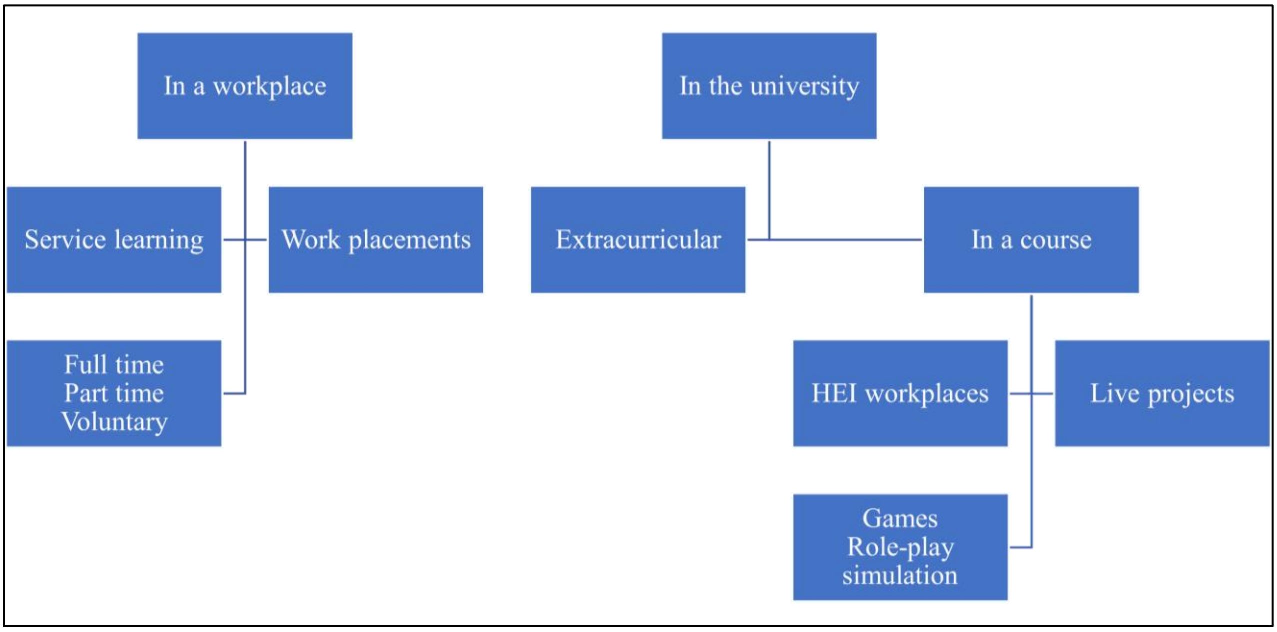


Figure 3: Typology of work-related learning (adapted from Coldham & Armsby, 2016)

The theoretical framework, combining Bourdieu's theory of cultural and social capital and Becker's analysis of human capital, is a useful lens to view the discourse on the pedagogical strategies. Indeed, a dominant thread of employability pedagogical research can be interpreted as supporting students through the embedding of opportunities for work-related learning, personal development and other interventions that enhance human, social and cultural capital (Cutts et al., 2015; Kalfa & Taska, 2015; Knight & Yorke, 2003; Pegg et al., 2012; Tomlinson, 2017). Kalfa and Taksa (2015) argue that that it is useful to view curriculum design as the accumulation of cultural capital, enabling an effective transition to the workplace. Cutts et al. (2015) make a similar argument, focusing in their empirical study on the importance of appearance and non-verbal communication techniques that can facilitate positive interview outcomes. In order to be successful in the recruitment process, students not only need to develop their employability competencies but also articulate them when required using robust, practical examples (Knight & Yorke, 2003; Pegg at al, 2012).

3.2.6 Chapter summary

In summary, this section has shown that all degrees, but business in particular, are required to offer graduates with access to greater life chances than they would have obtained if they had not attended university (Artess et al., 2017; Scott, 2013). This expectation is imposed, in part, through the QAA, who published Subject Benchmark Statements for the first time in 2000 (QAA, 2019a; Scallen & Gallagher, 2003). It has resulted in a lively academic debate around employability pedagogy, with a new audit culture acting as an incentive for pedagogic and intellectual research (Bacon & Sloam, 2010; Jackson, 2002). A student-centred, constructivist approach to employability pedagogy has been the dominant discourse of the last twenty years, this section has shown, rooted in Deweyan reflective thinking (2009; 2011) and Biggs' theory of constructive alignment (1996, 2003), both providing a bridge between academic theory and professional practice. This model of teaching and learning has evolved from Harvard's innovative case method in the 1920s, to Kolb's experiential learning theory (1984), and can be successful when incorporating work placements or internships. Experiential learning now forms the basis of a multi-faceted employability pedagogy, designed to boost students' human, social and cultural capital, and increase levels of graduate recruitment (Cutts et al., 2015; Kalfa and Taksa, 2015; Pegg et al., 2012; Tomlinson, 2017). Indeed, this section has also begun to discover the importance of experience to employers, not only the professional practice itself but a candidate's ability to reflect in a considered and articulate way (Knight & Yorke, 2003; Pegg at al, 2012). The next section will look further at this important topic, reviewing employers' approach to recruitment and discovering the extent to which human, social and cultural capital plays a role in the decisions of recruiters.

3.3 What do employers expect of graduates in the recruitment and selection process?

To understand how to shape a contemporary employability pedagogy, it is critical for universities to understand how employers evaluate graduates in their recruitment processes. It is only armed with this knowledge that the academic community can adequately prepare their students to compete for highly prized graduate roles. Graduate recruitment and selection is defined as "the process of searching for and obtaining potential job applicants from graduates in sufficient quantity and quality so that employers can select the most suitable candidates" (Branine, 2008:500). Alternatively, as Ployhart et al. neatly summarise, "at its core, recruitment is about finding and putting the right person in the right job at the right time" (2017:293). With this in mind, American psychologist Hall (1917:12), called recruitment and selection policy the "supreme problem". As this section will show, processes have changed significantly over the last century, but they continue to captivate the attention of researchers, responding to "business, legal and societal" change (Ployhart et al., 2017:291). The 'supreme problem' in the last 25 years has been due to the expansion of higher education in the UK, which has seen employers becoming increasingly concerned about differentiating between the ever-expanding pool of graduates (Beardwell at al, 2004; Branine, 2008; Heaton et al., 2008; Sackett & Lievens, 2008). This section will analyse the rapidly changing "recruitment mix", as employers "grapple" with the scale and diversity of the graduate market in the United Kingdom by increasingly adopting a complex, meritocratic approach (Pollard et al., 2015:218).

Going further, the previous section reviewed the pedagogic strategies currently being implemented by universities with the aim of enhancing graduate employability and dealing with the graduate recruitment challenge. This is because the economy of work experience and soft skills are easily as important to graduate recruiters as "academic currency" (Brown et al., 2003:120). In today's knowledge economy, "knowledge acquisition, processing and transfer" are paramount to becoming an employable graduate

(Morley, 2007:191). As the research has highlighted, due to the permanent updating of skills required of the modern workforce, it is the personal capacity of individuals to be agile and resilient that has become most sought-after by employers (Deloitte, 2017; EY, 2018; McKinsey Global Institute, 2016; PwC, 2018). Educational experience at university can be vital to this process, especially where inherited symbolic capital accumulation is lacking (Bakhshi et al., 2017). This section will review the available research, suggesting that graduates must be able to "recognise, define and acquire" the attributes of being a professional (Anderson-Gough et al., 1998:4). If they are able to do so, in line with Foucauldian concepts of power, it does not "simply take and repress, it also gives and enables" (Anderson-Gough et al., 2000:1171). In other words, for those who are successful, they can achieve a lucrative, satisfying career.

3.3.1 Marketisation of higher education: the shift in power from graduate to employer

Marketisation of the higher education sector, resulting in a rapid increase in the volume of graduates, has directly resulted in new and more sophisticated methods of graduate recruitment in order to select from an ever-expanding volume of applicants (Brown & Hesketh, 2004; Sackett & Lievens, 2008). In the first section of the literature review (see section 3.1), this thesis analysed the utilitarian policy of rapid expansion in higher education in the UK, where overall participation increased from three per cent in 1950 to 50 per cent in 2017 (Kershaw, 2019). Pollard et al. (2015) carried out 80 in-depth interviews with graduate employers, in a study commissioned by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, finding that the increased pool of graduates combined with the 2008 financial crisis, resulted in far more graduates than graduate jobs. In the same vein, another study suggests that graduate applications in the United Kingdom increased by 4 per cent in 2019 compared to 2018 (High Fliers, 2019). Looking back further, applications rose annually by 10 per cent in 2018 and 2017, and by 13 per cent in 2016, according to a survey of 100 leading employers (ibid). Indeed, graduates are "no longer guaranteed employment after graduation" and applicants are struggling to progress beyond the application stage, Branine's (2008:499) survey of 700 UK employers found. As a result, an "increasing population" of graduates are taking on roles previously held by individuals educated to GCSE and A-level standard (ibid), referred to by Beardwell at al as "filling 'McJobs'" for which they are clearly over-qualified (2004:352). Therefore, there is more pressure on universities to prepare students with the knowledge, skills and competencies required to obtain graduate employment (Morley, 2007). Going further, Nabi and Bagley (1999) argue, it is their duty to do so. In a generation, therefore, the balance of power has shifted from graduate to employer, directly due to the mathematics of supply and demand. In what was seen in the 1990s as a mutual psychological contract between employee and employer (Herriot, 1988), in today's hyper-competitive mass market, businesses hold all the cards.

The shift in power from graduate to employer is showcased in a review of empirical research prior to the explosion in the number of graduates in the last 20 years. In the 1970s, business and societal changes led to more specialised skills and graduate level jobs, resulting in challenges for employers in finding enough suitable candidates (Ployhart et al., 2017). This issue was exasperated in the 1980s, where the market for graduates was "buoyant" and the process for recruiting them less complex, driven by a market in which there were fewer graduates than today (Herriot, 1988:228). Only 8.3 per cent of graduates in 1986 were still seeking employment by December that year, while only 2 per cent of postgraduates were unemployed, according to Herriot's (1988) review of the published government data at the time. Employers were "sceptical" at government plans to expand the number of student places, with limited funding available to boost polytechnics (Herriot, 1988:229). As a result, employers were keen to recruit new graduates as quickly as possible, with a process largely comprising of an application and single interview with the decision-maker, often taking place on campus, referred to as a 'milk round' (Bevan & Fryatt, 1988; Pollard et al., 2015). Milk round employers were typically large, blue-chip organisations, part of the FTSE 100, whose annual graduate recruitment cycle begins autumn and often ends in spring the following year (Gordon, 2013). Establishing face-to-face contact through an interview was seen as vital, employers stated, providing the advantage of assessing the candidate's social and communication skills (Branine, 2008). In this period, graduates lacked work experience during their degree programmes, which provided difficulties in selection and led to decisions being made on instinct, one study found following a survey of 536 employers featured in the *Guardian's* Graduate Opportunities guide (Keenan, 1995). Indeed, employers took a relaxed approach to shortlisting applications, believing they will "get it right" at interview (Keenan, 1995:314). Similarly, employers had traditional views of universities, preferring the research active 'red brick' institutions (Ryan, 1996). As a result, recruitment and selection was "unstructured", "judgemental" and "prone to discriminatory bias" (Herriot, 1988:232).

There were signs, however, that the use of tests was increasing as part of the pre-selection screening process (Branine, 2008; Keenan, 1995). This is partly because the academic reference process could not be completely trusted, as university staff did not have the information about students' soft skills, and would not wish to disclose anything negative to risk the offer being withdrawn and the reputation of the course being damaged (Keenan, 1995). Furthermore, the new millennium saw a rapid increase in graduate recruitment intracity, with techniques that sought to test personality and aptitude in timed settings, through the use of assessment centres, which had the benefits of high volume and low cost (Sacket & Lievens, 2008). In addition, large employers were increasingly looking beyond qualifications and knowledge, instead looking for qualities that meet the needs of the changing and challenging global business world (Branine, 2008). This shift in focus from qualifications to cultural and social capital has had the added benefit of beginning to level the playing field in terms of old and new universities. Whilst the grades are important, by 2008 research is beginning to suggest that employers' attitudes are changing, and the university brand is less important than before (ibid). However, an upper second class degree (2.1) is becoming a "pre-requisite" and those applicants without a good degree classification are "screened out" automatically by recruiters (Morley, 2007:201; Pollard et al., 2015).

Going further, today's graduate recruitment process is both "highly elaborate and fairly standardised", according to contemporary research from Gebreiter of Birmingham Business School (2019:239), using documentary data and interviews conducted at one British university. This study is mirrored by a similar study by Pollard et al. from the Institute for Employment Studies at the University of Sussex (2015), in a very limited pool of published UK-based research. Indeed, large employers are generally more concerned with cultural fit rather than specialist human capital (Heaton et al., 2008). While there is some debate regarding the steps, they represent a series of examinations that enable the employer to accumulate knowledge and data about the candidates. The end to end process lasts from one to two months, with each element adding up to around 24 hours (Gebreiter, 2019). The process begins with an online application in which graduates are asked for personal details, education and employment histories. Gebreiter points out that large employers (specifically the so-called Big Four firms comprising of PwC, Deloitte, EY and KPMG) tend not to accept a curriculum vitae (CV). The great majority of large employers ask applicants to map themselves against the essential eligibility criteria, enabling recruiters to score or judge applications against a "preconceived competency [or] strength-based framework" (Pollard et al., 2015:135). Alongside the application, individuals frequently complete online psychometric tests or questionnaires, for example a critical thinking test at Deloitte and a personality questionnaire at PwC. These online tests enable recruiters to "focus time and attention" on candidates that closely match the vacancy criteria, filtering out unsuitable applicants at an early stage (Barber, 2006:6).

The second stage comprises of an interview which takes place remotely, either on the telephone or online, conducted by a human resources representative or a third-party recruiter (Gebreiter, 2019). These are generally used to gather further "hard and soft" evidence from candidates, who are required to demonstrate a good knowledge of the company alongside core soft skills including professional communication, teamwork and commercial awareness (Pollard et al., 2015:135). If applicants progress to the next stage, they are required to visit an assessment centre, usually for an entire day, where they will complete a series of exercises, in particular business simulations in groups and further written communication tests (Pollard et al., 2015). If he/ she/ they are successful, the final stage of the graduate recruitment journey is a formal interview with a manager or director from the department to which they have applied (Gebreiter, 2019). In the great majority of cases, this interview comprises of a further set of competency or scenario based questions. This stage is seen by researchers as being a positive step, "removing potential bias and thus increasing diversity" (Pollard et al., 2015:137). The modern recruitment process has replaced socio-economic privilege with verbal and non-verbal communication. Graduates are now required to have developed their professional identities in order meet the employer's exacting expectations.

3.3.2 Technologies of the self, professional identities and professional socialisation

Today, graduate behaviour is prescribed, standardised and normalised through a system that "punishes non-conformality" (Gebreiter, 2019:237). The recruitment process can be seen as a performance, in which individuals are responsible for the creation of their own professional identities. French philosopher, Foucault, provides a useful perspective to interpret this discourse, in particular his work on the technologies of the self (see section 2.4). A Foucauldian lens is useful to examine the techniques required to be the 'ideal' graduate recruit, where "commercial orientation" is promoted over the previously dominant "public service ethic", according to a UK study interviewing 77 graduate recruits at two large employers (Anderson-Gough et al., 2000:1152). For graduates applying to large employers, they must adapt to a system normalises their appearance and behaviour, and transforms them into "corporate clones" (Covaleski et al., 1998:294). Indeed, "part of being a professional person involves a regulation of the self", following norms of formal and informal conduct (Anderson-Gough et al., 1998:1). Going further, an American study based on in-depth interviews with 180 managers at accountancy firms describes how company recruitment, training and mentor programmes are designed to create individuals that are "duplicates" of the organisation in a process defined as socialisation (Covaleski et al., 1998:294). There is frequently a degree of resistance to the training schemes in particular, the researchers point out, but ultimately workers have to be transformed into clones that are mapped to the goals of the organisation. Employees who adapt quickly to the culture of a large company are more successful, Corritore et al. (2020) conclude, in an American study analysing the common linguistic style of company emails and messages. This is partly due to increased retention, as an employee who is a solid cultural fit is more likely to stay, but can come at the expense of fewer new ideas and fresh thinking (ibid). The research produced by large employers as a result of these training schemes often creates some useful and influential insights, as explored previously in section 3.1. This is seen as a deliberate strategy to establish their control as an exemplary model of a "knowledge-creating organisation", increasing influence over government policy and even university curriculum (Covaleski et al., 1998:295).

As a result, to successfully negotiate the highly demanding and competitive graduate recruitment process, candidates must succeed in "cultural matching", whereby graduates must "look, sound and behave" like professionals before they even take up a post (Gebreiter, 2019:234-5). Therefore, as Carter and Spence (2014) conclude, in their research featuring 32 interviews undertaken with graduate employees in Canada and the UK, the acquisition of technical knowledge is now secondary to these attributes. Graduates' actions must fit into a "grid of written, exam-like forms" that ranks them in quantitative terms, creating certainty out of subjectivity (Covaleski et al., 1998:323). Graduates must possess a specific blend of cultural and social capital matching the job description for the role, delivered through an "anticipatory socialisation process", predominantly on campus, and involving direct contact with influential employers (Gebreiter, 2019:235).

Exploring this further, to achieve what Foucault (1988a:15) refers to as an individual's "telos", the ethical route to the end goal for the graduate, there are several stages of preparation. They must read the job description and review the company website in order to understand what an "ideal recruit" looks like (Gebreiter, 2019:241). Although this desktop research is useful, the individual must be able to engage with professionals at the company during their time at university, taking place on campus at recruitment events or off campus at informal careers days. It is at these events that graduates gain first-hand advice from employees, which is explored in Gebreiter's (2019) research with some noteworthy evidence collected during interviews. Potential applicants were given advice, for example to wear a regular fit suit versus a 'skinny fit' outfit, while another male applicant was told to remove an earring (ibid). As well as appearance, employers are looking for a "can-do" mentality, showing passion and flexibility, to the extent that young married people are "ruled out" (Morley, 2007:199-200). Often, graduates felt this information was worthwhile, enabling them to build their social and cultural capital, and ensure they "tick the right boxes" (Gebreiter, 2019:243). The graduates are required to re-model themselves in the image of the company, building on the advice provided as well as making their own observations. Indeed, noting that the employees seemed "posh", one graduate taking part in the study's semi-structured interviews deemed it necessary to "neutralise" his regional accent (2019:241). This elaborate socialisation cannot take place in days or even weeks; the process goes far beyond standard interview preparation techniques, requiring, for many, the development of a normalised professional identity that rejects his/ her/ their upbringing. This new identity, however, has the potential to be a "social leveller", where an applicant is able to progress based on merit (Pollard et al., 2015:210).

3.3.3 Meritocratic approach to recruitment and selection

In this thesis, merit is interpreted within the concept of meritocracy, first coined in 1958 by the sociologist Young (1961) in his satirical essay, *The Rise of the Meritocracy* (see section 2.5). In the text, Young argues that merit combines "intelligence and effort" and, within a meritocratic system, succeeds in exacerbating inequalities (1961:94). The robust empirical research from Pollard et al. (2015:16), commissioned by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills and heavily referenced in this section, concludes that the "majority of employers were committed to a generally meritocratic approach to selecting graduates against clear criteria". Going further, for some employers, concerns of diversity and candidates' backgrounds were felt to be "directly at odds with their dominant idea of merit", seen as the "cornerstone" of their processes (Pollard et al., 2015:192). Their only goal was to identify the "best talent" and conceived of higher education as a natural "social leveller" (2015:210). In the public sector, both in the UK (civil service) and the United States (federal services), a merit-based system is fully embedded and essential to avoid accusations of political bias (Pynes, 2013). Concluding his content analysis, Saunders (1995:38) provides a strong rebuke to what he calls "left-wing bias", concluding that the UK class system is "broadly meritocratic", appealing to "British sociology" to provide evidence to the contrary. Jackson (2007), in her content analysis of over 5,000 newspaper job advertisements, agrees in part, stating that merit is much more important than non-merit characteristics to UK employers (such as appearance), but that some subgroups within professions still made decisions based on these subjective factors.

On the other hand, the published literature also includes several studies rejecting meritocracy in the UK (Gordon, 2013; Keep & James, 2010; Purcell et al., 2013). Purcell et al. (2013) emphasise that recruitment decisions are still being based on subjective factors such as age, parental education and ethnic background. Further, Gordon (2013) examines early graduate labour market experiences of 103 graduates from different class backgrounds and from three universities of differing status. Although he establishes some meritocratic aspects, such as academic performance, it is also "geographically-bound and socially and culturally constituted" (2013:182-3). In a similar study, Keep and James (2010) highlight a lack of empirical evidence that a meritocratic model exists in recruitment and selection. These studies, however, fail to acknowledge their nationalist sentiment, where concern with meritocratic opportunity "extends only to the borders of affluent nations" (Brown & Tannock, 2009:387). Indeed, globalisation undermines national class differences by advancing marketisation to the labour market (see section 3.4.4). The global "war for talent" is a crucial factor in business planning, with companies aiming to recruit the world's brightest and best, regardless of background (Michaels et al., 2001:1). Therefore, UK-based graduates now face more competition than ever, with large employers actively searching different countries, backgrounds and demographic profiles (ibid). In a knowledge economy, based on Becker's linear relationship between learning and earning, professional identity is paramount (Becker, 1993).

3.3.4 Chapter summary

An analysis of the literature reveals a limited range of empirical research analysing graduate recruitment and selection practice in the UK. What is available, however, has contributed greatly to this section, in particular Pollard et al. (2015) and Gebreiter (2019) who, with contrasting methodological approaches, examined the highly competitive landscape for today's graduates. This section, therefore, has found that graduate recruitment is now a buyers' market, with the consequence that the balance of power has shifted from applicants to organisations (Beardwell at al, 2004; Branine, 2008; Heaton et al., 2008; Sackett & Lievens, 2008). The implications for recruitment practices are clear, and a new complex and sophisticated model of selection has been implemented, in particular at large employers. A focus on qualifications has been replaced with a combination of human, cultural and social capital, which are now the essential tools required to compete (Barber, 2006; Gebreiter, 2019; Pollard et al., 2015). To be successful, graduate recruits are required to have normalised professional identities; to become "corporate clones" (Covaleski et al., 1998:294). This professional socialisation can be seen through the lens of Foucault's technologies of the self, this section has found, as individuals "transform themselves" (Foucault, 1988b:18) by adopting a different attitude, a new persona which, to reference Bourdieu, enables an individual to play the game through “politicking and manipulation” (Gebreiter, 2019:236). The revised recruitment process is now, therefore, more objective and meritocratic, offering opportunity for social mobility, if individuals are able to meet the exacting demands of the global marketplace (Anderson-Gough et al., 2000; Michaels et al., 2001; Pollard et al., 2015). A century ago, Hall described recruitment and selection as the “supreme problem” (1917:12). With human capital the “fuel” of the modern economy, and the volume of graduates continuing to increase, it is inconceivable that the problem will be any less great in future (Becker, 2002:3).

3.4 Social justice and meritocracy: the barriers to graduate recruitment

Following the sustained increase in higher education participation, universities have the potential to be dual engines of social mobility and economic productivity, with the graduate employability agenda meaning more highly skilled professionals to fuel the knowledge-based economy (Major, 2019). Indeed, successfully embedding employability in the undergraduate curriculum could provide less privileged graduates with the opportunity to break the glass ceiling of social reproduction by moving into elite professions. However, scholars have found that the neoliberal expansion of the student population, along with the introduction of tuition fees in 1998, have had a negative impact on young people from less privileged backgrounds (Friedman & Laurison, 2020; Reay, 2017; Warikoo, 2016). The admissions process, based on exam results, has created an illusion of meritocracy that is skewed to the advantage of wealthy families to access the traditional, elite universities, who are then much more likely to gain high ranking jobs in politics, the judiciary and the media (Bathmaker et al., 2016; Brezis & Hellier, 2013; Friedman, 2018; Heselwood, 2018; Reay, 2017). Consequently, the ability of universities’ employability initiatives to overcome ingrained structural inequalities appears in doubt.

In coming to this conclusion, the section rejects the case for educational meritocracy (Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Bukodi & Goldthorpe, 2019; Young, 1961). Instead, the published literature highlights the existence of a two-tier system of higher education in England, comprising of the elite universities and new institutions (Bathmaker et al., 2016; Brezis & Hellier, 2013; Friedman, 2018; Heselwood, 2018; Reay, 2017). Further, the admissions process generates social stratification as well as self-reproduction of the establishment, resulting in an overall decline in social mobility driven by weak graduate employment (Major, 2019; Sutton Trust, 2019). Political attempts to improve social mobility, such as widening participation to higher education, this section discovers, are linked to economic rather than social aims, with mixed outcomes that lack sophistication and rigorous evaluation (Barak, 2015; Reay, 2017; Harrison et al., 2015; Robinson & Salvestrini, 2020). Empirical studies exploring the post-industrial hyper-globalisation of world cities like London, driven by large employers, are also analysed, finding that many sociological studies are overly nationalist and insular, failing to account for globalisation and its impact on business education and graduate recruitment (Bradley, 1996; Butler & Watt, 2007; Fakunle, 2020; Thrift, 1988; Urry, 2000). For disadvantaged business students, the competition for professional positions at large employers is not just about the English elite, there is now a global competition which has made the challenge of graduate recruitment more complex than ever (Alsop, 2013).

This section also unpacks the sociological concepts that are important to understand the potential barriers to graduate recruitment. It finds that the traditional analysis of the UK class system, aligned to the grand narrative of Marxism, is just one aspect of social inequality, and research is more powerful when focused on the fragmented identities of individual social actors, and how inequalities intersect and interweave (Bradley, 1996; Butler & Watt, 2007; Crenshaw, 1989; 2017; Hill Collins 1990; McRobbie, 1991). It is argued that the fluid intersectionality paradigm is non-hierarchical, refusing primacy to social factors including social class, ethnicity and gender (Butler & Watt, 2007). In the context of this study, the changing patterns of inequality explored in this section are essential to understand the social and political context at the time of the fieldwork in 2021. Specifically, the social movement, Black Lives Matter, and the global pandemic, Covid-19 (see section 5.3), had an impact on the interview data, with module leaders and graduate recruiters highlighting the potential significance for graduate recruitment. In addition, although intersectionality is not a focus of this study, this section identifies a gap in the published literature, and questions whether universities have the power and the will to address individualised intersectional discrimination through strategies to enhance employability. As employability discourse evolves further, it has potential to be an important subject of future research.

3.4.1 Meritocracy, social reproduction and elite universities

Rather than being engines of graduate recruitment empowered by a meritocratic system that enables the less privileged to access elite professional roles, universities reproduce the status quo through an approach that favours the rich and powerful (Bathmaker et al., 2016; Brezis & Hellier, 2013; Friedman, 2018; Heselwood, 2018; Reay, 2017). Sociologist, Young (1961) coined the term *meritocracy* in 1958 as a satirical account of a dystopia, in which notions of merit were used to reproduce and legitimise class status (see section 2.5). Young's account warned of the dangers of a system in which the elite craft definitions of merit to enable them to perpetuate class privilege across generations, with consent from the lower classes based on the perceived legitimacy of the meritocracy. In the text, Young (1961:94) argues that merit combines "intelligence and effort" and, within a meritocratic system, succeeds in exacerbating inequalities. He states that "educational injustice enabled people to preserve their illusions, inequality of opportunity fostered the myth of human equality" (1961:85). Similarly in the United States, Bowles and Gintis (1976) found that the education system in America plays a key role in the reproduction of capitalism, preparing young people to take their established employment position in the differentiated class hierarchy. Forty years later, Reay (2017:122) agrees, highlighting in her analysis what she calls the "myth of meritocracy in the twenty-first century". A meritocratic system, suggests Reay, is a "competition in which there are clear winners and losers", but in which the resulting inequalities are justified on the basis that participants have an equal opportunity to prove themselves (ibid). Pointing to published statistics on access to Oxbridge, Reay (2017:123) concludes that the idea that the English education system is meritocratic is "all ideological bluff with no substance". Instead, calling on Bourdieu, she determines that Oxbridge plays "a crucial part" in the reproduction of the British elite, "expanding its academic, cultural and social capital" and maintaining domination of leading professions including politics, the judiciary and the media (ibid).

Several studies highlight the labels that have been applied to elite universities over the past twenty years, creating a perception of superiority both with employers and the wider public (Baker, 2014; Friedman, 2018; Warikoo, 2016). In her study featuring 67 interviews with Oxford students, Warikoo (2016:32) concludes that elite universities in England hold "symbolic meaning" around merit, not just for students but for "wider society". In the twenty-first century, and especially magnified by the growth of global university rankings, there has been a new focus on elite universities at the global level. This group of institutions has acquired different labels, such as "world-class" and "elite" (Friedman, 2018:249). Friedman (ibid), in his study comprising of 40 interviews with academics, finds that the elite universities, in particular Oxford and Cambridge, have come to be seen as the "world's leaders in high-impact research and high-quality teaching", with everything else appearing to be second best, resulting in intense competition for places. Baker (2014:86) has similar conclusions in his American study, arguing that elite research universities now function as the "antithesis of the older national flagship university, which focused on the production of successive generations of national elites".

Developing the argument, multiple studies highlight that elite universities are dominated by students from the most privileged backgrounds, creating a seemingly endless cycle of graduates to monopolise the ultra-competitive, elite professions (Brezis & Hellier 2013; Haselwood, 2018; Sutton Trust, 2019). Heselwood (2018), in his study featuring 16 interviews with higher education policy makers and senior managers, defines 'elite' universities as those that are high tariff, in other words attracting the brightest students within a meritocratic, results-based framework. There are 29 in total in England, comprising of the Russell Group association of universities, and five others with equivalent entry requirements (ibid). In his study, Heselwood uses the terms elite and high tariff interchangeably. He finds that there has been "no significant change in the social class composition" (2018:6) of elite universities in the last 35 years, while the most affluent in society are 10 times more likely to attend an elite university. In their study analysing published recruitment data, Brezis and Hellier (2013:2) also highlight a system that "generates social stratification as well as a self-reproduction of the elites", resulting in a decline in social mobility. First, elite universities select a limited number of the best students and this number has not changed significantly in the last 30 years. In contrast, the number of students in standard universities has substantially increased (ibid). The researchers found that, despite apparently meritocratic recruitment, there is an increase in social stratification, with students in elite universities essentially originating from the top social classes (ibid). Similarly, The Sutton Trust (2019:13) found that, in England, a small number of schools dominate access to Oxford and Cambridge, with just eight top schools and colleges "sending as many pupils to Oxbridge as 2,900 others put together". The lack of access is important, The Sutton Trust (2019:2) argues, because of the "power gap" that exists at the top of many professions. Decision makers in government, media, business and the judiciary are still dominated by the seven per cent of the population who are educated privately and the one per cent who go to Oxford or Cambridge universities (ibid). Moreover, women are "under-represented across the top professions", making up just five per cent of FTSE 350 chief executives (2019:5). Although these statistics are well-known to policymakers and business leaders, the bias in the system is unlikely to change. As white Oxbridge male, Kupar (2014) writes, "we will not make the revolution… turkeys don't vote for Christmas".

The minority of less privileged students who gain prized places at elite Russell Group universities frequently find it challenging to 'fit in' with their peers and fail to take advantage of the extracurricular opportunities to develop their employability (Reay et al., 2009; Bathmaker et al., 2016). Reay et al. (2009:1110) found that working class students at elite universities can have a challenging "out of habitus" experience. Their case study called *Strangers in Paradise*, features interviews with nine working class students at an English elite university. To be successful, the students are able to adapt, learning to conform to "middle class educational norms" (2009:1114). In conclusion, the authors note that "academically successful working class students gain enormously from studying at [elite] institutions, flourishing as learners and growing in confidence both academically and socially" (2009:1116). Increasing the number of working class students at elite universities would, therefore, enable many more to realise their "academic potential" (ibid). In this conclusion, Reay et al. appear to acknowledge that the student experience and employability of graduates at elite universities is superior to other institutions. Despite their faults, they seem to represent a "triumph of tradition"; an "elitist Oxbridge ideal" that leaves "pioneering alternatives to England's ancient institutions as second class substitutes" (Barnes, 1996:305).

Bathmaker et al. (2016) investigate this concept in more detail in their three year, ethnographic study of 90 students in Bristol. Half were students at the elite University of Bristol, and the other half at the University of the West of England. The authors' "deeply disappointing" conclusion is that the elite university experience is a major advantage, mainly due to the established links with leading employers (2016:121). Further, the economic constraints on working class students make their lives more difficult, forcing them into term time working, and reducing the participation in extracurricular activities that contribute to employability (ibid). Young women in particular seemed to "drift away" from their original career ambitions, Bathmaker et al. (2016:122-3) find, while black students felt "uncomfortable" and "marginalised". Ten years earlier, Mirza (2006:103) highlights the "normative whiteness" of elite higher education in England, while Granfield (1991) also comes to a similar conclusion in his ethnographic

American study, finding that Black working class students were positioned as outsiders, leading to fears of academic inadequacy. On the other hand, Bufton (2003:232) in her phenomenological research, finds that successful working class students are able to separate themselves from the performance required in the sub-culture of the elite academic microcosm, "creating a feeling of bifurcated selfhood". Puwar (2004) agrees in part, arguing that academically able students have a greater chance of fitting in than they had at school, despite the class difference. They at least, Puwar (2004:128) concludes, "partially mirror and clone the self-image of the hegemonic norm".

The divide between elite universities and the rest is picked up by Willis (2004:185), who argues that a further fragmentation between the "elite and the new universities, and 'e-unis' will rise", as England heads further "towards an American situation". The higher education system reflects an "increasingly divided nation", exacerbated by the vote to leave the European Union that succeeded in accentuating "deep social divisions across the country" (Sutton Trust, 2019:4). Brezis and Hellier (2013:3) found that the expanding middle class contains individuals with a "standard university degree", while the upper class is "composed of those graduates from the elite university". The scholars conclude that the meritocratic admissions system at best extends to the standard universities only (ibid). Urging the government to take action to address structural inequalities in higher education, Reader et al. (2020:32) point out that it is "widely expected that the Covid-19 pandemic will increase the disadvantage gap significantly" as the English elite continues to look after its own. Elite universities, therefore, need to "embrace a cultural shift" in the support provided for students from disadvantaged backgrounds to enable social mobility through graduate employment (Major, 2019:9).

3.4.2 Widening participation: the impact on social mobility and graduate employment

Social mobility in the UK is driven by the employability agenda, with contemporary definitions focused on occupational classification as the key to improving an individual's social class (Brown, 2013; Bukodi & Goldthorpe, 2019; Roebuck, 2019). Equally, *widening participation* has been seen as a key initiative to enable disadvantaged students to achieve social mobility, through the belief that a university degree remains a rite of passage to highly paid graduate employment. However, the uncomfortable truth for policy makers is that less privileged students remain more likely to attend universities with weaker graduate employment outcomes (Friedman & Laurison, 2020). Indeed, while higher education has undergone change and transformation as a result of massification since the Blair government in 1997, persistent patterns of under-representation persist, and the prospects of less privileged graduates achieving elite graduate roles remains stubbornly remote (Burke, 2012).

Social mobility has been a much-used term in the UK since the 1950s, and definitions and understandings can vary (Roebuck, 2019). Brown (2013:679) defines it as the "movement between occupational categories across generations", while Bukodi and Goldthorpe (2019:13) frame social mobility as "the movement of individuals over time between different social positions". After pioneering research since the 1960s, Goldthorpe designed a new system to measure social mobility, which had seven class categories according to occupation:

1. Higher managerial and professional occupations
2. Lower managerial and professional occupations
3. Ancillary professional and administrative occupations
4. Small employers and own account workers
5. Lower supervisory and technical occupations
6. Semi-routine occupations-working class
7. Routine occupations
   (Goldthorpe, 2016:20)

For successive governments, there has been an emphasis on the economic impact of social mobility rather than addressing the widening inequalities in society, which has been intensified by Goldthorpe's model (Major, 2019). For the coalition government of the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats (Crawford et al., 2011:6-7) for example, the "key drivers" of social mobility were income, education and occupation with a view to achieve "efficiency and economic growth". Policy should seek to increase "the supply of graduates with economically valuable skills", the report adds, in order to "help social mobility, albeit indirectly" (Crawford et al., 2011:25).

The implementation of university tuition fees since 1998 (see section 3.1.2), up to £9,250 a year, has led to increasing government demands that universities demonstrate 'widening participation' as a vehicle for social mobility (Warikoo, 2016). However, the "hegemonic neoliberal policies" of free market expansionism in the higher education sector have resulted in exacerbating the harmful reproduction of hierarchy and privilege (Barak, 2015:14). Much of the "heavy lifting" on widening participation has been undertaken by "less selective" higher education institutions (Major, 2019:1). The access challenge, therefore, remains greater at more selective institutions. In 2017-18, the universities in the UK spent £248 million on widening access projects, however there "seems to be limited evidence on the effectiveness of the interventions carried out" (Robinson & Salvestrini, 2020:5). As Reay (2017:125) points out, widening access to a "very unequal, hierarchical field is a very crude response to an intractable problem" that requires a sophisticated, intersectional solution. Working class students graduate with an average of £14,000 more debt than their wealthier peers (Britton et al., 2015); graduates from the poorest 40 per cent of families have average debts of £57,000 compared with £43,000 for the richest 30 per cent (Belfield et al., 2017). For Reay (2017:128), the "sad irony" is that as more working class students have achieved a degree, its employability value has been eroded. Higher education, Goldthorpe contends, is not "an instrument to achieve social mobility", but to achieve the liberal ideal of enabling individuals to achieve their *academic* rather than *employability* potential (Wilby, 2020).

According to university admissions service, UCAS, more 18-year-olds from disadvantaged backgrounds are entering higher education than ever before, “with an increase of 78 per cent since 2006 for the most disadvantaged” (Heselwood, 2018:6). Access and outreach spending vary between universities, with Oxford University spending the most on access and Queen Mary, University of London spending the least (Heselwood, 2016:19). There is, however, “little transparency” as to what spending on ‘access’ is used for, and how effective it is (ibid). Indeed, access does not address the entry requirements, which will inevitably minimise the number of disadvantaged students who can access elite universities and maximise their graduate employability (Sutton Trust, 2019). Activities such as summer schools, Robinson and Salvestrini’s (2020) analysis found, are high cost interventions with mixed results in progression to university. In addition, no studies in this literature review could move beyond basic correlations between activity and enrolment, rather than seeking to discover the casual effect (for example Hatt et al., 2009; Hoare & Mann, 2011; Lawson et al., 2019). In other words, it is possible that these motivated students, choosing to take part in these activities over their summer holidays, are more likely to enrol at university than those not present (Harrison et al., 2015). Significantly, Webb et al. (2017:13) use their study of widening participation activities to expose the “deep tensions and contradictions” in generic widening participation policies, failing to address the “intersecting, and often contradictory, identity formations” of disadvantaged students. Social divisions and positions have different organising logics, Skeggs (2002) argues, and the conceptual tools to address differences in class, gender and ethnicity, should not be treated similarly or equally. Widening participation initiatives can be seen to “homogenise rather than recognise difference” and in doing so have only succeeded in sustaining educational inequalities (Webb at al, 2017:15).

3.4.3 Social justice, intersectionality and graduate recruitment

For the academic community, higher education’s social justice premise is central to their enthusiasm for employability, believing that degrees have the potential to address class-based inequalities in the UK (Morrison, 2018). However, the concept of employability as a meritocratic mission for social justice is rejected as a “colourblind narrative” (Gillborn, 2015:277) that ignores intersectionality, used as a cloak of “neutrality” to camouflage the interests of the elite and maintain their dominance of elite professions (Tate, 1997:235). Multiple social factors, particularly ethnicity, gender and social class, deeply impact the experiences of individuals in navigating systems of power (Crenshaw, 1989; 2017; Hill-Collins, 1990). Large employers are built upon retaining existing hierarchies of identity, reproducing patterns of social and economic inequality (Bradley, 1996). Additional factors such as age, religion and sexual orientation also occupy academic attention (ibid). However, only a limited number of global studies have begun to unpack the intersectional dimension of employability, particularly through the lens of migration, concluding that individualised interventions are required to untangle the complex employability journey for those who experience society’s structural inequalities (Bolzani et al., 2020; Butler, 2017; Ngoubene-Atioky et al., 2020; Rodriguez et al., 2021; Zehavi, 2019). Students may be at an advantage on one basis (for example being male) but at a disadvantage on another (such as being Black), with individual life experiences influencing their employability status (Kapilashrami, 2021). Indeed, following graduation, less privileged individuals are likely to experience intersectional class, gender and ethnic discrimination during their entire careers (Berghs & Dyson, 2020). However, the intersection of social class with gender and/ or ethnicity is historically absent in scholarly activity taking the Bourdieusian approach to understanding the barriers to education, including graduate recruitment (Deem, 2004; 2015; Sepúlveda & Lizama-Loyola, 2021). Moreover, the published literature is currently silent on the pedagogic implications of intersectionality in the context of employability. While intersectionality is not a focus of this study, the qualitative data that emerges is highly sensitive to social context, which has influenced the findings (Bryan et al., 1996). As employability discourse evolves further, it has potential to be a subject of future research.

The philosophical concept of social justice represents the "ongoing struggles" against repression (Barak, 2015:2), and at its core combines the redistribution of status, power and wealth for all (Sadeghi & Price, 2007). It is defined as "the fair distribution of opportunities, rewards and responsibilities in society", including the distribution of education and the freedom to pursue their career aspirations (Hudson, 2013). One of the most influential theories of social justice is Rawls' (1999:3) notion of "justice as fairness" in his *A Theory of Justice* (first published in 1971), which draws upon Kantian philosophical traditions of justice as impartiality. Calling for "education for all", Rawls (1999:63) states that "chances to acquire cultural knowledge and skills should not depend upon one's class position, and so the school system, whether public or private, should be designed to even out class barriers". Going further, he recognises that a greater proportion of education funding should be spent on the "less rather than the more intelligent", in order to establish a meritocratic society based on an "egalitarian conception of justice" (1999:86) that levels the playing field for graduate roles. Barak (2015) argues that Rawls' success is his ability to find a middle ground between Marxist theories of equality and neo-liberal concepts of freedom. In the context of this study, Rawls' argument suggests that less privileged students will require greater investment from universities in their employability interventions, in order to make up ground on their privileged peers.

