Consuming work and managing employability: Students' work orientations and the process of contemporary job search

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Abstract

Unemployment and precarity have become key features of 21st century work. Employability is presented as a solution to these issues. Individuals are exhorted to manage their employability, in order to be able to exercise choice in the labour market. While employability is individuals' responsibility, governments, employers and educational bodies simply provide opportunities for its development.

Higher education is a key site for this process, as employability rhetoric increasingly informs policy and practice. It is founded on rhetoric that emphasises flexibility, skills and marketability, shaping students in certain ways with the risk of being deemed unemployable as the consequence of disengagement.

At the same time, there has been a rise in employer presence on university campuses. Recruitment is no longer its key feature. Traditional 'milkround' recruitment has been replaced by year round marketing campaigns. As a result, students are continually exposed to a selection of employers promoting a specific image of work and work orientations.

The theoretical framework of this study is informed by works of Antonio Gramsci and Mikhail Bakhtin. Gramsci's notion of 'common sense' is central to analysing the rhetoric on work and employability present on campus. I also give voice to students by recounting how they as 'dialogical selves' engage with such 'common sense'. These issues are explored through an analysis of data gathered during seventeen months of fieldwork. This includes longitudinal interviews with students, participant observation, documents, interviews with careers advisors and non-participant observation of career consultations. From this, I argue that there was a strongly normative image of work constructed around an orientation I term 'consumption of work'. This image was closely associated with consumption opportunities, marketed to students through corporate presence on campus. 'Consumption of work' was central to shaping students' work orientations and only few of them resisted the 'common sense'. Those who made 'alternative' choices articulated doubt about these, with the challenge to employability as a key reason for it. Employability was presented to students as a lifelong project of the self, where constant acquisition, development and selling of skills were necessary to maintain a position in the labour market. Many students embraced the rhetoric of skill 'possession', but were 'playing the game' when 'demonstrating' skills. Conforming to what the employers were willing them to 'demonstrate' and understanding how to do this became the primary condition for achieving employability.

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While I was writing this thesis, and especially when the words were not coming easily, I dreamt of the point when I'd be writing these acknowledgements, articulating them in my head and having what seemed to be a clear picture of what they would look like. Now the time has come and it doesn't seem to be the case anymore. Apparently it's not as easy to capture the various people, places, situations and instances that have helped me in writing this thesis on a single page especially reserved for it, but I'll try to highlight some.

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Chapter 1. Introducing the theme and the theoretical framework

1.1 Introducing the theme

At the time of starting my PhD, I did not draw a connection between my personal experience and the theme I had chosen to explore. Now that I look back, this connection is clearer to me. Employability and work orientations were of course themes that were close to me as an undergraduate and masters student. However, I was not interested in researching them for pragmatic reasons, such as helping myself and others to be more employable or deciding what work was most suitable. Instead, these were questions about certain norms, rules and shared understandings about these themes, which I will later call 'common sense', that made them the object of my research. As I think this is important enough, I would like to start the thesis by explaining my interaction with these themes, which is something I could not quite articulate then, but which has definitely influenced the particular shape my thesis has taken.

Having come to the UK amidst the financial crisis, in 2008, getting a job was an especially important topic among my masters classmates. This is when I first came across the word 'employability', with substantial time at the university being devoted to guiding us, students, on how to be employable. Having studied Economics before, it was not a surprise to me that some university modules could be very practice-oriented, directly connecting the content of education with the labour market. However, it was the first time that I saw how this connection was arising out of the way modules were organised. The subjects I learnt were designed in a way that contributed to employability, for example, via having a lot of group work that was done in randomly assigned teams, or, presentation skills being assessed separately from the content of the presentation. Outside the degree, employability was always in the air too. Almost any voluntary role within the university was advertised through employability, as if nobody would be interested in taking it for other reasons. This was all extremely bizarre, especially as fewer and fewer jobs were being offered and youth unemployment was rapidly growing as a consequence of the economic crisis. I knew I could think of hundreds of examples of how I was an 'effective team player' or exercised my 'problem-solving' skills, but was very unsure that it would help me (or anyone else) to actually find a job. Also, having done a couple of internships before as well as having heard about the experiences of others, doing most graduate level jobs did not seem particularly difficult to me, apart from probably getting used to the routine of the job, having to work long hours and not necessarily being given much responsibility. It is probably this encounter with employability that made me interested in researching this theme. Not having made up my mind about it yet, I wanted to see how students were experiencing the process of job search and making sense of the (questionable) categories that they needed to position themselves around, in the face of intense competition in the labour market.

At the same time, throughout my university years, both in Russia and the UK, there seemed to be some shared understanding of what a ‘good job’ was, and certain employers and industries were considered more prestigious than others. Those who succeeded in finding these ‘good jobs’ were admired by others and were giving tips to their friends and classmates. Multinational corporations (MNCs) were always popular while investment banking and consultancy were often the areas of choice for my undergraduate classmates. Somehow I was not as thrilled about these ‘good jobs’, so I decided that doing a masters degree in a different area would give me time to think about what other potential paths in life could be taken. However, there was not much difference in students’ work orientations during the masters, except that among students who studied Human Resource Management, the popular choice was now in the HR departments of multinationals or in HR consultancies. Also, while there was mostly an informal understanding of the ‘good’ places to work during my university studies in Moscow, this became much more ‘official’ in the UK, with a variety of rankings guiding students in their life choices and indicating a clear hierarchy of employers. Corporate employers were very visible on campus too, coming to advertise jobs at their organisations, even though a lot of them were not even recruiting for the 2009 graduate intake. It was from the interviews with students half-way though my PhD, informed by a shared image by many of them of what a ‘good job’ was, that I decided to explore the theme of work orientations in more detail. However, I can now see how this theme speaks to my own experience.

University is a key site (although not the only one) for the processes described above and has a role in shaping norms, rules and shared understandings about employability and work orientations. In the UK since at least the 1990s, universities themselves have become increasingly neoliberalised, corporatised and financialised (e.g. Readings, 1996;

Jarry and Parker, 1998; Aronowitz, 2000; Calás and Smircich, 2001; Beverungen et al. 2008; Beverungen et al., 2009). As part of these wider changes, university-business collaboration has been emphasised by universities and governments, and employability rhetoric has been increasingly entering higher education policies (see chapter 2). This has provided fertile ground for a rise in employers' presence on university campuses, with traditional 'milkround' recruitment having been replaced by year round marketing campaigns (see chapter 3). Arguably, these have been, and still are, shaping university practices as well as the lives of people connected to these spaces, which is what this study will explore.

Broadly and in short, this thesis is about 'consumption of work' and employability. It explores a particular context, the university campus, and a particular time, the process of the student job search, to analyse the following issues. First, it looks at the images of work and employability constructed on campus (chapters 5 and 6). Second, students' engagement with these during the process of the job search is analysed (chapters 7 and 8). These themes are very interconnected, yet different, so a single theoretical framework for working with conceptual and empirical material throughout the thesis needs to be introduced, which is what will be done in this chapter (1.2). This theoretical framework will also allow me to connect the two broad themes when analysing the results and concluding. The structure of the thesis will be outlined in section 1.3.