Several scholars have sought to extend the social justice argument beyond social class, pointing to the range of social inequalities that form the lived experience of individuals (Dahrendorf, 1959; Ransome, 2005; Savage et al., 2004). For British-German sociologist, Dahrendorf in his landmark text, *Class and Class Conflict in Industrial Society* (1959:127, first published in 1957), the concept of class is problematic, noting that the term is frequently interchangeable with race, the elite and "cultural diffusion". Half a century later, Ransome (2005) concurs, highlighting that class distinctions are bound up with holistic socio-economic inequalities. For Savage et al. (2004), social class as a singular measure fails to account for where people live. Highlighting the north-east of England, the authors suggest that place, belonging and identity have grown in importance to supplant those derived from social class. Therefore, for universities to improve graduate employability, the academic community must recognise that “class is no longer king” (Butler & Watt, 2007:12), but instead one among several sources of inequality. Butler and Watt (2007) highlight the work of scholars including Bradley (1996) and Crenshaw (1989), seeking the progressive expansion of social inequality discourse by moving gender, ethnicity and age up the social agenda.

The *intersectionality* of social inequalities was a term formed by black feminist scholar, Crenshaw in 1989, in response to the civil rights movement in the United States. She argued that neither “black liberationist politics nor feminist theory can ignore the intersectional experiences of those whom the movements claim as their respective constituents” (1989:166). Feminist theories of the time, she added, excluded black women because it was “predicated on a discrete set of experiences that often does not accurately reflect the interaction of race and gender” (1989:140). Hill Collins agrees (1990), defining ethnicity, class and gender as “axes of oppression” within a “matrix of domination”. Social inequalities should be reconceptualised as “interlocking systems of oppression”, states Hill Collins, with employability through education as the key to empower the lives of black women (ibid). Intersectionality is a concept where power collides, Crenshaw (2017) deduces, adding “it is not simply that there’s a race problem here, a gender problem here, and a class or LBGTQ problem there”. Butler (2017) concurs in part, adding that the new paradigm should be “non-hierarchical”, refusing primacy to either race, class, gender, or ethnicity. For Butler (2017:38), intersectionality is a necessary framework for pedagogic engagement, enabling the academic community to “embrace diversity” in teaching and learning to support all students to achieve their employability potential.

Despite the increasing discourse around intersectionality, there have been criticisms of education scholars continuing to rely on Bourdieu’s framework because of its failure to sufficiently acknowledge the significance of ethnicity and gender (Sepúlveda & Lizama-Loyola, 2021). Deem (2004:33) discussed the disconnect between sociology and higher education almost 20 years ago, arguing that researchers are failing to connect with the range of sociological perspectives, except where they “make use of Bourdieu”. She returned to the subject ten years later, arguing that while there was an increase in European research linking sociology and higher education since 2004, much of the literature was designed to “serve the interests of bureaucrats” (Deem, 2015:279). According to Adkins (2004), Bourdieu’s theory is based in terms of class and so is not always relevant for a feminist perspective. Similarly, Reay (2014) laments the scholarly obsession with Bourdieu’s concept of habitus in education research, highlighting the limitations on gender and ethnicity. Rollock (2014) makes a similar argument in relation to racial inequalities and criticises the work of Bourdieu for not recognising how class locations, dispositions and capitals are all influenced by ethnicity.

The discourse is beginning to shift with a small number of international studies developing empirical arguments around intersectionality through an employability lens (Bolzani et al., 2020; Butler, 2017; Ngoubene-Atioky et al., 2020; Rodriguez et al., 2021; Zehavi, 2019). A study by Rodriguez et al. (2021:145), comprising of 40 interviews with students, found that students impacted by multiple forms of social discrimination are held back by "a lack of sense of agency, confidence and self-awareness". Similarly, a study by Bolzani et al. (2020:2152) in Italy comprising of 40 interviews with professionals working directly with migrants, found that "contextual barriers [to graduate recruitment] are difficult to remove or alter", especially for migrant women. More specifically, Ngoubene-Atioky et al. (2020:90) concluded in their study of African women migrants in the United States, that their parenting role held back their employability and resulted in them being "de-skilled" in adulthood. As Zehavi (2019:96) points out, empirical research linking intersectionality, employability and pedagogy has not yet moved beyond theory into practice, and needs to be embedded "in all systems and institutions". This study begins to analyse the intersection between social class and ethnicity on graduate recruitment, wrapped in the context of two seismic events, the social movement, Black Lives Matter, and the global pandemic, Covid-19 (see section 5.3). While intersectionality is not a primary focus of this study, the findings are informed by this academic discourse, providing a potential springboard for future research.

3.4.4 Business education and the impact of hyper-globalisation

Building on the discourse around migration, the nationalist discourse around social class fails to account for globalisation and its impact on graduate recruitment (Bradley, 1996; Butler & Watt, 2007; Fakunle, 2020; Thift, 1988; Urry, 2000). Globalisation has "undermined the perceived national experience of systems of class inequality" and so led to its increasing marginalisation in sociological research (Butler & Watt, 2007:12). Globalisation is defined as the post-war socioeconomic settlement that had begun in the late-1970s (ibid). As Thrift (1988:9) states, it was a response to an economic crisis where the choices for business were to "automate, emigrate or evaporate". To rely on a western brand of sociology that operates within a largely national concept of a society, encapsulated by the Oxbridge elite, as happened for much of the twentieth century, appears outdated when considering large, transnational employers. It may be an era of "cosmopolitan borderlessness" but this is no unified global society, Urry (1988:13) argues, with the potential for "unpredictable shockwaves" to spill out chaotically due to the scale of "roaming across the globe". The "association between class structures and national states" has been fragmented (Breen & Rottman, 1998:16), with a growing "transnational capitalist class" (Scott, 1997:312), creating a sense of global identity driven by multi-national corporations, described by Urry (2000:13) as "powerful empires". Indeed, since the 1980s the "free market rather than state control has become the dominant principle", with the rise of a pluralistic culture, the "proliferation" of the middle class and the "diminishing control" of the political elite (Bradley, 1996:33-4). The two dominant global cities, London and New York, are key locations for financial activity and specialist services, such as accounting and legal (Butler & Watt, 2007). The recent gentrification of London over the past thirty years, created by an increasingly global, mobile middle class, has had the impact of establishing a highly diverse, liberal, cosmopolitan population

(McRobbie, 2004). Indeed, Hamnett (2003:126) goes further, stating that London has been transformed from being a white mono-ethnic city to "one of the most multi-ethnic cities in Europe". Universities' neoliberal dependency on international fees has also contributed to the diversity of major cities, with students entering the UK principally with an employment-focused "economic rationale" (Fakunle, 2020:681).

As a consequence, international student mobility has become an important phenomenon in tertiary education over the past 20 years. In an empirical Australian study featuring 25 interviews with international students and programme directors, Tran (2016:1286) finds that the growth in international students is driven by "class habitus" and economic capacity of parents, creating a new barrier to access for disadvantaged students (also King et al., 2010). The advantages in terms of graduate recruitment are stark, with global mobility representing a "fluidity, flow and dynamism" at the expense of domestic students, described as the "already achieved, the stable and static" (Tran, 2016:1269). In 2017, there were around 5.3 million international students worldwide, and these numbers have been increasing steadily since 2000 (Bilecen, 2020). Since the early 2000s, China has been the largest country of origin for international students worldwide (ibid). In the UK, there were around 750,000 overseas students in 2018 (Migration Advisory Committee, 2018), while only 39,000 UK students are studying abroad in 2020 (Unesco, 2020). In a government report to the Migration Advisory Committee (2018), the most common nationalities for switching from student Tier Four visas to employer-sponsored Tier Two visas are China, India, Malaysia, the United States, Nigeria and Pakistan. Nearly 85 per cent of jobs were in managerial or professional occupations, with information and communications technicians making up nearly all the remainder (ibid). According to the report, businesses have found these graduates to be "skilled and talented", "vital" to fill high ranking positions (Migration Advisory Committee, 2018:92). In 2020, the City of London Corporation reported that the proportion of workers in the City of London's services sector born outside the UK jumped to 36 per cent in 2019, up from 32 per cent a year earlier (City of London Newsroom, 2020). In his analysis of the data, Clear (2016) points out that "London's workforce is one of the most international in the world, reflecting the fact that the city receives the lion's share of immigrants who settle in the UK". The international workforce is vital, Clear determines, "to ensure that London remains a preeminent global centre for business" (ibid). Indeed, Deloitte (2020:4) are one business analysing the future of the distributed workforce following the Covid-19 pandemic, moving the emphasis away from the global cities, to businesses that are "completely distributed and dependent on virtual interactions". Large, multi-national employers, acting as "hyper-globalisers", now carry immense power, to which the nation state has become "like a subsidiary company to a global corporation" (Butler & Watt, 2007:37).

Drawing upon some empirical evidence of international students' experiences of transition to the labour market, Li (2016) argues that UK business students can learn from their international peers, through the ways they actively approach and engage with labour market and their understanding of the wider cultural context. Interviewing Chinese tourism management students, Huang (2013:89) finds them to be "well educated, motivated and committed", with clear career intentions in the UK. He points out that there is an urgent need to explore the employability of international students further. Similarly, Waters (2009) points out that existing literature on employability in business education has a strong national focus in the UK or the United States, and little reference is made to the increasingly international dimensions of graduate employability. In a survey of 450 Chinese business students, Haung and Turner (2018:175) find that "the forces of internationalisation and globalisation have had considerable influence on organisations and their expectations of their employees". Large employers now wish to recruit personnel with the "knowledge and understanding of cultural issues", as well as the ability to manage complex international relationships (ibid). King et al. (2010:32) propose a similar conclusion, pointing out that international students quickly "accumulate multiple and mutually-reinforcing forms of capital". The clear stance of employers, found in a study interviewing 85 business graduates, is that international experience enables students to become more employable through the development of "intercultural competence and new linguistic skills" (Brooks et al., 2012:284). A Polish study analysing the graduate destinations of business students draws a particularly stark conclusion, that international experience is likely to be acting as "a screening device and be used by firms for the purpose of recruiting better candidates" (Wincenciak et al., 2012:72). For less privileged business students, the race for professional positions at large employers is ultimately not just about the English elite, there is now a "round the world race for graduate jobs" which has made competition more fierce than ever (Alsop, 2013). In the context of this study, the necessity of business schools to develop culturally aware global citizens appears crucial for graduate recruitment, in order for graduates to compete with leading candidates from around the world.

3.4.5 Chapter summary

This section has found that the neoliberal marketisation of higher education in England has only succeeded in inflaming social inequalities (Reay, 2017; Warikoo, 2016). The admissions process, based on exam results, has created an illusion of meritocracy that is skewed to the advantage of wealthy families to access the traditional, elite universities, who are then much more likely to gain high ranking jobs in politics, the judiciary and the media (Bathmaker et al., 2016; Brezis & Hellier, 2013; Friedman, 2018; Heselwood, 2018; Reay, 2017). Going further, the experience of working class students who are able to access universities such as Oxford and Cambridge, is superior to those who study at new institutions, seeing them grow in confidence and accumulate symbolic capital that is highly valued by large employers (Bathmaker et al., 2016; Reay et al., 2009). Scholars focusing on a narrow, Marxist interpretation of the British class system are only seeing part of the picture, however. The spotlight on the individual is showcased through the concept of intersectionality, where shared experiences are interwoven into multiple forms of social inequality (Bradley, 1996; Butler & Watt, 2007; Crenshaw, 1989; 2017; Hill Collins 1990; McRobbie, 1991), with some studies beginning to connect intersectionality with graduate recruitment (Bolzani et al., 2020; Butler, 2017; Ngoubene-Atioky et al., 2020; Rodriguez et al., 2021; Zehavi, 2019). Nonetheless, the higher education sector's response to social inequality, through schemes such as Widening Participation, are inadequate and poorly evaluated (Barak, 2015; Reay, 2017; Harrison et al., 2015; Robinson & Salvestrini, 2020). Most notably for this study, perhaps, the existing literature remains overly nationalist in its approach, failing to sufficiently analyse the impact of global mobility on the fragmentation of internal class structures (Butler & Watt, 2007; Fakunle, 2020; Thrift, 1988; Urry, 2000). International business students, the limited range of global studies highlight, are more employable due in part to their motivation and cultural awareness, as multi-national companies seek new employees who are able to build partnerships around the world (Bradley, 1996; Brooks et al., 2012; Haung & Turner, 2018; King et al., 2010; Li, 2016). For disadvantaged graduates to achieve social mobility, this potentially significant ingredient will need to be further understood, through the lens of course design and the expectations of large employers.

3.5 Summary of the literature review

The literature review has demonstrated that the empirical research around graduate recruitment is closely aligned to the policy context of the UK, in particular the relationship between graduate outcomes and economic growth. Each of the four sections has positioned findings of contemporary studies in a historic, chronological context to understand how the academic discourse has shifted over time. In summary:

- The first section explored *the meaning of higher education* discovering a transformation from liberal ideals to utilitarian concepts of economic value over the past fifty years, concluding that employability skills discourse, in particular the accumulation of human, social and cultural capital, is now the dominant scholarly narrative (Bhagra & Sharma; 2018; Bublitz, 2018; Fugate et al., 2004; Lazear, 2003; Ledermuller, 2011; Maxwell et al., 2009; Raybould & Sheedy, 2005; Tomlinson, 2017). In doing so, the section revealed that empirical studies were positioned from the perspectives of students, academics *or* employers, rather than attempting to gain a holistic, integrated understanding of graduate recruitment.
- The *pedagogic strategies* section found that Kolb's (1984) experiential learning framework forms the backbone of a sound employability pedagogy (Artess et al., 2017; Bassot, 2016; Kalfa & Taksa, 2015; Kolb et al., 2000; Lage et al., 2000; Pegg et al., 2012; Yorke, 2006). However, there was very little testing of the empirical findings with employers, giving a sense that the academic community was too often marking its own homework.
- The *recruitment and selection* section highlights the competitive approach to graduate recruitment, analysing the limited range of empirical studies. It argued that individuals are able to succeed through a deliberate process of professional socialisation, viewed in the context of Foucault's

technologies of the self (Gebreiter, 2019; Pollard et al., 2015). The section exposed an important gap in knowledge around recruitment and selection practice, with business education potentially disconnected from the realities of the hiring process.

- The *social justice and meritocracy* section unpacks the case for educational meritocracy and social mobility through an intersectional lens, arguing that while access to universities is increasing, there is no evidence of less privileged graduates being recruited to elite professional roles (Barak, 2015; Reay, 2017; Harrison et al., 2015; Robinson & Salvestrini, 2020).

Through a critical review of the literature, the study has developed a command of the key studies, theories and historical trends around graduate recruitment (Merriam, 1998). As a result, the following gaps in the literature have been identified which inform the research questions:

1. First, the published studies do not combine the perspectives of both universities *and* employers within the same empirical study (Bublitz, 2018; Fugate et al., 2004; Lazear, 2003; Ledermuller, 2011; Maxwell et al., 2009; Raybould & Sheedy, 2005). For example, Bakhshi et al. (2017) set-up a series of workshops with industry leaders to generate a set of 30 occupations and the future demand prospects of each. They concluded with recommendations for business schools, however the views of business school academics were absent. It is likely that the triangulation gained from the academic perspective would have generated a more valid, reliable set of findings. Indeed, the decision to focus on either academics or recruiters misses the opportunity to discover and understand "alternative explanations" of graduate recruitment (Stake, 1995:107).
2. The second gap I identified is how business school academics informally and systematically link the views of employers to the practice of *curriculum development* and periodic review. While there is debate around the pedagogic strategies to support employability, the impact is measured through student satisfaction rather than the perspectives of recruiters (Coldham & Armsby, 2016; Knight & Yorke, 2003; O'Leary, 2016; Lage et al., 2000). For example, Pegg et al. (2012) collated a range of employability pedagogy case studies from universities around the UK, designed for academic practitioners to develop their teaching and learning. The great majority of the initiatives are analysed through questionnaires, with some qualitative analysis of student views, while employers' perspectives are largely absent. Therefore, I argue that the perspective of recruiters on undergraduate course design and review is not fully understood.
3. The third gap in the existing research is the transition of graduates from students to quasi-professionals, in order to gain access to competitive roles that enable *social mobility* (Gebreiter, 2019). The current literature focuses on accessing university as a solution for social mobility in itself (Andres, 2016), whereas scholarly attention now needs to shift from access to graduation, where social inequalities are being exacerbated. A focus on qualifications has been replaced with a combination of human, cultural and social capital, which are now the essential tools required to

compete (Barber, 2006; Gebreiter, 2019; Pollard et al., 2015). To be successful, graduate recruits are required to have normalised professional identities; to become "corporate clones" that impersonate their privileged peers (Covaleski et al., 1998:294). It is unclear in the limited empirical research whether less privileged students can accumulate capital through the university experience that will overcome intersectional social discrimination (Crenshaw, 1989; 2017; Hill Collins 1990).

Consequently, to fulfil the overall research aims set out in chapter 1 of this PhD thesis, and taking into account the gaps in the literature, four main research questions have been formulated. These are:

- How does a Russell Group university prepare graduates for employment in its undergraduate business degrees?
- How do large employers evaluate business graduates to inform recruitment decisions?
- What social factors limit recruitment of business graduates at large employers?
- What are the knowledge, skills and attributes required in business graduate roles?

4. Research methodology

This chapter sets out a methodological framework for how the research was carried out, closely aligned to Merriam's (1998) approach to an interpretivist, qualitative case study. The chapter demonstrates how this decision was informed through my ontological and epistemological assumptions, setting out a constructivist approach that acknowledges the intersubjectivity of social actors with competing interests. The principal method of in-depth, semi-structured interviews is also explained, arguing for a purposeful approach to the sampling of module leaders and graduate recruiters. The necessary thick description that characterises the case study is further enhanced through incorporating the perspectives of university professional services staff, graduating students through the free text responses in the National Student Survey, in addition to thematic analysis of key academic documentation (university strategies, policies and module specifications) and employers' graduate scheme websites. The chapter highlights some of the key decisions taken during the fieldwork, in particular following the pilot study which tested the content and practicalities of the interview guides. There is always the danger that by re-constructing the methodological process I impart logic and rationale after the fact; however the chapter seeks to address some of the practical decisions that were taken, not least as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic and the shift from face-to-face interviews to online. The chapter concludes by arguing for a multi-phased thematic data analysis approach, enabling me to generate useful connections from the data, and setting the scene for the rich data analysis chapter that follows (see chapter 5).

4.1 Research approach

The purpose of my literature review (see chapter 3) was to establish what is already known about graduate recruitment in business education, through a synthesised, critical assessment of theoretical concepts and published research (Lichtman, 2013). The review has enabled me to advance my argument about the significance of my research (Bryman, 2008), in order to "develop sharper and more insightful questions about the topic" (Yin, 2009:14). Further, it has provided an opportunity to consider the different theoretical and methodological approaches to research in this area (Bryman, 2008). Significantly, in my literature review I found an overreliance on quantitative surveys and questionnaires when seeking to identify how employers evaluate graduates. The studies I reviewed lack a "descriptive vividness" (Lichtman, 2013:179) and fail to account for a range of socially constructed, dispositional factors that impact on individual, human judgements. This inspired me to move towards a solely qualitative, case study approach, to gain the in-depth 'thick' description that I believe other studies lack. Consequently, the aim of this chapter is to convey how the research study was undertaken, namely through an interpretivist, qualitative case study methodology. This is led by a discussion of the methodological approaches to be adopted and an explanation of my ontological and epistemological assumptions which signify that this is a qualitative study. This is followed by the research design, including the rationale for selecting qualitative interviews, and the approach to data analysis. I complete the chapter by considering my positionality which reflects on the influence of my background, before considering the ethical deliberations in my research.

4.1.1 Ontological and epistemological assumptions

The research process has three interconnected dimensions: ontology, epistemology and methodology (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 1999). Consequently, I begin by addressing my epistemological and ontological assumptions, as these philosophical ideas deeply influenced my research design, methodological justifications, and how I interpreted data (Bryman, 2008). These assumptions represent the heart of an academic debate, as different research communities have "competing ideas about what constitutes quality" in research (Niebauer et al., 2020:2). These perspectives are divided by their approach to ontology, or beliefs about the form and nature of reality (Guba & Lincoln, 1994), as well as epistemology, or the process in which the investigator "comes to know that reality" (Antwi & Hamza, 2015:218). Indeed, as a researcher, I approach the world with a "set of ideas, a framework that specifies a set of questions, which are then examined in specific ways" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018:52). Each philosophical position reflects a different stance on the status of knowability and concerns the fundamental question of what is regarded as acceptable knowledge in education (Bryman, 2008).

Positivism is the epistemological position that advocates the application of research methods used in the natural sciences to the study of social reality (Taylor et al., 2016). Idealised as "*the* scientific approach", positivism is built on a quantitative framework of methods including surveys, questionnaires and statistical models, testing a structured hypothesis (Hughes & Sharrock, 1990:24, emphasis in original). It is underpinned by the principle of objectivism (Lichtman, 2013), conducted in a way that is free of values so that knowledge is gained through the gathering of undisputable facts (Bryman, 2008). The central question is whether social entities can be considered objective, built on "external facts" (Bryman, 2008:18), or whether they should be viewed as social constructions built by the perceptions and values of social actors (Hughes & Sharrock, 1990). Objectivists take the view that social organisations have "a reality that is external to the individuals who inhabit it", with an unrelenting pressure to conform to rules and regulations, described as a "constraining force" that restricts and inhibits individuals (Bryman, 2008:18). At the heart of my assumptions is that positivism is less successful in the study of education due to the need to understand the complexities of human behaviour. As Cohen et al. (2018:10) state, the contexts of teaching, learning and human interaction "present the positivist researcher with a mammoth challenge".

Instead, I take an interpretivist position, based on hermeneutic-phenomenological philosophical traditions, as the fundamental subject matter of my study (academics/ universities and recruiters/ employers), was about the interpretation of human action (Von Wright, 2004). Built on phenomenologist principles of Schutz, I attempted to see things from the participants' point of view, seeking to understand a range of perspectives (Taylor et al., 2016). Therefore, my aim was to achieve an "empathic understanding" (Bryman, 2008:15) of social action, advocated by Weber and his approach referred to as *verstehen* or 'rational understanding' (Eliason, 2000). Weber believed that sociology is a science which must address the meaningful character of social actions, rather than the quantitative techniques used by natural scientists (ibid). He argued that to understand society, a researcher must look at the individuals that shape it (Weber, 2005), in my case the academics that shape the course design, and the employers who recruit graduates. To understand these actions, rooted in the urban sociological traditions of the Chicago School, I studied the interpretation of intended meanings behind them, as social agents actively construct and modify their versions of reality (Bloor, 2016; Milton, 2007; Presser & Sandberg, 2015). Human knowledge is an "imagined recreation of a lived experience"; a "mental reality", selectively recalled from previous events and actions that make up human existence (Hughes & Sharrock, 1990:98). In my research, I sought to understand how employers interpreted their lived experience of recruiting graduates, and how module leaders engaged with, and interpreted, the needs of employers.

The interpretivist paradigm is informed by social constructivism and underpinned by "a relativist ontology (there are multiple realities) and a subjectivist epistemology (knower and respondent co-create understandings)" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018:57). Knowledge is a social construction; a human creation that is a product of the mind (Mutch, 2005). In the context of my research, I asked questions to my participants and their answers represented their construction and reconstruction of realities. I adopted the position that people's knowledge of reality can change over time based on lived experiences, and events such as the Covid-19 pandemic will inevitably have an impact on how my participants will see the world (Eliaeson, 2002; Merriam, 2002). As a result, I needed to look for meanings and motives behind the actions of universities and employers (Whitley, 1984), by gaining access to their social worlds to discover "how individuals make sense of themselves" (Miller & Glassner, 2016:52). Equally, alongside the dispositional factors that impacted my participants' attitudes, motivations and feelings, I sought to understand the significance of rules and regulations imposed on the individuals (Eliaeson, 2000), such as quality assurance procedures or recruitment policies. Consequently, I attempted to resist the temptation to produce overly generalised, sweeping conclusions, as the judgements of my participants cannot be recognised as cultural or scientific truths (Hughes & Sharrock, 1990). What is true in one reality for an employer or a university can be different from another, creating "complex, multi-dimensional" perspectives (Ryen, 2016:35) where "nothing is ever certain" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018:52). The nature of social actors' responses, therefore, were evaluated against the accounts of their peers, in order to conduct analysis that is "co-constructed between the researcher and the researched" (Creswell, 2013a:36). The "plurality" of perspectives, comprising of module leaders, university professional services staff, graduate recruiters and graduating students (through the NSS survey), drove the data analysis in order to reduce the impact of my own viewpoints (Whitley, 1984:383). My position is that, at the heart of this research, was an investigation of human attitudes and behaviour that extends deeper than the statistics. Therefore, my relativist ontological assumption is that humans embody a set of values and interests that are best understood through a qualitative research methodology (Hume, 2000).

4.1.2 Qualitative research in education

In order to achieve "methodological congruence" (Lichtman, 2013:179) between my philosophical assumptions and research approach, I chose to adopt a qualitative methodology that is aligned to the interpretivist paradigm. Unlike quantitative research, my qualitative research analysed data within its textual form, rather than converting it to numerical categories (Carter and Little, 2007), in order to understand "the story behind the numbers" (Mayan, 2009:10). In doing so, I aimed to illuminate different aspects of social reality, attempting to "decipher the meanings that my participants ascribe to their reality" (Niebauer et al., 2020:2), or building thick descriptions of a specific aspect of social life (Leavy, 2014). It brought the potential, therefore, to broaden the conception of research "towards issues of language, representation and social organisation" (Silverman, 2016:4), enabling me to consider the major contextual economic, political and social factors, and how they affect the ways in which individuals construct reality (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

A major advantage of my qualitative approach was that, as the researcher, I was the "primary instrument for data collection and analysis" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016:16), "using [my] eyes and ears as filters" (Lichtman, 2013:7), reflecting the view that subjectivity is both appreciated and assumed (Russell & Kelly, 2002). As Bryman (2008:393-4) states, I was "in the driving seat", building a relationship and rapport with my participants, in order to gain a contextual awareness to "genuinely understand the world through their eyes". Stake (1995:37) goes further, highlighting that the human instrument allows researchers to be adaptive and respond to different situations, through a process of "experiential understanding" as opposed to a controlled, inflexible quantitative approach. The second major advantage is the inductive process of qualitative research, as I analysed the data in order to build understanding through themes, concepts and theories rather than deductively deriving hypotheses to be tested in the positivist manner (Bryman, 2008). Building on the principles of grounded theory, my data was the "driving force for theory building and data insights" (Koro-Ljungberg et al., 2018:809). Finally, the product of my qualitative inquiry was richly descriptive (Patton, 1990). The 'thick description', as defined by Geertz

(1973:28), aims to draw “conclusions from small, but very densely textured” analysis to support assertions about the “construction of collective life”.

The foundations of the qualitative study are rooted in historic origins of anthropology, the humanities and sociology (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). In the last 30 years, the number and types of qualitative design have become clearer, and scholars have identified five core, interlinking designs as viable ways to carry out qualitative research (Bryman, 2008; Creswell, 2013b; Lichtman, 2013):

- *Narrative research* is a design of inquiry originating from the humanities in which the researcher asks one or more individuals to provide stories about aspects of their lives (Riessman, 2008) “or events around them” (Bryman, 2008:696). This information is then often “retold or restoried” by the researcher into a “narrative chronology” (Creswell, 2013b:42).
- *Phenomenological research* is a design of inquiry originating in psychology and philosophy in which the researcher “describes the lived experiences of individuals about a phenomenon as described by participants” (ibid). In particular, the researcher must “bracket out preconceptions concerning his or her grasp of that world” (Bryman, 2008:697), avoiding “unreflective presuppositions” (Beck, 2020:1). This design has strong philosophical foundations and typically involves conducting interviews (Giorgi, 2009). The result is a privileged glimpse into the purity of human existence, with readers able “to walk a mile in the shoes of the participants [and] learn first-hand what that experience is like” (Beck, 2020:1).
- *Grounded theory* is a design of inquiry from sociology in which the researcher derives a substantive theory, directly “out of research data” (Bryman, 2008:694), “grounded in the views of participants” (Creswell, 2013b:42). This process involves using multiple stages of data collection (Charmaz, 2006), in order for “discovery” to emerge (Niebauer et al., 2020:4).
- *Ethnography* is a design of inquiry originating from sociology and anthropology in which the researcher studies the “culture of groups” (Litchmann, 2013:322), “in a natural setting over a prolonged period of time” (Creswell, 2013b:42). Data collection is “based on direct observation” and places emphasis on the “cognitive modes of observing, watching, seeing, looking at and scrutinising” (Gobo & Marciniak, 2016:103). To build relationships, researchers should “appear interested” and “open-minded about [the participants’] way of life” (O’Reilly, 2008:11).
- Finally, *case study* intersects and takes lessons from all the previous designs (Merriam, 1998). Cases are carefully bounded by factors such as time, location and activity, and researchers collect detailed information using a variety of methods (Bryman, 2008; Creswell, 2013b).

My chosen qualitative design for this research was *case study* and, since the 1980s, Merriam (1998; 2002), Yin (2014) and Stake (2006; 2010) have been recognised as the defining scholars to establish case study as a methodology (Harrison et al., 2017; Yazan, 2015). The reason I selected case study is because it incorporates principles of all the other qualitative approaches summarised above (Merriam, 1998). This is particularly true of ethnography, as both approaches employ research methods that are "dynamic and have application to different contexts", with a range of data collection techniques to answer different questions (Parker-Jenkins, 2018:21). Equally, case study is built on the ethnographic principles of trust, rapport and empathy, traditionally built through extended time with participants in the field (Miller & Bell, 2002). Third, building on grounded theory, it is possible to use case study data to develop theoretical generalisations and inferences which, while tentative, can form a basis for future research (Bryman, 2008). Indeed, due to the "crucial" thick description of the case, readers are able to make informed decisions about "fit" between this case and other situations to which researchers may apply the concepts and conclusions of this research (Schofield, 2002:20-21). Stake (1995:85) defines this as "naturalistic generation", with readers able to add this case study to the wider accumulation of qualitative research. Ultimately, however, the decision of case study is underpinned by Merriam's (1998) definition in her seminal text, *Qualitative Research and Case Study Applications in Education*. It enabled me to gain an "in-depth understanding" of graduate recruitment both for a university and employers (Merriam, 1998:19). It is a process of intensive discovery, Merriam argues, benefitting from being organised through the strict boundaries of a single entity or system (ibid). In the next section, I argue that Merriam is able to bridge both Yin and Stake's perspectives, bringing together the best of both.

4.1.3 The case study: Merriam's flexible approach to disciplined inquiry

I argue that the definition Merriam presents is a more pragmatic version of Yin and yet a more disciplined version of Stake's, providing flexibility to utilise qualitative case study methodology as an approach to disciplined inquiry (Harrison et al., 2017; Ebneyamini & Moghadam, 2018; Yazan, 2015). Indeed, Merriam is careful to differentiate and gain credibility for case study method as opposed to casework, placing emphasis on its unique and distinctive attributes. The case study, she argues, is: *particularistic*, focusing on a particular situation, programme or phenomenon; *descriptive* yielding a rich description of the phenomenon under study; and *heuristic*, illuminating the reader's understanding (Merriam, 1998). In creating this framework of idiosyncratic features, Merriam is closer to a Yinian view of case study as a legitimate research strategy (Yazan, 2015). Looking further at the scholars' definitions, much of the confusion around case study as a methodology is that the "process" of conducting a case study is often confused with "the unit of study": the case (Merriam, 1998:27). Stake (1995) and Merriam (1998) concur with the definition of Smith (1978:343), of a system with clear boundaries, largely established through a "common sense" approach, that is integrated, complex and functioning. Looking closer, on one hand, Yin defines case study as an "empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon" (2014:16) whilst Stake (2010:27) focuses on the unit of study, defining a case as a "noun, a thing, an entity" (2006:1), such as a "one playground, one band, one Weight Watchers group". Merriam (1998:29) goes further, combining both Stake and Yin's perspectives, pointing out that case studies are "particularistic", with researchers interested in discovery and insight, for the case itself "and for what it might represent" in terms of policy and professional practice, setting a benchmark for future research. Indeed, Merriam (1998:27-30) concludes that the defining characteristic of case study research "lies in delimiting the object of the study", in order to "fence in" and set boundaries for the study, resulting in a rich, thick description that can "bring about new meaning, extend the reader's experience, or confirm what is already known". Merriam's view is influenced by Miles and Huberman's (1994:25) understanding of the "case as a phenomenon of some sort occurring in a bounded context"; as long as researchers are able to specify the phenomenon of interest, they can define it as a case. I adopt Miles and Huberman's visual representation to support the definition of my own case (see 4.2.2) as a mechanism to shape what will and will not be studied. For Miles and Huberman (1994:25-26), the "heart" of the study represents the central focus, while boundaries are defined by the "sampling operations", acknowledging that the boundaries cannot be completely solid prior to the fieldwork. In the context of my research, the heart of the case is an undergraduate business degree at a Russell Group university, the rationale for which is outlined in the next section.

Turning to the methodological framework that builds on the definition, Merriam (1998) mirrors my epistemological assumptions, maintaining a constructivist approach to case study research, whereby she assumes that reality is intersubjectively constructed through meanings developed socially and experientially. In addition, she is able to incorporate the Yinian (2014) perspective, asserting that when information is plentiful and concepts abstract, it is important to use processes that help to sort and manage data to convey clarity and applicability to the findings. Playing to my strengths as a novice researcher, Merriam's (1998) emphasis on the importance of structured and robust procedures to frame the research was greatly appealing, to ensure the study was manageable and applicable to potential comparative fieldwork scholars may take on in the future. On the other hand, her interpretivist view of triangulation is closer to that of Stake (2006), moving away from the Yinian perspective of a mechanism to drive validity and credibility and instead enabling a "holistic understanding" of the situation (Merriam, 1998:204). This view again matched my own, as the literature review drove my perception that there were likely to be a range of opinions from participants in this study, and that definitive findings on graduate recruitment were unlikely, due to the complexity of socioeconomic variables. The case took place within its own context, in particular the timing of the study, coming as it did within a period of economic difficulties due to the Covid-19 crisis (Jones et al., 2020). Building on this theme, Stake's (2006) approach is also firmly aligned to interpretivist philosophy. He emphasises the researcher's interpretive role as essential in the process, viewing multiple subjective realities, relative to the *context* of the study. Similarly, Merriam (1998), points out that the descriptive case study illustrates the complexities of the situation, and presents information from a wide variety of viewpoints (also Brown, 2008).

In terms of the design of the study, Yin (2014) places considerable emphasis on preparation of a detailed design at the outset and advises that researchers make minor changes in the design after they begin data collection. Stake (2006:17) argues for an evolving, flexible design which allows researchers to make major changes even after they proceed into the fieldwork, using "issues as conceptual structure in order to force attention to complexity and contextuality". Merriam (1998:74) advocates a solution that is "halfway between the ends of the continuum", with a theoretical framework and thorough literature review integrating, synthesising and critiquing the important thinking and research. For Merriam, it is the critical assessment that exposes the gaps in knowledge and generates the research questions. These questions however, should "guide" (Merriam, 1998:60) the inquiry rather than dictate it, enabling the fieldwork to evolve. Stake (1995) builds on this view, identifying the evolution of the fieldwork to be a critical factor in order to maximise the new knowledge gained from the study. He compares the "*etic* issues", generated by the researcher, to the "*emic* issues", defined as the "issues from the inside", that became apparent during the fieldwork and helped to enhance my understanding of the meanings behind social action (Stake, 1995:20, emphasis in original). Going further, it was equally important to take current social and economic events into account, as they will inevitably shape the lived experiences of participants. Looking back at my research, the social and economic impact of the Covid-19 pandemic was uncertain during the fieldwork, but the influence of the crisis on my participants cannot be underestimated.

Merriam's approach to sample selection and data collection tracks a clearly defined pathway for researchers, again carefully balancing Yinian discipline against Stake's conceptual approach (Harrison et al., 2017). However, it is Patton (1990:169, emphasis in original) who sets the benchmark with his *purposeful* sampling approach, placing the emphasis on selecting "*information-rich cases* for study in depth" in order to "illuminate the questions under study". For Merriam (1998:61), the decision around sampling is determined by where "most can be learned" (also Stake, 1995). In order to determine which sample will result in the most learning, Merriam (1998) proposes a criteria-based approach, spelling out which criteria the researcher uses to determine the case, and why. Stake (1995:4) advocates an instrumental approach, acknowledging that our "time and access for fieldwork are nearly always limited", therefore "we need to pick cases that are easy to get to and hospitable to our inquiry". While this is pragmatic, I determined that a balance of accessibility and purposefulness was the optimum model. That is why I bridged Stake's instrumental approach with Patton's (1990:174) *critical case sampling*, making "strategic sense" to select a case which has the potential to bring the "greatest impact on the development of knowledge". For Patton (ibid), the "clue" to a critical case is a statement to the effect of "if it happens there, it will happen anywhere", or vice versa, "if it doesn't happen there, it won't happen anywhere". The latter is particularly pertinent in my case, as it makes sense to select a university and a course that is successful in terms of graduate employment, so if my case can learn any lessons, then so can the great majority of institutions in the UK.

Moving from the 'heart' of the case to the participants, Merriam (1998) proposes steps to purposefully select who to interview and what documents to read in advance. In the final selection, she is also willing to suggest a range of practical sampling approaches, in particular *convenience*, based on time, location and availability; and *network* sampling, "perhaps the most common form of purposeful sampling" (Merriam, 1998:63). Similarly, Patton (1990:182) suggests utilising referrals from individuals ("people who know people who know people") to gain potential interview participants. Setting a minimum threshold for participants is recommended, Merriam (1998:64) states, however the focus should be on proceeding until a state of "saturation or redundancy" is reached. Yin (2014:41) concurs, dismissing sample size and instead focusing on "replication logic", moving "sequentially" (Schwandt & Gates, 2018:608) through the participants identified until data patterns can be deduced (Small, 2009).

Going further, I also followed Merriam's (1998:72, emphasis in original) approach to data collection through in-depth interviews, often "the *only* way to get data" and get to the issues at the heart of the thesis. As my research intends to focus on a small number of individuals, interviewing represents the "best technique" due to the depth of data that can be obtained on a one-to-one basis (ibid). I also carried out semi-structured interviews, advocated by Merriam (1998), that fall halfway between the highly structured, questionnaire driven approach of Yin (2014) and the open, conversational format of Stake (2010). Brinkmann (2018:999) agrees, adding that the "flexible and dialogical form" of interviewing has become "widespread". The interview structure, he states, must be unstructured enough for participants to respond from their own perspectives. In a semi-structured interview, questions are more "flexibly worded", often with a combination of more and less structured questions, including probes that follow-up on something already asked (Merriam, 1998:74). This enables the interviewer to "respond to the situation at hand" in order to maximise the value of the interview (ibid). A model of questioning from Strauss et al. (1981) aligns well to this approach, combining hypothetical questions (what if, suppose), devil's advocate questions (challenging the participant with the opposing view), ideal position questions (a perfect situation) and interpretative questions (attempting to confirm what the participant has been saying). This semi-structured delivery, underpinned by heavily structured preparation, was an ideal combination for me as a novice researcher. This approach enabled me to explore the participants' version of reality and helped me to begin to discover more about graduate recruitment in business education.

4.2 <u>Methods of data collection and analysis</u>

4.2.1 Case study design

In my search for knowledge, I determined that my case study design should be a "delicate balance" between "the interesting, the workable and the acceptable" (Ryen, 2016:39). In this section, I detail my strategy for data collection and analysis, underpinned by the framework I have set out, specifically, Merriam's (1998) argument that case study is particularistic, descriptive and heuristic. In the following sections, I detail my decision-making and rationale for the case (figure 4), bounding it within parameters that will provide the focus required to enable robust data collection and analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994). I spend time discussing the context for the decisions, in particular the purposeful approach to sampling, the rationale for in-depth interviews and their participants, and the data collection culminating in a thematic data analysis. I conclude the Research Methodology chapter by considering the ethical implications in light of the Covid-19 pandemic.

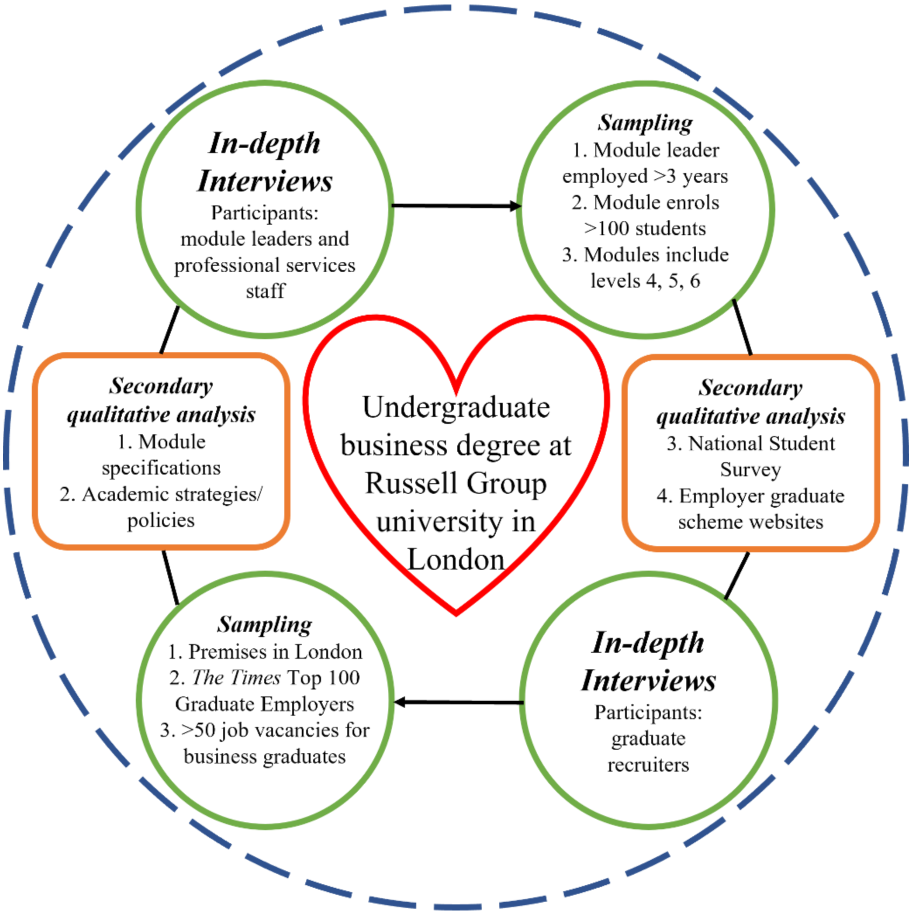


Figure 4: Case definition: undergraduate business degree at Russell Group university in London (adapted from Miles & Huberman, 1994)

4.2.2 Sampling strategies: purposeful approach

In the introduction (chapter 1), I set out the rationale for the study, specifically the rationale for a Russell Group university (section 1.2.1), the rationale for undergraduate business degrees (section 1.2.2), and the rationale for large employers (1.2.3). This was the first phase of a two-tiered sampling approach, first selecting the *case* to be studied, and turning in this section to the sample of participants *within* the case (Merriam, 1998; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Patton, 1990; Stake, 2010). My case is centred around a Russell Group university, based in London, which features in the top 20 of universities targeted by the top employers (High Fliers, 2020). The name of the institution, as well as the names of the participants, are anonymised. As stated in the introduction, the university is known as 'RGU'.

Next, I fence in the case further through the purposeful sampling of the participants (table 5). First, I analysed the individual modules to determine the participants taking part in the in-depth interviews. RGU holds its module data centrally on *Power BI*, a data visualisation tool developed by Microsoft (Power BI, 2020). The data reveals the most popular modules on the degree course, from International Business, a level five module with 369 students enrolled in 2019-20, to Organisational Research Methods, also at level five with seven students enrolled. To be included in the sample, my criteria is that: the sample incorporates modules from levels four, five and six so that I am able to analyse modules from the three years of study; the modules should have enrolled a minimum of 100 students during the 2019-20 academic year so that a sufficient proportion of students are studying them; and the module leaders have worked in the business school for a minimum of three years, so they have had the opportunity to experience some annual development of the programme that responds to feedback. The criteria are similar to an example used by Merriam and Tisdell (2016) which was helpful in shaping the second stage of the sampling process. Reflecting on the size of the sample, I turn to Lincoln and Guba (1985:202), completing the programme of in-depth interviews when "no new information is forthcoming" that will enhance the thematic analysis. I will expand on the interviews in the next section.

Criteria	**Rationale *(purposeful, critical case)***
Module leaders	
1. Module leaders have worked in the business school for a minimum of three years	Participants will have had the opportunity to experience an annual development of the module in response to feedback
2. Modules should have enrolled a minimum of 100 students during the 2019-20 academic year	Modules with greatest number of students will have the biggest overall impact on the employability of graduates
3. Incorporates modules from levels four, five and six	Ability to analyse modules across the whole student journey
Recruiters	
1. Private sector employers with premises in London	Realistic prospect of graduates from the selected course competing for jobs there
2. Employers must feature in *The Times Top 100 Graduate Employers* list in 2020	Employers are recognised as a credible, authoritative voice on graduate employment
3. Employers have advertised at least 50 vacancies requiring an undergraduate business degree in the job description in Greater London in 2019	Employers in the top 10 per cent of companies recruiting business graduates in London

Table 5: Participant sampling criteria

Before I move on to discuss the in-depth interviews, I finally turn to the employers in my sample. I carried out in-depth interviews with recruiters at private sector businesses, as I sought to determine how they evaluate graduates. As with the institution at the heart of this case, I anonymised the identities of the companies and participants, as I wanted my participants to be open in comparing their personal beliefs and values with the imposed corporate policies that drive their work. After all, as Weber (2005) states, to try and understand society, a researcher must look at the individuals that shape it. The sample of the companies were inevitably formed, in part, from snowball or network sampling, through engaging with professional networks (Merriam, 1998). I contacted individuals in the first instance through the professional network, LinkedIn, before usually following up via their corporate email addresses to fix the interview dates and times. Central to my criteria was that the companies must be recruiting graduates, and have premises in London, so that students from RGU can realistically be expected to compete for those roles. This was related to my second criteria, that the employers must feature in *The Times Top 100 Graduate Employers* list, created as part of the research for *The UK Graduate Careers Survey 2020*, to ensure they are credible recruiters of graduates (High Fliers, 2020). Third, the companies must have been willing to accept students with business related degrees, so they are not seeking to recruit accountants or engineers, for example. This is so that the RGU graduates have a realistic prospect of being shortlisted if they possess the combination of skills, knowledge and attributes that the recruiters are looking for. This judgement was determined by analysing the job descriptions using computer-based aggregate software, Labour Insight by Burning Glass, which is available under licence. The analytics software company provide real-time data on job growth, skills in demand, and labour market trends to provide data and analysis on UK job adverts. The software collects job postings from more than 7,500 UK online job sites to develop a comprehensive portrait (Royal Society, 2019). To be included in the sample, the companies need to have advertised at least 50 vacancies requiring an undergraduate business degree in the job description in Greater London in 2019, which positions them in the top 10 per cent of firms, according to Labour Insight. This positions the employers within the critical case, due to their statistical significance (Merriam, 1998), however I did need to contact employers in the second decile to achieve the minimum participant threshold. Following application of the three criteria, the sample list of employers is detailed in table 6.

Employer	**Job vacancies, Greater London, 2019**	**The Times Top 100 Graduate Employers 2019**
Amazon	452	23
PwC	287	1
HSBC	211	14
EY	170	9
Citigroup	141	69
Royal Dutch Shell	126	29
Deloitte	115	6
KPMG	103	8
JPMorgan Chase	85	13
Google	65	5
BT	64	70
Facebook	55	55

Table 6: Employers with premises in London, in *The Times Top 100 Graduate Employers*, and with a minimum of 50 job vacancies in 2019 requiring an undergraduate business degree (source: Labour Insight by Burning Glass)

I carried out seven in-depth interviews with recruiters within these companies, as they are closest to the process of hiring graduates and are likely to have interactions with universities. I did not choose to interview line managers and senior leaders as they are distanced from the end-to-end recruitment process, which is necessary to analyse in order to understand the full range of knowledge, skills and attributes a graduate must possess. To maintain anonymity, I chose not to disclose in this thesis which seven employers from the 12 identified in table 6 were represented in the interviews.

4.2.3 Method: qualitative interviews and secondary qualitative analysis

The interviews were designed to be semi-structured and recorded, to provide the focus and freedom to enable the participants (listed in table 7) to explain their personal perceptions about graduate employability, beyond what is forced upon them through established policies and procedures (Merriam, 1998). The purpose of the interviews was to "enter into the other person's perspective" (Patton, 1990:196), assuming that each participant would "define the world in [a] unique way" (Merriam, 1998:74), with their "culturally embedded normative explanations" of real events (Orbuch, 1997:455). Apart from the introductory questions, such as confirming identity and role in the organisation, the largest part of the interview was guided by a list of open questions and issues to be explored, allowing me to respond to the situation at hand (ibid). Done well, this technique was likely to elicit "authentic accounts of subjective experience" in order to "construct narrative versions of the social world" (Miller & Glassner, 2016:52). In addition, I followed Merriam's (1998) advice of establishing two pilot interviews (see section 4.2.4) to test the questions and gain more experience, one with an academic and the other with a recruiter.

Name	**Role**	**Gender**	**Age**	**Ethnicity**
Claire	Module leader	Female	40-45	White
James	Module leader	Male	30-35	White
Laura	Module leader	Female	35-40	White
Linda	Module leader	Female	55-60	White
Nicola	Module leader	Female	40-45	White
Sarah	Module leader	Female	50-55	White
Gemma	Careers service manager	Female	35-40	White
Rebecca	Academic skills manager	Female	30-35	White
Hannah	Academic skills tutor	Female	25-30	White
Jessica	Academic skills tutor	Female	25-30	White
Charlotte	Graduate recruiter	Female	30-35	White
David	Graduate recruiter	Male	50-55	White
Emma	Graduate recruiter	Female	30-35	Black
Oliver	Graduate recruiter	Male	30-35	White
Paul	Graduate recruiter	Male	50-55	White
William	Graduate recruiter	Male	25-30	Black

Table 7: Interview participants summary

In table 7 the names of the participants have been replaced with pseudonyms to maintain their anonymity. The names were generated from the Office for National Statistics (2016) database, selecting the most popular names from around the time the participants were born. While I considered avoiding pseudonyms altogether and identifying participants through a combination of letters and numbers (for example module leader one as ‘ML1’), I concluded that it felt impersonal and would make it harder for readers to follow the individual narratives (Saunders et al., 2015).

Turning to the location of the interviews, I hoped to conduct them face-to-face, however, due to the Covid-19 pandemic, I switched to an online mode. This was due to social distancing measures and intermittent national ‘lockdowns’, resulting in increased levels of working from home and uncertainty as to when employees will return to the office (Hern, 2020). I was concerned that the lack of face-to-face contact would reduce the level of rapport with the participants (Gillham, 2005; Shuy, 2003), with the absence of visual cues impacting “the depth of meaning that can be conveyed” (Irvine, 2011). However, the health and wellbeing of my participants needed to take priority over research output, therefore it was logical decision to adapt the fieldwork (Jowett, 2020). Real-time interviews were carried out via video conference, using Microsoft Teams, to ensure they can “stay in the comforts of their homes” (Adom et al., 2020). The online interviews were also made shorter (from one hour to 45 minutes) because of fatigue and the difficulty to sustain concentration (Irvine, 2011). On the positive side, I was pleasantly surprised with the timely response from my LinkedIn messages and emails, “with people more confined, feeling bored or restless but in good health”, they appeared to welcome the opportunity to be part of the research project (Lupton, 2020).

Moving to the content of the interviews, I employed Merriam’s (1998) structured approach to the preparation phase, in order to prepare an interview guide that maximised the learning opportunities from the interviews. The framework for the semi-structured interviews was supported by contextualisation, both the case institution and the employers, through the thematic analysis of printed and online sources (ibid). I was able to “ground the investigation” by drilling down into employers’ person specifications of their graduate schemes (accessed via their websites), to determine the common skills, knowledge and attributes the employers were looking for (Merriam, 1998:126). Second, the employers’ websites were also useful to understand more about the graduate recruitment process prior to the interview.

There was a similarly detailed approach to the university at the heart of the case. As Mathison (1988) concludes, having a holistic understanding of the case helped me to make sense of interview data from module leaders that initially appeared contradictory. First, following the interviews with module leaders, I carried out out a series of four in-depth interviews with university professional services staff. The departments represented were the university’s careers service (one interview with the Careers Service Manager) and academic skills teams (three interviews), to triangulate the different perspectives (Stake, 1995). Through the interviews with module leaders, it became apparent that the extracurricular employability support ‘package’ in the business school was fragmented which required further investigation. The interviews with professional services staff confirmed this initial finding (see section 5.1.4). I used the same interview guide as the module leaders to carry out these semi-structured interviews to ensure consistency of the topics raised. Further, I analysed learning objectives of the module specifications, as well as related education strategies, policies and other supporting documentation. This data added value to the interviews, giving me greater knowledge on the specifics of the case, and be able to ask contextual, interpretative questions (Patton, 1990). As a novice researcher, understanding the background gave me the confidence to approach the interviews with a semi-structured application. Moreover, it also gave me the opportunity to validate my understanding of the documentation to "minimise misrepresentation" (Stake, 1995:109). I took the opportunity to "check and recheck the consistency of the findings" from the different interviews in order to establish "converging lines of evidence, which [made my] findings as robust as possible" (Yin, 2012:13). Ultimately, while my preparation enabled the interviews to be personal, contextual and evolving, my research was centred on the lived experiences of my participants.

Therefore, unpacking the in-depth interviews as the principal mode of data collection in this study, I decided to set out the purpose, and ask a series of predetermined questions to allow the participant to feel comfortable (McGrath et al., 2018). Regarding the interview techniques, I led with an empathetic interviewing style, taking a stance in favour of the participants being studied and engaging in active listening (Fontana & Frey, 2005). Known as the *Rogerian Direction* after the client-centred therapy techniques of Rogers, I attempted "to restore the sacredness of humans before addressing any theoretical or methodological concerns" (Fontana & Frey, 2005:697). This included the ability to act as a sounding board, without being judgemental, and maintaining authenticity (Ackerman, 2020). Thereafter, as noted earlier in this chapter, I used Strauss et al.'s (1981) approach to interview questioning, taking the key themes of my literature review, summarised in table 8.

Research question	**Participants**	**Themes**	**Example questions**
How does a Russell Group university prepare graduates for employment in its undergraduate business degrees?	Module leaders	Course/ module design; Teaching and learning/ pedagogy	How do you incorporate graduate employability in your module design? Do you feel the university is doing enough to engage with businesses?
How do large employers evaluate business graduates to inform recruitment decisions?	Recruiters	*Theoretical framework:* Human capital; Cultural capital; Social capital	How do you evaluate the employability of graduates?
What social factors limit the recruitment of business graduates at large employers?	Module leaders	Meritocracy; Social mobility	How effective is your recruitment process at supporting social mobility?
As above	Recruiters	As above	How important is 'who you know' when applying for a graduate position?

Research question	Participants	Themes	Example questions
What forms of human, social, and cultural capital are required in business graduate roles?	Module leaders	*Theoretical framework:* Human capital; Cultural capital; Social capital	What do you think makes an ideal graduate for an employer? What are the qualities and attributes you think are most important?
As above	Recruiters	As above	What do you think makes an ideal graduate for your business?

Table 8: Summary of method and alignment to the research questions

My selection of ideal position and interpretative questioning over devil's advocate, for example, is that they were less provocative and can "elicit both information and opinion" (Merriam, 1998:78). Interpretative questioning then provided a check on my understanding with a format that was largely unstructured (ibid). Finally, an additional probe was sometimes deployed as a tool that followed-up for a final time on the question asked for clarification, noting that the participant is "being interviewed, not interrogated" (Merriam, 1998:80). In doing so, I did not "achieve a godlike immunity from bias" but only "attempt clarification of the issues" under examination (Strauss et al., 1981:3). The approach also limited the participants' options for "counter control such as evading or not answering the questions" (Brinkmann, 2018:1017). Indeed, as an interviewer, I was "neither judge nor therapist" (Merriam, 1998:214) but equally not "a cold slab of granite", unresponsive to the flow of the interview and the emotion of participants (Patton, 1990:354).

Finally, while the focus of my contribution to knowledge is the dual perspectives of module leaders and graduate recruiters, it remained important to understand the perspectives of students in the case institution. In this so-called "age of the student" (Department for Education, 2018) it is unsurprising that students' perspectives are central to current discourse around employability, driven in part by the critical role played by the National Student Survey (NSS) (as explained by Deeley et al., 2018). Indeed, as the literature review found (see section 3.5), the great majority of the empirical research exploring employability pedagogy is analysed through the lens of the student experience, while employers' interpretations are largely absent. Therefore, while this study has made the deliberate decision to focus on academic and employer perspectives, it was critical for the study to discover the lived experiences of third year undergraduate students. The reason for this choice was to understand the full range of social realities critical to the case (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The NSS is recognised by the Office for Students as helping to "put teaching and student experience at the heart of higher education" (Office for Students, 2020:1), however it has also been a source of controversy with students boycotting the survey and academics calling for it to be ended (BBC News, 2007). The NSS data has been used extensively, and for a variety of purposes. Most importantly, it is intended to help inform prospective students' choice of what and where to study (NSS, 2021), following the launch and subsequent increase in tuition fees, and the underpinning marketisation of higher education (see section 3.1.2).

Although the great majority of the questions that make up the online NSS are quantitative, to enable a straightforward comparison between institutions, there are several 'free text' questions that can be subjected to a qualitative thematic analysis. I decided to analyse these responses in order to achieve "methodological congruence" (Lichtman, 2013:179) and understand "the story behind the numbers" (Mayan, 2009:10). In particular, the students were asked to provide a positive comment, a negative one, and a piece of information or advice to someone joining RGU. Within the business school, 117 students responded, of which 26 comments were relevant to the research questions in this study. The majority of other responses were connected to grades and feedback, with many students taking the opportunity of the survey to communicate their displeasure around their final degree classification. These responses are analysed in section 5.1.5.

4.2.4 Pilot study

The term *pilot study* refers to a small scale version of the full study, as a way to test a particular research instrument, which in this study are in-depth interviews, to ensure the methods or ideas will work in practice (Kim, 2010; van Teijlingen et al., 2001; Wray et al., 2017). Described by Yin (2014:92) as a "dress rehearsal", the pilot study is an opportunity to learn lessons for both the research design and field procedures. It is a "routine" process for good qualitative research (Stake, 1995:65), primarily to give advance warning about where the main research project could fail, and whether proposed methods or instruments are inappropriate or too complicated (Bryman, 2008; van Teijlingen et al., 2001). The central aim of a pilot study is to increase the research quality (Malmqvist et al., 2019), adding credibility and dependability to the findings (Pratt & Yezierski, 2018). Pilot studies are "introductions to unknown worlds" (Sampson, 2004:399), which proved especially useful for me as a novice researcher to gain confidence in my interview technique, enabling me to self-evaluate my readiness and capability as a qualitative researcher (Bryman, 2008; Kim, 2010). By obtaining first hand, "real world" experience in the field (Kezar, 2000:385), the pilot study served to enhance the research design, conceptualisation, interpretation of the findings, and ultimately the results (Wray et al., 2017).

My pilot study comprised of two online semi-structured, in-depth interviews, with a recruiter and a module leader, both selected within the sampling criteria (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The interviews took place in February and March 2021. I chose to test my sampling within the pilot study in the knowledge that if significant changes were required to the interview guidance in light of the findings, the data would need to be discounted as it could be deemed “flawed or inaccurate” (van Teijlingen et al., 2001:2). I judged that the potential benefits outweighed the risks, as it enabled me to demonstrate that the recruitment of participants within the sample is possible (Sampson, 2004) and that the planned approach is robust (Wray et al., 2017). In addition, I chose to test both principal participant groups (recruiters and module leaders) to ensure that the lessons learned from the first in-depth interview can support the approach to the second, and that the potential similarities and differences between the participants can begin to be understood (Yin, 2014). The pilot study provided important experiential learning about the research method (Wray et al., 2017), especially around the timing, helping me to pace interviews with more confidence. Indeed, the flow of the questions was considered, including whether they needed to be moved around, and if the interviews could be carried out in the time allocated (Bryman, 2008). The pilot study allowed for issues to be identified in a safe environment that meant precautionary procedures can be devised as part of an effective “risk reduction” strategy (Sampson, 2004:400; van Teijlingen et al., 2001).

At the time of carrying out the pilot study in February and March 2021 during the Covid-19 pandemic, the UK government had just published a roadmap for lifting the national lockdown which had been in place since 2 December 2020 (Institute for Government, 2022). The public had been warned that an infected person could pass on the virus through talking, breathing, coughing or sneezing even if they do not have any symptoms (Cabinet Office, 2020). Consequently, I conducted synchronous interviews via video conference using Microsoft Teams. As stated earlier in this chapter, the online interviews were also be made shorter than originally planned (45 minutes instead of an hour) because of fatigue and the difficulty to sustain concentration (Irvine, 2011). Extra care was taken to hide domain names and other personal identifiers when storing the recorded interviews (Meho, 2006). A primary concern ahead of the pilot study was my weak internet connectivity, which I feared could result in a loss of pictures and/ or audio, which could have been frustrating for participants and adversely impact the rapport established (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Turning to the outcomes of the pilot study, I was pleased that the recruitment of participants was easier than I thought. I felt that recruitment was easier than it would have been face-to-face, due to the sustained period of working from home (Lupton, 2020). Further, I found that the participants were more open and expressive than I feared, and rapport was built quickly (Torrentira, 2020). Equally, the proliferation of video conferencing tools, such as Microsoft Teams and Zoom, meant that the participants were comfortable with the process of setting up their webcams and establishing clear audio (Gray et al., 2020). From my perspective, the set-up of the interviews was also very cost efficient (due to lack of travel) and easy to organise (Torrentira, 2020). Through a comparative study of face-to-face and video call interviewing using the same interview guide, Krouwel et al. (2019) found only modest differences in the depth of data generated. Challenges appeared to be negated through my charismatic approach to the interviews, using vocalisations/ clarification requests to show responsiveness. Finally, I also took time to acknowledge the value of participant disclosures (Drabble et al., 2016).

I used my interview guide to support the semi-structured, in-depth interviews. It featured topics and issues to be covered in outline form, however the sequence and wording of the questions was revised during the course of the interview (Patton, 1990). The outline increased the "comprehensiveness" of the data, adding a layer of systematicity, while enabling the interviews to remain conversational (Patton, 1990:288). However, I did divert slightly from Patton's approach, deliberately wording several questions in a predetermined fashion to enable clear comparisons to be made in the responses, while introducing flexibility in probing and creating further depth where it was appropriate. I observed that having fewer, broader questions unhooked me from the interview guide and forced me to listen to what the participant had to share, which in turn enabled me to "better follow avenues of inquiry that will yield potentially rich contributions" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016:126). I found that the interview guide had broadly the right number of questions and topics, but for the module leader I was aware of the time and need to rush through. After discussing this with my supervisors, I decided not to cover all the topics if it was needed, to ensure the participants did not feel inhibited in giving a full response to each question. Moreover, in reviewing the transcripts, I recognised that I was getting tempted to ask leading questions and I needed to be careful not to push participants down a particular path. Similarly, I also learnt to unpack some of the words and statements that the participants used, to get full value from the interviews and ensure that I did not make assumptions in the data analysis. Finally, the interview with the module leader involved a loss of contact for approximately twenty seconds; we resumed without difficulty but it was worrying and interrupted the flow of the conversation.

In summary, I was satisfied with the execution of the pilot study. Consequently, as I did not need to make changes to my interview guide, I decided to use the interview data in the main analysis of my research. This decision is justified because data collection in my qualitative study was inherently progressive, as I gained insights from previous interviews throughout the field work (van Teijlingen et al., 2001). Similarly, without needing to make significant changes to the method, discounting the data from the pilot study was not necessary (Holloway, 1997). Finally, the data generated from the participants was interesting and added value to the final analysis.

4.2.5 Data processing: transcription as interpretation

Next, participants' interviews needed to be reconstructed as research data in order to discover and construct meaning (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). My aim was to try to represent participants' views "fairly" and to portray them "as consistent with his or her meanings" (Charmaz, 1995:54). Focusing on the human sciences, Riessman (2008:22) argues that researchers need to think consciously and critically about how interpreters "constitute" the data that we then analyse. Riessman states that oral data (or field texts) requires transformation into a textual form (or research texts). For the purpose of this task, I used *transcription*. Hammersley (2010) suggests that transcription, as opposed to field notes, represents a more rigorous analysis due to its accurate representation that limits the element of construction. Merriam (1998:88) goes further, concluding that verbatim transcription provides the "best" data for analysis, rather than an interview log for example, where patterns can be easily missed. Hammersley (2010:565) defines this transcript as "strict transcription", acknowledging that there are some constructional elements including filler words and grammatical errors, "in the sense that it relies upon the transcriber's linguistic abilities". In order to transcribe in this detail, the interviews were recorded using the functionality on Microsoft Teams to ensure that everything that is said is "preserved for analysis" (Merriam, 1998:87). My ability to check the participant's account against his or her peers, as well as the documentary materials, was enhanced by the completeness of this technique (Whyte, 1982).

Further, I used Microsoft's transcription software, cutting down the time to transcribe, something that Merriam and Tisdell (2016:133) find "very helpful". To mitigate against inevitable errors in the automated process, I read through the transcripts to correct and fill in the blanks (ibid). This process took around two hours per interview, illustrating the good quality of Microsoft Teams, which proved another positive for carrying out the interviews online. The transcripts did not include non-verbal communication, such as gestures or facial expressions, instead focusing on what was said (Hammersley, 2010). I followed the layout mechanism of Merriam and Tisdell (2016), displaying the transcription single spaced but with line numbers in order to analyse later. The transcript was supported by some brief fieldnotes, taken "immediately following the interview" to provide an interpretative commentary (Stake, 1995:66). These notes, hand-written and kept in my journal, provided some ideas and context to enable me to interpret meaning from the interviews.

4.2.6 Data analysis: inductive-deductive approach to thematic analysis

Although Riessman (2008) stresses that the thematic approach can be painstaking, it enabled me to pay attention to macro-contexts as I made connections between the interview data and the larger social structures. For this reason, I employed thematic analysis in this study. Barkhuizen et al. (2014:77) argue that "good thematic analysis always involves repeated reading of the data and several rounds of analysis, in which the researcher moves back and forth between the data and its coded and categorised forms in order to refine themes and theoretical relationships". By moving from what the participants said to "exploring and explaining" the distilled essence of the interviews, I was able to "generate an increasingly refined" analysis, because it is grounded in the data (Rapley, 2016:332). I chose to carry out the data collection and thematic analysis in parallel, an approach valued by qualitative researchers (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Charmaz, 2006; Creswell, 2013b; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Silverman, 2014). For Miles and Huberman (1994:50) interweaving data collection and analysis "generates strategies for collecting new, often better, data", resulting in not only a richer but a more compelling analysis, as I was able to use first waves of data collection to verify and further build my understanding. A notable similarity across the majority of discourse around thematic analysis techniques is the identification of themes and patterns (Creswell, 2013b; Coffey & Atkinson, 1996; Dey, 1993; Miles & Huberman, 1994). This is achieved by searching for patterns or regularities across the data, which is most typically done by comparing and contrasting the data segments and thus delineating the overarching themes. One of the most widely used tactics for thematic analysis is the practice of coding.

Codes are "a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data" (Saldana, 2013:3). For Miles & Huberman (1994:62), a well-structured code list is "keyed to the research questions", ensuring the researcher remains "explicitly mindful of the purposes of [the] study and of the conceptual lenses you are training on it" (1994:56). Descriptive codes are preferrable, requiring minimal interpretation, and made possible in my research through the software package, NVivo (see appendix 7) (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). My transcripts were reviewed line by line to achieve the first set of codes, before a more abstract category began to link several incidents or observations (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). This process of grouping the open codes is referred to as *axial coding* (Charmaz, 2014) or pattern coding (Miles & Huberman, 1994). As a next step, *analytical coding* goes beyond the descriptive, rooted in "interpretation and reflecting on meaning" (Richards, 2015:135). I was prepared to work with "loosely held chunks of meaning" at this stage, "ready to unfreeze and reconfigure" as more data was analysed (Miles & Huberman, 1994:70). This process strives "to reduce and combine [codes] into the five or six themes that [used] in the end to write my narrative" (Creswell, 2013b:184). My end point to the coding process was theoretical saturation, reaching the point at which no new knowledge was generated (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005).

The process behind the coding and the identification of themes is, for Miles & Huberman (1994), inductive and comparative. However, as Braun & Clarke (2006:84) acknowledge, researchers "cannot free themselves of their theoretical and epistemological commitments, and data are not coded in an epistemological vacuum". I chose to carry out a process of memoing to support my supervision meetings, aware that this was an opportunity to become more theoretical, connecting observables and unobservables "with successive layers of inferential glue" (Miles & Huberman, 1994:292). Memos were an opportunity to reflect on the issues raised and "how they relate to larger, theoretical, methodological, and substantive issues" (Bogdan & Biklen, 2011:161). Similarly, Braun and Clarke (2006:84) suggest a latent level of analysis starting "to identify or examine the underlying ideas, assumptions, and conceptualisations" that were shaping the data. It is a chance to step back from the data, moving from the coding tree pattern to the whole "forest", where ultimately the answers to the research questions were found (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016:208). For Miles & Huberman (1994), the approach is *inductive-deductive*, following the elaboration of a conceptual framework based on a comprehensive literature review that guides subsequent data collection and analysis but still leaves space for unanticipated information to emerge. As a novice researcher, this approach was attractive, enabling me to immerse myself in the data with an open mind and to consider various possible interpretations and theoretical directions (Kalpokaite & Radivojevic, 2019), while also being pre-sensitised to the more subtle features in the data based on a sound understanding of the previous empirical research (Tuckett, 2005). The resultant theorisation which underpins my findings represents the "cognitive process of discovering or manipulating abstract categories and the relationships among those categories" (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993:239). To do so, I relied first on my own "sense making, understandings, intelligence, experience, and judgement" (Patton, 2015:572).

Table 9 represents the emerging themes from the case, from the perspectives of module leaders, student support staff, students, and graduate recruiters. Based on the process of analytic storytelling advocated by Miles et al. (2020), the table summarises the cognitive process behind the transformation of the data from practical to theoretical. Following the principles of grounded theory (Corbin & Strauss, 1990), the emerging themes from the data analysis were grouped under more general categories and then linked to relevant theories and concepts in order to provide an overarching account for the 'how' and the 'why' of the phenomena discovered in this empirical analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Categories	**Themes**	**Theoretical framework**
Employability agenda	• Regulation and audit culture • Mass market approach to student recruitment	• Neoliberalism (Foucault, 1995)

Categories	Themes	Theoretical framework
	• Transactional relationship between students and the university • Tuition fees and value for money	
Curriculum design	• Practical application of the theory • Professional outcomes • Real life situations and experiences • Reflective practice	• Experiential learning (Kolb, 1984)
Professional identity of graduates	• Organisational culture • Values of students and employers • Commercial language	• Technologies of the self (Foucault, 1995)
Importance of graduates' soft skills	• Communication • Confidence • Commercial awareness	• Cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986)
Recruitment process	• Application stage • Assessment centre • Interview • Potential for nepotism	• Meritocracy (Young, 1961) • Social capital (Bourdieu, 1986)
Social movement (Black Lives Matter)	• Elite universities • Widening participation • Tokenism • Inclusivity	• Intersectionality; critical race theory (Crenshaw, 1989) • Social mobility (Goldthorpe, 2016)
Global health crisis (Covid-19)	• Work placements • Online learning • Digital discrimination	• Social reproduction (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990)

Table 9: Summary of thematic analysis (adapted from Miles et al., 2020)

Turning to the logistics of the coding itself, the process of analysing, reducing and coding the data according to the emergent themes, was carried out using NVivo version 12 software. To avoid misinterpretations occurring in the data analysis, I organised the NVivo coding frame (see appendix 7) according to the interview guide and arranged the codes alphabetically and thematically to ensure that the analysis was possible (Nagy Hesse-Biber, 2014). While Lichtman (2013) admits to finding NVivo a difficult programme to learn, I found it to provide useful analytical insight, especially with regards to the tree nodes and ease of data segmentation. This process facilitated a detailed credible account of similarities occurring in the participants' responses and helped me to crosscheck my interpretation of the data (Burton

& Bartlett, 2009). Interpretation of the data was carried out following a repetitive process of reading and rereading each transcript, with some of the coded themes either refined or discarded.

Positionality is a prominent concern for qualitative researchers in relation to the coding process (Copestake & Davies, 2018). It is important to consider how my positionality as a researcher affected the way I interpreted and interrogated the data, as well as the conclusions that were ultimately drawn. In the next section, I consider my positionality.

4.2.7 Positionality/ reflexivity

Turning to my positionality, I recognised that as a researcher my "personal, cultural, moral, or political values cannot be eliminated" (Root, 1993:33) and it is essential, therefore, to highlight my beliefs and subjectivities (Ahern, 1999). For Russell and Kelly (2002:3), reflexivity is a process of "self-examination" informed by the experiences of the researcher, while Creswell (2013a) summarises those experiences as work, culture and history that inform both interpretation of the study and what the researcher has to gain. Pyett (2003:1171) adds that the research process requires constant reflexivity and self-examination, and through the "tedious work of returning again and again to the data", I can more confidently discover and understand the "intersubjective dynamics, and the research process itself" (Finlay, 2002:532). As an interpretive approach was adopted for this study, I needed to be critically aware that my positionality may have affected the interview process in terms of how the participants responded, as well as the interpretation of meaning and how I analysed the data. Equally, I recognise that the decisions I took may have been influenced by the "needs of [my] intended audiences" (Lincoln et al., 2018:247), noting that I will use the finished thesis as a vehicle for my career progression.

Going further, it is necessary to interrogate my "personal history", speaking from a particular class, gender and ethnicity (Charmaz et al., 2018:735). Fundamentally, the theoretical framework and literature review juxtapose an idealised view of meritocracy against the social barriers of gender, ethnicity and social class. Indeed, for Denzin and Lincoln (2018:19), researchers should note that the human gaze is "always" impacted by these factors, while Fawcett and Hearn (2004:202) point out that carrying out research with "no direct experience of social divisions and oppressions" can be problematic. As a white male, I have not experienced these prejudices, however I do feel that my career has been held back somewhat due to my strong Yorkshire accent and a deficit of cultural and social capital. My accent in particular appears out of step with "academic culture", "spun out of the powerful allegiances of the past as well as the power relations of the present" (Hey, 2005:151). I recognise that my background may result in some social distance between myself and the participants, "impacting what stories interviewees share" and how they tell them (Miller & Glassner, 2016:56). Despite this, I do feel that I have been able to progress due, in part, to my track record, aligned to the increasingly meritocratic selection procedures of my university employers. I acknowledge that this may be naïve and have attempted to challenge these assumptions as part of this study.

Due to my insider status, there was a price to be paid in terms of objectivity and conclusiveness (Patton, 1990), however my accessibility enabled me to understand and give meaning to the social actions of university academics and employers (Hughes & Sharrock, 1990). My constructivist philosophy, that subjective meanings are constructed from our own experiences (Creswell, 2013a), is brought about by my career in higher education, leading on portfolio development. On the one hand, I have a great degree of loyalty to my academic colleagues, acknowledging the utilitarian pressures of modern higher education. However, I have also experienced the frustration of some employers, who have recognised the inconsistencies between the approaches of the academic community when tackling the employability agenda. As a consequence, I carried out the fieldwork as a "learner rather than the expert" (Lichtman, 2013:166), on a journey to better understand myself, the participants and "their social world" (Paulus et al., 2008:230).

4.2.8 Ethical considerations

The ethical issues that could arise from this study being published are now considered, built on the foundations of "consent, confidentiality and trust", and aligned with my subjectivist epistemological assumptions (Ryen, 2016:34). I followed the ethical guidelines for educational research of the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2019), and I gained formal ethical approval from my research institution, London Metropolitan University. The main ethical issues to be addressed are informed consent and confidentiality/ anonymity. First, however, I confirm that participants were all adults, none of whom could be potentially described as vulnerable or lacking capacity (as defined by the UK Mental Capacity Act, 2005). The research did not involve deceiving participants and it did not lead to the disclosure of illegal activity or incriminating information. In addition, all interviews took place with participants in the UK. I also confirm that I have not stored information which promotes extremism or terrorism, nor accessed or stored information which is security sensitive. However, there are two key topics to discuss from the outset: first, that I am employed by the institution at the heart of the case; and second, the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on my in-depth interviews.

As Punch (1994:92) states, "the cloak of anonymity… may not work with insiders who can easily locate the individuals concerned" and cause reputational damage to the people involved when the research is disseminated. That is why it is important to recognise that I have acknowledged my employment status, as not to do so, would break the important principle of transparency in methodology and positionality (Ezzy, 2002). I note that via the institution website, or alternatively via LinkedIn, it will be possible for individuals to determine the identity of my case. Therefore, I "assume that the reader will be able to identify my institution, should they wish to" (Trowler, 2011:3). As a result, I highlighted in information to participants that I cannot *guarantee* institutional anonymity. Equally, I acknowledge the impact around disparities of power that come into play when interviewing peers. Fortunately, I had not met the participants previously, which meant I was not tempted to use the "rapport to elicit information which might not be provided under purely impersonal conditions" (Platt, 1981:84). That said, I proactively raised the participants' right *not* to reflect their "innermost thoughts" and simply to disclose what they wish (Duncombe & Jessop, 2012:112). My primary priority remains a "moral responsibility" (Ryen, 2016:42) to the individuals involved.

Detailing the process for consent, aligned to BERA (2019), first, all participants were fully informed of the purpose of the study as well as the procedures that were followed. Second, I obtained the participants' informed consent to participate in the study. Participants were informed of the nature of the research, the reason for their participation, and their right to withdraw at any given time. Consent forms were emailed prior to interviews for a digital signature, using the recognised Public Key Infrastructure format (DocuSign, 2020). This covered permission not only for interviews to be recorded but also for me to reproduce portions of interview transcriptions in the thesis. The information sheet and consent form (see appendices 1-3) were designed incorporating best practice from the University of Sheffield (2020) and the UK Data Service (2020) (table 10), providing sufficient information to rule out accusations of deception (Bryman, 2008). Within the information sheet, I confirmed that whilst there were no immediate benefits for those people participating in the project, I hope that this work will advance the debate on employability in business education.

Information sheet	**Consent form**
• Who is carrying out the research? • What is the purpose of the research? • Why have I been chosen? • What is involved in participating? • Will I be recorded, and how will the recorded media be used? • What happens if I decide to take part? • What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?	• Taking part in the project (including having read and understood the information sheet) • How my information will be used during and after the project (including use of personal data) • So that the information you provide can be used legally by the researchers (including copyright)

Information sheet	Consent form
• What are the possible benefits of taking part? • Will my taking part in this project be kept confidential? • What is the legal basis for processing my personal data? • What will happen to the data collected, and the results of the research project? • Who is funding the research? • Who has ethically reviewed the project? • What if something goes wrong and I wish to complain about the research?	

Table 10: Information sheet and consent form content (adapted from University of Sheffield, 2020; UK Data Service, 2020)

Third, participants were promised confidentiality and, in the case of the academics and professional services staff, notified of the risks around individuals identifying the institution. In addition, pseudonyms were used, and I ensured that all transcripts were a fair representation of the participants' interviews (Richards & Schwartz, 2002). Furthermore, care was taken to hide domain names and other personal identifiers when storing the recorded interviews (Meho, 2006). I also acknowledged that participants leaving an online interview may have been a withdrawal of consent, or a technical issue, and they were not pressured to return (Hodgson, 2004). Following successful completion of this PhD study, I understand that I have a "responsibility to consider what the most relevant and useful ways are of informing participants about the outcomes of the research in which they were or are involved" (BERA, 2019). I will offer to debrief participants on an individual basis, and send a link to the published version of the thesis via email, within one month. In the body of the email, I will also include the abstract and recommendations.

Turning to technical requirements, I will comply with the legal requirements in relation to the storage and use of personal data as stipulated in the UK by the Data Protection Act (1998) and any subsequent similar acts, including, from May 2018, its replacement, the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). I have ensured that data is kept securely and note that the form of any publication will not directly or indirectly lead to a breach of agreed confidentiality and anonymity. To "reduce the risk of confidentiality" I chose not to store research data on "institutional servers", but instead on a third-party encrypted network (James & Busher, 2016:254). Going further, I have followed/ will follow the measures recommended by BERA (2019), specifically: interview recordings were saved on the Dropbox secure network, utilising 256-bit advanced encryption standard with two step verification (Dropbox, 2020); portable data storage devices such as USB sticks have been avoided; and I commit to ensuring that any third-party users of the data agree to a data-sharing agreement so that the same assurances are given for the protection of data. I will also avoid sharing data via email, as well as other media that are vulnerable to hacking, and at no stage will the data be shared with other researchers for means of secondary analysis (Merriam, 1998). The raw data, recordings and materials will be stored for a period of five years (Creswell, 2013b).

Finally, although I have attempted in this section to cover the main moral and ethical dilemmas, I understand that issues were often "spontaneously" without conscious consideration (Punch, 1994:84). Ultimately, it was my own ethical values, underpinned by participant consent and confidentiality, that informed the decisions that I took, in my role as the primary instrument for the research. Indeed, Silverman (2016:6) highlights that the "audit culture" surrounding ethical approval, unduly simplifying the process of understanding the social world. For example, I decided to not to include quotes containing strong language from the module leaders in the data analysis as I felt their responses were being impacted by the stress of the pandemic. As Merriam (1998:219) concludes, although researchers can turn to guidelines and regulations for help in dealing with some of the ethical concerns likely to emerge, "the burden of producing a study that has been conducted and disseminated in an ethical manner lies with the individual investigator".

4.2.9 Chapter summary

This chapter has set a clear methodological framework for how this research study is to be undertaken, closely aligned to Merriam's (1998) approach to an interpretivist, qualitative case study. This decision was informed by a discussion of my ontological and epistemological assumptions, setting out a constructivist approach that acknowledges the intersubjectivity of social actors with competing interests. The principal method (in-depth, semi-structured interviews) was also explained, in particular the purposeful approach to sampling, the rationale for in-depth interviews, and the secondary qualitative analysis of the NSS survey free text responses. Interviews were transcribed verbatim, with data collection culminating in a thematic data analysis. In the final section, I have considered the ethical issues from the outset, taking into account the added complexities of the Covid-19 pandemic. In the next chapter I will set out the data that will be generated using my methodological approach.

5. Data analysis

The next three sections present the data collected from the participants and discuss the major findings of this research. The findings indicate that recruiters and module leaders are actors situated at the intersection of various social structures and systems of power. Through gaining an "empathic understanding" (Bryman, 2008:15) of social action, interpreting the participants' motivations and mental realities (Hughes & Sharrock, 1990), the study has gained an appreciation of the power relations at play. In doing so, this study begins to gain an understanding of how employers interpret their experiences of recruiting graduates, and how module leaders engage with, and interpret, the needs of employers.

The first section seeks to interpret the perspectives of module leaders, student support staff and students (through the National Student Survey) about how the RGU business school embeds employability in their degrees. The section discovers that pedagogy centred on ideas around experiential learning is effective in developing graduates for employment, but a combination of increasing academic workload, weak data sharing and poor communication, has resulted in a lack of integrated employability support. The second section focuses on the perspectives of graduate recruiters. The data shows that the recruitment process is highly manual and pressurised resulting in subjective and impulsive shortlisting procedures. In the third section, the analysis turns to the impact of two seismic events: the social movement, Black Lives Matter, and the global health crisis, Covid-19. The findings suggest that Black Lives Matter has increased employers' focus on producing a more diverse shortlist of candidates, however this is not being reflected in the final recruitment decisions. Regarding Covid-19, the findings indicate that less privileged students are unable to sufficiently develop their employability as a result of the switch to online learning, while students with family ties in large employers have taken advantage of nepotistic social reproduction.

As stated in the introduction to this thesis (see section 1.2.3) it is important to note that the data analysis chapter refers to *social privilege* (rather than descriptions of class or traditional/ non-traditional students) not only to reflect differences in social status but, as Maxwell and Aggleton (2014) explained in their study, to capture the wider socio-cultural resources available to different groups of students. Indeed, as Black and Stone (2015) found, privilege is not just reflecting the advantages of social class, but the intersectional identities of race, gender, age, sexual orientation, and religion. In his definition, Kimmel (2019:1) declares that privilege is the study of the "superordinate", an invisible and ubiquitous standard against which everybody else is measured. First published in 1963, the sociologist Goffman (1990:128) identified the statuses that coalesce into the "perfect" American male (white, young, married, heterosexual, good height and weight), against which others are viewed as "incomplete and inferior". As Khan (2012) noted in his study, privilege continues to sustain itself today in a way that is socially constructed. As a consequence, as the findings in the following chapter shows, social privilege convincingly undermines the ideals of meritocracy.

5.1 The case study of a business school in a Russell Group university

This section seeks to understand the context of the case, a business school at a Russell Group university in London, anonymised in this study as RGU. As discussed in the methodology chapter (see 4.1.4), the study makes use of Patton's (1990:174) critical case sampling, making "strategic sense" to select a case which has the potential to bring the "greatest impact on the development of knowledge". For Patton, the "clue" to a critical case is a statement to the effect of "if it happens there, it will happen anywhere", or vice versa, "if it doesn't happen there, it won't happen anywhere" (ibid). The latter is particularly pertinent in this case, as it makes sense to select a university and a course that is successful in terms of graduate employment, so if this university can learn any lessons, then so can the great majority of institutions in the UK. The case, therefore, is centred around a Russell Group university, based in London, which features in the top 20 of universities targeted by the top employers (High Fliers, 2020). This section outlines the nature of the case, considering the characteristics of the students, the reputational positioning and the institutional habitus. It goes on to analyse the interview data, including the perspectives of module leaders, the careers service and academic skills tutors. These lived experiences are triangulated against teaching materials, module documentation and other artefacts, most notably including the National Student Survey (2021) free text responses.