1.2 Theoretical framework

In this part of the chapter I will outline the theoretical framework of this research. The theory of structure is drawn from the work of Antonio Gramsci (1.2.1). It allows one to connect power relations at the macro level with the local level, and hence will help this research in two major ways. First, it will provide a framework for the analysis of how categories surrounding the student job search that often seem 'normal' or even 'natural' at the local level, being parts of students' habitual experience, are constructed by the power relations at the macro level. Second, it will also help us to look at the potential differences in the images of different categories at the macro and local levels. To do this, I will adopt the following concepts: 'hegemony', 'war of position' and 'common sense'. I will also introduce the concept of 'hegemonic project', which does not come directly from Gramsci, but has been used in research that worked with his writing. However, Gramsci did not have a theory of agency that would explain individual reactions to socially constructed categories. As a result, so as to analyse how students engage with ‘common sense(s)’ surrounding job search, I will first introduce the notions of ‘embracing’, ‘resisting’, ‘manipulating’ and ‘escaping’ as potentially articulated reactions to ‘common sense’ (1.2.2). Then, so as not to fall into the trap of a ‘false consciousness’ argument by assigning students to one of the categories, I will introduce a ‘dialogical self’ as the theory of the subject. The ‘dialogical self’ will be derived from the work of Mikhail Bakhtin. Then I will outline how the ‘dialogical selves’ may potentially engage with the ‘common sense’.

1.2.1 Neo-Gramscian[1] theory of structure

In this section I will look at Gramsci’s concepts of ‘hegemony’, ‘war of position’, and ‘common sense’, as well as introduce the concept ‘hegemonic project’, and connect them into a single theoretical framework that will inform the analysis of structure at macro and local levels.

‘Hegemony’ is one of the key concepts in Gramsci’s writings, and arguably an ‘umbrella term’ for Gramscian thought; that is to say, a term all other themes can be linked to. Also, having been used by such theorists as Laclau and Mouffe (1985), Hall (1986) and Althusser (1971), the use of the concept in academia is very widespread. For Gramsci, hegemony means ‘“cultural, moral and ideological” leadership’ of a certain group (e.g. the proletariat or the bourgeoisie) ‘over allied and subordinate groups’ (Forgacs, 2000: 423). Hegemony goes beyond the group’s economic power, but is necessarily rooted in it:

> … though hegemony is ethico-political, it must also be economic, must necessarily be based on the decisive function exercised by the leading group in the decisive nucleus of economic activity.
>
> Gramsci (Q13§18[2] in Forgacs, 2000: 212-213)

Hegemony also goes beyond being a system of ideas (i.e. ideology) and is a ‘lived, habitual, social practice’, which encompasses ‘the unconscious, inarticulate dimensions of

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[1] Neo-Gramscian is often associated with a dimension of research based on Gramsci within International Relations (IR). Within management studies when the expression ‘Neo-Gramscian’ was referred to, the reading of Gramsci corresponded to the one in IR. The reading of Gramsci in this research is different, especially in the way ‘war of position’ is interpreted, so ‘Neo-Gramscian’ here does not refer to ‘Neo-Gramscian’ in IR and management studies.

[2] Q here refers to the number of the notebook (quaderno) while § to the concrete paragraph from it. This corresponds to the ordering in Valentino Gerratana’s critical edition of Gramsci’s Prison Notebooks (in Italian).

social experience as well as the workings of formal institutions' (Eagleton, 1991: 115). It goes into and shapes people's private lives and experiences, being 'carried in cultural, political and economic forms - in non-discursive practices as well as rhetorical utterances' (ibid: 113). Hegemony is maintained by both consent and coercion (or force). This may be seen in the text below, where Gramsci analyses the parliamentary regime in France after the French Revolution:

> This 'normal' exercise of hegemony in what became the classic terrain of the parliamentary regime is characterized by the combination of force and consent variously balancing one another, without force exceeding consent too much.
>
> Gramsci (Q13§37 in Forgacs, 2000: 262)

The idea that hegemony can be maintained by consent has been a very important theoretical contribution of Gramsci, remarkable for not reducing the role of the state to 'repressive state apparatus' (Althusser, 1971). Hegemony is also a dynamic concept (Forgacs, 2000: 423); it is 'continually reorganized in the face of the struggle between classes', which allowed Gramsci to avoid the 'false consciousness' argument (Brandist, 1996a: 109).

Gramsci's approach to hegemony has been state-centric primarily due to the time when he was writing. The twentieth century saw the rise of another power, international business, with some individual companies being among the world's largest economic entities (Korten 1995; Sklair, 2002). As a result, studies drawing on Gramsci have also looked at the hegemonic practices of multinationals (e.g. Böhm et al., 2008; Levy and Egan, 2003; Levy and Newell 2003, 2005). They assumed the power of multinationals over people's lives, in shaping institutions surrounding them as well as cultural practices.

This research looks at employability and consumption, both of which will be conceptualised as products of power relations. Consumption comes primarily from international business, and is the result of their mass production, mass consumption and globalisation (see Chapter 3). Employability is the result of both the globalisation of business and the need for it to be more flexible, as well as neoliberal labour market policies (see Chapter 2). As a result, in this research hegemony is assumed to be rooted in the power of international business as well as governments. I would like to call it 'global capitalist hegemony'. Although for Gramsci hegemony consists of many elements and spreads into all areas of life and exists at the local level, he does not have a term to describe this. As research often takes place at the local level or looks for a limited number of dimensions of hegemony, terms such as 'hegemonic project' (Leggett, 2009; Moore, 2010) or 'hegemonic discourse' (Böhm et al., 2008) have been used to describe social practices that help to maintain hegemony. In this research, as I look specifically at employability and consumption, I will use the term 'hegemonic project'[3] to refer to these.

The process through which hegemony is maintained is called the 'war of position':

> The same thing happens in the art of politics as it happens in military art: war of movement increasingly becomes war of position and it can be said that a state will win a war in so far as it prepares for it minutely and technically in peacetime. The massive structures of the modern democracies, both as state organizations, and as complexes of associations in civil society, constitute for the art of politics as if it were the 'trenches' and the permanent fortifications of the front in the war of position: they render merely 'partial' the element of manoeuvre which before used to be 'the whole' of war, etc.
>
> Gramsci (Q13§24, in Forgacs, 2000: 233)

'War of position' is a very broad term, which may include anything that builds 'superstructures of civil society'. It may involve investment in the non-economic aspects of hegemony, and can include building culture and social institutions. This concept is also accommodative of the idea that power is maintained by both discourse and practice. In this research 'war of position' is defined as process(es) and practice(s) that make 'hegemony' work. These may be, for example, labour market policies that focus on employability, employability programmes in universities, employer marketing campaigns on university campuses etc. In 'war of position' democracy, state organisations as well as the civil society serve as 'permanent fortifications' of the front, i.e. of the existing power. The 'war of position' helps to maintain hegemony even in times of economic crisis:

> The superstructures of civil society are like the trench-systems of the modern warfare. In war it would sometimes happen that a fierce artillery attack seemed to have destroyed the enemy's entire defensive system, whereas in fact it had only destroyed the outer perimeter; and at the moment of their advance and attack the assailants would find themselves confronted by a line of defence which was still effective. The same thing happens in politics, during great economic crises. A crisis cannot give the attacking forces the ability to organize with lightning speed in

[3] I have chosen the term 'hegemonic project' rather than 'hegemonic discourse' as hegemony is not only discursive. 'Hegemonic project', then, consists of both discursive and non-discursive elements.

> time and space; still less can it endow them with fighting spirit. Similarly, the defenders are not demoralized, even among the ruins, nor do they lose faith in their own strength or their own future. Of course, things do not remain exactly as they were; but it is certain that one will not find the element of speed, of accelerated time, of the definitive forward march expected by the strategies of political Cardonism.
>
> Gramsci (Q13§24, in Forgacs, 2000: 233)

In the excerpts above, ‘war of position’ is a term applied by Gramsci to the powerful, and involves strengthening hegemony and protecting it in times of crisis. However, if change to the existing order is possible, it may be argued that it should start from modifying the ‘trench-systems’. This is where a very different interpretation of ‘war of position’ comes from. It has been adopted in Neo-Gramscian research within International Relations, starting from Cox (1983), where ‘war of position’ was applied to subordinate groups[4]. This approach has also been adopted within organisation studies, with ‘war of position’ being used to conceptualise resistance to international business (e.g. Böhm et al., 2008; Levy and Egan, 2003)[5].