5.1.1 Context of the case: an elite English university and its employability agenda

RGU is a traditional redbrick university, founded in the nineteenth century. It represents a useful example of the institutional stratification of higher education in the UK discussed in the literature review (see section 3.4.2), hierarchically classified on the basis of selectivity, with an emphasis on research and academic prestige. There are embedded perceptions of status and merit, of which the institution's staff and indeed employers are all too well aware. RGU is a member of the Russell Group, the most widely recognised mission group in higher education, comprising of 24 larger, research-orientated universities (Bathmaker et al., 2016). It sees itself, and is widely seen by parents, politicians and employers, as the elite tier of the UK university hierarchy. As several studies have found, universities in the Russell Group have a clear and self-perpetuating sense of their own prestige, status, influence and power (Friedman, 2018; Reay, 2017; Warikoo, 2016). The classification of RGU is central to this study, to understand how an institution with the reputation to recruit the best academics, as well as the financial capital to invest in the student experience, goes about achieving graduate employability in its business school.

RGU, in the top five oldest universities in England, has 26,000 students, of which over 8,000 are international from 150 different countries (according to RGU's website). It has nine faculties, including the business school which was established relatively recently in 1989. In 2019-20, RGU had a total income of almost £1 billion, of which a fifth was made up of research grants and contracts, the largest research endowment of any university in London. It has a selective admissions policy, with data published by the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service in 2020 showing that the acceptance rate for undergraduate applicants was 59 per cent, however this is up from 31 per cent ten years earlier. The proportion of White applicants being accepted is 65 per cent compared to just 44 per cent of Black applicants. RGU's acceptance rate for Black applicants is 18 per cent lower than other selective 'high tariff' universities, but in line with its competitors in the Russell Group. According to the most recent 'Access and Participation Plan', a requirement of the Office for Students, the proportion of young full-time first degree entrants from state schools or colleges is 76 per cent. RGU has published an aim to lead the Russell Group in fair access and social mobility. It has a 'Social Mobility' and 'Student Success Strategy Group' to oversee its widening participation work, reporting to Academic Board. The Vice Principal (Education) leads on the Education Strategy and is accountable for the delivery of RGU's social mobility work. However, the Great British Class Survey (a major collaboration between the BBC and academics from the University of Manchester, the London School of Economics and Political Science, and the University of York) shows that, of graduates now aged between 35 and 50 who completed the survey, those from RGU were over twice as likely as their counterparts from new, post-92 universities in London as being members of the 'elite', defined at those with very high economic, social and cultural capital (Savage et al., 2015). This central finding includes graduates from minority ethnic backgrounds, however the study does not provide data that differentiates between different ethnic groups.

All these factors contribute to the environment of RGU and its reputation, which is historically and socially situated. As Stich (2012) explained, reputational positioning by the institution plays out in the lived experiences of students and academic staff, shaping students' discourses and dispositions. According to RGU's education strategy, written in 2017, employers are positioned *"squarely at the centre of the education we provide"*, enabling the institution to understand *"the skills, knowledge, attributes, experiences and behaviours required of our students by employers in an increasingly competitive and global workforce"*. Most notably, the strategy highlights the *"targeted, faculty specific support and training in pedagogy and employability-led quality assurance"*. Employability essentials are woven into the curriculum design approval process, with documentation referring academics to a 'KASE' framework (knowledge, attributes, skills and experience). Graduates should be able to *"express their skills and experiences in a job application"*, the guidance notes, and *"articulate their goals and achievements in interviews"*. An employability audit tool attempts to guide module leaders through the several steps to embed employability in their new module. Hosted on RGU's virtual learning environment, module leaders respond to prompts such as *"what are employer expectations of your graduates?"* and *"how will you take* *account of employer expectations through design and delivery of your proposed module?".* In addition, the module approval form asks for their conceptual ideas about the employability value of the proposed module along with whether they intend to offer accredited or un-accredited internship opportunities. The approval of individual modules is the responsibility of the faculty's education committee.

The business school's education strategy is well aligned to the wider institutional aims and processes, with its number one priority to:

> *Deliver transformative education, providing our students with the skills and knowledge to pursue their chosen career paths and enabling them to make a difference to business and society.*

In addition, there is an objective to *"expand the scope of opportunities for immersive and experiential learning"*. To achieve this, the strategy focuses on engaging with the school's international alumni network to more closely support the educational experience, including providing talks on different career paths, offering mentorship (especially by more junior people who are easier to relate to) and providing real life case studies and resources for teaching. On graduation, the school aims for students to demonstrate a range of transferable generic skills including effective communication, team building and project management.

In summary, the strategic focus of both the institution and the business school accepts the dominant discourse demonstrated in the literature review (see section 3.1.4) of policy makers and scholars, that higher education institutions need to prepare students for graduate careers (Bhagra & Sharma, 2018; Bublitz, 2018; Fugate et al., 2004; Lazear, 2003; Ledermuller, 2011; Maxwell et al., 2009; Raybould & Sheedy, 2005; Tomlinson, 2017). Indeed, the economic, social and political pressures are compelling RGU to prioritise the topic of employability in their strategic agenda. The next section explores module leaders' lived experiences of employability, to understand the extent to which the strategic focus is embedded in teaching and learning practice.

5.1.2 Employability agenda: neoliberalism and the audit culture

The findings indicate that the majority of module leaders regret the ideological shift in the role of higher education from the traditional ideals of liberal education, knowledge for its own sake and development of the whole person (Newman, 1996; Ozolins, 2013; Peters, 1970), to the contemporary neoliberal, utilitarian model of serving the knowledge-based economy (Bridges & Jonathan, 2002

Kennedy, 2019; Winch 2002). While the module leaders accept the gradual change in normative discourse illustrated in the literature review over the past 25 years (see section 3.1), of a sector moving decisively towards a free market and an audit culture, they question the government's approach as well as employers' ability to articulate their requirements in a consistent and coherent way.

Module leader, Sarah (female, age 50-55, white), disclosed that she has *"a real problem with the employability agenda"*, focusing her perspective on the *"transactional"* approach to measuring the value of an undergraduate business degree, which had to be seen immediately upon graduation. The relationship between higher education and economic prosperity had led to universities being forced to serve the needs of increasingly *"fickle"* and vocal employers, while creating a need to persuade students that they gained value for money. Sarah reported:

> *The focus is how you can demonstrate to students that they are learning something of immediate worth. Actually, what we need to do is give them the skills that will help them continue their self-development, so they can ride the rollercoaster of labour market trends and fads.*

Business schools are *"fighting a losing battle"* in this endeavour, Sarah believed, as large corporations exert increasing influence over policy makers. This perspective is reflected in the literature review, which highlighted the volume of influential empirical studies originating from large, multi-national companies, driving forward their agenda of what it takes for graduates to become 'job-ready' (Deloitte, 2017; EY, 2018; McKinsey Global Institute, 2016; PwC, 2018). Sarah added:

> *There will always be dissatisfaction from employers about the quality of graduates they are getting. The reality is that employers do not want to take the costs of staff development. They want graduates prepared 'out of the box'. So, who is the developer of last resort? Universities.*

The literature review found that the reputation of universities was being adversely affected by the intense lobbying of the private sector impacting on government policy and rhetoric. The Browne Report (2010) was particularly damaging, irreversibly lodging market discourse in mainstream policy thinking (Scott, 2013), advocating a system that serves utilitarian individualism and personal wealth (Bridges & Jonathan, 2002). For Browne (2010:23), "universities should close the gap between the skills taught by the higher education system and what employers need".

Going further, the Browne Report empowered the Higher Education Statistics Agency to collect more data on graduate employment in order for students to make informed decisions. Universities were challenged to provide “students with clearer information about employment outcomes” (Browne, 2010:14), as higher education become more accountable to consumers, who were able to make decisions on a cost-benefit analysis. Module leader, Claire (female, age 40-45, white), reported:

> *The approach to education has changed over the last ten or twenty years. It has become more economically based and because of the type of management approaches that have come into education, there is a lot of pressure on measurement. The moment you measure something then everything in our degrees is designed to make that measurement look good. Measurement mania has really set in, and it has gone into the consciousness of higher education.*

The white paper published by the Conservative government in 2016, *Success as a Knowledge Economy*, built on what had come before, expanding strong and transparent accountability through the *Destination of Leavers from Higher Education* survey (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2016). Module leader, Nicola (female, age 40-45, white), reported that the success of graduates from RGU was directly linked to sustained economic growth, and downward trends in graduate outcomes could not always be attributed to the curriculum. She commented:

> *With the employability agenda, there is something that makes me a bit uncomfortable about it. They can have all the employability skills they like, but if the economy is not there and the jobs aren’t there and people aren’t hiring, you’re not going to get a job and that’s that.”*

Indeed, the continued fallout from the UK leaving the European Union, along with the global health crisis, placed a spotlight on the economy in 2021 (the year the fieldwork was carried out). Fellow module leader, Linda (female, age 55-60, white), concurred with Nicola, suggesting that the *“obsession”* with salaries succeeds in devaluing public sector roles:

> *If you want to be a nurse, a primary school teacher or, for our business students, a civil servant, you’ll have an OK starting salary, but it will be capped. So, the government is basing its model on the assumption that success is all about money. For me, living a good life is having a successful career and so on, but it’s not all about money.*

In addition to expressing cynicism around the culture of audit, three module leaders expressed empathy for students and cynicism around the pace of change at RGU to align with the requirements of employers. Module leader, Laura (female, age 35-40, white) reported that the business school’s strategy was subject to debate from the academic community:

Employability is a big thing in the strategy of the business school. There is a lot of tension around some of the academics because they have looked at the strategy and think we're turning into a technical college. At the end of the day, we're turning out students who have got a lot of debt and who want to be employed.

Module leader, James (male, age 30-35, white), agreed, adding that *"business students more than any other group really rate their education in terms of how it prepares them for a job and starting salary"*. These concerns are reflected in the literature review, in particular in the study published by the Chartered Association of Business Schools (CABS) (2019), who issued a warning that to maintain relevance and credibility in the business community, business schools must show greater agility and a willingness to change. For CABS, the alternative is that large employers become a competitor to the higher education sector, establishing their own qualifications for a fraction of the price. Module leader, Linda (female, age 55-60, white), added weight to this argument, reporting:

There are fads but there are also trends, and I think for universities changing the curriculum is like turning the Queen Mary. So, there will always be a lag time of several years between employer requirements and changing the curriculum, and we need to address this.

The fundamental ideological shift in higher education, from liberal ideals to an output-driven sector serving the needs of the economy and influential employers, has forced RGU to focus its curriculum design on essential employability skills, as the sector responds to the growing challenge of marketised competition for fee paying students.

5.1.3 Curriculum design: the role of experiential learning in employability pedagogy

The findings show that experiential learning, especially in the form of work placements, is the most important foundation of graduate recruitment. However, a formalised, credit bearing, and multi-dimensional approach is required to ensure employability is fully embedded in the curriculum (Kolb, 1984; Kolb et al., 2000; Yorke, 2006). Relationships between the module leaders and employers are strong, the evidence suggests, with regular interactions being developed between students and business leaders. The data shows that a student-centred, constructivist approach to employability pedagogy, rooted in Deweyan reflective thinking (2009; 2011) is providing an essential bridge between academic theory and professional practice. Supporting the empirical research in the literature review (Bassot, 2016; Kolb, 1984; Kolb et al., 2000; Yorke, 2006), the findings suggest that learning is most successful when meaning is imparted or transmitted through discussion and interaction between students, teachers and employers.

On the other hand, although a range of employers are involved in the delivery of the modules, the findings show they have little or no formal role in the module design process. Therefore, as identified by students in the National Student Survey (see section 5.1.5), relationships with employers are casual rather than systematic, enabling inconsistencies in the student experience. The contradictions in the data, from employers' minimal involvement in the quality assurance process versus module leaders' attempts to embed employability into the curriculum, reveals a disconnect. The module specifications appear entrenched in the traditional ideals of higher education advocated by Newman (1996) in the nineteenth century, who believed specialised training was subordinate to the pursuit of a broader liberal education. As a result, the foundations of 'quality' at RGU are rigidly fixed in theoretical knowledge, leaving pedagogic decisions around employability to the discretion module leaders.

The module leaders recognise the value of Kolb's seminal experiential learning theory (1984) which is embedded systematically into module design, positioning concrete experiences as the basis for observation and reflection. However, there is no evidence to indicate that employers have an impact on the module design, including the learning objectives. Laura (female, age 35-40, white) acknowledged: *"I don't consult [with employers] and I should, but the reason is because I get enough feedback informally"*. Linda (female, age 55-60, white), who had a successful career as a consultant prior to moving into academia, deployed a fluid *"architectural approach",* which she defined using the flexibility in the quality assurance process to adapt her module to meet the changing requirements of employers. In addition, Nicola led on a third-year, thirty-credit capstone module, designed around problem solving with employer mentors and academic supervisors to support the students. She stated:

> *I think it came out of a review process with the students. So, I think that it was partly student comments and also trying to update the Business School curriculum to have something that was more related to professional life and employability skills.*

There was sufficient space within the module outline to define what the lectures and tutorials would contain, and she decided early on that sustainability was going to be the theme, because *"it's a very pressing issue and I'm interested in it, and I thought students would be interested in it"*. While there was no role for employers in this decision, the module leader reported high levels of engagement. Supported by the business school's external relations team, the module leader was able to secure a list of twenty active alumni from a range of companies, adding that the team *"put [her] at ease"* following a period of *"confusion and uncertainty"*. The importance of the alumni network, and the support of external relations, was critical in the success of this module, and the extent to which other business schools could replicate this structure is uncertain.

Linda (female, age 55-60, white) was also a strong advocate of practical, applied assessment techniques that link to the business world and her perceptions of employability, starting from her module in the first year. This includes *"how do you give a presentation",* and additionally *"how you write slides and we talk about how you organise your narrative and we talk about looking at the camera… we shouldn't assume students know how to do these things"*. She explained:

> *No doctor delivers a baby and looks and says congratulations, it's a consultant […] these things are not innate. I think it's important that we help to understand what they're supposed to do before we start giving marks. Where is it we want to get to, and how we're going to assess them getting there.*

Sarah (female, age 50-55, white) provided qualified support for this perspective, reporting that *"having an understanding of how theory links to practice is really key"*, but warning that assessment should not be *"spoon feeding exercise"* and students often *"don't have the confidence to necessarily find their own way"*. Laura (female, age 35-40, white) pointed out that *"we can talk about theory and all the crap, but we just actually need to help students to hit the ground running, and instil them with the practical basics they need"*. She added:

> *The weakness right now is experiential learning. We might have the best programme in the world, but if it doesn't include a combination of work experience and classroom experiences that include real life case studies and scenarios, there is a real gap.*

Sarah (female, age 50-55, white) proposed that the litmus test of a good assessment was if it could be incorporated into the student's CV and provide a useful example to draw on at interview.

Module leader, Claire (female, age 40-45, white) agreed, highlighting that students *"comment on LinkedIn, years later, saying because you made us do this real life brief, that's really helped me to get a job"*. It is *"always in my mind"*, she added, *"how can I bring this module to life?"*. She was able to bring about a *"serendipitous element"* to the module design, *"re-engineering"* her module each year to include employer-led live projects and briefs, adding: *"each year you are never quite sure what is going to happen on the module which is really interesting"*. For Claire, the quality assurance process was *"fluid"* and *"flexible"*, and any suggestion it was restrictive was a *"myth"*. The majority of module leaders agreed, with Laura (female, age 35-40, white) describing it as a *"tick box exercise"*, but with two exceptions: Nicola (female, age 40-45, white) said that to change a module would take *"two years"*, while Sarah (female, age 50-55, white) described changing the curriculum as *"like turning the Queen Mary"*. The findings indicate that both lived experiences are accurate: those module leaders who know how to play the game of quality assurance can create a flexible framework that enables collaboration with employers; while other module leaders restrict their creativity through a rigid module description. As Claire (female, age 40-45, white) concluded *"you can pretty much do what you want if you write [the module specification] with some wriggle room"*. As Jackson (2002) noted in her study, the QAA benchmark statements provide pedagogic flexibility, enabling individual business schools to experiment. The module leaders, especially Claire and Laura, are doing exactly this with positive outcomes for their students. However, this pedagogic freedom leaves module leaders with all the power to deliver teaching and learning aligned to their individual philosophies around of the purpose of higher education.

Module leaders who successfully collaborated with employers enabled their students to develop embodied cultural capital. Indeed, Gemma (female, age 35-40, white), the Careers Service Manager, reported that the greater the number of occasions that students interact with employers, *"the more confident students are in dealing with professional people"*. Sarah (female, age 50-55, white) agreed, adding that the university experience creates a *"transition of identity"* from *"student to quasi professional"*, with experiential learning important to enable this transformation. James (male, age 30-35, white) concurred, highlighting that *"successful students are gathering the evidence in order to create the person they claim to be"*.

As Bassot (2016) explained, in order to achieve a new constructed identity, the ability to critically reflect is key to examine personal values and issues of power in the context of working relationships. Sarah reported that to be *"self-starting, agile graduates, they need to be reflective and self-aware"*, adding that *"we don't really focus enough on reflection for our students"*. Laura (female, age 35-40, white) agreed in part, using reflection to make a point about emotional intelligence, highlighting that *"relationships are everything in the workplace"* and graduates must be able to *"assess their mood and manage their own emotions"*. Laura used a reflective journal to help students to think about leadership, reporting:

> *It is a really good way of helping students to understand the subject and themselves, rather than cram for an exam. Reflective practice is going to be hugely important for them in the future to be the best leaders they can be.*

Nicola (female, age 40-45, white) was in agreement, adding that theories and concepts needed to be practically applied rather than just memorised:

> *It's not about us filling students' heads with tools and concepts, it's about us getting students to be able to apply concepts, getting them to think, experience [...] to critically reflect and see whether they're appropriate in a particular real life context.*

The prominence of reflective learning in the responses reflects the literature review. As Gibbs (1988) identified in his cyclical model, holding up a metaphorical mirror will help students to deepen their self-understanding, enabling them to process their feelings. In addition, Wheatley (2002), highlighted that "without reflection, we go blindly on our own way, creating more unintended consequences". Building on his seminal experiential learning model, Kolb et al. (2000:3) stated that reflections should be "assimilated and distilled" by the learner, so that modified concepts and ideas can be developed. Critically, experiential learning needed to be fully embedded into the curriculum and not seen by module leaders and students as an optional extra (Artess et al., 2017; The Pedagogy for Employability Group, 2006; Yorke, 2006).

The graduate recruiters tended to interpret reflection in the context of self-awareness, with four participants referring to this requirement using this specific term. Graduates need to be *"self-aware of their own strengths and weaknesses"* reported Charlotte (female, 30-35, white), as employers are not looking for the finished product. Emma (female, age 30-35, Black) replicated this finding, describing how her employer seeks a *"growth mindset"*, defined as *"the ability and desire to learn"*. Graduates were sometimes *"fixed in their mindsets that they know it all"*, she added, and they would not be able to adapt to new approaches and ways of working. William (male, age 25-30, Black) pointed out that students need to be appear *"motivated and positive [...] and be self-conscious of eye contact and their facial expressions"*.

The findings show that the perspectives of the six module leaders were in contrast to their published module specifications, with the interviews providing a much greater emphasis on experiential learning and reflective practice than the documents suggested. This is, to some extent, to be expected given the focus of the semi-structured interviews and the line of questioning, which was focused on issues of graduate recruitment rather than theoretical scaffolding. However, carrying out data source triangulation within the case helps to deepening understanding and explanation, prompting reflection on the meaning of the data (Miles et al., 2020). In figure 5, the Venn diagram provides a snapshot of the most common quotes (excluding clauses interpreted as irrelevant to the study), to compare the focus of the interviews and module specifications.

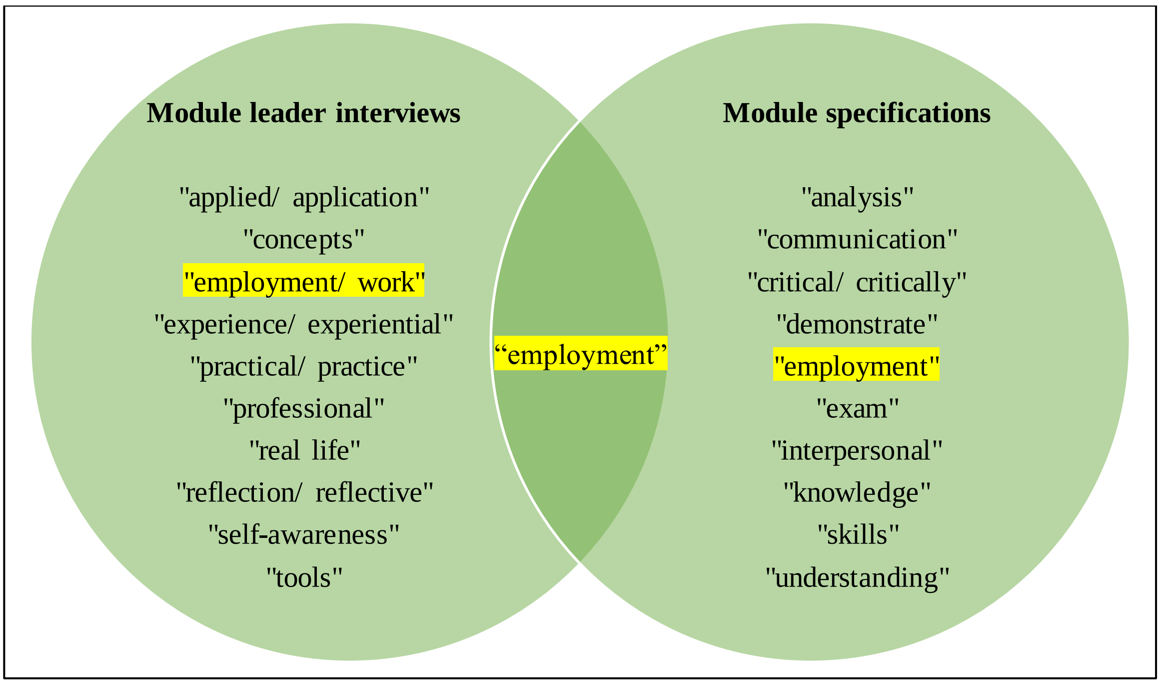


Figure 5: Terminology used by participants in interviews versus module specifications 2019-20

"Employment" is the only common term from the module specifications that confirms the findings from the interview data. While the module leader interviews contained salient themes related to experiential learning and self-reflection, the focus of the module specifications is focused on the traditional academic approach to university education, including exams. Typical objectives, copied across several module specifications, underscore the limited spotlight placed on preparation for employment:

> *Enhance students' interpersonal and communicative skills and thus contribute to their capacity for lifelong learning. […] Produce graduates who are well equipped for more advanced study and/or employment.*

If the module specifications are being applied with flexibility as the interviews suggest, it can be argued that they become irrelevant; simply a necessary tool to bypass a quality assurance process that built on a legacy of traditional values. In the literature review (see section 3.2.1), a study from Quinlan (2016:1044) pointed out that the QAA's Subject Benchmark Statements, the common standard for programme specifications, show "little attention" to the development cultural capital, a cornerstone of Bourdieu's (1986) sociological ideas (see section 2.2). This is particularly significant in the context of this study, as graduate recruiters judge cultural capital to be a critical component of employability (see section 5.2.2). The lack of specificity in experiential learning in the regulatory texts has resulted in a conservative, traditional approach at RGU, where module leaders apply a rich, embedded employability pedagogy in spite of RGU's quality assurance process, rather than because of it.

The disconnect in the quality assurance process between academic value and employability is indicative of the underpinning systems at RGU. The next section analyses the university's treatment of student support, which the findings show is disjointed and uncoordinated. While participants were able to communicate their focus and enthusiasm for employability, students were not able to access a cohesive package of support that had a measurable positive impact on their career potential. Going further, rather than helping to shape employability pedagogy in the business school, the careers service has no formal role to play in the design of modules.

5.1.4 *Student support services: a disconnected and inequitable approach to employability*

While student support staff in the business school at RGU are passionate about employability, student access to their services is inequitable and they have very little influence on the curriculum design. Student support is comprehensive, the findings show, with three distinct groups comprising of personal tutors, the careers service, and academic skills tutors. However, access to support and guidance relies on a combination of effective lecturer signposting and student proactivity, leaving behind less privileged students lacking in time and confidence, often due to a challenging work/ life balance (as explained by Bathmaker et al., 2016). Further, module leaders perceive support services as an optional extra, developing their modules in isolation and failing to tap into specialist expertise that has the potential to enhance student employability. As a cohesive package, the three services providing student support should be more than adequate to bring about equity in student success and employability, however they have been undermined by a lack of time, communication and data sharing. Given the sociocultural and economic pressures on current undergraduates (pointed out in a recent study by Yale, 2019), the need for effective student support has arguably never been greater. Equally, meeting the diverse needs of students is challenging given the constantly evolving mass education system, with increasing student numbers and competing demands on lecturers' time (Por & Barriball, 2008). The findings have potential negative repercussions for the welfare, academic success, and employability of the students as well as the reputation of the institution.

Perhaps inevitably, the role of the careers service is the most critical of the three services to develop students' employability. The role of personal tutor is important but more informal in terms of employability, while academic skills tutors are focused on scholastic summative assessment. In combination, all three roles have the potential to provide students with a comprehensive and individualised employability service. This finding is highlighted in table 11, which summarises participants' perspectives on their roles and impact on employability. As Bridgstock et al. (2019) found in their Australian study, the careers service at RGU focuses on the experiential acquisition of capabilities that are useful to the management of students' careers, grounded in reflective learning-based processes that build knowledge of the world of work. This process develops the students' ability to make connections between their academic studies and effective career choices. On the other hand, the role of personal tutors in employability is informal and inconsistent, lacking the top-down strategic enabling from senior leaders. There is a lack of understanding from both parties of what their roles entail, resulting in a lack of collaborative engagement. The findings show that organisational and cultural changes will be required for academic and support services to be integrated for the benefit of students' employability in the business school.

	Personal tutors	**Academic skills tutors**	**Careers service**
Role	• One-to-one and group sessions • Academic progress • Discuss assessment feedback • Signpost to other university services • Student wellbeing	• One-to-one and group sessions • Academic literacy • Developing criticality • Planning and time management • Research methods • Statistics	• One-to-one and group sessions
Employability	• Careers advice and support • Signpost opportunities (eg internships)	• Critical thinking • Developing presentations • Independence	• Assessment centre preparation • Communication skills • CV writing and cover letters • Interview technique • Job search • LinkedIn profile • Presentation skills • Work experience opportunities

Table 11: The role of personal tutors, academic skills tutors and the careers service in enhancing student employability

The business school's student handbook revealed that all undergraduate students are allocated a personal tutor, who will be a member of academic staff from within their department or faculty. The personal tutor is described in the handbook as being the *"primary academic point of contact"*, and can offer support and guidance, discuss academic progress, or direct students to specialist support services. The identity of students' personal tutors can be located on their online student records. Module leader and personal tutor, Linda (female, age 55-60, white), reported:

> *Personal tutors provide students with the opportunity to periodically take stock of their learning, academic progress and general wellbeing as they progress through their studies.*

In addition to one-to-one meetings, group discussions offer students an opportunity to meet other students from within the business school, some of whom may be from other year groups. Linda added that by *"sharing experiences and achievements, as well as how students have overcome any challenges, can help to give less experienced students more confidence"*. The student handbook states that personal tutors should meet with their students during each academic year to review progress and set development objectives. Students can discuss feedback they have received from assessments and identify key areas for improvement. However, students are advised to discuss any queries about specific feedback or pieces of work with the relevant module leader.

As Por & Barriball (2008) identified, the role of a personal tutor is multifaceted, including providing academic and pastoral support to students and juggling their lecturing, assessing, research and administrative commitments. The need for support is growing each year as a result of increasing student numbers and because students come from diverse educational, social and cultural backgrounds. Therefore, personal tutoring can be challenging to deliver consistently across a faculty given the academic workload (Ghenghesh, 2018). However, as FitzGerald (2014) found, if successful, it can be used as a strategic tool for employability, retention, pastoral support and progression. Module leader, Claire's (female, age 40-45, white) perspective is that the use of *"learner analytics and dashboards"* has to be *"far more effective"*, as the *"personal tutoring system is not fit for purpose"*. She reported:

> *It is the job of a personal tutor to coach an individual student. I think we need to be getting some intelligent data and using that data more intelligently. Some students don't reach out, you know, and we need mechanisms to flag these things.*

Laura (female, age 35-40, white) agreed, pointing out that with 140 students enrolled on her module, *"you can't personalise the experience to help them to understand what employability means"*. Highlighting the neoliberal marketisation of the sector, she reported that *"for a long time, it has been about bums on seats [...] and we're not going to notice when someone is falling through the cracks"*. She added:

> *I care about personal tutoring, but I know others who don't. I will look at my student list and will chase to have a conversation. I know other colleagues who will email once and that's that. For those of us who do care about being a personal tutor, our careers suffer. There are three elements of this job: teaching, research and administration. You can only do one really well, and most people go for research.*

Module leader, Nicola (female, age 40-45, white), disclosed a specific example of a student benefitting from the personal tutoring system at RGU, but also cast doubt on the consistency of the student experience. She stated:

> *As a personal tutor I have a range of students, one of whom is from a school where 40 per cent of pupils have free school meals and she's a bursary student, and she is from an ethnic minority, and so I do make sure that I talk to her and about things like internships. I know one of the big consultancy firms actually has a scheme that takes interns from her old school, so I'm trying to get her accepted. But, as a personal tutor, nobody has told me I need to do that. It's a choice that I have made.*

The findings reflect the published empirical research, in particular the study by Dobinson-Harrington (2006), who suggested that due to the conflicting priorities and busy schedules of personal tutors, many academics are showing an insufficient interest in, and empathy for, their assigned students. Therefore, as Stephen et al. (2008) identified, achieving motivation and buy-in from the academic community is paramount to the success of the system. Indeed, as Yorke (2001) emphasised in her study that remains relevant today, personal tutors play a vital enabling role to enhance student performance and well-being through educational socialisation and in promoting the development of independent learning skills vital for employability. While some tutors regard personal tutoring as integral to their role, for others, in making themselves available, they fear being inundated. The module leaders' responses showed that, even with the best of intentions, the demands of their roles are sometimes not enough to feel on top of all core activities, be it teaching, administration, personal tutoring, or research. As a result, at RGU, personal tutoring can be interpreted as a largely transactional endeavour. Indeed, as Shin (2002) explained 20 years ago, the personal tutoring process lacks connectedness between teachers, students, and the institution as a whole.

Personal tutors are also gatekeepers to other specialist support services, including academic skills tutors and the careers service, providing guidance or referral, a point emphasised by McFarlane (2016). The Academic Skills for Learning service utilises current PhD students at RGU as academic skills tutors. They are available for students to book every day of the week at various times. According to RGU's student intranet pages, their sessions *"offer a range of support in academic writing, scientific writing, academic reading and statistics"*. They also assist with planning, time management, and editing skills. In addition, a range of online resources and activities are available to help students, covering topics such as maths, writing, presentations, and evaluating information. One-to-one sessions are 45 minutes long and students are allowed to book three sessions per term.

Rebecca (female, age 30-35, white) line manages the 16 academic skills tutors available for students across the university. She reported that the service is not widely used by students from the business school, and they were *"dependent"* on referrals from personal tutors. They collect *"very limited data"* about the students following their interventions and there is no link drawn between the one-to-one sessions and the module/ degree grade. More than two-thirds of the students who sign up for sessions are female, which Rebecca judged was a *"similar issue to other universities across the country"*. In terms of graduate recruitment, she hoped that the service supported the students with *"transferrable skills for jobs and applications"*, however the fundamental aim of the academic skills tutors was to support *"academic literacy"*. One of the academic skills tutors, Jessica (female, age 25-30, white), reported that she was mainly booked up by students from the Faculty of Arts and Humanities. Most of them were *"looking for reassurance"*, she stated, as *"they were not able to access personal tutors or module leaders"*. Many students would use their full allocation of three sessions per term, Jessica point out, *"especially on longer projects like the dissertation"*. A second academic skills tutor, Hannah (female, age 25-30, white), highlighted that *"at least half of the students are asking 'am I being critical enough?'"*. They were permitted to give feedback on a maximum of 1,000 words in as assignment, she added. Both academic skills tutors reported that they perceived the promotion of skills around independence and critical thinking would help the students with their employability. Hannah noted that they worked hard to teach students how to *"construct arguments, seek out information, and carry out research"*.

Confirming the study from Wingate (2019), the findings from the three interviews showcased the ability of the academic skills tutors to strike a balance between giving advice and conducting a dialogue, scaffolding students' understanding of academic literacy. However, students' engagement with the service is heavily reliant on clear signposting from personal tutors, which is not consistent. Hannah (female, age 25-30, white) reported that one module leader in a health faculty *"added a link to book a session with an academic skills tutor on the assessment guide"*, resulting in *"students from that module dominating my schedule"*. The inconsistency in student engagement with the service, and the minimal interaction with the business school, is a matter of concern, particularly for less privileged students facing additional barriers to reach their academic potential (Reay, 2009). The lack of a joined-up approach between personal tutors and the Academic Skills for Learning service is a missed opportunity.

The third pillar of student support in the business school is the careers service, which has no direct link with the academic skills tutors or personal tutors. Gemma (female, age 35-40, white), the Careers Service Manager, leads a team of careers consultants, who provide support for students in the business school, arranging events and activities in addition to the one-to-one careers guidance, which can be booked via RGU's student intranet. The sessions are restricted to 20 minutes, with practice interviews also available with a duration of 45 minutes. The careers consultants provide feedback to students to improve their interview technique. Students can also watch back the interviews and evaluate their own performances. Her team develop and maintain a calendar of optional events, including employer or alumni panel sessions. They encourage students to participate and enhance their communication and presentation skills. The team also offers a series of 'MyNextSteps' workshops which cover the students' entire career journey from exploring potential careers to working on CVs and succeeding at interviews. These workshops are available live online and then as recordings, while the sessions were delivered face-to-face prior to the pandemic in 2020.

In addition, at the start of each academic year, the careers team run webinars on the latest data and trends in graduate recruitment. Viewing the recording of the session, a careers consultant runs through a series of published reports, highlighting the skills and technical knowledge employers are requesting across a range of sectors. Gemma (female, age 35-40, white) stated:

> *We organise the kind of events that help students to discover what is out there, then we focus with them individually on narrowing down the options. We don't want them to just jump straight into applying, but start helping them to research and evaluate their options.*

The role of the careers service is disconnected from the module leaders, and they have very little influence in the curriculum design. Gemma was critical of the assessment methods in the business school and their *"inconsistent"* link to real life application:

> *I would change the assessment methods… things like presentations, writing a proposal, preparing policy documents. We need to mirror what they will be expected to do in industry. We also need to bring in more employers to help. I think it does happen, but it is variable.*

Gemma monitors the impact of the careers service separately from the modules in the business school. Her careers consultants circulate a questionnaire following one-to-one sessions which seeks to understand *"where were you at the beginning of this before you came and where are you now?"*. The team does not issue the questionnaire following group events as they *"found out the response was really low"*. The impact of careers service interventions with individual students was consistently good, however the service could only engage with a *"small percentage"* of students who were usually in their final year, often *"too late"* to have a major impact on their CVs.

Ultimately, while the support services at RGU are well resourced, the lack of a common strategy or approach has deeply undermined the positive potential for graduate employability. The business school will require a cultural shift to enhance the role of academic and career support, especially as the apparent lack of advertising and communication cannot be explained by the participants. As the students emphasise in the next section analysing the National Student Survey, the careers service should be playing a vital role in employability. However, there is no integration between the careers service and the curriculum, and meaningful change will require organisational and cultural shifts at RGU. The findings show, in line with wider studies of transformative change in universities (for example Kezar & Eckel, 2002) that both top-down and bottom-up processes need to happen concurrently for a truly institution-wide, integrated approach. Bottom-up collaborative work between module leaders, the careers service, and academic tutors to design and deliver an employability curriculum would be enormously beneficial. At the same time, a strategic commitment to learner analytics is required to enable an integrated, personalised, and equitable approach to student support.

5.1.5 National Student Survey: students' perspectives on employability

In this "age of the student" (Department for Education, 2018) it is unsurprising that students' perspectives are central to current discourse around employability, driven in part by the critical role played by the National Student Survey (NSS) (as explained by Deeley et al., 2019). Indeed, as the literature review found (see section 3.5), the great majority of the empirical research exploring employability pedagogy is analysed through the lens of the student experience, while employers' interpretations are largely absent. Therefore, while this study has made the deliberate decision to focus on academic and employer perspectives, this section seeks to understand the lived experiences of third year undergraduate students. The reason for this choice is to understand the full range of social realities critical to the case (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The NSS is recognised by the Office for Students as helping to "put teaching and student experience at the heart of higher education" (Office for Students, 2020:1), however it has also been a source of controversy with students boycotting the survey and academics calling for it to be ended (BBC News, 2007). The NSS data has been used extensively, and for a variety of purposes. Most importantly, it is intended to help inform prospective students' choice of what and where to study (NSS, 2021), following the launch and subsequent increase in tuition fees, and the underpinning marketisation of higher education (see section 3.1.2).

Although the great majority of the questions that make up the online NSS are quantitative, to enable a straightforward comparison between institutions, there are several 'free text' questions that can be subjected to a qualitative thematic analysis. I have analysed these responses in order to achieve "methodological congruence" (Lichtman, 2013:179) and understand "the story behind the numbers" (Mayan, 2009:10). In particular, the students are asked to provide a positive comment, a negative one, and a piece of information or advice to someone joining RGU. Within the business school, 117 students responded, of which 26 comments were relevant to the research questions in this study. The majority of other responses were connected to grades and feedback, with many students taking the opportunity of the survey to communicate their displeasure around their final degree classification.

The most striking finding from the anonymous NSS survey was the students' focus on extracurricular activities, with several lamenting their lack of engagement with opportunities available at RGU. *"One needs to pay attention and grab these opportunities"*, said one student, while another added that *"I always kept procrastinating and I didn't end up doing anything extracurricular. I regret it a lot"*. Students need to *"be prepared to step out of your comfort zone"*, stated one respondent, *"and get involved in extracurricular activities as much as possible"*. Business students who had engaged in RGU's network of societies found them greatly beneficial. One student reported how they *"helped me to make that next step into work"*, another said they made him/ her *"more employable"*, while another student described the *"extracurricular environment"* as *"fantastic opportunities to boost your CV"*. Another student noted that the opportunities were *"countless"*, and it was vital to *"make the most of them to progress into work"*.

The praise for extracurricular opportunities was not matched by students' experiences of the careers service and personal tutors, which were criticised by several respondents to the NSS survey. The careers team were *"not effective"* according to one student, while another reported that while the careers service *"can be helpful, […] becoming more employable is mostly about your own efforts"*. Another respondent recorded that *"while the careers service exists, it is not as comprehensive as I would have imagined"*. While the written survey responses did not allow for the detailed unpacking that can take place in a semi-structured interview, in this case the student did add what he/ she/ they meant by *"comprehensive"*, reporting that they would have benefitted from a *"placement year, to gain professional experience, which would have made job hunting easier. This is something that I have struggled with personally"*. There was a sense that several students felt misinformed from the outset of their degrees about finding employment. One student reported that he/ she/ they should *"have focused on getting work experience very early on because you are significantly disadvantaged if you don't. I wish the university told us that"*. Another stated that *"personal tutors are not very interested in you and your future"*, while another advised future business students to *"make a fuss with your personal tutor if you need help, otherwise you won't get it"*.

Going further, the lack of experiential learning was critiqued by seven business students responding to the NSS survey, using language closely aligned to academic employability discourse. One student bemoaned the *"theory heavy modules that lacked relevance to real life"*; the opportunity to develop skills such as *"business negotiation"* were lost, the student commented. A second student reported that *"teachers were unprepared to give guidance about the labour market"*, while another individual could see the course was *"evolving"*, however *"hands-on learning is crucial and should be emphasised even more"* in the curriculum. Part of the issue for some students could be around module selection, with one student highlighting the *"flexibility to choose between different modules that suit everyone's future ambitions"* and another respondent commenting on the *"ample opportunities to develop practical technical skills that make you work ready"*. For another student, it was the inconsistency in the module diet that was a concern, arguing that he/ she/ they *"would have loved for a greater proportion of the modules to have a more practical, applied approach to learning"*.

The views of respondents around the academic capital of the RGU degree certificate was mixed, with only three students commenting, with differing perspectives. On one hand, a student found that the *"institution's name carries weight in the professional world, enabling me to obtain interviews for lots of great positions relatively easily"*. Another student concurred, reporting that RGU *"is a very established name which helps with career search"*. Conversely, another student had this advice for new starters:

> *Look, you have got to realise that [RGU] will not provide you with a job. The labour market does not care about the fact you went to [RGU]. Unfortunately, while [RGU] is an amazing place to develop yourself (and I owe so much to it), the way the labour market works, at least in London, means that even [RGU] is not considered a target university.*

This lived experience, from an international student, is an outlier within the wider NSS survey, however it does align with the perspectives of graduate recruiters. It is unclear whether other students had a similar experience and may be an avenue of future research.

5.1.6 Chapter summary

In summary, the findings of the in-depth interviews and documents (module specifications, NSS findings, employability strategies and promotional materials) show that RGU has the resources and strategic intent to embed employability into the student experience, both through teaching and learning and the wider extracurricular offer. However, the lack of data sharing and weak communication, as well as the motivation and workload of the academic community, has resulted in an unequitable approach. The findings suggest that the model may work well for students whose backgrounds are already privileged enough to have accumulated social capital, cultural capital and the financial resources that enable them to engage effectively with a range of optional extracurricular opportunities. On the other hand, less privileged students who need more encouragement to enable them to take advantage of such opportunities are, as module leader, Laura (female, age 35-40, white) observed, left to fall *"between the cracks"*. RGU's model would benefit from reconsideration in light of a sociological perspective on employability, with proactive interventions driven by learner analytics, targeting less privileged students. The context of institutional privilege, tacitly embedded in the ethos of the institution and the disconnected approach to the careers service and academic skills support, is failing students who are not intimately aware of the comprehensive offers available to them. Critically, making students autonomously responsible for taking advantage of opportunities means that many of them, particularly those from less privileged backgrounds and lacking in confidence, will not do so.