It is through ‘war of position’ that ‘common senses’ are created. Different ways to invest into hegemony produce different ‘common senses’. For Gramsci ‘common sense’ is a set of conceptions of the world, many of which ‘are imposed and absorbed passively from the outside, or from the past, and are accepted and lived uncritically’, which ‘contributes to people’s subordination by making situations of inequality and oppression appear to them as natural and unchangeable’ (Forgacs, 2000: 421). In Gramsci’s own words, ‘common sense’ is ‘the traditional popular conception of the world: what is very tritely called “instinct”, which is itself of rudimentary and basic historical acquisition’ (N3§48[6] in Buttigieg 2011, V2:51). At the same time, Gramsci (Q11§13 in Forgacs, 2000: 346) does not claim

---

[4] However, according to a recent prominent analysis of Gramsci done by Thomas (2009: 150), ‘war of position’ is not the strategy recommended to be adopted by the subordinate groups:

> ‘War of position’ in Gramsci’s conception, just as for Lenin and Trotsky, was not a programmatic strategy that he recommended be adopted by the proletariat. Rather, he recognised it as a technique of nascent ‘biopower’ deployed by the bourgeoisie, and to which the proletariat, subalternly confined in bourgeois civil society, was constrained to respond with a realistic political strategy.

[5] For example, Levy and Egan (2003: 807) define ‘war of position’ in the following way:

> ‘The concept of ‘war of position’ employed a military metaphor to suggest how groups challenging hegemonic coalitions from below might avoid a futile frontal assault against entrenched adversaries; rather, the war of position constitutes a longer term strategy, coordinated across multiple bases of power, to gain influence in the cultural institutions of civil society, develop organizational capacity, and to win new allies’.

[6] N and § refer to the number of the notebook and the paragraph assigned in Buttigieg’s critical edition of Gramsci’s Prison Notebooks. Where possible, Buttigieg refers to the number and paragraph of the notebook in Gerratana, which is however not the case here.

that ‘common sense’ does not hold any truth; it is a complex and ambiguous concept, so one cannot claim that common sense is the confirmation of truth.

‘Common sense’ is a term that is very close to everyday life practices – this is the subjectivity, or set of subjectivities, resulting from hegemonic projects being exercised. Although ‘common sense’ exists at the macro level as well, it may be redefined or take a different form locally. So this research will look at ‘common senses’ constructed both at macro and local levels. For Fairclough, ‘common-sense assumptions may *in varying degrees* contribute to sustaining unequal power relations’ (2001: 70) as it ‘helps deflect attention away from an idea which could lead to power relations being questioned and challenged - that there are social causes, and social remedies, for social problems’ (ibid.: 71). He developed the concept of ‘common sense’ further, identifying its objective to ‘naturalise’. Fairclough claims that when ‘naturalised’, the ‘common sense’ appears as having no ideological character and seems ‘to be neutral in struggles of power’ (ibid.: 76). This results in ‘a fundamental ideological effect: ideology works through disguising its nature, pretending to be what it isn’t’ (ibid.: 76-77). Within this thesis, I will look not only at how ‘common senses’ are constructed at the macro (chapters 2 and 3) and local (chapters 5 and 6) levels, but also explore how students relate to the locally constructed ‘common senses’ during their job search (chapters 7 and 8). For this a theory of agency is needed, which will be outlined in the next section.

1.2.2 Theoretical framework for the analysis of agency

The major limitation of the Neo-Gramscian framework for this research is its inability to explain how subjects engage with ‘common sense’. It is not that Gramsci does not have an analysis of agency at all, or does not treat agency as having the potential to change social practices. On the contrary, Gramsci was looking at ways in which subordinate groups can engage in counter-hegemonic activities. The concept of ‘war of position’, as used within IR and organisation studies so far (Böhm et al., 2008; Levy and Egan, 2003), ‘the modern prince’ (Levy and Scully, 2007) or ‘organic intellectuals’ (Elliott, 2003) can be used for this. However, these are all based on the analysis of groups rather than individuals, i.e. where resistance is exercised at group level. This research, however, will involve an analysis of the experiences of people while living through ‘common sense(s)’. In this section, the Neo-Gramscian framework for the analysis of structure will be complemented by a framework for the analysis of agency. First, the agency’s engagement with ‘common sense’ will be divided into 'embracing', 'resisting', 'manipulating' and 'escaping'. This distinction will help me analyse the ways in which 'common sense' is referred to by students. At the same time, this is a somewhat simplistic distinction and if not complemented by a theory of agency, would be too close to making 'false consciousness' claims. To overcome this issue, I will use Bakhtin's notion of 'dialogue' to inform the theory of agency, with individuals being conceptualised as 'dialogical selves'.

Agency response to the 'common sense'

Part of this research will look at how people engage with the 'common sense'. The key assumption that I am making here is that although human subjects are socially constructed, they do not necessarily take 'common sense(s)' for granted and actively engage with it/them. Agency responses to 'common sense' in this research will be divided into 'embracing', 'resisting', 'manipulating' and 'escaping'. 'Embracing' the 'common sense' is taking it for granted and living uncritically through it. However, knowing that 'common sense' is itself a dynamic category that takes different shapes in different circumstances and is constituted by a number of aspects, when talking about 'embracing' the 'common sense', I will pay attention to the way 'common sense' is interpreted as well as the particular aspects of the 'common sense' that are referred to. 'Resisting' is in taking 'common sense' critically and either rejecting it completely or having reservations about what the 'common sense' manifests. 'Resisting' may also further be divided into doing this actively and passively. 'Resisting actively' is in explicitly rejecting the 'common sense'. For example, when 'common sense' is an object of popular choice (e.g. the 'common sense' of a 'good graduate job'), this would be in questioning it and making a different choice. Or when 'common sense' is a process (e.g. the 'common sense' of how to be employable), actively resisting the 'common sense' would be in not acting in the way that is usually expected, explicitly voicing the disagreement with the 'common sense', or even making choices where the 'common sense' does not have to be lived up to. 'Resisting passively' is in questioning the 'common sense' (for example, via irony or cynicism), but still engaging with it. This second type of resistance is what may also be called 'decaf' resistance (Contu, 2008), as even though resistance on the individual level takes place, it accepts and even reinforces the existing power structures (see Fleming and Spicer, 2003). However, this type of resistance is still worth paying attention to as it highlights human agency even in cases of oppression and (seemingly) unchangeable circumstances (Scott, 1990). 'Manipulating' the 'common sense' may take place when 'common sense' is a process, and involves using the rhetoric for one's own purposes. This may be, for example, in emphasising that one has the characteristics a particular employer asks for during a job search, without necessarily thinking of oneself as having these characteristics. 'Escaping' the 'common sense' might mean literal of metaphorical escape. The former is in constructing one's choice according to a set of principles not related to the 'common sense'. Metaphorical 'escape' may be referred to as an 'escape attempt' (Taylor and Cohen, 1992/1976), where the 'common sense' is engaged with, but an alternative also exists. The alternative can be thought of as something that may be taken in the future instead (which would make it literal escape). At the same time, it might be a fantasy of escape without actually escaping. This was the case in LaPointe's (2011) study, where participants talked about future career transitions as a form of escape, without actually making these transitions later. Such fantasies might be a form of escape that helps individuals to cope with their everyday lives and routines. At the same time, in taking this route, there is a risk of failing to escape and maintaining the balance between everyday life and the alternative world that one would not escape to, resulting in a 'dead man working' (Cederström and Fleming, 2012).