In addition, several module leaders have been able to unite employability and academic curricular through experiential learning pedagogy (Kolb, 1984) and reflective practice (Bassot, 2016; Gibbs, 1998), leading modules designed to develop a complete professional identity for all who participate. However, module leaders, the careers service, and students acknowledge the inconsistency of the approach, with module selection becoming a lottery for students. This is because the implementation of experiential learning pedagogy is not systematic, and reliant on the philosophical approach of the module leader, rather than the business degree representing a cohesive package of learning. The quality assurance process serves to compound the issue, with the approval process rooted in the liberal ideals of cultivating intellect, as promoted by Newman (1996) and Peters (1973).

With module leaders questioning the clarity and consistency of their requirements, what employers are looking for in business graduates is equally an area of intense debate. In the next section, the study seeks to discover and understand the perspectives of recruiters.

5.2 The expectations of employers in the recruitment and selection process

This section explores the lived experiences of graduate recruiters of large employers in Greater London. The seven interviews with different large, private sector employers were selected based on the sampling criteria (see section 4.2.2), so students from the business school at RGU can realistically be expected to compete for roles at their organisations. The focus of the section is to search for a deeper understanding of the knowledge, skills and attributes that makes a graduate employable in an increasingly competitive market. Three main themes emerged from the analysis of the data and are discussed in the following sections. In the first section, the data shows that graduates are still required to construct a normalised professional identity, as identified by Covaleski et al. (1998) more than 20 years ago, replicating the culture and values of the employer. The second section focuses on the embodied state of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986), specifically communication, confidence and commerciality, as the critical components of success in the recruitment arena. The final section unpacks the significance of extracurricular opportunities and work experience, as the most important tool recruiters use for application differentiation. Put simply, for business graduates the degree is no longer enough to gain graduate employment.

5.2.1 Playing the game: developing a normalised professional identity

The findings suggest that the increasing demand for graduate roles has amplified the pressure on stretched graduate recruiters, resulting in the rushed manual screening of applications, creating a well-intentioned but arbitrary approach to shortlisting. Graduates who have not been supported to 'play the game' in their applications, through the habitual social memory of family ties (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992), or the experiential learning embedded into their university experiences, are at risk of being dismissed without detailed consideration of their abilities. While the findings are confirmed by the literature review in respect of the elaborate and sophisticated layers of the recruitment process (especially Gebreiter, 2019; Pollard et al., 2015), the recruiters' lived experiences highlight a largely subjective manual operation that reinforces the principles of social reproduction. In order to be shortlisted, the data shows that graduates are required to adopt what Covaleski et al. (1998) identified as a uniform professional identity, that is specifically designed to create duplicates or clones of the company's published values, rather than celebrate individual flair or creativity (see also Anderson-Gough et al., 2000).

Six of the seven recruiters reported that the volume of applications is continuing to rise year-on-year, resulting in limited time for evaluation. David (male, age 50-55, white) reported:

> *We're already over 8,000 applications this year and it's only March [2021]. We're going to be 10,000 soon and that'll be a record for us. That's an awful lot of people and there are four of us in our team, three full time and one part time.*

While automation is being investigated or used in a limited way such as marking multiple choice questions, the sifting of applications is currently a human endeavour exposed to potential bias under pressure of time. Oliver (male, 30-35, white) recruits 2,000 graduates per year, while Charlotte (female, 30-35, white) has a target of 1,500, but both are heavily oversubscribed with applicants, with around one in ten being ultimately successful. Emma (female, age 30-35, Black) screens all 2,000 applications for her company's graduate programme, a *"crazy"* and *"insane"* task, with no computer-based support at one of the world's largest technology firms. Using a strengths-based methodology, applicants are *"mapped against [the company's] published leadership principles"* with a third progressing to the first-round interview, adding:

> *You have only got about 10 to 20 seconds to impress with your CV. I'm definitely not always going into the granular detail. I'm looking for a particular profile […] the right experience […] and the right projects.*

Charlotte (female, 30-35, white) concurred, adding that while the *"back office"* administration process is increasingly automated, including the collation of applications and standardised communications, there is still an *"inefficient"* screening procedure. Applicants are assessed *"as individuals"* she added, but decisions are at her discretion with no opportunity for feedback or appeal on behalf of the applicants. David (male, age 50-55, white) admitted that pressure is mounting on recruiters, as graduates are *"just a piece of paper, competing with hundreds of other pieces of paper"*. Automation is being investigated, he added, but has been delayed due to cost. Despite the lack of automation, there is no evidence in the data that graduate recruiters are consciously biased in their screening of applications. Oliver (male, 30-35, white) became defensive in response to questioning, leaning forward towards the camera, reporting that he did not want to be a *"rejecting machine"* and was instead actively looking for reasons to *"progress people"*. However, he added that *"there has to be the evidence to support the statements being made"* and graduates need to tailor their applications to the requirements of the role, enabling recruiters to shortlist against the company's essential criteria, a point emphasised a few years ago in a study by Pollard et al. (2015).

Indeed, in order to be shortlisted, the findings show that applicants need to adopt a prescribed and normalised professional identity due to a shortlisting process that is focused on alignment with the company's values. Oliver (male, 30-35, white) suggested that graduates who do not believe in the values and culture should be put off from applying rather than add to the workload of recruiters. They require *"a* *more realistic preview"* of the industry, he stated, so a graduate can decide *"I'm not signing up for this"*. James (male, age 30-35, white) agrees in part, arguing that graduates should *"pick companies where their values do align"* which will therefore enable them *"in turn to be more successful because it's far easier to respond to the questions with confidence"*. For Paul (male, 50-55, white), incorporating the company's language into applications and interviews is important, emphasising a system that is punishing any sense of individual non-conformality, as explained by Gebreiter (2019) in relation to the hierarchical normalising of large accounting firms. Identifying the importance of *"buzzwords"*, the interviewer is thinking:

> *He sounds like one of us, she's talking like she already works there. She gets us. You are on brand and that kind of helps you just a little bit. Language is quite a powerful thing. It might give you the five or ten per cent marginal gain, but that is sometimes what you need to get an offer.*

William (male, age 25-30, Black) corroborates this perspective, adding that graduates may need to *"pivot quite a bit"* so that they *"demonstrate [the company's] values rather than tell us about their values"*. The practice of assessing applications against company values is *"unfair"* and *"frustrating"*, William contends, as he recalled that the employer had recently spent *"a few weeks embedding the new values with staff"* but refuses to *"cultivate the value set"* with the graduates they recruit. Graduates are required match the culture of the employer from the outset, as Johnson and Burden (2003:8) found twenty years ago, often with weak induction processes that provide "very limited recognition of the specific needs of young recruits".

The analysis corroborates the limited existing empirical research, finding that graduate behaviour is prescribed, standardised and normalised through a recruitment process that punishes non-conformality (Covaleski et al., 1998; Gebreiter, 2019; Pollard et al., 2015). The recruitment process is a performance; a metaphorical dance in which the employers define all the moves. The strategy for success needs to be conscious, deliberate and rehearsed, what Foucault (1995) defines as 'technologies of the self' (see section 3.3.2), showcasing personality and experience over theoretical knowledge. The outcome is increased subjectivity in recruitment decision making, humanising decisions that were previously more concrete, and creating a system that seeks to "repress, to prevent, to exclude [and] to eliminate" (Foucault, 1995:23-24) applicants who do not pass an exacting test of "cultural matching", a concept used by Gebretier (2019:234) to explain how recruiting managers hire graduates who are similar to themselves. Indeed, the data shows that employers seek to recruit in their own image, and it is the responsibility of graduates to mirror the company's values through confident written and verbal communications.

5.2.2 Cultural capital: communications, confidence and commerciality

As explained by Bourdieu (1986), one consequence of the clandestine nature of embodied cultural capital (in the sense that its value is rarely explicitly acknowledged), is that it can often be mistaken for aptitude and intelligence (see also Eisner, 1992). Indeed, a major theme from the data is that a lack of cultural capital, in respect of communication and confidence, is often inappropriately identified as a lack of natural ability. The recruitment process can be seen as a performance, in which individuals are responsible for the creation of their own professional personas. Further, the findings show a common matrix of cultural capital for assessing graduates' professional identities, punishing individuals who do not confirm to the exacting requirements of what Scott (1997:312) defined as the "transnational capitalist class".

The findings indicate a lack of emphasis from graduate recruiters on technical, job-specific human capital, of the type endorsed by proponents of a knowledge-based economy (as identified by Becker, 1993). Instead, cultural capital, embodied by the attitudes and behaviours of graduates, is significantly more important (Bourdieu, 1986). Oliver (male, 30-35, white) reported that *"you don't necessarily need all the technical know-how"* while David (male, age 50-55, white) dismissed any variation in the applicant pool, adding that technical skills were *"a given"*. For Paul (male, 50-55, white), it was the combination of technical and people skills that was most impressive, suggesting that candidates with this combination *"just wipe the floor with everybody else"*. Indeed, communication and confidence are the leading elements of cultural capital that the recruiters currently discuss, referenced by five of the seven recruiters. Paul reported that *"clearly communications is most important"* but more specifically the ability to influence:

> *So, what's the reason for the communication? Are you trying to get someone to agree to something or can you convince other people of your point of view? Is the person actually receiving what you are saying and are you checking for understanding?*

The ability to communicate is directly connected with the requirement to represent the company with clients. For David (male, age 50-55, white), *"a quiet assertiveness"* is required to deal with clients without patronising them. The attribute is closely linked to the commercial purpose of the employer, as *"the reality is, if you get promoted in our company, the likelihood is you're going to be dealing with clients and you're going to be pitching for work"*. Charlotte (female, 30-35, white) emphasised this point, asking if the graduates cannot sell themselves, *"how will they sell our products and services to the client?"*. Emma (female, age 30-35, Black) defines this factor as a *"customer obsession"*, questioning the extent to which business education recognises the importance of the *"client relationship"*. The way graduates are able to *"treat customers is of paramount importance, and I don't know if that is drilled into the students"*, she added. The importance of free market principles in employer requirements is a primary finding, similar to Bradley's (1996) conclusion almost 25 years ago. Employers still require business school graduates to understand how they operate and how clients interact with them. As emphasised by Kneale (2008), a commercially aware candidate can reflect and adapt to the opportunities and issues in different business situations, with the aim of maximising the profit margin. These principles are being asserted by the "powerful empires" of multinational corporations, as explained by Urry (2000:13), over the values of social justice emphasised by module leaders at universities such as RGU.

The framing of communication by the participants overlaps strongly with confidence. William (male, age 25-30, Black) reported that an *"extraverted personality, or at least being able to fake it in the interview process"* is critical to success. For Paul (male, 50-55, white), graduates must have *"confidence in themselves and their abilities"*, adding *"if you can't convince yourself you can do the job, how are you going to convince the interviewer?"*. Going further, David (male, age 50-55, white) disclosed that *"a lot of the guys that I try to hire are very confident, some would say borderline arrogant"*. This comment was interpreted as a positive attribute for the graduates, due to the upbeat tone and body language of the participant. Arrogance, as a result of the graduate's successes or achievements, is not perceived by recruiters as a personality flaw. From the case institution, Gemma (female, age 35-40, white), the Careers Service Manager agreed, pointing out:

> *How [graduates] present themselves, in terms of their demeanour and their confidence dealing with people, still does make a difference.*

The ability to adopt a confident professional persona for the recruitment process brings theoretical coherence with Foucault (1995), describing how individuals can exercise power via a strategic approach that maximises his/ her/ their strengths. The strategy is conscious, deliberate and rehearsed, Foucault deduces, in an ultimate act of self-discipline that transforms an individual into the type of subject "they aspire to be" (Gebreiter, 2019:236).

Comparing the interview data with published graduate scheme specifications on company websites (table 12), the idea of a professional persona is supported by the evidence with essential criteria skewed towards cultural capital. The criteria in blue indicates the essential criteria, collated via the interviews and on employer websites, that can be defined as cultural capital, in line with the theoretical framework. Although the interpretation of the findings is that human capital is taken for granted rather than not required, the focus away from technical knowledge is a significant trend in the evidence. The ability of business schools to impart technical knowledge is not questioned, rather it is the embodied cultural capital that is the differentiator recruiters and their employers are seeking.

Graduate recruiter/ participant	**Criteria discussed in interview** *(Red criteria interpreted as cultural capital)*	**Published criteria on employer website**
Emma (female, age 30-35, Black)	**Communication** **Customer obsession** **Confidence** Growth mindset	**Customer obsessed** **Diverse and inclusive** **Making a difference** Growth mindset

Graduate recruiter/ participant	**Criteria discussed in interview** *(Red criteria interpreted as cultural capital)*	**Published criteria on employer website**
James (male, age 30-35, white)	**Communication** **Confidence** **Self-awareness** **Presenting**	**Communication** **Relationships** **Business acumen** Technical capabilities Whole leadership
David (male, age 50-55, white)	**Communication** **Confidence** **Assertiveness** **Flexibility**	**Strong communicator** **Confidence to challenge** **Building relationships** **Motivated to make a difference** Commercial acumen
Paul (male, 50-55, white)	**Communications** **Confidence** **Curiosity** **Self-awareness**	**Strong communication** **Open and collaborative mindset** **Proactive and driven** High learning ability Project management and problem-solving
Oliver (male, 30-35, white)	**Communication** **Confidence** **Creativity** **Emotional intelligence** **Resilience** **Self-starter**	**Effective communication** **Career motivation** **Purposeful collaborator** **Show curiosity** Critical thinking
Charlotte (female, 30-35, white)	**Communication** **Motivation** **Negotiation** **Self-awareness** Leadership	**Outstanding communication** **Confident** **Client focused** **Adaptable to change**
William (male, age 25-30, Black)	**Adaptability** **Empathy** **Enthusiasm** **Extraverted personality** **Resilience**	**Adaptability** **Communication** **Courage and tenacity** **Empathy**

Table 12: Terminology used by graduate recruiters in interviews versus published graduate scheme criteria

The great majority of recruiters partially reflect the published graduate scheme criteria on their employers' websites. The employer of James (male, age 30-35, white) is the outlier, including communication but with a greater focus on human capital, including *"technical capabilities"*. James's employer also included *"business acumen"* in its graduate scheme criteria, a view matched by David's (male, age 50-55, white) employer in their requirement for *"commercial acumen"*, and in part by Emma's (female, age 30-35, Black) employer's behavioural notion of *"customer obsession"*. Echoing the study by Prince (2010), the findings from the interviews with recruiters and module leaders show that university degrees lack a framework for building business acumen; instead, they are designed to teach the understanding of accepted business and economic models. Graduates must rely, therefore, on gaining awareness of the business environment through social capital (networking) and by gaining work experience (also identified by Jewell et al., 2019).

The interviews demonstrate that embodied cultural capital is now the dominant requirement of large employers, enabling graduates to differentiate themselves from their peers, and moving the employability debate beyond the current empirical research which positions human, social and cultural capital with equal importance (for example Fugate et al., 2004; Tomlinson, 2017). Further, the findings highlight that the preparation required cannot take place in days or even weeks; the process goes far beyond the standard interview techniques discussed by Gemma (female, age 35-40, white), the Careers Service Manager at RGU. Engagement with employers is critical, throughout the university journey, to enable students to gain confidence through active engagement. In doing so, they will learn the vocabulary of businesses, to improve their communication skills and achieve greater commercial awareness. The next section unpacks these ideas in greater detail, focusing on the significance of extracurricular activities and work experience as part of the business school's employability package.

5.2.3 University experience: extracurricular activities and work experience

Building on the previous section, employers determine that the role of extracurricular activities and work experience are the most significant differentiators when business graduates apply for graduate roles. Emphasised by Brown and Hesketh (2004) many years ago, the soft currency of embodied cultural capital, combined with concrete examples accrued as part of the wider university experience, still creates a compelling professional package for employers. Indeed, since Brown and Hesketh's study was published, the data shows that the importance of academic qualifications has declined, due to the increasingly congested and competitive graduate labour market. As a consequence, the need to add value to the degree experience is critical to business students in order to gain a competitive advantage.

All seven graduate recruiters reported the importance of work experience in the recruitment process. Oliver (male, 30-35, white) expressed strong support for students who undertake a yearlong work placement, expressing that *"it could be happening a lot more [...] to set them up for the workplace environment"*. David (male, age 50-55, white) agreed, proclaiming *"of the steps that universities need to take, internships and placements are the most important"*, adding:

> *Students who have taken a year on a placement, I would say about 75 per cent chance we will be offering him the job. I don't know why more universities don't run sandwich placements. I think they are just amazing. [...] You have got to think, how can I distinguish myself from these other people? Number one is a work placement.*

Paul (male, 50-55, white) went even further, disclosing that *"the only way to become employable is through a work placement"*, so that students understand what *"makes employers tick"*. Charlotte (female, 30-35, white) reported that *"absolutely, work experience is a significant part of a candidate's employability"*, while Emma (female, age 30-35, Black) suggested that *"placements should be compulsory [...] so that students get a real kind of understanding of how a business works"*. They are *"super, super important"*, she added. William's (male, age 25-30, Black) perspective was that it is *"no longer viable"* for business schools not to offer placements, and there were *"no more excuses"* for universities. James (male, age 30-35, white) concluded that *"work experience is such a good way to get ahead [and] employers really value it"*. In these unified and replicated responses, there is the sense that it is the employers themselves who play the critical role in the employability of graduates, and a lack of trust in the academic community to replicate these experiences in the classroom. However, the scaffolding and support for students from business schools to make the most of their placements is not acknowledged. As Smith and Curtis (2020) identified in their recent study, scaffolding students' transition into work placements is essential to maximise the learning gained from the experience.

Oliver (male, 30-35, white) reflected several perspectives when he declared *"it's not just the degree that matters these days"*, adding that *"students should be encouraged to do sports or charity work, whatever it is alongside the university study"*. Charlotte (female, 30-35, white) added that recruiters were looking at the *"whole candidate, as an individual, as opposed to their degree certificate"*. David (male, age 50-55, white) concurred, including several extreme examples for impact, highlighting the close link between extracurricular experience and economic capital:

> *There will be a lot of applicants who will look very similar on paper and, if I'm going to choose between them, it has to be extracurricular. You know, I've climbed Mount Everest, I can play the trombone, I've got a Black belt, people are going to be impressed.*

For Paul (male, 50-55, white) it was less about the examples but a greater emphasis on *"commitment"* and *"seeing something through"*, rather than a scattergun approach of trying out several activities and not seeing them through to fruition. Charlotte (female, 30-35, white) suggested that business schools needed to do more to *"publicise"* these opportunities, recognising that *"societies are really key for students"*. James (male, age 30-35, white) agreed, reporting that *"graduates who have been captain of a sports team or taken part in a debating society [...] these are the individuals who have that leadership potential we are looking for"*.

The role of extracurricular activities and work placements as a differentiating factor in graduate recruitment is a major finding of this research, corroborated by all seven graduate recruiters. The wider scope of the university experience, beyond the core teaching of the degree programme, is more important than ever. As a consequence, due to the economic constraints on less privileged students forced into term time working, their participation in extracurricular activities is reduced and, as a result, their employability suffers. These findings confirm a study by Bathmaker et al. (2016), comparing the student experience of a Russell Group university against a post-92 institution. As the literature review found (see section 3.2.4), the focus of less privileged students on formal studies misses the opportunity of the university experience being a process of social equalisation (Artess et al., 2017; Scott, 2013). Students who excel in the accumulation of academic capital, believing it to be the critical element to progress to a graduate role, are being set-up for failure in the challenge of the hyper-competitive recruitment process. Participation in extracurricular activities and volunteering are now essential components in a CV, and a major route into sought-after permanent positions.

5.2.4 Chapter summary

The combination of embodied cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986) and the concrete, lived experiences (Kolb, 1984) of work placements and extracurricular activities, are essential components for graduate recruitment, according to the sample of large private sector employers. Critically, students are required to demonstrate behaviours and attributes, specifically communication, confidence and commerciality, while embodying the company's values through their well-articulated lived experiences. They require rounded, fully formed professionals, prepared to add instant value to their organisations. A graduate must be prepared to develop a normalised identity and professional persona, adapting to the commercial ideological subtexts of their employers. This study's interpretation of the interviews is that the recruiters are not rejecting the need for human capital, defined as the theoretical knowledge and practical skills needed to carry out the graduate roles successfully. Instead, as identified by Bacon & Sloam (2010) over ten years ago, due to the robustness of the QAA's Benchmark Statements, there is very little to differentiate between undergraduate business degrees, regardless of the institution. Therefore, the wider university experience becomes more important, and students' ability to participate fully is crucial.

5.3 Social justice and meritocracy: the enduring barriers to social mobility

The third section of data analysis examines the wider social context of the study and unpacks the continuing barriers to social mobility, encapsulated in Goldthorpe's (2016) influential research. The findings show that module leaders and recruiters are situated at the intersection of various social structures and systems of power, designed to maintain reproduction of the privileged class, as emphasised in recent studies by Major (2019) and The Sutton Trust (2019). In the first section, the findings show that individuals need to successfully negotiate a highly demanding and competitive graduate recruitment process, characterised by cultural matching, whereby employers select candidates who are culturally similar to themselves. The study reflects the themes of the literature review, discovering that graduate recruitment cannot be regarded as meritocratic (Covalski et al., 1998; Gebreiter, 2019). Instead, the recruitment process represents a series of obstacles for less privileged graduates to overcome. The second section explores the impact of the global social movement, Black Lives Matter, identifying that recruiters are now targeting a greater proportion of post-92 universities to achieve a more diverse candidate pool. Equally, however, the data shows that the decision-making process at large employers has failed to sufficiently address racial inequalities. The final section discusses the impact of the global health crisis, Covid-19, arguing that the switch to online teaching and the reduction in experiential learning will have lasting damage on the accumulation of cultural and social capital (Bourdieu, 1986), creating an enduring legacy of social reproduction.

5.3.1 Chasing meritocracy: networks and nepotism

The complex process of selection is a well-intentioned attempt by graduate recruiters to bring about a meritocratic framework, but has the outcome of maintaining and exacerbating social reproduction. As Reay et al. (2009:1110) highlight in their research, less privileged graduates are faced with a challenging "out of habitus" experience, navigating the complex and challenging recruitment process without sufficient preparation. Meanwhile, the children of existing employees are able to exercise sustained domination through their enhanced knowledge of the recruitment process due to inherited social capital. Five of the seven recruiters highlight that applicants must understand the 'rules of the game' to stand a realistic prospect of being shortlisted and ultimately receive an offer. Bourdieu and Wacquant (1993) explain in their seminal work that the metaphorical game is played in accordance with rules or regularities which determine how players should and should not behave, interact, and present themselves. These rules are not explicit and codified, the authors state, but are norms of the incumbent recruiting class. This concept is reflected in the interviews with participants who revealed a multi-stage, standardised approach to graduate recruitment. Indeed, the findings show that while the "old boys' network", as Bourdieu puts it (1986:58), may not always result in a job offer in itself, the role of social capital in providing the guidance and know-how to beat the recruitment system remains a significant tool in maintaining social exclusion.

Table 13 summarises the multi-stage recruitment process identified in the interview data by graduate recruiters. The three core stages (application, assessment centre, and interview), are broadly in line with the recruitment process that has been identified in the literature review (see section 3.3.3), in particular studies by Gebreiter (2019) and Pollard et al. (2015). The success criteria, in order to secure a job offer as an outcome of the recruitment process, can be analysed through the lens of the theoretical framework (see chapter 2), combining Bourdieu's (1986) theories of social and cultural capital, and Becker's (1993) theoretical and empirical analysis of human capital. In this research, social capital refers to the professional network of the graduate, while cultural capital includes the institutionalised state (such as educational qualifications), the embodied state (such as communication and confidence), and the objectified state (status symbols such as mobile phones and tailored suits). For Becker, human capital refers to the technical knowledge and skills gained through the education system, including university. The findings show that displaying the right combination of social, cultural, and human capital is critical for graduates to construct legitimacy, credibility, and belonging as players in the recruitment arena.

Indeed, analysing the combination of the different symbolic 'capitals' is an important discovery in the data. The interviews with graduate employers show that the success criteria are skewed heavily towards the Bourdieusian concepts of cultural and social capital, and away from human capital. This is, in part, due to the primary decision maker at each stage of the process, noting the declining role of the graduate recruiter following the application stage. The data shows that as the influence of the recruiting line manager increases, so does the risk of cultural bias, nepotism, interpreted in table 13 below through the scores of low, medium and high. The reasons for these scores, interpreted from the interview data, are unpacked later this section.

Graduate recruitment stage	**Success criteria**	**Decision maker**
Application	• Cultural matching: alignment of applicant to company values • Cultural capital: effective written communications • Social capital: work experience, extracurricular participation	• Graduate recruiter • **Potential for cultural bias and nepotism: low**
Assessment centre	• Cultural capital: communication, confidence, commerciality • Human capital: numerical and logical reasoning	• Graduate recruiter • Line manager • **Potential for cultural bias and nepotism: low/ medium**
Interview	• Cultural capital: communication, confidence, commerciality • Social capital: professional network, family ties	• Line manager • **Potential for cultural bias and nepotism: medium/ high**

Table 13: Graduate recruitment process and the increasing role of cultural bias and nepotism

The recruitment process typically begins with an online application, based on personal strengths aligned to the company's values. Graduate recruiter, Emma (female, age 30-35, white) stated that she is responsible for designing the *"selection methodology"*, which progresses from the application phase to a first-round interview (with the recruiter), followed by an assessment centre day comprising of a presentation and group exercise, culminating in a final round interview. Fellow recruiter James (male, age

30-35, white) concurs in full, managing the decision-making until the assessment centre phase. For Oliver (male, age 30-35, white), there is a process of cognitive testing as part of the application, in graduate roles where *"numerical, verbal and logical reasoning are critical"*. The end-to-end process, he reported, takes around three months. The process for Paul (male, age 50-55, white) differs slightly, with an added phase of psychometric testing, where graduates *"need a high level of concentration for a short amount of time"*. Final decisions are taken by the line managers, with graduate recruiters having a limited impact, although David (male, age 50-55, white) raised that he would *"typically sit around the table and talk about everybody"* as part of the decision-making process. Graduate recruiters' main role is to carry out the applicant shortlisting and arrange the subsequent phases of the recruitment journey. Without exception in the sample, they also compile statistics on the diversity of candidates both at application and shortlist stage.

Two recruiters disclosed that nepotism still exists at their companies, suggesting that despite the progress made, graduates with limited social capital still face the struggle of navigating the constraints of the social structure. William (male, age 25-30, Black) disclosed that the practice is *"still alive and kicking"*:

> *We have a referral policy where people's cousins, nieces [...] they kind of get a fast track through the assessment stage [...] so discrimination is obviously alive because it is built into our recruitment process.*

James (male, age 30-35, white) concurred in part, suggesting that the practice was *"generational"* and *"definitely a lot less"* than previously. He argued that *"if you have a relative in a senior position and they want you, they will get you into the business. [...] I'm not happy about it but it is happening"*. These findings reflect a recent study published by UK-based career management firm, Handshake (2021), suggesting that businesses are relying on existing contacts to find recruits, limiting diversity and prohibiting inclusivity. In addition, three-quarters of graduates surveyed in another study published by UK recruitment firm, Milkround (2020) believe that nepotism is a major factor in recruitment decision-making. As Gilani (2020:16) finds in his study, the "who you know culture" remains an underlying injustice in society.

On the other hand, fellow recruiter Oliver (male, age 30-35, white), rejects this finding, stating that although senior executives may ask for updates around specific applicants, *"there is never much pushback"* on rejected candidates and all applicants *"go through the same process as everybody else"*. There is no reason to doubt the lived experiences of participants on both sides and inconsistencies between the approaches is a fair interpretation of the current landscape. Nevertheless, the findings contradict the perception that the contemporary recruitment process is meritocratic, successfully *"removing potential bias and thus increasing diversity"* (Pollard et al., 2015:137). Instead, as Reay (2017) found in her study focusing on the education system, perceived meritocratic processes result in inequalities being justified on the basis that applicants have an equal opportunity to prove themselves.

For graduate recruiter, James (male, age 30-35, white), universities should play a greater role in supporting students to understand what is required to be successful in the recruitment process. Universities need to provide graduates with a *"complete awareness of the process [as] if they are the first member of their family to go to university, there is no-one within their network to explain how to get a graduate job"*. Fellow recruiter, Emma (female, age 30-35, white) concurs, highlighting that *"it is not enough just to give students a spot [at university]"*, it is their responsibility to provide *"wrap around"* support for students *"from socially deprived areas"*. Many graduates have *"no idea"* how large employers operate, she added, and graduates who are able to navigate the *"recruitment process seamlessly understand what they need to do to be successful"*. Graduate recruiter, James, also highlighted the lack of data sharing between RGU and employers, resulting in discrimination, reporting that they *"have received several applications from students with dyslexia, but you've literally got no signposting from the tutors, and we didn't know to give them extra time"*, resulting in several students with dyslexia being rejected. As Moreau and Leathwood (2006) pointed out in their study of non-traditional graduates from a post-1992 inner city university, learning difficulties such as dyslexia contribute to a lack of confidence and sense of struggle. The authors state that a framework to address the assumptions at the heart of employability discourse is paramount, to sensitise employers to the intersectional issues of disability, gender, ethnicity, and social class.

Module leaders, Claire (female, age 40-45, white) and Laura (female, age 35-40, white), had strong views on graduate recruitment using Bourdieusian concepts/ language to make their points. Claire believed that to achieve social mobility, graduates *"previously needed to be above average; now they need to be in the top percentile"*. The difficulties of navigating the hurdles to graduate employment has become like a *"Super Mario game"*, she added. Claire, who previously worked at a post-92 university before joining the Russell Group case institution, admitted that the graduate recruitment process does not enable *"meritocratic progression"*, as the students have *"different starting points"* and she argued that some are in danger of becoming *"a fish out of water"*. Laura concurs, adding that students may have similar knowledge regardless of their socioeconomic backgrounds, but *"one of the things they don't have are the rules of the game [and] what they need to do in order to open some of those doors"*.

While progress has been made, recruitment at large employers remains subject to systems of "power, nepotism, grace, and favour", as highlighted in a study by Nicholson (2010). However, the rise of global social movements is shining a light on social inequalities. In the next section, the study explores the extent to which Black Lives Matter has accelerated the pace of change towards a more inclusive culture at large employers and in the university curriculum.

5.3.2 Black Lives Matter: diversity in curriculum development and graduate recruitment

The findings indicate that the impact of the social movement, Black Lives Matter, has raised awareness of increasing diversity, both within the workforce and in the university curriculum. For employers, the shift has resulted in a proactive, data-led targeting of universities with diverse student populations, accelerating the volume of engagement activities beyond the elite Russell Group institutions. However, the progressive expansion of social inequality discourse has failed to result in Black applicants moving from the shortlist to job offer, simply delaying the seemingly inevitable rejections. At the same time at RGU, module leaders reported that decolonising the curriculum had been discussed frequently during course management meetings, but that the pandemic had slowed the pace of change.

The findings show that while discussions on decolonisation have proliferated at a theoretical level in RGU, work on operationalising them within the business school remain at an early stage. Module leader, Laura (female, age 35-40, white), reported:

> *I think decolonisation is slowly filtering down the institution. It is very dependent on individuals and how strongly they feel about it. Frankly, cross old white men in the business school... this is a massive generalisation… but they will say 'I've always taught this and this is how I'm always going to teach it'. Whereas, if you are attuned to that kind of social movement, then I think yes, Black Lives Matter will have implications and you will try and think about the way that you teach. It is going to be a long, long process.*

As Morreira et al. (2020) identified, it has been a combination of social movements, including the student protests in South Africa (2015-2017) as well as Black Lives Matter, that has triggered an explosion of interest in the new wave of decolonisation discourse. RGU acted quickly to remove a statue of a colonial-era philanthropist with links to the slave trade, as did The Cass Business School also in London (O'Reilly, 2020), but the impact of Black Lives Matter has not yet progressed to the classroom. As Luckett et al. (2019) found in their recent South African study exploring figures such as Cecil Rhodes, the ethical imperative to shift away from colonial identities has not been sufficiently applied to teaching practice. Indeed, as Baloyi and Lebelo (2021:256) pointed out, decolonisation may require a "new age" of academics and university leaders to shift the culture of institutions from western epistemology.

Module leader, James (male, age 30-35, white), highlighted that *"movements like Black Lives Matter have really raised awareness"*. Fellow module leader, Nicola (female, age 40-45, white) agreed, reporting:

> *At every meeting there seems to be some mention of equality, diversity and inclusion. We do have scholarships for students on our programmes, and we have some really good students coming in, who are very different from other parts of the cohort.*

When asked if there have been any outcomes from those equality, diversity and inclusion meetings, Nicola responded: *"not that I can think of"*. Revealing the contrast between more privileged and less privileged students, module leader, Linda (female, age 55-60, white), disclosed:

> *We've seen students from ethnic minorities do quite well and it does happen. On the other hand, we have some students at [institution] whose dad can make a phone call and they'll get an internship at the bank.*

Module leader, Claire's (female, 40-45, white) contribution supported the distinction made by Linda, adding that the lack of social capital, interpreted as the students' professional networks, contributed to a deficit in embodied cultural capital too, in particular confidence and resilience. She stated:

> *If you don't know someone who has been to [an elite university], it is a whole new world of scariness. This is why you see a black and ethnic minority [attainment] gap because many of those students are coming from really underprivileged backgrounds, they haven't seen black leaders and they don't think that they can do it. I think we do have a responsibility to support those aspirations and ensure that they are reflected in the cases studies we use.*

As Jansen (2017) identified in his study exploring post-Apartheid South Africa, with strong echoes to the recent student protests in the UK (Dar et al., 2020), privileged students appear to invoke notions of decolonisation for symbolic reasons only, as these students and academics return to the settled curriculum after the protests. Consequently, no meaningful change has taken place, and Black voices remain side-lined. At RGU, according to their demographics dashboard, Black and Minority Ethnic students make up nearly 60 per cent of their total student population, but just 3 per cent of academic staff in the Business School are Black.

Turning from staff to students, as explained in the literature review (see section 3.4.3), the implementation of university tuition fees since 1998, up to £9,250 a year from 2016, has led to increasing government demands that universities demonstrate 'widening participation' as a vehicle for social mobility (Warikoo, 2016). According to university admissions service, UCAS, more 18-year-olds from disadvantaged backgrounds are entering higher education than ever before, "with an increase of 78 per cent since 2006 for the most disadvantaged" (Heselwood, 2018:6). However, the interview data indicates that widening participation has only delayed discrimination on the intersectional grounds of ethnicity and social class. Less privileged students are now able to access less selective universities, as pointed out in a study by Major (2019), but as graduates they are unable to secure roles against the dominant white middle class elite. Indeed, the data shows that the response from large employers to Black Lives Matter has been crude and lacking in transparency, with a need to reach a more refined, intersectional solution. As Webb et al. (2017) argues, the genuine attempts to make the graduate recruitment process more meritocratic (through a complex, multi-stage process) have homogenised rather than recognised difference, with the impact of maintaining social inequalities.

Analysing the evidence in the interview data, three recruiters exposed the deep societal tensions and contradictions in the context of the graduate recruitment process. While recruiters are responding to pressure from *"shareholders"*, according to David (male, age 50-55, white), the shortlisting statistics have not reflected the job offers. He added:

> *You know, we're pretty much always looking at something: gender, race, or social class. With my experience, all the big companies are always looking at the shortlisting data. Probably the worst place is Scotland. Now, you could argue they are a little bit racist or whatever. They are certainly very old fashioned.*

Fellow recruiter, Paul (male, age 50-55, white) accused a previous employer of tokenism, focusing on getting a Black female recruit into *"marketing campaigns"* rather than providing a good experience, *"because all around here were white males and they hadn't thought through how to make sure she stays"*. He went on:

> *The pointy end is when it boils down to that line manager making his or her decision, that's where the bias still creeps in, and that's where I think the reality bites. So, the Black Lives Matter campaign has been really great, but I really need to see this actually translating into job offers and not just the shortlisting.*

Recruiter, Emma (female, age 30-35, Black) believed that her company represented many tech firms based in the United States, observing that there are *"actually a lot of companies really, really far behind in that conversation"*, adding *"generally there is a denial that there is a problem"*. As a Black woman, she has *"worked at some terrible places [...] and diversity isn't even of interest to them"*. Emma believes her current employer is on the right track, but progress is slow. Her experience is that companies are *"really guilty at tackling one problem at a time"* and as a result, gender has been prioritised over ethnicity.

Unpacking this concept of non-intersectional prioritisation further, I acknowledge that the focus on Black Lives Matter in the in-depth interviews has positioned graduate recruitment in the context of race. The global social movement was particularly relevant at the time of the data collection in 2021, sharing the news agenda with the global health crisis, Covid-19, since the murder of George Floyd the previous year (Adams, 2020). If the research had been carried out in 2017, the #MeToo movement would arguably have played a more significant role in this analysis. The social movement, seeking to expose the sexual abuse and sexual harassment of women, became widespread following accusations of predatory behaviour by the American film producer, Harvey Weinstein (Sayej, 2017). However, while the data lacks a significant focus on gender inequalities, the intersectional nature of social discrimination is present in the findings, as Emma identified in the previous paragraph. Black people and women continue to be subject to domination by others, restricted in their ambitions to achieve social mobility, based on the existing distribution of wealth and power (Crenshaw, 1989).

The collective failure of these large organisations to comprehend the intersectional factors of race, gender and social class, emphasised by Hill Collins thirty years ago (1990), undermine their positive recruitment strategies. Indeed, the findings reveal that it is important for forward-thinking employers to consider the relationship between intersecting aspects of identity rather than addressing the gender gap this year and racial diversity the next (Crenshaw, 1989). In particular, the diversity of experiences among Black women, explored in the rise of Black feminism through researchers such as Crenshaw (ibid), reveal the fragmentation of identity through an interconnected and evolving set of relationships, rooted in social privilege rather than patriarchal lineage (Bradley, 1996). The findings of this qualitative study show that part of the problem is the positivist reporting of statistics, designed to be self-congratulatory, while masking the systematic underlying failure to support less privileged students/ graduates.

As Duarte's (2020) recent study of art and design professionals identified, the neoliberal audit culture has extended from university access to encompass applications and shortlisting at large employers, due in part to social and political pressure. As a consequence, the findings show that large employers are being increasingly attracted to post-92 universities with a more diverse student population linked to the widening participation agenda. This is due to much of the "heavy lifting" on widening participation being undertaken by "less selective" higher education institutions (Major, 2019:1). Graduate recruiter, William (male, age 25-30, Black), reported that the Black Lives Matter movement has given *"everybody a kick up the arse in terms of racial and social diversity"*. Fellow recruiter James (male, age 30-35, white) agreed, adding that the murder of George Floyd pushed race higher up the political agenda. He reported:

> *I am not exaggerating when I say that about 90 per cent of the conversations that we have involve an aspect of diversity, inclusion and widening participation.*

Data sourced from the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) enabled James to benchmark his employer's partner universities, in particular the Black, Asian and minority ethnic student populations. He disclosed:

> *The classic red bricks where big graduate recruiters historically target… well, they are down the very bottom of the list when it comes to diversity and we're having to look elsewhere.*

To emphasise this shift, all graduate recruiters in the sample disclosed that applicant shortlisting does not take the university into account, and therefore being a student from an elite Russell Group university is not an advantage at that first stage in the recruitment process. Two recruiters in particular strongly denied any favouritism towards elite universities. Emma (female, age 30-35, Black) takes a *"university agnostic"* approach, while James added that *"the degree definitely matters, but what matters less so is the grade and definitely where the degree is from"*.

However, the bias towards elite universities comes to the surface when the decisions are being made not by recruiters, but line managers. Recruiter, William (male, age 25-30, Black) reported that he was faced with a *"real challenge"* from his employer, asking *"why aren't you looking at the university or the grade?"*. He added:

> *It is important to have the right data and use it effectively so that you can prove you can still get the right people with the right skills who don't attend Oxbridge… [but] if one of the C-suite [executive level manager] went to [an elite university], they would say, it really needs to be a graduate from there and it is hard to push back.*

Graduate recruiter, James (male, age 30-35, white) concurred, reporting that the hierarchical structures are *"very old fashioned"*. They will recruit in their own image, as they have done for the past *"30 years"*:

> *Those executives will be on Oxbridge graduate […] and what happens is, they say, well, I want Oxbridge graduates in my team.*

Reflecting the ingrained attitudes exposed by Barnes (1996) 25 years ago, for senior leaders at large employers in London, graduates from post-92 universities are regarded as second-class substitutes, with social reproduction representing a triumph of tradition and an English elitist ideal. In the Sutton Trust's (2019) recent study of *Elitist Britain*, while there are isolated pockets of positive change, recruitment to leading roles remains characterised by persistent inequality. The study calls for employers to take up their "socio-economic duty" (Sutton Trust, 2019:90) with contextual recruitment decisions considering race, gender, and family background. Attempts to create a meritocratic recruitment process are currently damaged by the middle and senior managers making the ultimate recruitment decisions, exercising their power to maintain a status quo of white privilege (Friedman & Laurison, 2019; Jensen, 2005). The interview data shows that, by bypassing the system, senior staff are able to boost the careers of people that they have affinity with, which can often be formed based on social and cultural similarities rather than on merit.

As Gillborn (2015) found in her study (see the literature review, section 3.4.2), the concept of meritocracy is a "colourblind narrative" that ignores intersectionality, used as a cloak of neutrality to camouflage the interests of more privileged graduates and their families. Indeed, the findings show that insufficient progress has been made since intersectionality of social inequalities was a first identified by Black feminist scholar, Crenshaw in 1989, in response to the civil rights movement in the United States (see 3.4.1). As Hill Collins (1990) emphasised in the same period, race, gender and class remain the "axes of oppression" within an immoveable "matrix of domination". Going further, critical race theory academics, such as Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995:49) in their landmark study focusing on education, placed the spotlight on "White Marxists" who position white males as the standard to which Black graduates can aspire. As Iverson (2007) pointed out in her American study several years ago, there is still a sense that Black (and frequently female) graduates are perceived to be inferior by employers based on race alone, with successful Black students heralded as exceptional highfliers; as individuals who are breaking the mould.

In London, while socio-political pressure may be contributing to a rejection of England's traditional universities, the corporate support for social movements like Black Lives Matter do not reflect long-term plans for social inclusion and racial equality. As Dixon-Fyle et al. (2018) found as part of a McKinsey study of large multi-national employers, shortlisting diverse talent during the recruitment process is no longer enough. Hiring managers are undoing the hard work of graduate recruiters by failing to be congruent with their published values. Instead, the interview data suggests, they maintain behaviours that endorse privilege and cultural bias.

5.3.3 The Covid generation: a legacy of social reproduction

The impact of Black Lives Matter has arguably been exceeded by a global health crisis, sparked by the new coronavirus, Covid-19, which has exacerbated social inequalities in graduate recruitment, through increasing social reproduction. First, in RGU's business school, opportunities for experiential learning and work placements have been significantly reduced due to the lockdown and government restrictions around social distancing. This is even more important in the context of this study, as the graduate recruiters identified work placements as critical to graduate recruitment (see section 5.2.3). Consequently, graduates who benefitted from inherited social capital through a relative working at a large company, had a higher probability of gaining graduate employment, as there was little opportunity for less privileged students to acquire a professional network. It appears that graduates who came to university with an advantage, are almost certain to graduate in the same position of power, with the leverage to achieve their career aspirations.