Although this distinction would be a helpful way to analyse agency, assigning individuals to one of the categories introduced would be a crude oversimplification. So when using the categories of 'embracing', 'resisting', 'manipulating' and 'escaping', I will not take them as defining a particular subject. Rather, these categories will be looked at as (fragmented) articulations of the dialogical engagement of subjects with 'common sense'. 'Embracing', 'resisting', 'manipulating' and 'escaping' are not necessarily mutually exclusive and may belong to the same agents' articulations of 'common sense'. Bakhtin's notion of 'dialogue' will help me to elaborate on these assumptions via introducing a 'dialogical self' as the theory of the subject, assuming that subjects' identities are not complete and not finalised.

Bakhtin's 'dialogue'

In this section Bakhtin's notion of 'dialogue' will be introduced, which will help me to complement the Neo-Gramscian theory of structure and the four types of agency response to the 'common sense' in a manner that would provide a more subtle way to conceptualise and analyse structure and agency. However, before I go on to discuss the notion of 'dialogue' and how it adds to the analysis of agency, the compatibility of Gramsci and Bakhtin will be briefly touched upon. Overall, in the literature that looked at the two theorists, they have been considered to be ontologically compatible (Brandist, 1996a, 1996b; Ives, 2004). Both have been influenced by similar intellectual traditions, for example, Vossler and Croce, as well as made similar points of critique on these (see Brandist, 1996a, 1996b). Influenced, by Vossler, Gramsci and Bakhtin acknowledged the presence of ideologies within the semiotic form; as a result language and ideology became the objects of analysis for both, and they attempted 'to forge a Marxist theory of ideology and its relationship to language' (Brandist, 1996a: 94-95). Bakhtin's contribution to the way individual subjects may be understood would add to the theoretical framework for the analysis of agency and the theoretical framework of this research in general.

The notion of 'dialogue' comes from Bakhtin's work on Dostoyevsky's new type of novel, the 'polyphonic novel':

> A plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses, a genuine polyphony of fully valid voices is in fact the chief characteristic of Dostoevsky's novels. What unfolds in his works is not a multitude of characters and fates in a single objective world, illuminated by a single authorial consciousness; rather a plurality of consciousnesses, with equal rights and each with its own world, combine but are not merged in the unity of the event.
>
> Bakhtin (1999/1963: 6)

The notion of 'polyphony' has gone far beyond Dostoyevsky's novel and has been widely used within the social sciences and humanities. 'Polyphony' has also been referred to as 'polyvocality', 'multivoicedness' and 'heteroglossia' (Belova et al., 2008). Reference to these words might make one think of 'polyphony' as a relativist approach. However, this is not the case:

> We see no special need to point out that the polyphonic approach has nothing in common with relativism (or with dogmatism). But it should be noted that both relativism and dogmatism equally exclude all argumentation, all authentic dialogue, by making it either unnecessary (relativism) or impossible (dogmatism). Polyphony as *inartistic* method lies in an entirely different plane.
>
> Bakhtin (1999: 69; original *italics*)

Although Bakhtin refers to polyphony as 'inartistic method' here, the statement that polyphony is not related to relativism holds for the life of 'polyphony' beyond the novel.

Within the area of organisation studies 'polyphony' has mostly been approached in two interrelated and mutually complementing ways (Belova et al., 2008). First, 'polyphony' has been used as an approach to writing research. In Bakhtin's terms, research within the social sciences may often be characterised as 'monologic', where the purpose of writing is to outline a certain argument that the author wants to make, while research participants are treated as objects, interpreted with the authoritarian/expert researcher's voice. Studies that have been conducted using 'polyphony' to approach writing have often challenged the 'monologic' style of academic research, trying to give more voice to research participants or to listen to voices that are often unheard in the research (e.g. Boje et al., 1999; Oswick et al., 2000). Alternatively, 'polyphony' has been approached by researchers in relation to themselves, highlighting different voices of the researcher in academic writing (e.g. Rhodes, 2001). Second, 'polyphony' has applied to organisations and practices within them (e.g. Sullivan and McCarthy, 2008; Shotter, 2008). In these works organisational practice was viewed 'as multi-centred, non-linear, and intersubjective activity', which is 'shaped by a multiplicity of voices, dominant and peripheral, which together make up a contested and ever-changing arena of human action' (Belova et al., 2008: 494-495). Like 'polyphony' in Dostoyevsky's novels being seen in every aspect of it, it can also be applied to different aspects of organisations, subjects and processes in organisations, as well as ways they are connected. In other words, 'polyphony' can be used at various levels of analysis, separately and simultaneously, e.g. intra-organisational, inter-organisational and inter-personal (ibid.).

The notion of 'dialogue' is central to the 'polyphonic' novel, which 'is dialogic through and through' (Bakhtin, 1999: 40). 'Dialogue' is what enables the multiplicity of voices to be heard. Here is how Bakhtin refers to 'dialogue' in Dostoyevsky's novels:

> Thus all relationships among external and internal parts and elements of his novel are dialogic in character, and he structured the novel as a whole as a *"great dialogue".* Within this "great dialogue" could be heard, illuminating it and thickening its texture, the compositionally expressed dialogues of the heroes; ultimately, dialogue penetrates within, into every word of the novel, making it double-voiced, into every gesture, every mimic movement on the hero's face, making it convulsive and anguished; this is already the *"microdialogue[7]"* that determines the peculiar character of Dostoevsky's verbal style.
>
> Bakhtin (1999: 40; original *italics*)

[7] Archer (2003) has a somewhat similar notion of 'internal conversation'. However, Bakhtin's ontological stance fits better with this research and the Gramscian analysis of structure. Archer's position may be characterised as critical realist, which the Gramscian approach as outlined above does not fit in.

Bakhtin highlights that 'dialogical relationships' go beyond the novel, being 'an almost universal phenomenon, permeating all human speech and all relationships and manifestations of human life - in general, everything that has meaning and significance' (ibid.: 40).

'Dialogical self'

For the purposes of this research and as a result of the limitations of the theoretical framework outlined above, it is the 'dialogue of the subject' that comes to the front as it allows to conceptualise agency as a 'dialogical self' (see also Hermans and Kempen, 1993; Taylor, 1991; Sullivan and McCarthy, 2008; Beech, 2008; Barge and Little, 2002; Jabri, 2004). Conceptualising the subject as a 'dialogical self' assumes that subjects are incomplete, unfinalisable and in constant dialogue with themselves and others. 'Dialogue', for Bakhtin is central to one's identity:

> It [dialogue] is not a means for revealing, for bringing to the surface the already ready-made character of a person; no, in dialogue a person not only shows himself outwardly, but he becomes for the first time that which he is and, we repeat, not only for others but for himself as well. To be means to communicate dialogically.
>
> Bakhtin (1999: 252)

At the same time, Bakhtin does not deny that the 'dialogical self' is socially constructed. He does not discuss it explicitly [as this is not the purpose of his work on Dostoyevsky], but when Dostoyevsky's writing is analysed, the agency of the 'dialogical self' is demonstrated through a revolt of the subject that, although constructed by social structures, is not completely shaped by them and is in dialogue with them. This is the case when Bakhtin discusses Makar Devushkin[8], who is a typical 'little man', as described by another writer, Gogol. While reading Gogol's 'Overcoat', he sees himself in the main hero of the short story. However, he revolts against being completely defined, without any potential to go beyond what is prescribed by the social and no prospects for the 'little man'. From this Bakhtin (1999: 58) concludes that 'a living human being cannot be turned into the voiceless object of some secondhand, finalizing cognitive process'. So a 'dialogical self' is constructed by social structures, but can also go beyond them and is in constant dialogue with the social, himself/herself and others. The incomplete and unfinalised selves imply that subjects have an active position in relation to the 'common sense'.