Second, the switch to online learning has exposed working class students to digital discrimination, creating a negative impact on young people from less privileged backgrounds. Interview data from the module leaders suggested that these students lacked confidence to communicate and show their surroundings on camera. As a result, the same module leaders highlighted that many suffered from mental health challenges and lacked social skills. In turn, this damaged students' graduate employment potential, with recruiters pointing out that fewer working class students applied for roles, and poor wifi connections impacted on graduates' interview performances. These findings reflect the emerging empirical research investigating the impact of the pandemic. Khan's (2021) study analysing online questionnaires of 349 UK degree students, identified that social, economic, and health inequalities were exposed, particularly amongst the most disadvantaged communities in the UK. He argued it was also possible that mental health issues were prevalent among students from less privileged backgrounds and that online learning may have added extra pressures and exacerbated socioeconomic problems. Further, some students struggled with "technology poverty" (2021:1184) as they did not have the right equipment and technology required for online learning. Another electronic survey of students studying at the University of Oxford in the UK, and Queen's University in Canada, found that the majority of students perceived online learning had impacted negatively on their prospects for internships, exchanges and other learning experiences. Hassan and Daniel (2020) found in their Canadian study that Black students had been disproportionately affected due to a lack of technology, weak internet, and higher rates of infection. In the United States, Lazar (2021) found that some disadvantaged students suffered almost a complete exclusion from the university experience. The pivot to online course delivery in the name of social distancing created a digital divide that further entrenches the potential for divisions on the basis of race, gender, and social class.

Indeed, the data shows that the pandemic had a detrimental impact on the employment potential of less privileged students/ graduates at every stage of their journey, from university study to interviewing for competitive jobs. Table 14 summarises these findings from the data analysed in this section. It combines the interview data from module leaders and graduate recruiters during the pandemic, noting the common topics and themes that have emerged. The impact was most keenly felt in the business school, with the shift to online learning having a detrimental impact on less privileged students. Shifts in the pedagogic principles, from experiential learning to a largely traditional one-way, lecture-based model, resulted in a lack of opportunities for students to accumulate social and cultural capital.

Student/ graduate journey	**Impact of the global health crisis (Covid-19)**	**Outcome for less privileged students**
Degree study	• Switch to online learning from face-to-face • Decline in experiential learning curriculum	• Decline in opportunities to accumulate social (professional network) and embodied cultural capital (communication, confidence, commercial awareness)
Extracurricular activities	• Significant decline in work placement and internship opportunities	• As above
Graduate recruitment	• Switch to online interviews	• Negative impact on disadvantaged graduates with poor wifi connections

Table 14: Module leaders' and graduate recruiters' perceptions of the impact of the pandemic on graduate recruitment

Unpacking the pedagogic shift, the fall-out from the global health crisis has had a profound impact on experiential learning in the business school. The lack of placements during the pandemic has exacerbated the divide between students without inherited social capital, and those with connections to large employers through family members. Module leader, James (male, age 30-35, white) reported:

> *About a third of our placement programmes have been scrapped, which means we will have a whole year of students who will have less experience than their peers. I think that will be devastating. For students who came to university in a solid position, with family ties into The City, they will still do OK. They will be able to get into graduate schemes. Those that really needed that face-to-face experience will be more severely impacted.*

Gemma (female, age 35-40, white), the Careers Service Manager at RGU, supported this assertion, as *"a lot of companies have deferred their placement programmes or have reduced their internships [resulting in] far fewer opportunities"*. Students who have been able to secure a placement have been *"virtual only"*, she reported. Gemma's perspective is that the pandemic will have the *"most impact on those from widening participation backgrounds"* due to a lack of social capital. She went on:

> *There will be some students who are absolutely fine because their parents can tell them everything, but there will be some students who have missed out on the cues, the nudges from their peers or from academics, which I think will have a knock-on effect down the line.*

Equally, the switch from face-to-face teaching to online has favoured confident students from more privileged backgrounds. As identified by a study by Beer (2020), the objectified state of cultural capital, such as the expanse and contents of bookshelves, has become the *"mise-en-scene"* of wealthier students and their families, as a representation of symbolic knowledge. Module leader, Sarah (female, age 50-55, white) reported that the *"proximity"* of online seminars has *"made students feel very uncomfortable, and I am finding that they are turning their cameras off […] due to where they are living right now, such as in shared accommodation"*. The mixing of nationalities from the international student body has been limited due to their different time zones, highlighted module leader, Claire (female, age 40-45, white), as well as *"wifi issues and bandwidth"* limiting the interaction. She added:

> *Students in the Covid generation are going to not necessarily have the social skills that you would normally get from engaging with others through the societies, the clubs and everything else. It has created a problematic situation for those that were already isolated and didn't have the social capital.*

It will take *"resource and an investment in time and effort"* to make up for the last year and support students in an accelerated accumulation of social capital, Claire pointed out, and she was *"not convinced that we have the capacity to do it"*. Module leader, Laura (female, age 35-40, white) concurred, disclosing that some students have *"just fallen off a cliff"* and the pandemic is going to *"screw up a lot of people"*. Module leader, Linda (female, age 55-60, white) unpacked the issue, stating that loneliness has been an issue for some students. As she put it, *"The new cliché is we're in the same storm but we're not in the same boat. I think that is very, very true"*. Fellow module leader, Nicola (female, age 40-45, white) pointed out that students *"had relatives who had Covid and that impacted on them"*, and the face-to-face tutorials would have normally *"helped in terms of support"*. Going further, uncertainty about their future job prospects is also having an impact on students' wellbeing, with Nicola suggesting they are *"het up and worried"* about what graduation will bring.

Turning from the university experience to graduate recruitment, the findings show that technology has produced and reproduced social orders, as identified in a recent study exploring the impact of the pandemic by Zheng and Walsham (2021). Graduate recruiter, Oliver (male, age 30-35, white), disclosed that *"technology does have an impact"* on social mobility, going on to say: *"if you can't get online during Covid, or if your connection isn't great, then that can create barriers to entry for some people"*. Fellow recruiter, Emma (female, age 30-35, Black) agreed in part, reporting that some individuals from the *"lowest socioeconomic groups"* could not find a *"quiet space in their homes"* to engage in an online interview. Going further, she added that while there have been *"lots of diverse candidates"* in the pandemic, including strong gender and ethnic representation, *"from a socioeconomic standpoint, I have seen fewer of those [working class] candidates this year"*.

As Brezis and Hellier (2020) and The Sutton Trust (2019) highlighted in their recent studies, the post-pandemic landscape is likely to heighten the deep social divisions of an increasingly divided nation, as the disadvantage gap increases and the English elite continues to look after its own. In addition, digital inequality has opened multiple intersectional fracture lines that have prevented the enduring goal of social mobility. In short, Covid-19 has unmasked the social reproductive function of universities, and inflamed social inequalities that exist in society.

5.3.4 Chapter summary

As Major (2019) emphasised in his study, at their best, business schools have the potential to be dual engines of social mobility and economic productivity, with more graduates meaning more highly skilled professionals to fuel the knowledge-based economy. However, this section has found that progress towards this goal has been limited, despite the ambition and motivation of module leaders and graduate recruiters. The Black Lives Matter social movement has raised the profile of racial inequalities at universities and in company boardrooms, however there is a worrying disconnect between the marketing of inclusive values and culture, and the decision making of recruiting managers. Similarly at RGU, discussions about decolonisation have not been matched by action, in module outlines, reading lists, or the recruitment of academic staff. Indeed, the global health crisis, Covid-19, has revealed the extent of self-reproduction of the English establishment, built around historic structures of elite universities that generate and maintain social stratification. The positive strides made in the last twenty years in building experiential learning pedagogy as part of a multi-dimensional employability curriculum has been lost due to the pandemic, and it remains to be seen how and if universities will seek to address the imbalance in the cultural and social capital of their students.

In the next section, the study interprets the findings through a theoretical lens to demonstrate how the research answers the research questions and the overall research aim. The section will show how the study makes an important contribution to the body of knowledge about the educational and social perspectives of graduate recruitment. Through the lens of social constructivism, it will argue that the research contributes to a deeper theoretical understanding of teaching and learning, social mobility and meritocracy.

5.4 <u>The rules of the game: a conceptual framework for graduate recruitment</u>

In this section, the study seeks to draw coherent meaning from the data, deepening conclusions through a conceptual framework (Miles et al., 2020) that aims to "prove useful in practical and theoretical terms" (Corbin & Strauss, 1990:20) for business schools in the UK. To achieve useful and transferrable findings, the section synthesises the thick description of the three data analysis sections, resulting in three theoretical implications of the data. First, that the accumulation of Bordieusian (1986) social and cultural capital is a greater factor in graduate recruitment than human capital (Becker, 1993). This is due to the enduring presence of nepotism and cultural bias in graduate recruitment. Second, pedagogic strategies of experiential learning are critical to build students' professional networks, as is engagement with the non-credit bearing extracurricular portfolio including societies, clubs, and volunteering. Indeed, it is the complete package of the wider university experience that can ensure business schools become the engines of social mobility. Third, that the global context (social movement, Black Lives Matter, and the global health crisis, Covid-19) has exacerbated intersectional social inequalities (Crenshaw, 1989) and exposed the myth of cognitive meritocracy (Bukodi & Goldthorpe, 2019). In short, the conceptual framework recognises that the odds are stacked against less privileged students achieving graduate recruitment in a system rigged in favour of social reproduction (Friedman & Laurison, 2020). However, the interview data demonstrates that the university experience has the potential to teach students the 'rules of the game', empowering them to challenge the privileged elite through the construction of a professional identity that rejects upbringing and cultural heritage.

5.4.1 Social capital: professional networks for mutual benefit

The findings of this research have shown that the role of social capital in graduate recruitment is both critical and complex. The interview data of recruiters highlighted the integral importance of *"awareness of the [recruitment] process"* to understand what is required to be successful. Similarly, module leaders emphasised the hurdles of graduate recruitment, which have become like a *"Super Mario* *game"*, leaving graduates in danger of becoming *"a fish out of water"* (see section 5.3.1). To conceptualise the empirical findings, this section combines the definitions of Bourdieu (1986), Coleman (1988), and Lin (2001). There are two broad intellectual schools of thought in social capital linked to the empirical data. First, for Bourdieu, actors are governed by social norms while being constrained and directed by the wider social context. The other intellectual stream, developed by Coleman and Lin, sees the actor as having goals independently arrived at, and as wholly self-interested. It is argued that both perspectives contribute to the definition in the context of graduate recruitment in business schools. Interview data from graduate recruiters has shown that they are constrained by structures of power, but their actions in recruitment are individual, deliberate and rehearsed. Equally, for less privileged graduates, recruiters have highlighted the importance of understanding how graduates are 'measured' (Lin, 2001) against their peers. In other words, graduates need to recognise using Bourdieusian (1986) terminology, the 'rules of the game'. It is possible, this study finds, to accumulate social capital, nurturing professional links with a variety of people to create a bank of resources, including contacts, information, and a network of support. With this support, graduates can gain the skills and confidence to navigate the system and ultimately succeed in the increasingly competitive recruitment arena. Without it, less privileged students are left in the dark, playing a game they don't know how to win, making a mockery of political rhetoric about social mobility (Friedman & Laurison, 2020).

Beginning with Bourdieu, the interview data of graduate recruiters supports his concept of inherited social capital, specifically the role of parental social connections and friendships which form the backbone of elitist social reproduction. As one graduate recruiter stated, nepotism is *"alive and kicking"* in the recruitment process, while another recruiter highlighted a *"fast track"* referral process to enable employees' relatives to be automatically shortlisted. Bourdieu interprets social capital as the resources embedded in relationships among powerful actors, with strong connections to different social fields. He defines social capital as:

> *The aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalised relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition - or in other words, to membership in a group - which provides each of its members with the backing of the collectively owned capital.*
> (Bourdieu 1986:247).

In the context of the empirical findings, the terms 'resources' and 'relationships' are particularly important. The interview data has shown that business graduates are required to forge relationships that are far deeper than a LinkedIn connection, in order to gain valuable information (the resource) into the recruitment process. One recruiter pointed out that graduates need *"complete awareness of the [recruitment] process"*, while a module leader suggested that less privileged students lacked the connections to *"open some of those doors"* to successfully navigate the complex and competitive recruitment journey. Relationships with influential individuals at large employers must be built and maintained, this study has discovered, to provide mutual credit and support when needed.

Equally however, the findings have highlighted the limitation of Bourdieu's approach, and reveal a complex multi-dimensional, intersectional interpretation of social capital. The interview data from graduate recruiters, in the context of the Black Lives Matter movement, revealed that business students with a deficit of social capital is not simply due to social class but also their ethnicity (Foroohar, 2020). One graduate recruiter suggested there was *"denial that there is a problem"* amongst senior managers, and *"diversity isn't even of interest"*. The racial prejudice identified in McDonald and Day's (2010:538) study more than ten years ago still persists, as the "invisible hand" of social capital continues to provide white men with access to exclusive jobs while, as another recruiter revealed, the cultural *"bias"* of line managers is allowed to endure, and that is where *"reality bites"* for Black graduates. The study suggests that Black graduates are more likely to be embedded in less privileged social circles, with the white elite creating a form of social exclusion through highly segregated professional networks. This is partly due, as Gaddis (2012) pointed out in his study, that social capital is easier to accumulate where the two parties share the same ethnicity and social class, as individuals are more likely to trust someone similar to themselves. Consequently, as one recruiter disclosed, the minority of Black graduates who gain employment are recruited as tokenistic symbols for *"marketing campaigns"*, while *"all around [...] were white males"*.

In order to build these relationships, the interview data shows that less privileged business students are able to build social capital through experiential learning, from proactive interactions with guest speakers, to substantial work experience and internships. In doing so, they are able to deliberately operationalise social capital accumulation as a pathway to social mobility. One module leader acknowledged that experiential learning was a *"weakness"* in RGU's undergraduate business degree, while a recruiter proposed that *"placements should be compulsory [...] so that students get a real kind of understanding of how a business works"*. Another recruiter highlighted that less privileged students who had not benefitted from experiential learning, had *"no-one within their network to explain how to get a graduate job"*. This transactional perspective of social capital, interpreted as an exchange of valuable knowledge or information from employer to student, is strongly aligned to economist, Coleman (1988). He believes in the theory of rational choice, suggesting that individuals have the power to accumulate social capital through their own actions. Mirroring the perspectives of the graduate recruiters in this study, Coleman states that individuals (business students in this case) are able to calculate and determine the quality and quantity of social relationships in which they are involved. However, Coleman points out that the transaction is not tangible or easily discovered. This lack of transparency can allow social norms to be maintained, enabling actions in recruitment that are seen as appropriate and correct by the dominant management elite. Indeed, passing down knowledge and contacts to a son or daughter is seen as family members "acting selflessly in the family's interest" (Coleman, 1988:104-5). He also identifies that social capital loses value over time like human capital, with relationships as well as knowledge becoming outdated or obsolete (ibid). Given time, social relationships can fragment, while expectations and obligations lose importance.

Positioning Coleman's definition in the context of the empirical findings, the social capital of graduate recruitment is the information an actor possesses about the recruitment process, including the hints, tricks and tips of the complex, multi-stage applicant journey, that are used for his/ her/ their own advantage. This study demonstrates that the primary source of this information is the company insider, either recruiter or hiring manager, who passes this knowledge to others inside his/ her/ their social circle. Coleman, while essentially arguing from an economic perspective, builds his theory of social capital around a judgement of trust. If a recruiter or manager trusts that a graduate will add value to the company, he/ she/ they are more likely to take action to ensure that specific graduate is recruited, devised through a cost-benefit analysis. The empirical data has shown that if trust has been built between the graduate and the recruiter/ manager, the more likely they are to disclose (or even adapt) the rules of the game, to improve that graduate's prospects of gaining employment. Beyond family ties, the typical route into the social circle for business students is experiential learning.

Fellow economist, Lin (2001:192) goes a step further than Coleman, defining social capital as an "investment in social relations with expected returns in the marketplace". For Lin, 'capital' is the quality of the knowledge obtained and the power of the individual, rather than the relationship alone. As graduate recruiters highlighted in this study, taking time to build and nurture relationships with the right individuals is key to gaining employment. One key relationship with an influential decision maker can be greater than hundreds of casual connections where critical information is not being transferred. Indeed, Lin deduces, to produce profit from the time and effort, individuals need to interact and network mutually. Individuals with more social capital carry more valued resources and, therefore, exercise greater power because of their strategic location in the network. In the context of the empirical data, this includes actors in decision-making management positions with the power to fast-track applicants and manipulate the system. For Lin, social relations are underpinned by loyalty, emotional support, and public advocacy, especially in a recruitment setting. Indeed, unlike Bourdieu or Coleman, Lin (2001:37) believes that social capital can be measured, in particular through "contact statuses" (occupation, position, sector) and "strength of ties" (interaction and reciprocity). Lin proposes to score relationships through a set of questions, for example testing the duration of a relationship, seniority and accessibility. For Lin (2001:42), the process of "social capital mobilisation" is not only possible but desirable because, through measurement, graduates are able to devise strategies to accumulate social capital and grow their professional networks. The interview data shows that a strategic and targeted strategy of relationship building is important, focused on quality rather than quantity, ideally forged through concrete experiences such as a placement or capstone project. As one recruiter pointed out, selecting a small number of relationships is key, as if they *"see [the student] connecting with my competitors, [it leaves] a negative impression"*.

Therefore, this study's definition, based on the analysis of the data, recognises the difference between informal social networks and social capital. The former are connections, frequently online, for sharing news, knowledge and 'likes'. Social capital on the other hand, is more akin to significant relationships that can assist business graduates with employment opportunities. It is built on common values and can only be nurtured when each party has a good understanding of their mutual benefit. To achieve this, the interview data shows that graduates need to utilise their qualities and values in building relationships with employers, and it will take time and effort to translate a professional network into social capital that will bring about measurable gain. In the context of this study, the definition of social capital is required to combine the perspectives of social versus transactional; of structural versus individual. Therefore, this study's definition is:

> ***Social capital****: a professional network, built on shared values and interests, for the purpose of career development.*

5.4.2 Embodied cultural capital: reconstructing the self

The empirical findings of this research present business graduates as engaging in a 'game' of recruitment. Graduates agree to play because they believe the gain is worth it, to be seen as a competent and legitimate employee, resulting in a secure and lucrative career. The interview data showed that the majority of module leaders recognised their role in supporting the *"transition of identity [from] student to quasi professional"*, through teaching and learning. Similarly, graduate recruiters described how the game of recruitment is played in accordance with rules or regularities (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992), which orient how players should and should not behave, interact, and present themselves. Corporate culture, and its inherently middle class connotations, requires graduates to enact a specific form of professional identity, in accordance with the one expressed by the dominant incumbents. This study finds that the attributes of a professional identity can be defined at cultural capital. For Bourdieu (1986), cultural capital refers to the embodied, objectified, and institutionalised states. The interview data conclusively shows that all three are relevant to the findings of this study, however it is the embodied state (defined by Bourdieu (1986:243) as the "long-lasting dispositions of mind and body") that is most critical to the central argument of this section.

Embodied cultural capital takes a long time to accumulate, which is why it is typically passed through the family from generation to generation. For graduate recruiters and module leaders in this study, embodied cultural capital is characterised by professional communication, confidence (verging on arrogance), and commercial awareness (profit over purpose). Indeed, as one recruiter pointed out, graduates with strong cultural capital, *"wipe the floor with everybody else"*. The objectified state is the physical representation of the embodied attributes, as recruiters disclosed, including physical appearance and wifi quality (due to the switch to online interviews during the pandemic). The institutionalised state is demonstrated through the degree certificate itself, with mixed experiences from recruiters regarding the significance of the awarding university's elite status (see section 5.3.2).

Unpacking the concept further, the empirical data from module leaders and recruiters shows that business students who were raised in privileged families are likely to have learned how to engage with middle class cultural capital before their employment. As the Careers Service Manager put it, *"parents can tell [privileged students] everything"*. This finding can be analysed through the lens of Bourdieu's notion of habitus. A habitus is the set of cultural experiences and dispositions that individuals have collected and encountered before embarking on a competitive recruitment process. Habitus forms "the infra-conscious mastery that agents acquire in the social world" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992:19), "predisposing rather than predetermining individuals towards certain ways of behaving" (Allen & Hollingworth, 2013:500). Having been brought up in the habitus of affluent families and private schools, privileged graduates achieve a natural cultural fit at large corporate employers, with a prior knowledge of how to play the game. This not only bolsters privileged graduates' chances of being recruited to sought-after positions, but also heightens their chances of feeling, metaphorically, like a "fish in water" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992:127) once employed, as they already possess and enact habitus associated with competent and credible employees. As a consequence, this also helps privileged graduates to cement relationships with clients at a time when "status is seen as a proxy for professional competence" (Giazitzoglu & Muzio, 2019:71). In contrast, those who are brought up in less privileged families have been exposed to, and most likely know best, a working class habitus. According to the interview data from recruiters, this is frequently encapsulated through a lack of communication skills, confidence, and commercial awareness.

As a result, the message from graduate recruiters in this study is that less privileged business students need to evolve and learn 'the rules of the game' operating at large corporate businesses. They must acquire and confidently display the values of the commercial, capitalist class to be seen as competent players, neutralising their personalities to reflect the hiring manager. As one graduate recruiter disclosed, graduates need to *"pivot quite a bit"* so that they *"demonstrate [the company's] values rather than tell us about their values"*. Accordingly, this results in a process of symbolic violence, whereby powerful hiring managers impose their values and norms on the less powerful business graduates. For their part, the business graduates participate in this domination by accepting this prevalence, feeling it necessary to adapt what they say and how they say it to mirror the recruiting manager. This performance, in an effort to reproduce the persona of the recruiting manager, requires accumulated embodied cultural capital, like an employability toolkit, in order to be successful. This is the reason that the conceptual framework draws a clear connection between embodied cultural capital and professional identity, viewed through the lens of Michel Foucault's social philosophy (see section 5.2.1).

In 1981, Foucault became increasingly fascinated by how an individual can turn him/ herself into a subject. In his seminars at the University of Vermont, Foucault defined four technologies comprising of technologies of production, technologies of sign systems, technologies of power and, critically in this study, 'technologies of the self'. The latter, he argues, enables individuals "by their own means or with the help of others… to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection or immortality" (1988b:18). This transformation is beyond "the obvious sense of acquiring certain skills" but also by adopting a different attitude; a professional persona which enables graduates to play the game of recruitment through "politicking and manipulation" (Gebreiter, 2019:236). In order to achieve this, Foucault argues, an individual must engage with the "Delphic principle, gnothu sauton", or 'know yourself' (1988b:19), stating that, "in the modern world, knowledge of oneself constitutes the fundamental principle" (1988b:22).

The empirical findings show that the neoliberal conceit of technologies of the self, in the pursuit of embodied cultural capital, is an ethically questionable but vital component for graduate recruitment. Therefore, cultural capital and professional identity are defined as:

> ***Embodied cultural capital****: dispositions of mind and character, particularly communications, confidence and commercial awareness.*
> ***Professional identity****: a persona that mirrors the values and behaviours of the recruiting organisation.*

5.4.3 Human capital: the diminishing differentiator of graduate recruitment

The empirical findings of this research have conclusively identified the diminishing role of human capital in graduate recruitment, with one recruiter describing technical knowledge as *"a given"*. The data has shown that this is not because the core knowledge and skills do not remain important to large employers, but that human capital is no longer a differentiating factor, either in shortlisting or hiring decisions. To this extent, business schools and the regulatory body, the Quality Assurance Agency, have been victims of their own success, creating a level playing field across the sector in terms of academic content. In the context of these findings, the definition of human capital, which was developed and articulated by American economists in the early 1960s, is strongly aligned to the work of Schultz and Becker (1993). Schulz (1961:1) defines human capital as "useful skills and knowledge" which form part of a deliberate strategy from governments to invest in education to drive post-war economic growth. Becker's definition, originally published in 1964, defined human capital as the "knowledge, skills, health [and] values" of an individual (Becker, 1993:16), extending this definition to incorporate "information" and "ideas" in 2002 (Becker, 2002:2).

Within the context of business education, for Becker (ibid), human capital is developed in three distinct ways: on-the-job training; formal and specific training; and general schooling. The findings of the research show that business schools are competent at delivering formal education that is transferrable to other sectors, companies, and roles. Business students leave with the necessary theoretical scaffolding to carry out graduate-level duties and tasks. On-the-job training is provided by the employer and, as Becker identified, is often exclusive to that company's products and services. This form of firm-specific human capital is seen by employers as being distinct from the university curriculum and, therefore, it is the soft skills of embodied cultural capital, and the relationships of social capital, that are more valuable. Therefore, based on the research data, the definition of human capital for graduate recruitment is:

***Human capital**: disciplinary knowledge and skills to perform a graduate role.*

High social mobility in the latter half of the twentieth century allowed Becker to imagine that human capital was not just necessary, it was sufficient to explain the relationship between education and work. It was, as Marginson (2015:3) deduced, "remarkably optimistic about the social power of higher education". The pervasive belief in the power of degrees to propel graduates into the labour market was, according to the empirical research, a naïve position. As Fugate et al. (2004:15) found in their study at the beginning of the century, employability is more than simply knowledge, it is a "psycho-social construct" that is a person-centred synergistic combination of human, social and cultural capital. Consequently, due to the levelling up of academic quality within business education, it is social and embodied cultural capital that are inevitably the differentiating factors in graduate recruitment.

Academic quality has been regulated through the Quality Assurance Agency, including the use of Subject Benchmark Statements (see section 3.2.1). Quinlan (2016) points out that they were subject to consultation and involved input from panels of academics and employers. In addition, the official programme specification provided for each university degree course in the UK must reference one or more of the subject benchmark statements, helping to ensure a common standard across universities within a given discipline (ibid). Similarly, Holloway and Francis (2002) highlighted the benefits to be gained by all business schools using the same subject benchmark statements to enhance the clarity and coherence of teaching programmes across the country. However, Quinlan's (2019:1044) study finds that there is "little attention" paid to the development of social and cultural capital. Indeed, as Massaro (2010:24) identified, the QAA only sets out the academic characteristics and standards of UK programmes, with some combining professional standards required by external professional or regulatory bodies. They are not, and have never been, designed to dictate the pedagogic approach to higher learning. That element is left to business schools to determine, which is analysed in the next section.

5.4.4 Employability pedagogy: concrete experience and reflective practice

The empirical findings of this research demonstrate that a combination of concrete experience, reflective practice, and engagement in extracurricular activities are essential for business schools to develop the employability of their students. First, the interview and NSS survey data suggests that experiential learning (see section 3.2.4), devised by Kolb (1984), is an effective way of engaging with work and work-related experiences, so that students can systemically accumulate the crucial embodied cultural capital components of communication, confidence, and commercial awareness. Second, Gibbs (1988) advanced Kolb's seminal model through his reflective cycle. Gibbs' cycle enables business students to critically reflect and process concrete experiences to develop their resilience and emotional intelligence in pressurised corporate environments. Third, that the concrete experiences for business students are a combination of formal work experience and engagement in extracurricular activities, including volunteering, clubs/ societies, and sport. Indeed, it is only through exposure to multiple environments that disadvantaged students can hope to compete with their peers for competitive graduate jobs. The findings of the NSS survey (see section 5.1.5), highlighted the inconsistency in the pedagogic design of modules at RGU's business school, with one student arguing that he/ she/ they *"would have loved for a greater proportion of the modules to have a more practical, applied approach to learning"*. This perspective was mirrored by graduate recruiters (see section 5.2.3), with the experience gained from internships and placements regarded as *"the most important"* aspect of a university experience. As another recruiter put it, not including opportunities for experiential learning was *"no longer viable"* for business schools.

Experiential learning challenges the traditional idea that learning is achieved through transmission of knowledge and suggests that deep learning is a process of creating knowledge through synergetic transactions between the business student and the environment (Marton & Saljo, 1984). Kolb conceived experiential learning (figure 2) as a holistic process in which the student is called upon to think, feel, perceive, and behave in interaction with the environment. It portrays two dialectically related modes of engaging with the experience: concrete experience and abstract conceptualisation; and two related modes of transforming experience: reflective observation and active experimentation (Kolb & Kolb, 2005). 'Concrete experiences' represent the basis for reflection, to create meaning from the experiences, and develop self-awareness of strengths and areas for development. The empirical findings of this study have shown that business graduates need to demonstrate their strengths succinctly and positively, as well as developing self-awareness of areas for development, if they are to achieve graduate employment. As one recruiter suggested, graduates are required to have a *"growth mindset"*, recognising their strengths and weaknesses, and three recruiters disclosed that self-awareness was a critical deciding factor at the interview stage (see section 5.2.2).

In advancing Kolb's model, Gibbs' (1988) reflective cycle (figure 6) is more detailed, providing questions to prompt the students, enabling them to process concrete experiences. The model chimes with the perspectives of module leaders, with one reporting that to be *"self-starting, agile graduates, they need to be reflective and self-aware"*, while another pointed out that reflective practice supports students to *"assess their mood and manage their own emotions"* in the workplace (see section 5.1.3). There are clear signs of how Gibbs' model echoes Kolb, in that he emphasises how learning happens from experience, which he suggests takes place in a particular sequence. Gibbs' cycle appears more comprehensive, however, with six steps, providing a series of cues to help students explore what they have learned at a deeper level. Although the model was designed for professions such as social work and health care, arguably this model will also help to support students in challenging private sector companies where stress levels can be high (Elvin, 2020). Indeed, as Bassot (2016:72) points out, Gibbs model prevents students from "dwelling too much on the negative side", encouraging them to find the positives. This is an important factor for a competitive interview process, with business graduates required to match durability and tenacity with an energic appetite to improve.

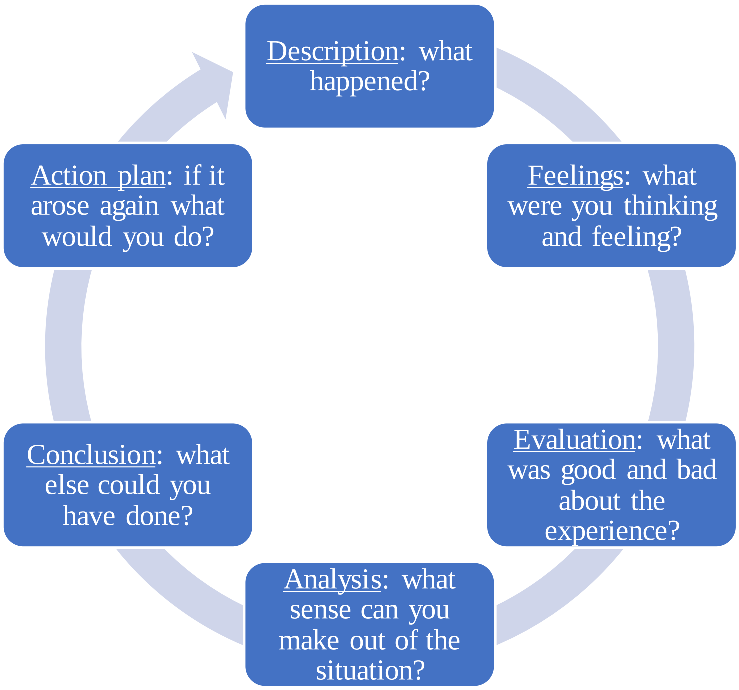


Figure 6: Reflective cycle (Gibbs, 1988)

In order to maximise the value of experiential learning and critical reflection, the interview data from module leaders and the Careers Service Manager highlight that employability pedagogy in the modern business school needs to be multi-dimensional and fully embedded in the curriculum. As one module leader stated, undergraduate business degrees must include a *"combination of work experience and classroom experiences that include real life case studies and scenarios"*. Indeed, as Yorke (2006) identified several years ago, employability should not be seen as an optional extra but fully integrated through summative assessment, enabling students to acquire professional behaviours. The structured process behind experiential learning is important to maximise the value of the experiences, for framing narratives around the potential to contribute to an organisation for employment, and for the transfer of this potential to professional contexts. This creates meaning for employability that is socially and contextually framed as students construct and articulate meaning from their experiences for personal growth. With this approach, aspiring business graduates need not be passive victims in the recruitment process. Exposure to practical experiences can enable students to be transformed into ideal recruits in a journey, as Gebreiter (2019:246) discovers, of "self-mastery, self-fulfilment and self-discipline".

There is consensus from the graduate recruiters that the nature of the experiences should be two-fold: formal work experience; and engagement in extracurricular activities (defined as volunteering, clubs/ societies, and sport). Indeed, as business schools expand their work experience offer, the length and quality of the placement will be more important than ever, with recruiters suggesting a duration from one semester to a whole academic year. For extracurricular activities, one recruiter summarised the empirical data, stating: *"There will be a lot of applicants who will look very similar on paper and, if I'm going to choose between them, it has to be extracurricular"*. These are key differentiating factors for business graduates, not just to gain cultural capital but social capital as well. This is because the culture of 'who you know, not what you know' can pose challenges for less privileged students. Activities that sit alongside formal work experience are also important, such as access to the institution's alumni to mentor and network with students, as module leaders identified. In the interview data, there is also evidence of good practices that bring employers directly to students in the form of events and practical projects. As Gilani (2020) found in his study, these interventions are especially impactful when they target students most in need of creating connections to enhance their social capital. Alongside enhancing the social capital of students, the interview data suggests it is also crucial that business schools are able to utilise their employer engagement networks to challenge discriminative practices at large employers, a theme conceptualised in the next section.

5.4.5 Conceptualisation in context: the barriers to social mobility

The real-world context of the empirical data is a vital consideration as it helps to frame the 'where', 'who', 'what' and 'when' of the research (Litchman, 2013). For Patton (1990) and Stake (1995) the role of context places findings socially, historically, and temporally, accepting that realities are fluent and fluid. Indeed, the influence of global events provides greater illumination into the research questions, contributing to the rich and detailed analysis of the participants' lived experiences (Bryman, 2008). Similarly, an understanding of the context helps to convey a sense of what it is actually like to be a module leader or graduate recruiter in a unique moment in time (Merriam, 1998). Therefore, this analysis highlights that the fieldwork for this study was carried out in 2021 at the same time as two significant events: the rise of social movement, Black Lives Matter; and the global health crisis, Covid-19. This context greatly influenced the interviews and the findings of the research, shining the spotlight on issues of intersectional discrimination and cultural bias. As one recruiter pointedly disclosed, Black Lives Matter has given *"everybody a kick up the arse in terms of racial and social diversity"*. It is acknowledged that if the research had been carried out in 2017, the #MeToo movement would arguably have played a more significant role in this analysis. As discussed in section 5.3.2, the social movement sought to expose the sexual abuse and sexual harassment of women and, like Black Lives Matter, spread from America around the world through social media campaigns and large-scale protests (Sayej, 2017). In short, the global context of 2021 (Black Lives Matter and Covid-19) generated useful findings that exposed the limitations of the conceptual framework, and extent to which social mobility is achievable through business education.

Despite the limited data exploring gender, the findings of this research can be aligned with the intersectionality of social inequalities, a concept formed by black feminist scholar, Crenshaw in 1989, in response to the civil rights movement in the United States. Both Black Lives Matter and Covid-19 have highlighted the distribution of wealth and power, with intersectionality as the glue to unite different forces of social discrimination in respect of ethnicity, gender, and social class. In the context of Black Lives Matter, one graduate recruiter suggested that for many large employers, *"diversity isn't even of interest to them"*. Meanwhile, the Careers Service Manager at RGU explained that Covid-19 will have the *"most impact on those from widening participation backgrounds"* due to a lack of opportunity to accumulate social capital because of the switch to online learning. The interview data suggests that the barriers experienced by less privileged students are not an issue of simply ethnicity or social class in isolation, but through a combination of factors that require a personalised and coordinated response. Reflecting Bradley's (1996) philosophical approach to identity, the findings of this research require business schools to treat students as individuals, abandoning the grand narrative of Marxism (capitalism producing inegalitarian social structures), instead focusing on the Weberian plurality of inequalities and how they intersect and interweave.

The vivid accounts from academics and professional services staff at the case institution underline the centrality of intersectionality in understanding the lived experience of less privileged graduates and their aspirations of social mobility. As one module leader disclosed, the focus on increasing student recruitment has meant that she *"can't personalise the [learning] experience to help them to understand what employability means"*. Another module leader revealed that the pressures on academic time resulted in a broken personal tutoring system that is *"not fit for purpose"*. The outcome is a business school that cannot sufficiently account for the employability needs of the individual. As Hill Collins (1990) identified, ethnicity, gender, and social class do not operate as separate mutually exclusive axes of inequality. However, as one graduate recruiter pointed out, companies are *"really guilty at tackling one [social] problem at a time"*, perceiving social inequalities as a series of one dimensional pillars.

To unpack this argument further, the study conceptualises the impact of Covid-19 and Black Lives Matter through a Bourdieusian lens. The barriers to accumulating social and cultural capital result from an intersectional habitus, framed not only by the socioeconomic status of the family but ethnicity and gender as well. In the context of Covid-19, the discrimination and bias around technology, due to the shift to online learning and recruitment during the pandemic, can be interpreted as cultural capital. Most significant is the impact on experiential learning and the concrete experiences identified in Kolb's (1984) cyclical model. The reduction of work placements of up to a third during 2020-21, according to the module leaders in this study, had a profound negative impact on disadvantaged students' attempts to accumulate cultural and social capital. Consequently, this shift favoured privileged students with hereditary social capital. Future studies will determine if this shift is short term or an abiding legacy of the pandemic.

Perhaps even more significant is the role of technology as objectified cultural capital. As one recruiter encapsulated, *"if [graduates] can't get online during Covid, or if [their] connection isn't great, then that can create barriers to entry for some people"*. Moving beyond the traditional view of expensive hardware (such as phones, tablets, and laptops) as the "symbolic markers" of social legitimacy, emphasised in Coskuner-Balli and Thompson's (2013:21) study, it is the quality of internet connectivity and confidence on webcam that are the essential components of cultural capital in the findings of this research. A lack of online engagement with module leaders and potential employers are lost opportunities to accumulate social capital, and can contribute towards expanding digital inequalities, which in turn play a role in reproducing social inequalities. As Ragnedda and Ruiu (2020) identified in their recent study exploring the impact of the pandemic on digital discrimination, competency and confidence can be accumulated over time during university study and converted into social and cultural capitals. However, as the findings from Ignatow and Robinson (2017:962) underline, students' engagements in the digital space throw into sharp relief new interrelations between technology and social positioning. The sustained quality of internet connectivity, combined with students'/ graduates' confidence to show their faces on camera, are a new para-pandemic litmus test of graduate recruitment. Landrum (2020) identifies in his US study that students' confidence levels are aligned to their level of IT competency. The findings of this research agree with this outcome, but further suggest that confidence and competency with online learning and graduate recruitment are sociologically connected to the students' technological habitus and economic capacity. Confidence levels are negatively impacted and exacerbated in the online environment, the data from module leaders and recruiters suggest, and becomes another hurdle for disadvantaged individuals to overcome.

Turning to ethnicity in the context of Black Lives Matter, the findings of this study align with the research of Hage (2000), a Lebanese-Australian academic, who uses Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital to explore multiculturalism and racism in Australia. Hage conceives of 'whiteness' as being a form of embodied cultural capital, with other ethnicities attempting to exchange the cultural capital of their ethnic background with that of whiteness to gain a higher position in the social hierarchy. For Hage (2000:204), it "presupposes a 'cultured' and sublimated approach to otherness" in a society dominated by the elitist dimensions of the "cosmopolitan class" representing the embodiment of transnational capitalism. The connections between privilege and ethnicity, and between cultural capital and professional identity, are strongly aligned to the interview data from recruiters, in particular the dominance of cultural fit in recruitment decisions. Beyond the physical characteristics of race (in particular, skin colour), cultural fit is determined through an intersectional embodiment of an employable business graduate, duplicating the organisation within the individual. As one recruiter highlighted, the graduate must become *"one of us"*, especially if they are to represent the company in front of clients. The findings show that, to be employable, a business graduate must aspire to mirror the recruiting (mostly white) line managers, with the same values, university, and personality traits, in a concerted effort to homogenise difference between him/her and the privileged elite.

To take Young's (1961:85) satirical account of meritocracy into the present, it is the series of intersectional injustices that generate "inequality of opportunity fostered [in] the myth of human equality". Indeed, this study has found that graduate recruitment is not about ability or intelligence, but as Friedman and Laurison (2020:124) found in their study exploring social class, "the fuzzy, ambiguous notions of [cultural] fit". As Bukodi and Goldthorpe (2019) emphasised, cognitive meritocracy is a myth of the educational policy-making establishment. In short, the brightest will not necessarily rise to the top. Less privileged business graduates must judge themselves not by their intellect, but by the standards of the corporate elite. Without the experience, opinions, and values sanctioned by potential employers, they are deemed unworthy. This is a relatively unexplored area of empirical research that provides further justification of the methodological decision to focus on the perspectives of graduate recruiters. The analysis of student perspectives in the NSS survey adds value to this study, but it is the discoveries based on the semi-structured interviews with recruiters and module leaders that has informed the contribution to knowledge. As Goodhart (2020) noted in his recent study, the hyper-globalisation of cities such as London has created a transnational privileged class, studying at the same universities, working at the same corporations, and consuming the same media. In connecting with their peers around the world, they have grown more distant from compatriots at home (Rodrik, 2019). That view may be part of what motivated young white men and women marching with people of colour as part of the Black Lives Matter movement (Foroohar, 2020). At its heart, those individuals were protesting against social injustice; against an educational system that pits one individual against another and rewards a smaller group of people at the top.

The empirical findings of this study suggest that the question for business schools and graduates alike is simple: do you protest or play the game? If it is the latter, to achieve graduate recruitment, less privileged students must be willing to use their undergraduate business degree to reconstruct their identities through symbolic capital accumulation, and ultimately conform to the expectations of the transnational elite. In the next section, the study sets out a conceptual framework for graduate recruitment.

5.4.6 Chapter summary

The framework (figure 7) is designed to provide an understanding of graduate recruitment through a network of intersecting concepts (comprising: embodied cultural capital; social capital; human capital; professional identity; and social mobility) that provide an interpretative approach to the nature of reality (Levering, 2002). It is intended to build on the powerful thinking tools of theoretical framework (see section 2.6) and respond to the empirical data (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The interpretative framework is underpinned by social constructivism (see section 4.1.2), influenced by the author's relativist ontology and subjectivist epistemology (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). The graduate recruitment framework is based on the lived experiences of graduate recruiters, module leaders, university support staff, and students, in an attempt to understand employability from their perspectives. Significantly, the framework reflects a particular moment in time, with individuals' versions of reality shaped by events such as the global health crisis (Covid-19) and Black Lives Matter, which inevitably have had a profound impact on how the participants see the world (Eliaeson, 2002; Merriam, 2002). Advancing the debate of employability in the UK (for example Tomlinson, 2017), the study uses the synergistic perspectives of the participants to understand the relationship between human, social, and cultural capital, questioning the role of human capital in the UK as a result of a regulated and standardised approach to business education.