[8] Makar Devushkin is the hero of Dostoyevsky's earliest literary work, 'Poor folk'.

Epistemologically, the assumption of a 'dialogical self' means the following for the research. First, the way people speak about 'common sense' represents their position towards it to some extent, but does not define them as subjects. In this study I will primarily focus on the positioning of 'common sense' within a range of incomplete and unfinalised voices. Second, most of the 'microdialogue' is not visible to the researcher as this is not something that is articulated and happens internally. However, for Bakhtin (1999: 252) it is '[o]nly in communion, in the interaction of one person with another, can the "man in man" be revealed, for others as well as for oneself'. As a result, the 'external dialogue' (dialogue with others) 'is inseparably connected with internal dialogue, that is, with microdialogue, and to a considerable extent depends on it' (ibid.: 265). For research purposes, the 'external dialogue' is likely to be more revealing when there is more communication between the researcher and the subject. Time stimulates articulation of the 'microdialogue' externally due to potentially more trust to the researcher, as well as the 'common sense' being reflected on and thought through. Interaction with 'common sense' in different contexts may also intensify this interaction between the 'microdialogue' and the 'external dialogue'. Last but not least, when the relationship of a 'dialogical self' to 'common sense' is analysed, there is no need to search for a coherent subject position. This means, for example, that when seeing students contradicting their own points on the 'common sense', I will not try to find a way to assign them to one or the other category, but rather pick up these contradictions, taking them as part of the 'dialogue' and discuss what these might mean.

The summary of the theoretical framework of this thesis is provided in Table 1.1 below.

Theoretical framework		
concept	**definition**	**in this research**
theoretical framework for the analysis of structure (informed by Gramsci, 2011/1929-1935)		
'hegemony'	- power is rooted in economic dominance, but goes beyond it, into culture, politics, ideology, as well as everyday lives - power is maintained by both coercion and consent	hegemony of global capitalism, rooted in the economic power of MNCs and governments

Theoretical framework		
concept	**definition**	**in this research**
theoretical framework for the analysis of structure (informed by Gramsci, 2011/1929-1935)		
hegemonic project’	socially constructed (by power) dimensions of hegemony	- employability (chapter 2) - consumption (chapter 3)
‘war of position’	process(es) through which hegemonic projects operate	e.g. marketing campaigns, policies, practices and the rhetoric around these
‘common sense’	socially constructed concepts of the world that are often lived uncritically	- ‘initiative employability’ (chapters 2 and 6) - ‘consumption of work’ (chapters 3 and 5)
theoretical framework for the analysis of agency (informed by Bakhtin, 1999/1963)		
‘dialogical self’ embracing, manipulating, resisting (actively/passively), ‘escaping’ the ‘common sense’	subjects are incomplete, unfinalisable and in constant dialogue with themselves and others	- students engaging with the ‘common sense’ of ‘initiative employability’ (chapter 8) - students engaging with the ‘common sense’ of ‘consumption of work’ (chapter 7)

Table 1.1 Theoretical framework

1.3 Structure of the thesis

The purpose of this chapter is to introduce readers to the theme of my research and the theoretical framework that was used to conduct it. First, the key themes were introduced by referring to my experience of engaging with them. University was positioned as a key actor in informing students on these. Second, I outlined the theoretical framework of this research, based on the works of Antonio Gramsci and Mikhail Bakhtin. The rest of this thesis will be structured as follows.

In short, chapters 2 and 3 are conceptual chapters that discuss employability and ‘consumption of work’ respectively. Chapter 4 is devoted to the methodology. Chapters 5, 6, 7 and 8 present the empirical findings of this research. Chapters 5 and 6 analyse the ‘common senses’ about student work orientations and employability constructed at the university. Chapters 7 and 8 look at how students engage with these ‘common senses’ during their job search. Chapter 9 is the discussion chapter, which brings the themes of ‘consumption of work’ and employability together. Chapter 10 is the conclusion. Now I will briefly outline the content of each chapter.

Chapter 2 is devoted to employability. It positions a particular understanding of this notion, namely ‘initiative employability’ (Gazier, 1999), as the ‘common sense’ in employer practices and labour market policies. Central to this research, ‘initiative employability’ also shapes the understanding of graduate employability and higher education policies. In the contexts that I look at, ‘initiative employability’ is ‘instrumentalised’ through (‘soft’/‘transferable’) skills. As a result, my critique of employability in this chapter comes from the critique of the conceptualisation of skills that is most often used in graduate employability rhetoric and higher education policies. The gaps in the literature that are outlined throughout this chapter lead to the following research questions.

RQ1: How is employability presented to students at the university? How does it correspond to the ‘common sense’ of ‘initiative employability’ identified at the macro level?
RQ2: How do students engage with the ‘common sense’ of employability during the job search?

In chapter 3 I develop the concept of ‘consumption of work’, which involves the commodification of the meaning of work. This concept is positioned within the literature on work orientations. Within this work orientation, work is, first, the site for consumption. Second, the images and processes of work itself become objects of consumption. In addition, by using the notion of the ‘commodification of the meaning of work’, I highlight that the politics of consumption goes beyond concealing production (Dunne et al., 2013). It is also in concealing that consumer choice is limited to the ‘menu’ (Korczynski and Ott, 2006; Korczynski, 2007). Furthermore, the very act of consumption being concealed from consumers might be a specific aspect that ‘consumption of work’ adds to the politics of consumption. The research questions that have been derived during this chapter are the following:

RQ3: Is ‘consumption of work’ constructed as the ‘common sense’ work orientation? How does commodification of the meaning of work take place on the university campus?
RQ4: How do students engage with the ‘common sense’ work orientation constructed at the university?

Chapter 4 outlines the methodology of this research. Here I explain the rationale for adopting a critical qualitative research strategy and using interviewing, documenting and observing as research methods. Due to a variety of research methods used, they are divided into core and supplementary. Observations at careers fairs and documentary data are core to the analysis of university context. They are complemented by interviews with students and career consultants, as well as observations at career consultations. Longitudinal semi-structured interviews complemented by documentary data are core for the analysis of students’ job search. This section also provides information on how the data were gathered and analysed.

Chapter 5 analyses the construction of the ‘consumption of work’ as a ‘common sense’ work orientation on campus. It shows how students are primarily exposed to MNCs and large for-profit organisations on campus, which is rooted in the politics of employer presence on campus that I also discuss. The positioning of these employers as ‘top’ is one of the aspects of the ‘consumption of work’ orientation. Other aspects of ‘consumption of work’ are identified when analysing the ‘employee value proposition’ contained in recruitment brochures. These are: organisational brand, lifestyle, self-development, and employability. This chapter also pays attention to how these meanings of work are promoted to students via marketing campaigns on campus.

Chapter 6 analyses the employability agenda at the university, through which the ‘common sense’ of ‘initiative employability’ is constructed. Employability is presented as going beyond getting a job, being a lifelong project for which one’s private experiences are mobilised. ‘High levels’ of skills are presented as the key component of employability, as well as the ability to articulate and ‘sell’ them to employers. While the university provides various programmes to help students ‘acquire’ and ‘develop’ their skills, during career consultations students are shown how to articulate and ‘sell’ them. Although it is the rhetoric of ‘initiative employability’ that is communicated to students during career consultations, manipulation of it also takes place. Examples of deviation from the rhetoric are also highlighted.

Chapter 7 is devoted to the analysis of students' work orientations. It shows the preferences of most students being shaped by various aspects of 'consumption of work', as well as instances of resistance demonstrated by a number of students. It also looks at students' work orientations beyond 'consumption of work', and how they as 'dialogical selves' navigate between them. The cases that are especially notable are where students have to give up some of their preferences about work in favour of others. 'Consumption of work' is chosen when other aspects of students' choices challenge their employability. In its turn, this orientation is also ready to be sacrificed by students strongly oriented towards the materialistic ends that work might provide.

Chapter 8 looks at students engaging with the 'common sense' of employability while managing it during their job search. I pay particular attention to how they relate to the rhetoric of skills, which they 'embrace', on the one hand, but actively manipulate during the job search, on the other. I also look at how students learn to 'play' the job search 'game' by figuring out how to manipulate the skill rhetoric and how to present themselves to employers. This commitment to and manipulation of the skills rhetoric at the same time is what leads to instances of resistance from the 'dialogical selves' during a job search. The scope of employability and students' response to rejections are also examined in this chapter.

Chapter 9 is the discussion chapter that brings the themes of employability and 'consumption of work' together. It discusses the 'menu' of 'consumption of work', which has been constructed as 'common sense' on campus and embraced by most students. At the same time, it highlights how 'dialogical selves' resist and try to escape this 'common sense'. 'Initiative employability' is discussed as the lifelong 'project of the self' (Grey, 1994), and hints of resistance to it during the job search are highlighted. The two are closely tied together, with the 'consumption of work' orientation strengthening one's employability, and employability providing access to 'consumption of work'. Both are argued to be empty of substantive meaning, but at the same time normative, hence the potential for resistance is limited.

Chapter 10 is the conclusion, in which I provide a summary of the thesis as well as outline its contributions and implications for future research.

The next two chapters identify gaps in the literature on employability and work orientations, and derive the research questions of this study. Chapter 2 is devoted to the rhetoric of ‘initiative employability’.

Chapter 2. The rhetoric of employability

2.1 Introduction

Employability is a word that has become natural to hear and use. It is central to labour market and education policies, defines organisations' relationships with their employees and is arguably at the core of individuals' (working) lives. Hence, we need to understand what employability is and where it comes from. This chapter will start by looking at 'A story of employability' (2.2), in order to see the many interpretations of the concept that have been produced since the late 19th century. 'Initiative employability' (2.3), which consists of 'Employability in managerial literature' (2.3.1) and 'Employability in labour market policies' (2.3.2), aims to outline how one particular way to understand employability has become 'common sense' since the 1980s. A 'Graduate employability' section (2.4) will follow by tracking higher education policies in the UK since the 1960s (2.4.1), raising points of their critique (2.4.2) and then outlining the 'common sense' of graduate 'initiative' employability (2.4.3). As the 'common sense' of 'initiative employability' is positively presented and promises individuals choice and empowerment, so as to challenge this view, I will outline 'what is wrong with employability' (2.5). There are three key points that make up the critique of employability; they will all be discussed in detail. First, employability ignores social exclusion (2.5.1). Second, while employability is a concept that is central to employees' and citizens' relationships with employers and the government, its meaning is elusive, if not empty (2.5.2). Third, employability is a normative category that intends to produce a certain type of individual (2.5.3), which nevertheless the individuals can react to (2.5.4). With these critiques of employability in mind and gaps in the literature highlighted, the conceptual positioning of employability within this study will then be outlined and research questions framed (2.6).

2.2 A story of employability

This section will tell a story of definitions of the word employability from the late 19th century to the present day. It provides *a* story rather than *the* story of employability because of my acknowledgment of the fact that knowledge is socially constructed (Foucault, 1991/1975). Hence the emphases made here may differ from those made by other researchers. Although the definitions of employability primarily follow Gazier's

(1999), they are complemented by other work on employability and embrace more recent research too. This focus on the different meanings attached to employability throughout the twentieth century is necessary in order to emphasise how a certain definition of employability ('initiative employability') has become 'common sense' among policy-makers, educators, counsellors, academics and individuals as a result of changes in capitalism that took place in the 1980s. This section will also only partially cover the story of employability due to other commitments of this thesis.

Employability can be traced back to at least the 1880s (Welshman, 2006), when it was used with a prefix 'un', i.e. 'unemployability' was the category in question. From the 1880s to the 1940s unemployability referred to the social group of 'those unable and those unwilling to work' (ibid.: 578). What is remarkable here is the relationship between 'unemployment' and 'unemployability'. Mid-Victorian reformers equated the two, claiming that 'defects of character automatically caused people to be unemployed' (Komine, 2004: 257). However, a distinction was later drawn between the two. The unemployed were considered to be often able and willing to work, but being in temporary unemployment, while the unemployable were a permanent social feature (Webb and Webb, 1897, cited in Welshman, 2006). Beveridge (1903) proposed a reverse causality between unemployment and unemployability, suggesting that unemployment itself was creating unemployables. Interwar social surveys also pointed out that unemployability could become the result of long-term unemployment (Welshman, 2006). Gazier (1999) names this type of (un) employability 'dichotomic' as people were classified as either employable or not. So as not to be unemployable, one needed to belong to the 15-64 age group, have no physical/ mental impairment and no family constraints (ibid.) and be willing to work (Welshman, 2006). Overall, (un)employability was the status of people in relation to the labour force. Gazier (1999) identifies this definition of employability as the first of seven concepts of employability, representing the first of three waves of the emergence of employability rhetoric, which are not mutually exclusive.

According to Gazier (1999), the start of the second wave of using the concept of employability is associated with the period from after World War II until the 1980s, with three different definitions: 'socio-medical employability' (Byrd et al., 1977; Kolstoe and Shaffer, 1961; Schwarz et al., 1968), 'manpower policy employability' (Hopper and Williams, 1973; Mangum, 1983) and 'flow employability' (Ledrut, 1966; Salais, 1974). The characteristic feature of this period was that quantitative scales to measure employability were widely used, and employability was often measured as either employment outcomes or potential employment outcomes (Gazier, 1999). ‘Socio-medical employability’ and ‘manpower policy’ employability were used to measure all sorts of relationships between, broadly, individual characteristics and labour market requirements. The former emerged before the 1950s in the United States as well as Europe and targeted the disabled while the latter emerged in the United States after the 1960s and targeted the entire workforce. Both focused on the labour supply side (Gazier, 1999), largely being about getting people to work. The emergence of these types of employability may be explained by countries’ losses in the war which led to smaller workforces and the need to recover production at the same time. ‘Flow employability’ comes primarily from French sociological literature (McQuaid and Lindsay, 2005) and focuses on the labour demand and the absorption capacity of the economy (Gazier, 1999). ‘Socio-medical employability’ and ‘manpower employability’ were the primary focus of research at the time. It is during this time that research on education and employability also appeared (e.g. Kenneth, 1978), which looked at the role of education and teaching in relation to employability. This may be considered a subdivision of ‘manpower employability’.