Critically, it has been discovered that the role of human capital (Becker, 1993) is diminishing in graduate recruitment. Indeed, the case study demonstrates that it is the accumulation of social and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986) that are greater factors in graduate recruitment. To accumulate social and cultural capital, pedagogic strategies rooted in experiential learning (Kolb, 1984) and reflective practice (Gibbs, 1988) are critical for business students, in order to develop a reconstructed professional self (Foucault, 1988) to successfully navigate the complex and hyper-competitive recruitment process.

The context of the study, in particular Black Lives Matter and Covid-19, have damaged social mobility through ingrained structures and processes that are designed to protect the powerful elite and retain the status quo. It appears that the business school at the heart of this research needs to do more to systematically weaken the enduring link that exists between students' intersectional inequalities and their employability. In contemporary Britain, graduates from privileged backgrounds are more likely to enter elite occupations (Bukodi & Goldthorpe, 2019). Fundamental inequalities flow from students' individual family backgrounds, leaving well-meaning recruiters unable to unilaterally tackle intersectional inequalities (especially ethnicity, gender, and social class) in the workplace (Friedman & Laurison, 2020). The ability to present oneself confidently, with strong communication and commercial awareness, are the fundamental ‘rules of the game’ of graduate recruitment (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1993), rooted in a misrecognition of ‘talent’, sponsored by a powerful elite built on cultural and class homogenisation. Efforts to improve equality and diversity, both at business schools and large employers, are too often one dimensional along a single axis of inequality (Hill Collins, 1990), failing to understand how students’/ graduates’ lives are influenced by multiplicative layers of discrimination (Crenshaw, 1989).

However, for the graduate recruitment framework to be understood as the culmination of the data analysis, it is important to view social mobility through the primacy of agency in shaping human behaviour (Barker, 2005). In doing so, there is a necessary extension from Marxist philosophy, embracing the pluralistic fragmentation of class and social mobility (Bradley, 1996). Less privileged business students in post-industrial capitalist societies can function as active agents in the construction of their professional identities rather than being the casualty of ingrained structural inequalities (Foucault, 1988). They achieve this through the rational and calculated accumulation of cultural and social capital to bridge the partition between less privileged graduates and the establishment. This is the logical conclusion of the study, not just as a result of the interview data from graduate recruiters and module leaders, but the striking feedback from students in the NSS survey. For many of them, the realisation that degree alone is not enough came too late, due in part to the fragmented approach of the case institution, which required students to be independent and self-directed in their efforts to build employability.

For less privileged students with a strategy to build their employability, this study has shown that there are grounds for optimism. Indeed, Bourdieu (1986) does not assume a perfect alignment between the accumulation of economic capital with cultural and social capital. There is the possibility, albeit challenging, to gain a foothold in the elite transnational capitalist class by navigating the constraints of the social structure (Calhoun, 2002). The “dispositional architecture” of habitus is subject to change, via a conscious and intentional strategy of symbolic capital accumulation (Friedman & Laurison, 2020:194), developed by the individual and scaffolded by business school pedagogical interventions. Maximising exposure to members of the dominant class in field-specific scenarios at university has the ability to beat the ruling elite at their own game. The propelling power of privilege remains a major advantage, but this conceptual framework is designed to present a pathway for business schools to enable their students to level the playing field and achieve graduate employment.

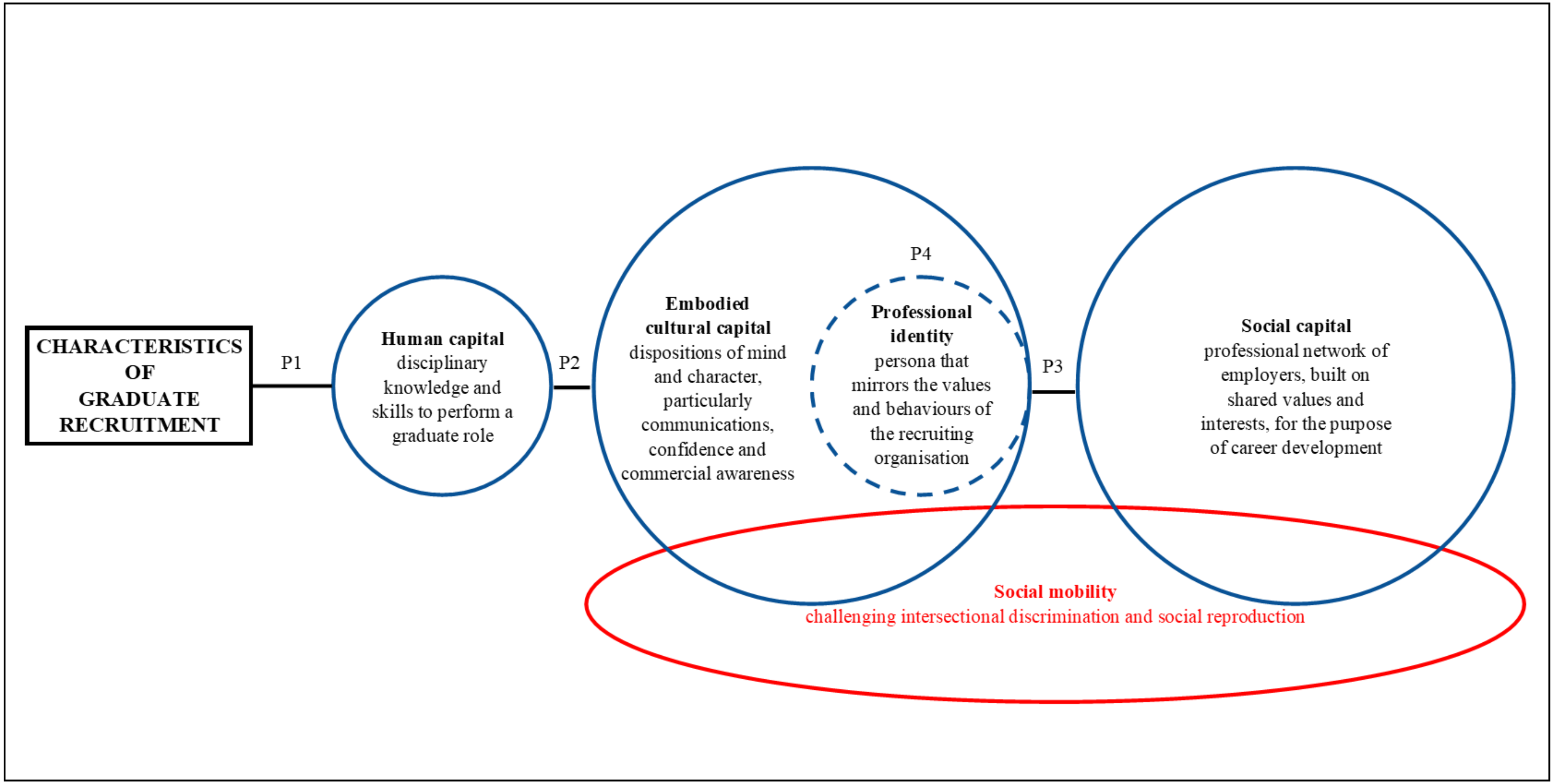


Figure 7: Conceptual framework displaying the characteristics required for graduate recruitment in the case study of RGU's business school

Proposition labels: P1, P2 and P3: A combination of human (Becker, 1993), cultural and social capital (Bourdieu, 1986b) is required to compete for graduate roles (Young, 1961). The findings of this study indicate a hierarchy to symbolic capital, with cultural and social capital the most important in the graduate recruitment arena.

P4: To accumulate cultural capital, students are required to develop a professional identity (Foucault, 1995) aligned with the expectations of the employer. The findings of this study indicate that graduates are required to perform a deliberate process of cultural matching with the cosmopolitan capitalist class in order to compete for graduate roles.

5.5 Summary of the data analysis

The three sections of the data analysis presented the data collected from the participants and discussed the major findings of this research. The fourth section sought to draw coherent meaning from the data, deepening conclusions through a conceptual framework. In summary:

- The role of human capital (Becker, 1993) is diminishing in graduate recruitment and my case study demonstrates that it is the accumulation of social and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986) that are greater factors in graduate recruitment. Students are required to demonstrate specific behaviours and attributes, specifically communication, confidence and commerciality, while embodying the company's values through their well-articulated lived experiences.
- To accumulate social and cultural capital, pedagogic strategies rooted in experiential learning (Kolb, 1984) and reflective practice (Gibbs, 1988) are critical for business students, in order to develop a reconstructed professional self (Foucault, 1988). The accumulation of social and cultural capital is principally achieved through work experience and extracurricular activities, with students often realising too late that academic credentials alone are not enough to successfully navigate the complex and hyper-competitive recruitment process.
- Module leaders and graduate recruiters are situated at the intersection of various social structures and systems of power, designed to maintain reproduction of the privileged class. The Black Lives Matter social movement has raised the profile of racial inequalities at universities and in company boardrooms. However, there is a worrying disconnect between the marketing of inclusive values and culture, and the decision making of recruiting managers. Similarly at RGU, discussions about decolonisation have not been matched by action, in module outlines, reading lists, or the recruitment of academic staff.
- The global health crisis, Covid-19, has exacerbated social inequalities in graduate recruitment, through increasing social reproduction. First, in RGU's business school, opportunities for experiential learning and work placements have been significantly reduced due to the lockdown

and government restrictions around social distancing. Second, the switch to online learning has exposed working class students to digital discrimination, creating a negative impact on young people from less privileged backgrounds.

- Advancing the debate around the employability agenda in the UK (for example Donald et al., 2019; Fugate et al., 2014; Tomlinson, 2017), the study uses the synergistic perspectives of participants to understand the relationship between human, social, and cultural capital through a series of revised definitions and a conceptual framework for graduate recruitment representing the culmination of this study.

6. Conclusion and Implications

In this final chapter, I summarise the findings from the data analysis chapters to demonstrate how I have answered the research questions and addressed the overall research aim. I recognise that it is not possible to conclude with overly generalised, sweeping statements, as the judgements of my participants cannot be recognised as cultural or scientific truths (Hughes & Sharrock, 1990). What is true in one reality for an employer or a university can be different from another, especially given the "complex, multi-dimensional" perspectives (Ryen, 2016:35) of employability, where "nothing is ever certain" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018:52). The overall aim of the study was to explore the extent to which the case business school, a Russell Group university, was preparing its graduates to meet the needs of large corporate organisations in London. For this, I drew on an educational and sociological lens to analyse and make sense of the interview data from module leaders (sample of 6), university support staff (4) and graduate recruiters (7), and the free text responses of students in the National Student Survey (NSS) (26). In doing so, I explored the ways in which quality assurance regulation, teaching and learning practice, family backgrounds, and wider social factors influenced the perspectives and actions of respondents both inside the business school and at large employers.

6.1 Final reflections

The findings were organised in four sections culminating in my conceptual framework for graduate recruitment, resulting from the research questions outlined in the Research Methodology (see chapter 4), comprising:

Section	Chapter title	Research question
5.1	The case study of a business school in a Russell Group university	1. How does a Russell Group university prepare graduates for employment in its undergraduate business degrees?
5.2	The expectations of employers in the recruitment and selection process	2. How do large employers evaluate business graduates to inform recruitment decisions?
5.3	Social mobility and meritocracy: the enduring barriers to graduate recruitment	3. What social factors limit recruitment of business graduates at large employers?
5.4	The rules of the game: a conceptual framework for graduate recruitment	4. What are the knowledge, skills and attributes required in business graduate roles?

Table 15: Data analysis chapters organised by the primary research questions

6.1.1 How does a Russell Group university prepare graduates for employment in its undergraduate business degrees?

Throughout this thesis I have argued that there is no single 'truth' but multiple realities (Weber, 2005). The perspectives of the interview participants at RGU, comprising of module leaders and support staff, in addition to the analysis of free text data from the NSS, were multiple, complex, and overlapping. Consequently, the business school does not always embed employability consistently, with students' experiences heavily dependent on their module leaders' philosophical approach to higher learning. At its best RGU embeds employability through a multi-dimensional approach to experiential learning and critical reflection, bridging theory and practice through credit bearing and extracurricular activities, ranging from substantial work placements and summative capstone projects to formative employer-led tasks and guest speakers. The university support services, in particular the careers service, seek to prepare students to compete for graduate roles through structured CV enhancement and workshops on interview technique. Module leaders bring learning to life through a Deweyan (2011) socially constructivist educational philosophy achieved through practice to develop intellectual initiative and personal growth. However, it is an open secret in the academic community in the business school that other module leaders are opposed to this type of module design, apparently rejecting the utilitarian shift to 'vocational' education and, instead, focusing on traditional lectures to large groups of students.

I have argued that the QAA has successfully levelled up the delivery of business degrees in the UK with regards to theoretical concepts and technical knowledge, the essential building blocks of human capital (Becker, 1993). The Subject Benchmark Statements have set a clear direction for learning objectives and module content that means business students have appropriate knowledge for graduate roles (Quinlan, 2016). It is evident from the findings that this regulation has been so successful that recruiters interviewed as part of this study now take graduates' knowledge for granted. In a competitive environment, the differentiating factors are now cultural and social capital, which the QAA has failed to sufficiently address. While module leaders point to a culture of *"measurement mania"*, the absence of pedagogical consistency prescribed through regulation is resulting in business students' employability being limited due to a lack of practical application, experience, and critical reflection embedded into some modules. Universities such as RGU have the power to bring about consistency, but they are potentially hiding behind a cloak of individual academic judgement. The outcome is that some students feel let down by their module selections, particularly impacting on less privileged students trying to navigate a complex system of graduate recruitment without the advantage of family habitus.

The inconsistency in module design discovered in this study makes extracurricular opportunities even more valuable to the employability of business graduates. Particularly salient were the perspectives of graduate recruiters who found extracurricular opportunities to be *"really key"*. Participants found RGU's extracurricular offering to be comprehensive, including societies, volunteering, and opportunities to engage with employers, either through events or work experience. Too often, however, students lamented their lack of engagement with these opportunities, frequently realising too late their significance to graduate recruitment. As the extracurricular portfolio, by its nature, is optional and non-credit bearing, some students chose instead to focus on their formal module diet resulting in missed opportunities to enhance their CVs. In the next section, I develop this argument further as I conclude the findings of graduate recruiters.

6.1.2 How do large employers evaluate business graduates to inform recruitment decisions?

It is evident from the findings that the graduate recruitment process is consistently complex, typically comprising a minimum of three stages: application; assessment centre; and interview. Further, the evaluation criteria are skewed away from technical knowledge towards an assessment of professional identity and cultural fit, established through an assessment of embodied cultural capital, defined by participants as communication, confidence, and commercial awareness. Graduates' applications are enriched by a variety of experiential components including work experience, volunteering, and participation in sports. Recruiters are seeking to understand the graduates' *"growth mindset"*, with the motivation and initiative to take on new challenges, while also having the ability to critically reflect on their strengths and weaknesses. Graduates must also use these experiences to clearly demonstrate alignment with the company's published values, although the extent to which these values are exhibited by recruiting managers has been found to be questionable. It is salient that the aspiration of recruiters, and to some extent shareholders, to achieve a diverse workforce through a meritocratic recruitment process has been largely dashed through the necessity for graduates to understand the 'rules of the game'.

The shortlisting process dominated the findings to this research question, because it in turn monopolised the day-to-day workload of the graduate recruiters. For the majority of graduate recruiters, the increased demand for graduate roles amplified the pressure on stretched teams, resulting in the rushed manual screening of applications, creating a well-intentioned but arbitrary approach to shortlisting. Graduates who have not been supported to 'play the game' in their applications, through the habitual social memory of family ties (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992), or the experiential learning (Kolb, 1984) embedded into their university experiences, are at risk of being dismissed without detailed consideration of their abilities. Once 'through the door' of the assessment centre and ultimately to interview, graduates must showcase their professional identities to prove, as a recruiter succinctly stated, that he/ she/ they are *"one of us"*. Rather than appearance, the findings have emphasised behaviour and personality as core components of a professional identity, fulfilling the requirements of a multi-national capitalist class. One possible advantage of the multi-national perspective of large employers and their shareholders is the reduced impact of the university the graduates attended. Several participants reported that shortlisting was agnostic of institution, however recruiters equally reported that it became more relevant at interview stage due to the personal preferences of the hiring manager. I expand further on the social factors impacting graduate recruitment in the next section.

6.1.3 What social factors limit recruitment of business graduates at large employers?

In this study, social factors are defined as the social categories or constructs that inform processes of social differentiation (Bradley, 1996) (see section 3.4). These social factors are not limited to social class like the majority of educational sociological discourse (for example Willis, 1977), but consider other aspects including ethnicity and gender. These social phenomena exist outside of us as individuals, acting as constraints that affect the prospects of social mobility (Durkheim, 1966). They intersect and interweave to form the complex hierarchies that are characteristic of metropolitan cities such as London (Butler & Watt, 2007). In the context of this study, social factors have been found to be bounded within contemporary institutional and cultural contexts (Mehan, 1979), requiring greater interpretation of the raw qualitative data (Hammersley, 2008).

The findings gained from this research suggest that patterns of power and inequality that exist for business students competing for graduate roles reflect the intersectional discrimination ingrained in society on the basis of ethnicity, gender, and social class. Indeed, despite the achievements in widening participation policy since the mid-1990s (Major, 2019:1), the rapid increase in higher education students has only delayed intersectional discrimination to the graduate recruitment phase, potentially limiting social mobility and deepening structural inequalities. RGU's business school could not protect its students from the global health crisis, Covid-19, which has been shown to have deeply damaged graduates' employment potential, through the shift to wholly online learning which severely restricted access to experiential learning opportunities, particularly formal placements and internships. The interviews highlighted that graduates who benefitted from inherited social capital through a relative working at a large company, had a higher probability of gaining graduate employment, as there was little opportunity for less privileged students to acquire a professional network. It appears that graduates who came to university with an advantage, are almost certain to graduate in the same position of power, with the leverage to achieve their career aspirations.

Similarly, the impact of the social movement, Black Lives Matter, has resulted in the progressive expansion of social inequality discourse at large employers and universities. Modules leaders disclosed that discussions regarding decolonising the curriculum at RGU have been frequent, while according to participants from large employers, pressure from shareholders has resulted in recruiters targeting post-92 universities, with challenging targets to achieve diverse applicant shortlists. However, while participants universally acknowledged that Black Lives Matter has successfully raised awareness, the positive impact on Black business graduates has been limited. Module leaders participating in this study could not recall practical differences to the curriculum as a result of decolonising initiatives, while one recruiter captured the perspective of the majority of participants, that despite his endeavours, they "*really need to see this [work] actually translating into job offers and not just the shortlisting"*. The findings show that successful Black graduates are seen as breaking the mould; individuals to be paraded in marketing literature and presented to new business students as a triumphant display of their progress. In the realities of the graduate recruiters, these graduates were successful because they were able to embody 'whiteness' (Hage, 2000), a professional identity of the elite cosmopolitan class that enabled them to achieve a cultural fit. They were able to 'become' the organisation, like a piece in a jigsaw, completing a process of homogenisation by adapting their communication styles and personalities, to become a commercialised embodiment of the company.

The findings of this study indicate that while increasingly business graduates are having fair *access* to recruitment opportunities, intersectional social factors including social class, ethnicity and gender are resulting in sustained inequality of *outcomes* from the recruitment process. Going further, social mobility is a key means of justifying inequality, legitimised by claims of meritocracy that have served to reinforce social reproduction. In the next section, I discuss the wider contribution of this study and recommendations for policy and practice, in an attempt to overcome some of the social limitations to graduate recruitment.

6.1.4 What are the knowledge, skills and attributes required in business graduate roles?

My conceptual framework for graduate recruitment in section 5.4 demonstrates that employers are seeking well-rounded business graduates with a combination of human, social and embodied cultural capital. This finding reflects many of the existing empirical studies analysed in the literature review, including Fugate et al. (2004), Knight & Yorke (2003), Pegg et al. (2012), and Tomlinson (2017). Critically, however, this study builds on the existing discourse, through identifying the diminishing role of human capital (Becker, 1993) in graduate recruitment, with one recruiter describing technical knowledge as *"a given"*. My case study demonstrates that it is the accumulation of social and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986) that are greater factors in graduate recruitment. Indeed, business students are required to develop a reconstructed professional self (Foucault, 1988) to successfully navigate the complex and hyper-competitive recruitment process. The ability to present confidently, with strong communication and commercial awareness, are the fundamental 'rules of the game' of graduate recruitment (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1993).

However, this research has also discovered that business education and the labour market can be seen as having a complimentary rather than contradictory philosophical approach. The prevailing discourse of higher education shifting to a form of vocational training (Kennedy, 2019) is, according to this study, not the core requirement of large employers. In the literature review (see section 3.1), I analyse the contemporary studies highlighting a neoliberal, utilitarian model of serving the knowledge-based economy through the rapid acquisition of occupation-specific human capital (Bridges & Jonathan, 2002; Kennedy, 2019; Winch, 2002). Instead, my empirical research discovers that employers are seeking graduates with self-awareness and growth potential, characterised through an ability to showcase values and attitudes needed to represent their businesses and shareholders. Regulation informed by government policy has resulted in human capital being the core purpose of higher education in the UK, but it is the ability of the business school to drive the construction of social and cultural capital that will enable graduates to gain maximum return from their degrees as global citizens. Indeed, the focus on human capital and its narrow social meaning is being used by privileged class as a mechanism to maintain power and reproduce social inequalities.

Using a sociological lens framed by Bourdieu's (1986) concepts of habitus and capital, Becker's (1993) analysis of human capital, and Foucault's (1988) theory of technologies of the self, I have been able to revise and update the definitions in the context of business graduates. Together, while these components do not guarantee a graduate role, they represent the essential building blocks:

***Social capital**: a professional network, built on shared values and interests, for the purpose of career development.*
***Embodied cultural capital**: dispositions of mind and character, particularly communications, confidence and commercial awareness.*
***Professional identity**: a persona that mirrors the values and behaviours of the recruiting organisation.*
***Human capital**: disciplinary knowledge and skills to perform a graduate role.*

This study has found that the accumulation of symbolic capital, to inform the development of a graduate's professional identity, is grounded in the neoliberal conceit of self-responsibility. For the less privileged, it is for the individual to navigate their undergraduate education to develop their employable self. In the next section, I showcase the study's contribution to knowledge of sociology in higher education.

6.2 Contribution of the study to academic knowledge of sociology in higher education

The study makes an important contribution to the body of academic knowledge in the sociology of higher education. My literature review in chapter 3 analysed how studies that have explored issues of equity in higher education have overwhelmingly drawn on Bourdieu's (1986) 'forms of capital' to explain how privileged groups monopolise resources to maintain processes of social reproduction (Bhagra & Sharma; 2018; Bublitz, 2018; Fugate et al., 2004; Lazear, 2003; Ledermuller, 2011; Maxwell et al., 2009; Raybould & Sheedy, 2005; Tomlinson, 2017). Through recognising and critically analysing the dominance of Bourdieu in employability discourse, I have refined the definitions of cultural and social capital to reflect the lived experiences of my interview participants, by incorporating other sociological perspectives, including Foucault (1981), Coleman (1988), and Lin (2001). This was made possible through a case study methodology, seeing the world through the eyes of module leaders and graduate recruiters in a qualitative design to uncover the stories of graduate recruitment from their points of view. By further incorporating the perspectives of graduating students through free text responses in the established National Student Survey, I have been able to discover how the students suffer from a misdirected sense of agency, focusing on core academic work rather than the critical accumulation of cultural and social capital.

Going further, updating employability discourse focusing on a narrow, Marxist interpretation of the British class system (Reay, 2017; Willis, 1977), my empirical findings place the spotlight on the individual student through the concept of intersectionality (see section 3.4), where shared experiences are interwoven into multiple forms of social inequality (Bradley, 1996; Butler & Watt, 2007; Crenshaw, 1989; 2017; Hill Collins 1990; McRobbie, 1991). My study demonstrates that graduate recruitment can be limited by multiple social factors, in particular the intersectional elements of ethnicity, gender, and social class. Together, these represent a series of hurdles to overcome, requiring less privileged graduates to adapt their values and personalities through a conscious process of cultural matching. Interpreted through a Foucauldian lens (1981), graduates are able to embody 'whiteness' (Hage, 2000), which is not simply about race, but the ability to reflect the language and behaviour of the privileged white, male, cosmopolitan class. In short, this form of social bridging represents the 'rules of the game' (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1993) for graduate recruitment.

Developing this argument, Deem (2004) discussed the disconnect between sociology and higher education almost 20 years ago, arguing that education researchers were failing to connect with the range of sociological perspectives. I have attempted to advance the academic discourse by considering a range of concepts including Bourdieu (habitus, social and cultural capitals), Young (meritocracy) and Foucault (technologies of the self), to understand the extent to which business education can support social mobility by overcoming intersectional social barriers. In doing so, I have shed light on the social worlds that universities serve in an effort to make higher education a more equitable experience (Huber, 2020). In this respect, a key finding is the rejection of educational meritocracy as a driver of social mobility, mirroring the outcome of a large recent study by Bukodi & Goldthorpe (2019). However, my findings go further. I have discovered that while the existing research and policy focuses on accessing university as a solution in itself for social mobility (Andres, 2016), discrimination is being shifted from university admissions to graduation, where social inequalities are now being exacerbated in the recruitment arena. A focus on qualifications has been replaced with a subjective combination of cultural and social capital and, to be successful, graduate recruits are required to have normalised professional identities; to become as one recruiter disclosed, *"one of us"*. The process of professional socialisation is seen through the lens of Foucault's concept of technologies of the self, as individuals need to deliberately "transform themselves" (Foucault, 1988:18) by adopting a new normalised, marketable persona. This power struggle creates one of the core ethical dilemmas of our time: do less privileged students accept these social structures and learn to complete, or do they challenge the system through social movements such as Black Lives Matter?

Whichever direction the next generation of graduates take, the study finds that it is necessary for the case business school to treat students as individuals through an intersectional lens. As Crenshaw (2017) deduced, "it is not simply that there's a race problem here, a gender problem here, and a class or LBGTQ problem there". A sophisticated, holistic approach is required, through a consistent and connected, multi-dimensional approach to employability. In its simplest form, the institution needs to recognise that some students require more support than others. Without the required guidance, at the case institution, students experience an illusion of agency (Pronin et al., 2006), believing that their academic efforts will bring about the graduate role they crave. In doing so, they fail to deduce the intentions of the powerful agents, the graduate recruiters and hiring managers, who will ultimately decide who is employable and who is not. To make sound decisions, students need to understand what employability means to the individuals they wish to impress. To do so, they rely on the employability strategy of their business school. In the next section, I showcase the study's contribution to policy and practice, and recommend that change is required in business schools to enable *all* graduates to achieve graduate recruitment.

6.3 <u>Contribution of the study to policy and practice in higher education</u>

An important aspect of this study was to influence academic communities in business schools, in particular the pedagogic design of their undergraduate modules. Critically, the findings showcased the importance of experiential learning and reflective practice as components of employability. Consistency of the approach was key, especially for students, who felt in the National Student Survey that they faced a lottery of experiences depending on the educational philosophy of the academic. Moreover, students regretted their lack of participation in extracurricular activities, recognising too late the perspectives of recruiters who treat these experiences as pivotal in shortlisting. Significantly, the findings of this study are not to follow a path of narrow vocational training in business schools. On the contrary, it is a holistic education that is most important, featuring the theoretical scaffolding and technical expertise, which are now standardised through the QAA's regulation, matched by the evolution of the self, through work experience and critical reflection. This study concludes that business schools have the potential to be the spark to reignite social mobility in society, but it is by taking students on a socially constructivist journey of discovery - to learn through doing - that will give less privileged students the chance to become the "fish in water" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1993:127).

The great majority of module leaders, graduate recruiters, and university professional services staff recognise the need for business schools to change in order to enhance graduate recruitment. My interpretation of the recommendations emerging from the data include:

1. Achieve pedagogic consistency in teaching and learning, with a multi-dimensional and credit bearing approach to the development of graduate employability, focusing on experiential learning and critical reflection. In the Subject Benchmark Statements, the QAA is well-positioned to influence, and insist upon, a consistent pedagogical philosophy in business schools that supports the accumulation of social and embodied cultural capital.
2. Equality and diversity in business schools is too often organised one-dimensionally along a single axis of social inequality, especially gender or ethnicity. Yet individuals are better understood as being shaped by many axes of inequality that work together and influence one another. Business schools should treat students as individuals by understanding intersections between different strands of diversity, both in terms of how they analyse their learning analytics, and also in the design of modules and employability support services.
3. Business schools should encourage employers to reject favouritism and nepotism through the process of circumventing or 'gaming' formal recruitment processes. Properly articulated and enforced guidelines are therefore key to shutting down informal recruitment tracks that disproportionately reward the privileged. One way to achieve this would be to expand and democratise mentoring and coaching opportunities in partnership with all large employers, so less privileged students can learn the 'rules of the game' (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1993).
4. University research teams should partner with large employers to publish social mobility data related to graduate recruitment, at all stages of the recruitment journey, from shortlisting to job offers. This will allow for benchmarking across different companies and sectors, as well as for sector-wide drivers to be identified and collective solutions found. Where data is published, employers should also include details about what actions they are taking to drive improvement.

Clearly, the recommendations above affirm that more should be done to enhance the employability of business graduates, and deter employers from sustaining social reproduction in their organisations. The case institution, RGU, is well-placed to play a leading role in establishing a high quality and consistent employability pedagogy. However, other universities with smaller budgets may find it difficult to produce the comprehensive university 'experience' that business students require to accumulate social and embodied cultural capital (Bathmaker et al., 2016). Changes to the law will be required to enforce a transparent approach to graduate recruitment at large employers, however the capability of those businesses to implement the recommendations in a timely manner is not in doubt. Finally, of course there is an element of 'chicken and egg'. Employers will understandably require business schools to address their undergraduate degrees, by personalising learning to develop the employability of less privileged students.

Improving diversity and inclusion depend on reducing inequalities at each stage of a student/ graduate's journey. The findings of this study show that business schools are perpetuating inequality, while employers introduce barriers of their own making.

The rewards of effectively tacking employability in business education are significant. Change will bring about a more diverse workforce, potentially higher levels of productivity, and a socially just approach to the workplace, where individuals can thrive irrespective of their backgrounds. In the next section, I analyse the limitations of this study in achieving these objectives.

6.4 Limitations of the study

The qualitative methodology used in this study was appropriate for a small-scale research project seeking an in-depth understanding of the lived experiences of module leaders and graduate recruiters. I am a single researcher, which ruled out any possibilities of conducting and analysing additional interviews within a specified timescale. This would have brought extra value to the study, in particular a comparison between the case Russell Group institution and an alternative business school at a post-92 university. I accept that what is true in the reality of my case can and will be different from another, creating "complex, multi-dimensional" perspectives (Ryen, 2016:35) where "nothing is ever certain" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018:52). On the other hand, my decision of a single case study was underpinned by Merriam's (1998) approach, enabling me to gain an in-depth understanding of graduate recruitment both for a university and employers. It was a process of intensive discovery, benefitting from being organised through the strict boundaries of a single entity, and resulting in a heuristic outcome, illuminating the reader's understanding about graduate recruitment (ibid). Indeed, the use of semi-structured interviews brought an in-depth understanding of the educational and social factors within the specific case institution, allowing the respondents to construct their own meanings, and creating a thick description that reached beyond the large-scale quantitative studies that dominate the current published empirical discourse.

Using principles of grounded theory, it was possible to use the case study data to develop conceptual generalisations which, while tentative, can form a basis for future research (Bryman, 2008; Schofield, 2002). Patton's (1990) purposeful sampling approach produced an intuitive, information-rich case, building on other studies and taking into account the new and emerging social context (Stake, 1995). As Cronbach (1975:122) pointed out almost half a century ago, the generalisations proposed by this study will "decay", but the findings are there to be "tested again in the next encounter and again in the encounter after that" (Guba, 1978:70). Graduate employability is a lively and evolving discourse and, while my study represents a moment in time, its framework is there to be examined and updated in the years to come.

A second limitation was the sample of module leaders, all but one of whom were female and were all passionate about employability. Module leaders who may have been more sceptical about the employability agenda did not volunteer to take part. Consequently, the study lacks the perspectives of academics who are opposed to experiential learning and chose not to include reflective practice in their modules. On the other hand, the London-based graduate recruiters were an excellent representation, covering a range of age groups and ethnicities, providing fascinating insights into the working practices of a previously under-researched group.

Finally, I acknowledge that if the research had been carried out in 2017, the #MeToo movement would arguably have played a more significant role in this analysis. As discussed in chapter 5, the social movement sought to expose the sexual abuse and sexual harassment of women and, like Black Lives Matter, spread from America around the world through social media campaigns and large-scale protests. Conversely, the global context of 2021 (Black Lives Matter and Covid-19) generated useful findings that helped to form my conceptual framework. As Schofield (2002) pointed out, individuals are shaped by the era in which they live, and the study's complex socio-political context has greatly influenced the data and subsequent findings. However, by building on previous empirical research and making modest extrapolations (Patton, 1990), the findings of this study are both logical and clearly derived from the case.

6.5 Future research

To build on the findings of this research, the legacy of the pandemic on graduate employability will be an important topic. At the time of the data collection, RGU was grappling with the challenges of online learning and module leaders understandably questioned how the students will make up for lost time with regards to work placements and wider experiential activities. Equally, students undertaking A-levels and GCSEs during the pandemic experienced similar challenges with respect to developing embodied cultural capital, in particular the loss of social interactions with friends and teachers (El-Osta et al., 2021). It is therefore crucial that future studies seek to understand this impact, in order for robust interventions to be developed, if social inequalities are not to be exasperated. Equally, this study was carried out in the aftermath of the murder of George Floyd and the rise of the Black Lives Matter social movement around the world. This resulted in ethnicity dominating the data rather than other intersectional inequalities including gender and sexual orientation. It will be appropriate for future studies to incorporate a range of intersectional factors to understand their impact on enhancing graduate employability.

The Russell Group institution at the heart of this study provided a rich insight into graduate recruitment. However, future researchers may wish to consider investigating other subject areas beyond business, to determine if the findings of this study can be generalised across other sectors/ disciplines. In addition, carrying out multiple case studies at other universities, and further education colleges, is required to gain a holistic view of graduate recruitment. Those universities could include different positions in league tables, or be geographically spread around the UK. This would help to determine, for example, whether graduates have more opportunity to accumulate social and embodied cultural capital studying in London than in other counties where the number of graduate roles may be fewer. Finally, incorporating small and medium size enterprises, where recruitment processes are perhaps more streamlined, will create a deeper understanding of graduate recruitment and the potential for social reproduction.

6.6 Final comments

I am pleased to have had the opportunity to present the case study of RGU's business school, as well as to contribute to the 'knowledge community' of academia in this area, both of which were only made possible by the participants volunteering to take part in this research. I hope I have managed to do justice to the participants' accounts, as I attempted to understand more about them as individuals, which has been largely absent from previous studies exploring employability. I have also learnt a tremendous amount about research processes, including the various methodological approaches and methods used to elicit information, to develop research questions, and to read and search for literature. However, above all, I have learnt valuable lessons about articulating research findings through an educational and sociological theoretical lens, contributing to the knowledge of teaching and learning in higher education.

Appendices

Appendix 1: Information sheet (recruiters)

An invitation to take part in a research project

The role of graduate recruitment in the employability agenda: A qualitative case study of undergraduate business education at a London Russell Group university

Your invitation

You are being invited to take part in a research project. Before you decide whether or not to participate, 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 and discuss it with others if you wish. Ask me if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part. Thank you for reading this.

Who is carrying out the research?

My name is Mike Bennett. I am currently studying for a PhD at London Metropolitan University and I am interested in graduate employability, curriculum design and social mobility.

What is the purpose of the research?

I want to find out the extent to which undergraduate business degrees are meeting the needs of large employers in London. I want to explore what knowledge, skills and attributes employers are looking for, understand the recruitment process, and discover how academics are embedding employability into their degree programmes.

Why have I been chosen?

You have been chosen due to the importance of your role in recruiting graduates at a large employer in London. Several employers were selected on the basis that they have premises in London, feature in *The Times Top 100 Graduate Employers* list in 2020, and have advertised at least 50 vacancies requiring a business degree in the job description in 2019.

What is involved in participating?

I want to talk to you about your work recruiting graduates. I want to find out about the recruitment process, what you are looking for, and how graduates are performing. I would like to carry out an interview which will last about an hour, ideally face-to-face at a local café or restaurant. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, I will adhere fully to the government guidelines, such as track and trace, social distancing and a wearing face covering. I will pay for refreshments or lunch to thank you for your time.

However, I also want to give you the option to carry out the interview online via Microsoft Teams, Zoom or Skype, depending on your personal preference. Whether in person or online, I will be asking open questions to enable you to provide in-depth responses.

Will I be recorded, and how will the recorded media be used?

The audio interview recording will be used only for analysis. No other use will be made of the recording without your written permission, and no one outside the project will be allowed access to the original recordings.

What happens if I decide to take part?

If you do decide to take part you will be given this information sheet to keep (and be asked to sign a consent form) and you can still withdraw at any time without any negative consequences. You do not have to give a reason. If you wish to withdraw from the research, please contact me:

Mike Bennett

Email: mib0736@my.londonmet.ac.uk

What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?

I do not envisage any possible disadvantages to taking part. However, if I become aware of any disadvantages, I will contact you without delay.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?

Whilst there are no immediate benefits for those people participating in the project, I hope that this work will advance the debate on employability in business education. In addition, in supplying you with a digital copy of the thesis, I hope the theoretical and empirical findings will help to inform policy and support your professional practice.

Will my taking part in this project be kept confidential?

All the information that I collect during the interview will be kept strictly confidential and will only be accessible to me. You will not be able to be identified in any reports or publications unless you have given your explicit consent for this.

What is the legal basis for processing my personal data?

According to data protection legislation, I am required to inform you that the legal basis I am applying in order to process your personal data is that 'processing is necessary for the performance of a task carried out in the public interest' (Article 6(1)(e)).

What will happen to the data collected, and the results of the research project?

I will ensure that the recording and transcript is kept securely and that the form of any publication does not directly or indirectly lead to a breach of confidentiality and anonymity. To reduce the risk of confidentiality I will save the data on a third-party encrypted network. I confirm that at no stage will the data be shared with other researchers for means of secondary analysis. The recording will be stored for a period of five years.

Who is funding the research?

My PhD has been co-sponsored by the London Metropolitan University and [removed].

Who has ethically reviewed the project?

This project has been ethically approved via the London Metropolitan University's Ethics Review Procedure, as administered by the School of Social Professions.

What if something goes wrong and I wish to complain about the research?

In the first instance, you would contact the Lead Supervisor for my study:

Dr Rossana Perez-del-Aguila

Email: r.perez-del-aguila@londonmet.ac.uk

Should you feel that your complaint has not been handled to your satisfaction, I will give you the details of the Head of School of Social Professions, who will then escalate the complaint through the appropriate channels.

Contact for further information

Mike Bennett

Email: mib0736@my.londonmet.ac.uk

Telephone: 07912 [removed]

Thank you for taking part in this project.

Appendix 2: Information sheet (module leaders)

An invitation to take part in a research project

The role of graduate recruitment in the employability agenda: A qualitative case study of undergraduate business education at a London Russell Group university

Your invitation

You are being invited to take part in a research project. Before you decide whether or not to participate, 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 and discuss it with others if you wish. Ask me if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part. Thank you for reading this.

Who is carrying out the research?

My name is Mike Bennett. I am currently studying for a PhD at London Metropolitan University and I am interested in the sociology of higher education, graduate employability, curriculum design and social mobility.

What is the purpose of the research?

I want to find out the extent to which business degrees are meeting the needs of large employers in London. I want to explore what knowledge, skills and attributes employers are looking for, understand the recruitment process, and discover how academics are embedding employability into their degree programmes.

Why have I been chosen?

You have been chosen as a module leader of an undergraduate business degree at my case study university. My sample of module leaders incorporates levels four, five and six so that I am able to analyse modules from the three years of study. In addition, I have targeted module leaders who have worked in the business school for a minimum of three years, so you have had the opportunity to experience the annual development process for the programme.

What is involved in participating?

I want to talk to you about your module, how employability is embedded and how you have taken employers views on board in the design. I would like to carry out an interview which will last about an hour, ideally face-to-face at a local café or restaurant. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, I will adhere fully to the government guidelines, such as track and trace, social distancing and a wearing face covering. I will pay for refreshments or lunch to thank you for your time.

However, I also want to give you the option to carry out the interview online via Microsoft Teams, Zoom or Skype, depending on your personal preference. Whether in person or online, I will be asking open questions to enable you to provide in-depth responses.

Will I be recorded, and how will the recorded media be used?

The audio interview recording will be used only for analysis. No other use will be made of the recording without your written permission, and no one outside the project will be allowed access to the original recordings.

What happens if I decide to take part?

If you do decide to take part you will be given this information sheet to keep (and be asked to sign a consent form) and you can still withdraw at any time without any negative consequences. You do not have to give a reason. If you wish to withdraw from the research, please contact me:

Mike Bennett

Email: mib0736@my.londonmet.ac.uk

What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?

I assume that it will be possible for individuals to determine the identity of the case study university, should they wish to. This is because I disclose in my methodology chapter that I am employed by the institution, for reasons of transparency. As a result, I cannot guarantee institutional anonymity.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?

Whilst there are no immediate benefits for those people participating in the project, I hope that this work will advance the debate on employability in business education. In addition, in supplying you with a digital copy of the thesis, I hope the analysis will help to support your professional practice.

Will my taking part in this project be kept confidential?

All the information that I collect during the interview will be kept strictly confidential and will only be accessible to me. You will not be able to be identified in any reports or publications unless you have given your explicit consent for this.

What is the legal basis for processing my personal data?

According to data protection legislation, I am required to inform you that the legal basis I am applying in order to process your personal data is that ‘processing is necessary for the performance of a task carried out in the public interest’ (Article 6(1)(e)).

What will happen to the data collected, and the results of the research project?

I will ensure that the recording and transcript is kept securely and that the form of any publication does not directly or indirectly lead to a breach of confidentiality and anonymity. To reduce the risk of confidentiality I will save the data on a third-party encrypted network. I confirm that at no stage will the data be shared with other researchers for means of secondary analysis. The recording will be stored for a period of five years.

Who is funding the research?

My PhD has been co-sponsored by the London Metropolitan University and [removed].

Who has ethically reviewed the project?

This project has been ethically approved via the London Metropolitan University's Ethics Review Procedure, as administered by the School of Social Professions.