The third wave of employability concepts appeared in the two decades after 1980 and was developed in the 1990s (Gazier, 1999). It was during the 1990s that employability became a ‘buzzword’ in the area of work and labour market policy (Baruch, 2001; Philpott, 1999). During this time policy prescriptions regarding employability became wider and less precise (Gazier, 1999). The same holds for managerial literature, which did not offer any mechanisms to estimate employability or see whether it was increasing or diminishing (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005/1999). Three definitions of employability emerged in this wave (Gazier, 1999). The first refers to employability as ‘expected labour market performance’ (Mallar et al., 1982) and presents a statistical definition (Gazier, 1999) that shows ‘labour market outcomes achieved by policy interventions’ (McQuaid and Lindsay, 2005: 201). In addition to this, the emphasis has been shifted to the dynamic nature of employability and the individual adaptation to the labour market conditions. ‘Initiative’ employability’ (e.g. Kanter, 1989; Ghoshal et al., 1999; Arthur and Rousseau, 2001) comes from the literature on human resource development and emphasises the importance of individual initiative in the labour market. Employment would not be guaranteed by employers to employees, but can be achieved through employability. The focus on the employer-employee relationship was a distinctive feature of this conceptualisation of employability in comparison to those which existed before. The same deal spread to the relationship between governments and the labour force, with labour market policies focusing on the labour supply, i.e. again on making the workforce more employable, but not necessarily employed. The often-cited broad definition used by Hillage and Pollard (1998) also belongs to this category, defining employability as one's capability of gaining initial employment, maintaining employment and obtaining new employment if required. However, Brown and Hesketh (2004) criticise 'initiative' definitions of employability for not taking into account the conditions in the labour market. For them the definition of employability should pay attention to the dualism of employability, which is a combination of the absolute (personal capital[1]), and the relative (labour market conditions). Hence employability refers to 'relative chances of getting and maintaining different kinds of employment' (ibid.: 25). The issues that Brown and Hesketh (2004) have raised echo what Gazier (1999) calls 'interactive employability' (e.g. European Commission, 1997), which focuses on individual adaptation in the labour market, but also takes into account labour market conditions. He states that 'interactive employability' is the preferred definition of employability. However, arguably it is 'initiative employability' that has been the most often used definition of employability, and the basis on which labour market policies have been implemented since the 1980s, at least across Europe (McQuaid and Lindsay, 2005). This will be discussed in detail in the next section.

2.3 'Initiative employability'

This section will look at how, out of the plethora of definitions of employability that were used throughout the twentieth century, 'initiative employability' has become 'common sense' since the 1980s. First, 'initiative employability' rhetoric appearing in managerial literature will be examined. It came as a result of globalisation and the need for employers operating internationally to adapt to market conditions, being flexible in hiring and firing employees. As a consequence, 'initiative employability' became the new deal for employees (2.3.1). It also became the new deal for citizens, being adopted by governments, who started planning their labour market policies around labour supply and 'initiative employability' rhetoric (2.3.2). Both points will now be discussed in detail.

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[1] 'Personal capital depends on a combination of *hard currencies* including credentials, work experience, sporting or music achievements, etc. and *soft currencies*, including interpersonal skills, charisma, appearance and accent' (Brown and Hesketh 2004: 35; original *italics*).

2.3.1 Employability in managerial literature

In the late 1980s the need for organisations to be more flexible so as to stay competitive in the increasingly globalised market led to talks about a new deal between employers and employees, namely employers investing in employees' training and development, and if the company needed to let them go, they would not have problems finding other employment (Handy, 1989). 'Employability security' (Kanter, 1989) was suggested as a substitute to job security in organisations (Baruch, 2001; Clarke and Patrickson, 2008). Employability has become a 'buzzword' (Baruch, 2001) since then, having attracted a lot of attention in the 1990s. Mainstream management scholarship (e.g. Ghoshal et al., 1999), practitioner-oriented literature (e.g. Fagiano, 1993) and the media (e.g. *The Economist*, 16 March 1996) were promoting employability within organisations. Employability became the centre of the employment relationship, representing a 'new moral contract' (Ghoshal et al., 1999) or a 'new psychological contract' (Martin et al., 1998) between employers and employees.

Employability not only settled at the centre of employer-employee relationships, but became one of the key criteria for career success (Carbery and Garavan, 2005). Traditional careers, where employees climbed the organisational hierarchy, usually within one organisation which guaranteed relative job security, were replaced by 'boundaryless' (Arthur and Rousseau, 2001) and 'protean' (Hall and Moss, 1998; Hall, 2002) careers, which embraced change and flexibility. In these career models employability rather than employment came to the fore. Periods of not having a job were now accepted as normal, and it was employability that mattered. The meaning of employment itself was reinterpreted as 'a temporary state, or the current manifestation of long-term employability' (Arthur and Rousseau, 2001: 373). Each employment experience could now feed back into one's employability. A very often cited quote by Hawkins (1999: 8) states that now 'to be employed is to be at risk, to be employable is to be secure'. The notion of skills was presented as the 'instrumentation' of employability, with each new skill acquired or developed contributing to one's employability (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005: 386). So skills became the centre of 'employability security':

> ... the concern is less with the availability of standard jobs than it is with marketability of cumulative personal skills. Employment increasingly focuses less on filling predetermined work roles, and more on cultivating and using skills and capabilities. In the process, employment is coming to mean something at once more exciting and more temporary.

Arthur and Rousseau (2001: 373)

Managerial literature presented employability as a mutually beneficial relationship for employers and employees (Clarke and Patrickson, 2005) as well as one based on consensus between them (see Brown et al., 2003). The benefits for employees were seen in independence from employers as well as choice of jobs one could do throughout his/her working life. Here is how Ghoshal et al. (1999: 15-16) describe the new contract:

> In the new contract, employees take responsibility for the competitiveness of both themselves and the part of the company to which they belong. In return, the company offers not the dependence of employment security but the independence of employability - a guarantee that they fulfill through continuous education and development.

The employer-employee relationship based on job security was even seen as an obstacle to a long-lasting, satisfying relationship (ibid.). Bagshaw (1996: 16) described job security as ‘service to one master’ and stated that the opportunities for ‘dynamic’ people in the labour market were spreading in all directions. In this analysis, the very transfer of responsibility for employment to employees was presented as ‘empowering’ the latter (Clarke and Patrickson, 2005). Employers were depicted as having to compete for the best employees who were free to choose where to go; work could now be seen as ‘the new consumption’ (see Brown et al., 2003: 15).

Training was promoted as the bridge between corporate and individual interests (Bagshaw, 1996) and the ethical responsibility of the employer (Van Buren, 2003). Employers’ role as a training (and hence employability) provider was seen as beneficial for organisations not only because they could be flexible in hiring and firing employees when necessary. Providing enhanced employability was expected to ‘make jobs so exciting that employees do not exercise their liberty to leave’ (Ghoshal, 1999: 16). There are different interpretations in this literature of where the expectation that employers will provide training comes from. For some it comes from ‘enlightened’ employers who know that investing in employees would bring value to the organisation (Rajan, 1997; Ghoshal et al., 1999). Others see it as stimulated by employees themselves, who in light of job insecurity and the broken contract demand more from their employers (Herriot et al., 1998; Martin et al., 1998).

Despite mainstream management literature mostly promoting employability, there were also reserved voices in this debate. Clarke and Patrickson (2008) summarised the argument for employability into five assumptions and put all of them into question. The first three concern individuals' relationships with employability. Individuals are assumed to be responsible for their employability, have the desire to manage it and have the capacity to do so. The fourth assumption is that employers would provide opportunities for employees to develop their employability. However, as it is up to the employer to decide what training would be provided, it would not necessarily benefit employees' future employability (Clarke and Patrickson, 2008; Baruch, 2001). The fifth assumption looks at employability as an antecedent of employment. This assumption downplays the structural factors that lead to unemployment and joblessness (see section 2.5.1 'Employability and social exclusion'). It has been noted that as employers still had the upper hand in making decisions on who to hire and fire, when, under what conditions, what training to provide etc, 'employability security' could ultimately be not as 'empowering' as its proponents claimed (Jacoby, 1999; Clarke and Patrickson, 2008). Furthermore, not everyone assumed that employees would accept the new deal. According to Baruch (2001), for employability to be accepted by employees, it needs to be accepted by HR managers as they are 'agents of change' in organisations. However, in his empirical study of HR directors their attitude to employability was mostly negative. They were not treating it as an equal substitute for employees' loyalty and long-term commitment. As a solution to these problems it was suggested that employees could undertake more training that would be related to their employability in the labour market in general rather than in a particular company, such as training in transferable skills (Baruch, 2001; Clarke and Patrickson, 2008). These reserved voices in the literature do not however question the employability deal as such, but propose ways to enhance it or make it 'fairer'.