What if something goes wrong and I wish to complain about the research?

In the first instance, you would contact the Lead Supervisor for my study:

Dr Rossana Perez-del-Aguila

Email: r.perez-del-aguila@londonmet.ac.uk

Should you feel that your complaint has not been handled to your satisfaction, I will give you the details of the Head of School of Social Professions, who will then escalate the complaint through the appropriate channels.

Contact for further information

Mike Bennett

Email: mib0736@my.londonmet.ac.uk

Telephone: 07912 [removed]

Thank you for taking part in this project.

Appendix 3: Consent form

Please tick the appropriate boxes	**Yes**	**No**
Taking part in the project		
I have read and understood the project information sheet or the project has been fully explained to me.		
I have been given the opportunity to ask questions about the project.		
I agree to take part in the project. I understand that taking part in the project will include an interview, lasting up to 45 minutes, which will be recorded.		
I understand that by choosing to participate as a volunteer in this research, this does not create a legally binding agreement.		
I understand that my taking part is voluntary and that I can withdraw from the study at any time; I do not have to give any reasons for why I no longer want to take part and there will be no adverse consequences if I choose to withdraw.		
How my information will be used during and after the project		
I understand my personal details such as name, phone number, address and email address etc. will not be revealed to people outside the project.		
I understand and agree that my words may be quoted in publications, reports, web pages, and other research outputs. I understand that I will not be named in these outputs unless I specifically request this.		
So that the information you provide can be used legally by the researchers		
I agree to assign the copyright I hold in any materials generated as part of this project to London Metropolitan University.		

Name of participant [printed] Signature Date

Name of researcher [printed] Signature Date

Appendix 4: Interview guides

Recruiter interview guide

1. **Confirmation of sample criteria**

- Confirm job title.
    - Duration of employment.
- What is your role in the process of recruiting business graduates?
    - Probe relationship to the wider process.
    - Probe role in decision making.

2. **Graduate employability: skills, knowledge and attributes**

- What are the skills and knowledge you are looking for in business graduates?
    - Validate analysis of job descriptions.
    - Probe factors not included in the job descriptions.
- What attributes are you looking for in business graduates?
    - Probe character, appearance, confidence.
- What is your advice to business schools seeking to improve the employability of their graduates?
    - Probe experiential learning, placements.
    - Probe employer engagement, co-creation.

3. **Recruitment process: meritocracy and social mobility**

- Tell me, in detail, how [employer] evaluates the employability of business graduates?
    - Validate published process.
    - Probe stages: how are decisions made and by whom?
- What are the main reasons business graduates are not successful in the recruitment process?
    - Probe specific examples.
    - Probe social capital/ contacts.
- How does [employer] ensure that your recruitment decisions are based on a graduate's ability to perform the job?
    - Probe Black Lives Matter.
- How does [employer's] recruitment process reflect the values of the organisation?
    - Probe differences or inconsistencies from published values.

- In an ideal world, what would you change about [employer's] recruitment process?
    - Probe differences from published process.

4. <u>Impact of the international health crisis</u>

- Has the Covid-19 pandemic had any impact on the way you recruit graduates?
    - Probe online interviewing, digital divide.

5. <u>Final comments</u>

- Thank you for all that valuable information. Is there anything else you would like to share about the employability of business graduates?

<u>Module leader interview guide</u>

1. <u>Confirmation of sample criteria</u>

- Confirm job title.
    - Duration of employment.
    - Confirm module title.
- What is your role in the process of designing and developing the module?
    - Probe relationship to the wider process.
    - Probe employers' role in module design and development.

2. <u>Graduate employability: skills, knowledge and attributes</u>

- When designing your module, what skills and knowledge did you consider are most important for your students' employability?
    - Validate analysis of job descriptions.
    - Probe factors not included in the job descriptions.
- When designing your module, what attributes did you consider are most important for your students' employability?
    - Probe character, communication, confidence.
- Tell me why do you think some business graduates are successful and why others are unsuccessful in the recruitment process at large employers?
    - Probe social class, appearance, confidence.
    - Probe social capital/ contacts.

3. Curriculum design and pedagogy

- Tell me, in detail, how your module design and pedagogy enhance students' employability?
    - Validate published module specification.
    - Probe pedagogic strategy; experiential learning.
    - Probe evaluation: what is working, what could be improved.
- What are the values and principles that you teach to students in your module?
    - Probe social mobility and meritocracy.
    - Probe Black Lives Matter.
- In an ideal world, what would you change about the design and development of your module?
    - Probe differences from published process.

4. Impact of the international health crisis

- Has the Covid-19 pandemic affected your module and do you know if there has there been any impact on graduate employability?
    - Probe online delivery, impact on networking opportunities.
    - Probe impact on experiential learning, placements.

5. Final comments

- Thank you for all that valuable information. Is there anything else you would like to share about the employability of business graduates?

Appendix 5: Transcript of interview with a graduate recruiter

Male; age 30-35; white

MB I have now started the recording. How long have you worked in graduate recruitment?

GR1 Since 2014 at [removed], [removed] and now [removed].

MB That's really impressive. Thinking about your career experience to date, what has been your role in the process of recruiting business graduates?

GR1 Um, yeah, I have been working in graduate recruitment now for nine years. I've spent time in both the UK and Australia. If I was to describe my day job, it's probably the end-to-end recruitment of early talent, that might be graduates but apprentices too. I've done that across different industries, including law, engineering and now professional services, so I've done a lot across a range of different environments.

MB Is it common for graduate recruiters to move between industries in that way?

GR1 I don't know if it's a common thing. Often people find a niche and they stay working within that niche. I actually think it helps me because you see different versions of what best practice looks like, and different industries do things in different ways. You can take that knowledge and insight to apply to different companies.

MB Fascinating. Have you seen dramatic differences between the different sectors and how they apply their graduate recruitment policy?

GR1 Not really, and I think there's this myth that, you know, to work in a certain sector, you've had to have done it for a number of years. Yeah, there are quirks between each one. I'd say at [current employer] we've probably got the most quirks because we're very involved in the development of graduates when they join. You see, at [current employer], we are recruiting. two thousand graduates a year. Then we essentially look after them for two years.

MB Really?

GR1 Yeah, so industry knowledge is important as a recruiter, but I kind of think if you can partner with stakeholders, and quickly get your head around what they do, then you can be a recruiter in any setting. It keeps it challenging and interesting for me so… I've probably hopped around a bit and I'm not too shameless about that. That's how I progressed through my career versus staying in one place for a significant time.

MB Thinking about the different employers then, what has been your role in the process of recruiting graduates?

GR1 My role starts and ends probably at the point of initial screening and any final decisions are made by the respective line manager. At the beginning of the process my role is to define that job criteria with the stakeholders. It needs to be legally defensible, and it needs to be consistent, so we review everyone's application in the same way.

I probably get rid of the masses and then it goes from a much larger number to a much smaller number for stakeholders to deal with. Each organisation has got a slightly different way of doing that. Some rely a lot on manual sifting, some rely more so on testing, whatever it might be to reduce that number down somehow.

At [current employer], you know, we are heavily oversubscribed. We have challenges in making sure we recruit in the most equitable, systematic way. And then I guess you want the most diverse talent as well, so you want talent and a diverse cross section of talent that's representative of society at large.

MB Leading on from that, what are the skills and knowledge that you look for in business graduates?

GR1 I think there's been a shift away from degrees. Now, I think, increasingly so as organisations I've worked for have removed those barriers of entry. Of course, we value people who have achieved academically and have worked harder.

MB Looking at the job specifications, it looks like a business degree is essential?

GR1 I mean, if you're applying for graduate scheme, it's kind of a prerequisite. You've got a degree, so what else do you have? We remove the name of the university and we don't see that or the grade.

MB You don't ask for a 2.1?

GR1 No, the capabilities we need are demonstrated through everything else that they've done.

MB So what are the skills you are looking for?

GR1 I think the project skillset is becoming increasingly important. There's a lot of, like, futureproofing. I guess we need people who have got skills to come into roles and to be able to perform pretty much straight away, and I guess we don't have a full view of what the company will look and feel like moving forwards. Humans will be replaced by technology, but we can't really say what that means. But you want people who can adapt to that kind of work and roll with that change.

Resilience is really important. So, it might not be the same as before, but there's there is a common set of traits. I think that has been made more salient because of the pandemic. To be honest, I think there is a skill in being able to bond with people in a virtual manner. At the organisations that I've worked at, half of the people aren't based in the UK, so there is that need to be able to build relationships remotely.

Cultural and emotional awareness, that's really important as well. I mean, there are classic things like being a self-starter, being able to plan and organise. Business graduates don't struggle with that too much because they have to do that a lot for university.

MB That makes sense.

GR1 Yeah, they are probably the key things. Innovation is important as well, I mean. You want people to come with fresh ideas and a mindset of wanting to create impact. Of course, there's a balance between creating impact and being arrogant, and that probably, you know, comes into that emotional intelligence piece as well.

MB Do you find graduates have the knowledge you are looking for?

GR1 Yeah, I mean, you don't necessarily need all the technical know-how. If the graduate has been taught the basic skills, it's been able to learn on the job that is important.

MB Understood, thank you. What are your expectations of business schools in relation to the design and development of their degrees?

GR1 I think across the board that there's probably room for more employer and university interaction to make sure the content that is being taught is relevant. There are differences between theory and practice, and I think many graduates probably realise that when they come out of University. The theory talk in the classroom is one thing, but actually the way that's applied in practice is sometimes different.

MB What is the role of [current employer] in that process?

GR1 Yeah, there's a role for employers to play in making that happen. Like everything, it is a time and resource thing, right? So in in principle it sounds lovely, but in practice it's probably difficult to do the maths and have that measurable impact.

MB Do you think offering placements is important?

GR1 Yeah, we do a fair bit of recruiting of graduates who have had placements. People who have gone out and spent a year in industry. It sets them up really well for real life. That's something that could be happening a lot more. So, equip students both academically, but also set them up well for the workplace environment.

MB Is a whole year on placement a lot more beneficial than a month, for example?

GR1 Yeah, there's just so much more to say and in their applications and in the interview process.

MB What role does the appearance of a graduate have in the process?

GR1 I'd like to say none. I think this year has been very different because recruitment is happening virtually. I think, by default, there's been more equity in that sense because, you know, all we can see is the top half of the person, and some of those biases are taken away. I mean, any organisation where I have worked, we ask that candidates wear appropriate attire, but I think you know realistically it's more about that candidate's capability than the way they are dressed.

When we pick assessors, we get them to reflect on what their biases are, and make sure that those biases aren't playing through in how they recruit. I'm making decisions based on what's being said and what's being done versus some of those more conscious or subliminal things that might swing someone's viewpoint on capability.

MB That is really fascinating that you think there has been increased equity in the recruitment process as an impact of the pandemic. Has there been any other impact of remote interviewing?

GR1 Look, I think there's a lot of talk about social mobility, and it is incredibly important, but to be honest, technology does have an impact. I mean, if you can't get online during Covid, or if your connection isn't great, then that can create barriers to entry for some people. So, it's been great in many respects, because as employers we've been able to potentially reach a far greater audience of students than we ever would normally be able to. Because, you know, generally we have lean teams. We have a set budget and can only get to so many events or so many campuses each year.

MB Do business graduates perform better online than in person?

GR1 I sense that some students love it and some students really crave that human contact and that opportunity to meet people in person. So, I guess it depends on the individual. From our perspective, it's allowed us to reach a greater audience. But are there barriers to entry still there? Unfortunately so… maybe those barriers might still be there, so I think it's kind of, you know, some things are good and some things are bad.

MB OK, thank you. Turning to the evaluation process, please can you tell me how the employers you have worked for evaluate business graduates?

GR1 Yeah, absolutely. I guess it starts with applying, normally online. It is normally an application form these days rather than a CV. I'll admit I have never worked in an organisation that reviews cover letters, ever. I'm baffled by the whole emphasis on cover letters at universities. We don't read them.

MB Why an application form rather than a CV?

GR1 The reason for that, and I know students probably hate that because they spend a lot of time perfecting a very lovely CV, is so we get the information in the same format for every candidate. So when we review it is systematic and fair. Because it's the same information for every person, so you can make balanced decisions, right? At [current employer] we have a commercial awareness question that we ask upfront as part of the application.

There are always some questions in the application. It might be cognitive testing, so things like numerical, verbal and logical reasoning are critical. Then it might be… behavioural. It might be a blend of both those things. That's coming increasingly popular to compare them against each other.

Then it's a video interview with the recruiter. This depends on the organisation, but there might be some kind of intermediate step. And then an assessment centre, usually a whole day. So an interview plus whatever else they want to do so. Written presentation, group-based exercise, whatever it might be. We try to wrap this up in one day just so it's quicker and more efficient for all parties concerned and then offers are made.

MB What is the time period between application and offer?

GR1 It's definitely slower here in the UK. If you're applying September or October time, you've probably got some indication of how your application is going around November or December, with an assessment centre to follow shortly after. So, it can be three months. Generally, that's because recruiters are working on campus and carrying out presentations, or whatever other marketing stuff we might be doing, so our attention at that point is often not on viewing applications.

MB When would a graduate know they haven't made it through the application process?

GR1 We will try and make it as quick as possible. If we're not pursuing someone's application, it's in both parties' interests to communicate that.

MB Right.

GR1 I guess no news is good news in graduate recruitment.

MB In your experience, what are the main reasons business graduates are successful or unsuccessful in the recruitment process?

GR1 Yeah, that's the question we probably get asked the most. What's the secret, right? There is not one thing. Students need to work out what are their unique points of difference, right? What have you done that makes you unique?

We don't have a checklist of Mike's done A, B and C? We're looking for, like, balance. We're looking for a variety of things that people have done. It's about harnessing what you have done and just making it salient.

MB Yes, I understand.

GR1 There have been candidates that don't describe what they've done very well. There's sometimes this collegiate tendency to want to talk about the team then it becomes very hard to understand what, actually, you did? What was it that you achieved? What were you responsible for? What were the outcomes? What did you learn? What are transferable skills? But often people don't convey that to us. They think we want to see everything and anything that they've ever done in their life and it just becomes a shopping list. What you've actually done, was it for a day, was it for a week?

MB Right.

GR1 It often means we can't really build a full picture on someone, so we can't progress with their application, because they don't meet the minimum benchmarks for testing.

MB What are the benchmarks?

GR1 There are usually two key things. People don't fill out the form correctly. So, say if there is a written response, they don't provide a proper response to that question and just leave it blank. Then there's, like, sufficient evidence to support the statements being made.

MB Sufficient evidence?

GR1 We're not looking for reasons to reject people. We want to progress people.

MB Sure.

GR1 We don't want to be a rejecting machine.

MB Does it help if you know someone at the company?

GR1 Is there any sort of shortcut to get around the process if you know somebody?

MB Yes.

GR1 There's not actually and that's the one thing that has got better during my career. No, in short, you have still got to meet the same benchmarks as any other applicant that's applying to the programme.

MB So you don't get asked to move a candidate through the process?

GR1 It might be the case we get referrals through, potentially in partnership structures where you know people and then they want to receive updates on certain applicants. But applications go through the same process as everybody else. We will just let them know if they are going forward or being rejected.

MB Would anyone ever pressurise you to approve a candidate?

GR1 There's never much pushback on that. I think people absolutely appreciate it. Not anywhere that I've worked, which I think is a good thing, to be honest, I think it's equal, yeah?

MB That's really clear. Is there anything else you want to add about how you ensure recruitment decisions are based on a graduate's ability to perform the role?

GR1 I don't think so.

MB You've spoken about the impact of the pandemic. What was the impact of another major news story, Black Lives Matter, on the recruitment process?

GR1 When something like Black Lives Matter happens, there is kind of a reset where you look at the process to check that it does have that equity… and yeah, we do that on an annual basis. That's just best practice, really. I guess I've been fortunate to work in organisations that recognise that and we have been doing a lot of work on that today, actually. So yeah, we do, we do. And if there is adverse impact then we just have to unpack that further and consider what appropriate action we need to take. Often it might just be under representation in the applicant pool and then that comes back to the marketing side of what we do.

MB Under representation?

GR1 We make sure we don't disadvantage any groups, but often it might be a case that we just don't have enough representation of Black students, for example, that are applying at the start.

MB Oh, I see.

GR1 So there are things that we can do, you know, positive action we can try and target better black students, or do events or initiatives that try and attract more Black students to at least apply to us. I would say any decent organisation would be looking at that on a semi-regular basis to make sure. Anytime anything is fundamentally changed in the process, validation happens afterwards to make sure it is not having any adverse impact.

Like anything with diversity, there's no magic answer. I don't think anyone's cracked it, but it's just about the small nudges. The little things you can do at every stage in your attraction and recruitment process.

MB Does the role of [current employer's] values have an impact in recruitment? Does the graduate recruitment process reflect those values?

GR1 Yes, it's about having an inclusive environment within the organisation, otherwise you don't retain these people and that's becoming more important as well. We have to ensure we're doing the right things so this diverse talent that we managed to get through the door actually wants to build their career at [current employer].

MB I know [current employer] says they value inclusiveness, integrity and respect for colleagues.

GR1 You know, I think that's it really. Diversity is one thing, but you can invite someone to the party, but if they don't feel comfortable when they're there, they won't stay.

MB I know we're running out of time. I just have a couple of final questions. First, in an ideal world, what would you change about the recruitment process of the employers you have worked for?

GR1 Hey, if I was to change anything and this might sound slightly controversial, I would probably want to try and reduce the standard number of applications that we receive. I want to do things to help students better understand what it is that they're applying for. We don't need volume of applications, actually. If you got a smaller number of highly diverse applicants, that's probably better for us, and we can then in turn run a better recruitment process because of not having to deal with the volume. I think if I could change anything it would be that.

MB What could you do differently?

GR1 What could we do?

MB Yes, what could you do differently?

GR1 Be upfront, more so, about the opportunities that the industry offers. So they can view the organisation, put two and two together, and actually say no, I'm not signing up for this. So, a more realistic preview of what people are applying for to be honest.

MB Are you seeing an increase in graduate applications this year?

GR1 Yeah, and it's not just [current employer]. We are up 45 per cent, which does put strain on what we do because you can't provide the touch points when you're having to deal with such volume. And obviously there's a lot of people that you have to reject as well, which is just that, yeah, it's hard.

MB It must be a huge challenge.

GR1 Yeah, for sure.

MB Well, thank you so much for all that valuable information. It's been incredibly helpful, so thank you. Is there anything else that you would like to share before I stop the recording?

GR1 I appreciate there's pretty baseline content that has to be taught on any course, and that it might even be pre-set by whatever body. But I think as many practical elements that can be introduced into academic teaching, the better. I think that's super key, that's super important.

MB Sure.

GR1 It's not just the degree that matters these days. Yes, it's important, but so is everything else that the student does or should be encouraged to do, whether that is sports, charity work or a part time job, whatever it is alongside the university study that's going to showcase their competence.

MB Great, thank you very much [GR1]. I will stop the recording there.

Appendix 6: Transcript of interview with a module leader

Observed: female; age 55-60; white

MB I have now started the recording. [Name], how long have you worked at [institution] and please can you talk through your role in the process of designing and developing your module?

ML3 I have worked at [institution] for five years now. I lead on four modules and my role in designing them is I designed them and it really is that simple. Basically, I do all of the design and most of the delivery, well except the first year module which obviously has quite a big teaching team so I don't show up for every single tutorial, but we work off the materials that I developed for them.

MB Please can you walk me through the process of how you designed and developed the modules?

ML3 That's like saying how do you breathe. I mean, there are people who talk about why you set the objectives and then you set the learning objective for each session, but I'm like no, it's not like that at all. Of course, there are learning objectives, but actually I take a much more architectural approach, which is that I'm looking for the narrative across the full programme. So if you're going to assess people on something, you have to tell them how to do it. It's wrong of us to assume that people can give a presentation. It's wrong of us to assume that people can write report, as students from a wide range of backgrounds and cultures and… so I do emphasise the inclusion of some things that will be seen as skills; the skills development in my teaching. So, for example, in the first year, one of the things they have to produce is a video presentation. So we talk about how do you give a presentation and we talk about how you write slides and we talk about how you organise your narrative and we talk about looking at the camera and we talk about… it's normal for people to feel nervous, and this is how we cope with it. I do more a sophisticated version of that in the consultant project in the third year. You know, we can't… we shouldn't assume.

I think consulting projects in the UK are quite interesting. A lot of business schools have a consulting project and basically the assumption is that people know how to do consulting and this is nonsense as big consultancies teach people how to do consulting. No doctor delivers a baby and looks and says congratulations, it's a consultant… these things are not innate. I think it's important that we help to understand what they're supposed to do before we start giving marks. I do incorporate a certain amount of skill, so when I'm designing a curriculum, you're thinking about, well, where is it? Where is it we want to get to, and how we're going to assess them getting there, and what's the content that I want to shovel in and other skills that I need to prime them for to get there. So there's normally one tutorial that is called coaching for your assessment, and it's normally group work. I am of the view that group work is actually quite an unnatural activity, and there are processes and methods that we would use in business that make groups more effective or less effective, so we should tell our students what they are so we always start with that in my modules. When you are put in a group, we have a discussion about what the team charter is and they set their own terms of reference and they have to send it to me. Not because I'm going to mark it but because I need to know that they've done it and for the babies we give permission… I call my first years my babies… we give them a template for how to do this and for the third years we take away the guidelines and they have to do it on their own. And then, you know, we talk at the end about post-project review and we talk about giving and receiving feedback. I weave in quite a lot of reflective practice in the syllabus. So yes, when I'm designing that goes in, with the same structure and rigour as the readings or the textbook, or here's the other stuff that we're going to do, because fundamentally, I mean, not everybody agrees with me on this… I think ethics is a practical subject, and I think if you don't get it right, you'll end up in jail. In fact, we know if you don't get it right, you'll end up in jail. So we ought to treat it as a practical subject. I mean, yes, I do talk about Jeremy Bentham and I do talk about Immanuel Kant. If I do talk about Aristotle, and I do talk about him, in general, we talk about it as a practical phenomenon. We relate it to the activities of business people. I take the same view of leadership as well and I think take the same view of sustainability. So my design process is quite integrated but that was a long and rambling answer to what was a perfectly sensible question.

MB Please can you expand on what skills and knowledge you consider are most important for your students' employability?

ML3 Machines are stealing our jobs and the technical stuff will be done more and more by machine, and so it becomes important to focus on the things that machines can't do… the interpersonal human aspects of things. How to communicate effectively. I actually teach them about leadership… I'm quite into how to solve a problem from first principles. In fact, a lot of my teaching… almost all of my teaching is problem-based and I trained as an engineer and engineers like problems. I use a lot of real life material so here I will update the case studies most years and we use a lot of things like, you know, company reports so that they can't just go and get something off the internet or download an answer. They actually have to solve the problem from first principles because I think that's the thing that we can do that machines can't.

MB What problem solving techniques do you teach?

ML3 I include systems thinking with first year undergraduates, which everybody says is bonkers. Of course they can and I do. I do systems thinking and I cover again a little bit more in third year. I do problem definition… problem disaggregation, so it's really the first principles.

MB What attributes do you consider are most important for your students' employability?

ML3 Depends on them. It's not for me to tell them how to grow up. They will have different intrinsic skills and capabilities and they should make the most of what they are. I do a session on strength-based development. I get them to take a strength finders survey, but I don't make a big deal of it. Then we discuss some psychometrics, but with the session on strength-based development, I normally get them to talk about peak performance experiences in small groups so I don't listen and they listen to each other and they give each other feedback on what strengths they heard. Normally they love it. I was on Teams and said I'm going to shut the room in two minutes and I went into this room and there were three girls in there. They were all crying and I said, oh my god, what's wrong? They said this is such a beautiful thing to do and the people are so amazing and they've done such wonderful stuff. But yeah, and it's interesting when you run it in class, which is what I obviously… normally I teach in a physical environment, it the session always starts quiet and ends loudly. You just hear the energy building up in the room, and so it does work and it gives them some confidence, which again, the education system is quite carefully designed to undermine confidence and so sometimes my job is to give that back.

MB Can you unpack this a bit more for me? Is it about reflecting on our own strengths and weaknesses that is most important?

ML3 Yes, there are two of us that actively teach it, and I know this because we're friends and we made the video together. One of the real strengths of [institution] is that we allow and encourage our students to find their own way. If you want to be a banker then take the finance courses, but if you take the finance courses, you won't stop and reflect. You'll be really good at a particular sort of sums, which, by the way, can be automated. At the same time, you know, you can lead a horse to water, but you can't make it drink. I cannot force reflective practice on everybody… that would be weird so if you're not ready to do it, let's not force you to. It's going to be counterproductive. So I think we have to work to a certain extent with the willing. So anyway, I do think that is an important part of development, and some of them take to it like a duck to water and others, it's a bit more unnatural. But if you don't make time to think about yourself, you will limit your growth and your potential, and that is a lesson for life.

MB Thank you. Can you please tell me why do you think some business graduates are successful and why others are unsuccessful in the recruitment process at large employers?

ML3 Well, luck does play a part... and privilege, which is of course just a particular expression of luck. That's why I've got a slight obsession about this idea of a hidden curriculum, which is that if you don't tell people what they need to do to get a good job, they won't get a good job. Unless your dad's got a good job and can introduce some people. This is why I try to make things very explicit in my teaching and try to make assumptions very explicit because I think it's fair.

Success isn't that important to everybody, and it is hard. I mean, I was very successful in my in my consulting career and you make a lot of compromises, and I don't think it's for us to ask people to do that. One of the things that concerns me hugely is the government's focus on graduate salaries as a measure of the worth of education. Now is you want to be a nurse or a primary teacher, you know you'll have an OK starting salary, but it will be capped. It won't go on forever and we need skilled and talented people to be nurses and primary school teachers as well as to be, you know, bankers. I mean, I think some of it is to do with choice of industry. So your question is based on the assumption about what successful is and I think, for me, this is why the government is focused on five year graduate income. So, as someone who teaches ethics, the roots of ethical thinking and ethical philosophy in most cultures, including China, including India… Confucius as well as from Aristotle and Plato, is what is it to live a good life? For me, living a good life is having a successful career and so on, but in the course of human history, that is quite a minority perspective. That's quite a weird thing for us to do. So sorry, that was a big old tangent.

MB Building on your thoughts about ethics, what are the values and principles that you teach to students in your modules?

ML3 It's really interesting. I almost had a row with a colleague about this because they had this idea of Gordon Gekko greed… how you're going to manage in these tough places where they don't care about mental health. You know, I spent 20 years in those tough places where they don't care about mental health apparently, and they're obsessed with mental health. So I think, you know, not all employers are the same. Different companies have different cultures… so more compassionate, some are not. One of the things that I say to students is that find a company that suits you… and that's not just your capabilities. If you're going into a long hours culture, you're going to be spending a lot of time in close contact with these people, and it's quite important that they don't make you unhappy. It's quite important that you like them. So I say, go to places where you fundamentally share the values of the people, whether that's the civil service, whether that's Goldman Sachs, whether that's McKinsey, whether that's Pricewaterhouse Coopers. So, I mean, choose an industry, choose a place that is right for you because you do have to get up and live with yourself in the morning.

MB Do you teach your students about social mobility?

ML3 I'm evidence of social mobility. My grandfather was a railway worker, my grandmother left school at 12. My parents went to grammar school… I went to grammar school. So I know that over the last century we've gone from not having anything much at all to this nice, comfortable life that I'm currently living. That's been brilliant. Lucky me! But I also know that it is not easy for everybody, and that particular path was based on the welfare state in the 1940s. So I am really a direct product of the 1944 Education Act which has been repealed. So I think it can happen… I think it does happen, but I do think there are some major structural problems about it. I've just supervised a masters student here at [removed], where I'm still a fellow in engineering. It is about the progression of Black women in engineering. We did look at structural racism which has not been adequately tackled. So is there such a thing as social mobility? Yes. Is it easy? No. Is it accessible to everybody as it should be? No.

MB Have you seen evidence of social mobility at [institution]?

ML3 Yes, absolutely. We've seen students from ethnic minorities do quite well and it does happen. On the other hand, we have some students at [institution] whose dad can make a phone call and they'll get an internship in the bank. Then we have some students who will need a tutor to say, have you seen this company, let me help you apply for their graduate programme. These students don't have that easy social capital, but would do fine with the right support, however I'm not sure what systems we have in place to identify them and support them. As a personal tutor I have a range of students, one of whom is from a school where 40 per cent of pupils have free school meals and she's a bursary student, and she is from an ethnic minority, and so I do make sure that I talk to her and about things like internships. We know that doors aren't going to be opened for her by anyone in her immediate social circle, so I'm making sure that she's got contacts. I know one of the big consultancy firms actually has a scheme that takes interns from her old school, so I'm trying to get her accepted. But as a personal tutor, nobody has told me I need to do that. It's a choice that I have made.

MB Very interesting. How has the pandemic affected the teaching and learning in your module?

ML3 It's been hugely variable, so for some students it's OK. I've had some students say working at home is fine. I can organise my life around it. These students have already done a year or two at [institution], they've got their friends, they've got study buddies. Yeah, it's a bit frustrating, but they kind of hold it together. For the first year students, I think it's been quite lonely for some of them. Having said that, they're holding it together. I mean, so a year ago, in March last year, I had Covid. I was advised to self-isolate at home and was in my bedroom for two weeks. It's horrific… it's absolutely dreadful. One of my students was diagnosed with ADHD and he obviously had some really good coping strategies because he was able to focus on a video for 20 minutes. That is actually really demanding if you have a learning difficulty. The new cliché is we're in the same storm but we're not in the same boat. I think that is very, very true.

MB Thank you. In an ideal world, what would you change about the design and development of your module?

ML3 So here's the problem… the students that I know well are doing well. The students that are really unhappy or dropping out or whatever, are not the ones to which I have much exposure. I do think that the school is extremely well intentioned and, you know, we work on the student experience and on giving them lots of things to do. However, students for whatever reason are left behind, and I think it might be more about ensuring consistency of experience at the bottom end. It doesn't even necessarily show academically. You could be going along OK with a low 2.1 and miserably unhappy. We wouldn't necessarily see it, and I don't know what we can do about that.

The second thing is about business. It is the sort of subject that you get sent to do because you think it'll give you an income rather than because it's a subject that you're necessarily in love with. Now I think we do have some students who are completely in love with it and doing amazing things, and that's wonderful. But, you know, I think many students been sent to do it because they think it'll make them money. Alright, nothing wrong with money, right? Poverty is grim and all of those sorts of things. We also have to make sure that those students are also doing something that is rewarding cognitively, socially and emotionally.

MB Thank you, I know our time is up. Thanks a lot for your time.

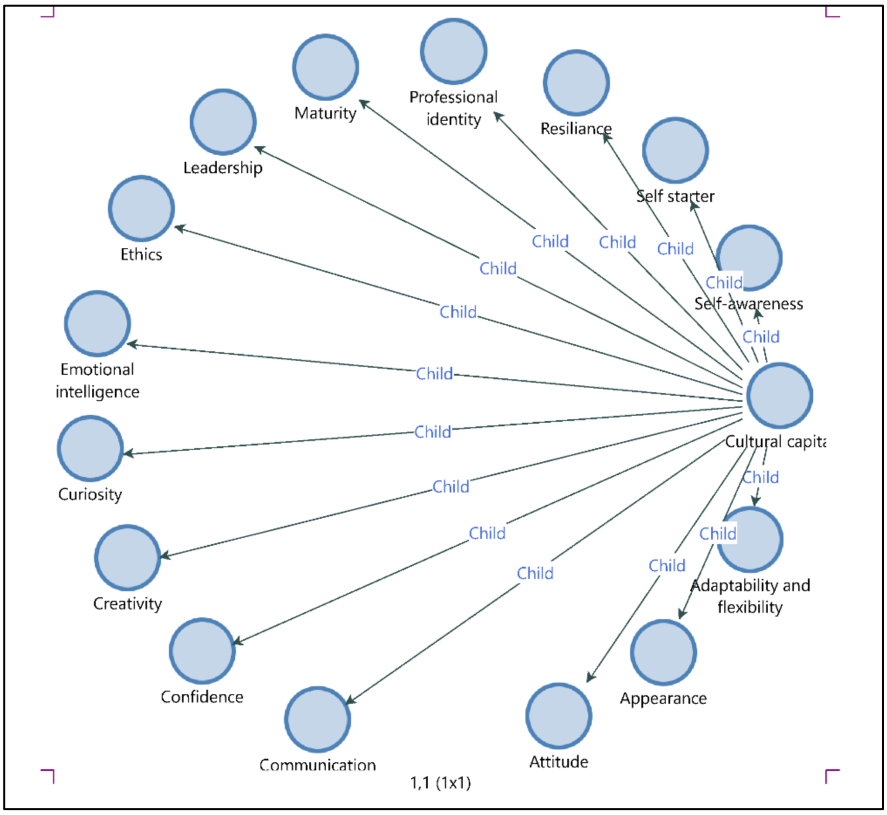
Appendix 7: NVivo tree nodes and screenshots

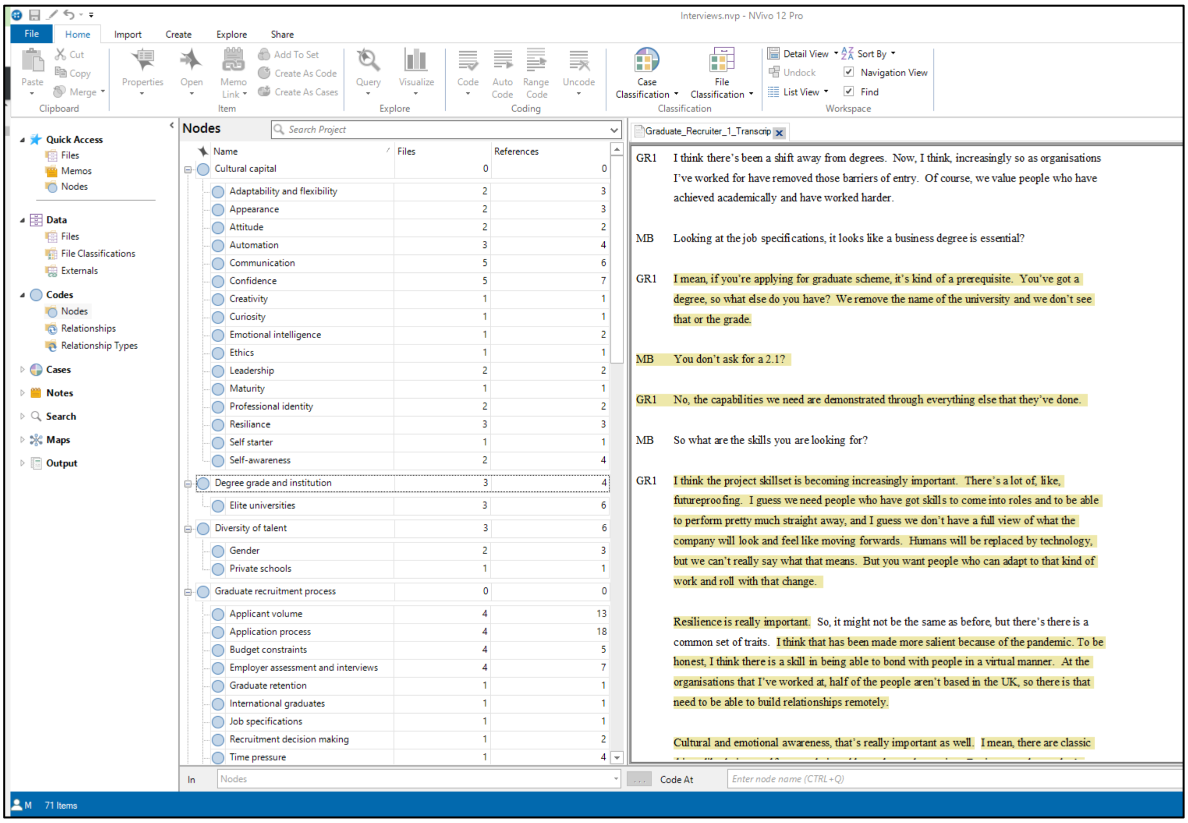
The table below is an export of the NVivo tree nodes following initial phases of axial coding:

Curriculum design
Experiential learning
Alumni
Connecting students and employers
Internships and placements
Module assessment
Linking theory and practice
Purpose of higher education
Graduate destinations
Perception of value
Student satisfaction
University experience
Academic
Personal tutors
Student support
Extracurricular
Careers service
Societies
Professional identity
Social capital
Family connections
LinkedIn
Networking
Values
Diversity
Sustainability
Commercial
Disconnect between university and employer
Capital
Cultural capital
Adaptability
Communication
Confidence
Creativity
Emotional intelligence
Resilience
Self-awareness
Human capital
Commercial awareness
Critical thinking

Problem solving
Technical skills
Meritocracy
Graduate recruitment process
Applicant volume
Budget constraints
Assessment centres
Decision making
Time pressure
Degree grade and institution
Elite universities
Social mobility
Pandemic impact
Extend recruitment reach
Mental health
Virtual recruitment
Black Lives Matter
Disconnect between shortlisting and job offers
Widening participation

The screenshots below show the process of coding in NVivo, including an example hierarchy chart and interview transcript coding activities. My transcripts were reviewed line by line to achieve the first set of codes, before some abstract categorisation began to link several incidents or observations together.




Interviews.nvp - NVivo 12 Pro
File Home Import Create Explore Share
Nodes
Graduate_Recruiter_1_Transcrip
Name | Files | References
Cultural capital 0 0
Adaptability and flexibility 2 3
Appearance 2 3
Attitude 2 2
Automation 3 4
Communication 5 6
Confidence 5 7
Creativity 1 1
Curiosity 1 1
Emotional intelligence 1 2
Ethics 1 1
Leadership 2 2
Maturity 1 1
Professional identity 2 2
Resilience 3 3
Self starter 1 1
Self-awareness 2 4
Degree grade and institution 3 4
Elite universities 3 6
Diversity of talent 3 6
Gender 2 3
Private schools 1 1
Graduate recruitment process 0 0
Applicant volume 4 13
Application process 4 18
Budget constraints 4 5
Employer assessment and interviews 4 7
Graduate retention 1 1
International graduates 1 1
Job specifications 1 1
Recruitment decision making 1 2
Time pressure 1 4
GR1 I think there's been a shift away from degrees. Now, I think, increasingly so as organisations I've worked for have removed those barriers of entry. Of course, we value people who have achieved academically and have worked harder.
MB Looking at the job specifications, it looks like a business degree is essential?
GR1 I mean, if you're applying for graduate scheme, it's kind of a prerequisite. You've got a degree, so what else do you have? We remove the name of the university and we don't see that or the grade.
MB You don't ask for a 2.1?
GR1 No, the capabilities we need are demonstrated through everything else that they've done.
MB So what are the skills you are looking for?
GR1 I think the project skillset is becoming increasingly important. There's a lot of, like, futureproofing. I guess we need people who have got skills to come into roles and to be able to perform pretty much straight away, and I guess we don't have a full view of what the company will look and feel like moving forwards. Humans will be replaced by technology, but we can't really say what that means. But you want people who can adapt to that kind of work and roll with that change.
Resilience is really important. So, it might not be the same as before, but there's there is a common set of traits. I think that has been made more salient because of the pandemic. To be honest, I think there is a skill in being able to bond with people in a virtual manner. At the organisations that I've worked at, half of the people aren't based in the UK, so there is that need to be able to build relationships remotely.
Cultural and emotional awareness, that's really important as well. I mean, there are classic
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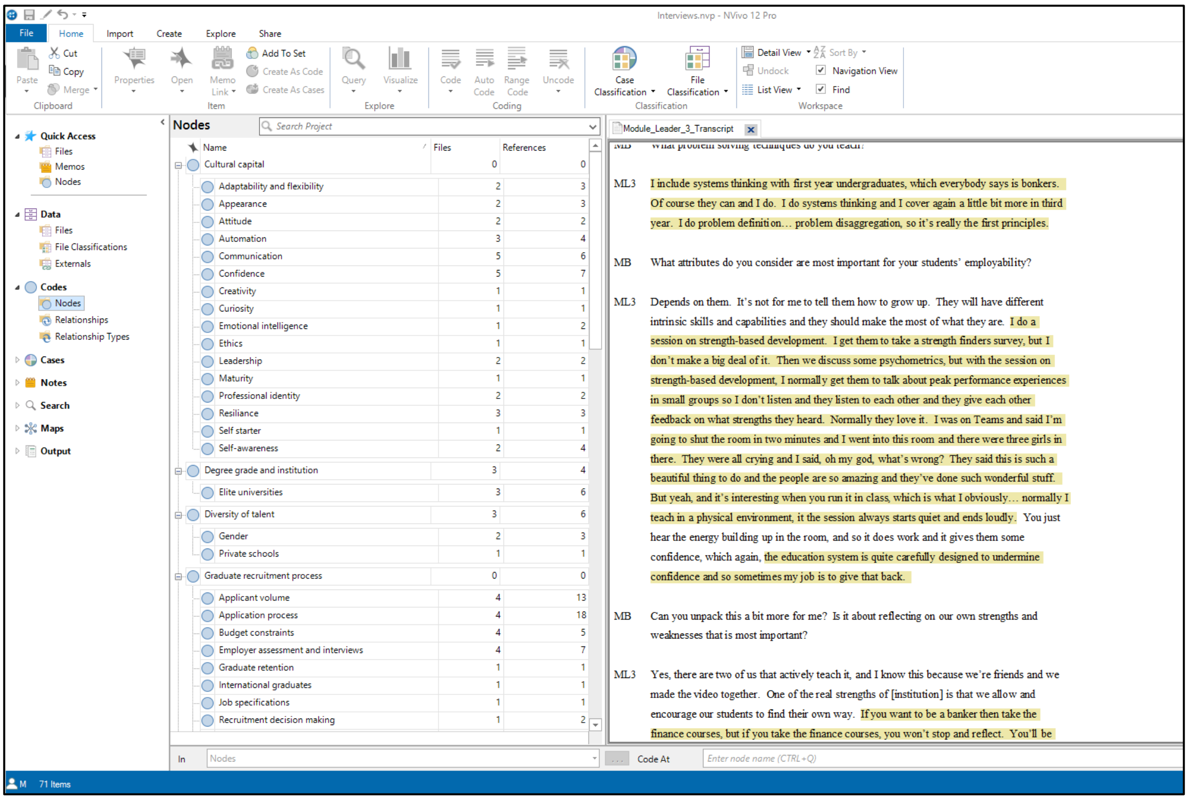
Interviews.nvp - NVivo 12 Pro
Nodes
Module_Leader_3_Transcript
ML3 I include systems thinking with first year undergraduates, which everybody says is bonkers. Of course they can and I do. I do systems thinking and I cover again a little bit more in third year. I do problem definition… problem disaggregation, so it's really the first principles.
MB What attributes do you consider are most important for your students' employability?
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MB Can you unpack this a bit more for me? Is it about reflecting on our own strengths and weaknesses that is most important?
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