It is arguable that employers also gained the upper hand beyond the employer-employee relationship, as governments, too, had to adapt to the new ways that organisations were operating. Despite some skepticism about employability being adopted as a management practice even within mainstream management literature, governments joined the 'initiative employability' rhetoric by making employability central to labour market policies too. Employability has moved 'from corporate wish list to government policy' (Taylor, 1998), which will be discussed in the next section.

2.3.2 Employability in labour market policies

Employability was taken up by governments who joined hands with the business world and, being unable to influence labour demand, built their labour market policies around labour supply, i.e. employability. Although it was the New Labour government elected in 1997 that started explicitly promoting employability (Peck and Theodore, 2000; Levitas, 2005), the election of the Conservative government in 1979 may be considered 'the decisive moment in the shift towards an employability-based orthodoxy' in the form of a 'Stricter Benefit Regime' (Peck and Theodore, 2000: 733). For example, it was in 1986 that people who claimed unemployment for more than 6 months were required to demonstrate that they were actively searching for jobs, with refusals to cooperate resulting in benefit sanctions (see the detailed discussion in Peck and Theodore, 2000). New Labour first emphasised 'job security' as a labour market policy priority, but after a number of unsuccessful attempts to influence labour demand which resulted only in the deterioration of working conditions for employees, their rhetoric shifted to constructing job security as employability (Levitas, 2005: 118-121). Demand-driven changes were regarded as being outdated, the prerogative of the 'very bad old days' (Layard 1998: 27, cited in Peck and Theodore 2000: 729). This shift in rhetoric is very similar to the one that was taking place in managerial literature and practice at the same time (see the previous section). So it was now employees' responsibility to acquire and develop skills, adapting to the labour market conditions, while the government would provide opportunities for them to do so. Unlike the Conservative government, New Labour also committed to spend on active programming and framed their policies within the communitarian rhetoric of 'rights and responsibilities' (Peck and Theodore, 2000: 735). This policy goal can be summarised as 'from full employment to employability' (Finn, 2000).

For Peck and Theodore (2000), supply-side labour market policies can only bring short-term labour market attachment, but in the long-run will not help to fight unemployment or create jobs. The short-term solutions employability offers are especially visible in geographic regions with a lack of labour demand, like Teesside (MacDonald and Shildrick, 2011; Shildrick et al., 2012). It is only by looking beyond employability that sustainable solutions can be found (Peck and Theodore, 2000). 'Initiative employability' as a policy instrument has been criticised not only in the academic literature, but in public debate too, being characterised as a theory that failed (e.g. *The Guardian*, 20 December 1999; *The Observer*, 12 September 1999). Since New Labour, labour market policies have kept evolving around employability, with, for example, the Employability Programme for unskilled (unemployed) employees offered by JobCentrePlus after the Leitch Review (2006).

Labour market policies that focus on employability have also been implemented internationally. Apart from the UK, labour market policies with a focus on employability have been central to EU/OECD policies (Jacobsson, 2004) and adopted by member countries. This has also been the case for the English-speaking world outside the UK (e.g. Taylor, 1998; Williams, 2005), and some Asian countries like South Korea and Singapore (Moore, 2010). Employability policies have targeted the young (Worth, 2003), women (Korteweg, 2003), immigrants (Vesterberg, forthcoming) and the disabled (Holmqvist, 2008). Among graduates too, employability has become a 'buzzword' (*BBC News*, 9 April 2011), with recent changes in higher education policies and practice more explicitly targeting employability. This is what the next section will specifically look at.

Summary

This section has looked at employability rhetoric in managerial literature, as well as in the UK's labour market policies. As a response to the globalisation of the economy that has been taking place at least since the 1980s, two powerful groups, multinational corporations and government(s), put 'initiative employability' at the centre of their relationships with employees and citizens. The responsibility for employability and employment was shifted to employees and citizens, positioning employers and governments as 'enablers' (Fejes, 2010). These changes were implemented by the powerful with almost no scope for employees or citizens to oppose them. This may be understood as 'coercion', using Gramsci's terminology (see chapter 1). However, the positive rhetoric around employability, and the claim that employability benefits everybody rather than being a forced measure, have worked towards stimulating consent from those affected by the changes. The presentation of employability in a positive way may be characterised as a 'war of position' (see chapter 1) as it helps to create the superstructures of society that maintain the hegemony of global capitalism. This 'war of position' contributes to the creation of the 'common sense' of employability. The amount of talk surrounding employability, with mostly positive voices, brings forward the principles of employability (individuals' responsibility, allowing independence and choice, etc), which may then become 'common sense' not only in policy and organisational practice, but for individuals as well. The rhetoric around graduate employability, although it came to the front slightly later than in government policies elsewhere, is an example of 'initiative employability' as well, which will be explored in the next section.

2.4 Graduate employability

In this section higher education policy since the 1960s will be outlined so as to understand at what point the employability agenda and, more specifically, the 'initiative employability' agenda, have entered it (2.4.1). Second, a critique of this policy will follow (2.4.2). Finally, the 'common sense' of graduate employability, i.e. what exactly graduate employability consists of, will be discussed (2.4.3).

2.4.1 Higher education policy in the UK since the 1960s

Since the 1960s British policy has highlighted the need for higher education to respond to business demands in order to achieve economic growth and to be able to compete in the global economy. This largely goes in hand with human capital theory (Becker, 1962) and has been the underlying approach to education since then (Brown and Hesketh, 2004). The development of the workforce through higher education has been one of the main issues in this discussion. The Robbins Report (1963) identified four key objectives of higher education, one of which was connecting education with the world of work through the development of skills that students would need in the real world[2]:

> We begin with instruction in skills suitable to play a part in the general division of labour. We put this first, not because we regard it as the most important, but because we think that it is sometimes ignored or undervalued. Confucius said in the Analects that it was not easy to find a man who had studied for three years without aiming at pay. We deceive ourselves if we claim that more than a small fraction of students in institutions of higher education would be where they are if there were no significance for their future careers in what they hear and read; and it is a mistake to suppose that there is anything discreditable in this. Certainly this was not the attitude of the past: the ancient universities of Europe were founded to promote the training of the clergy, doctors and lawyers; and though at times there may have been many who attended for the pursuit of pure knowledge or of pleasure, they must surely have been a minority. And it must be recognised that in our own times, progress - and particularly the maintenance of a competitive position - depends to a much greater extent than ever before on skills demanding

[2] Three other key objectives were promotion of the general powers of the mind, maintenance of research in balance with teaching and transmission of a common culture and common standards of citizenship (Robbins, 1963).

special training. A good general education, valuable though it may be, is frequently less than we need to solve many of our most pressing problems.

Robbins (1963: 6)

Although the Robbins Report (1963) emphasised the need for skills to be developed via higher education and supported university-industry collaboration, its focus was primarily on the demand for higher education in the UK, and hence proposed its expansion, which was subsequently supported by the government. The underlying assumption of the report was that the principles of traditional liberal higher education and mass access on their own would be enough for the creation of the skilled workforce that the labour market needed (Squires, 1990).

Later, however, the automatic contribution of an educated workforce to international competitiveness was challenged (Dunne et al., 1997), and as a result throughout the 1990s the skills agenda within higher education came to the fore. Various reports coming from government, industry and to some extent higher education practitioners highlighted the need for students' skills to be developed in higher education and suggested how exactly universities could do this (Atkins, 1999; Dunne et al., 1997). The Dearing Report (1997), which has dramatically changed the funding system of higher education through its influence on the introduction of student fees, also emphasised the importance of student skills received during higher education. The recommendation for higher education institutions was to integrate the information about skills into each 'programme specification'. These were 'key skills' (numeracy, communication, the use of information technology and learning how to learn), cognitive skills (such as understanding methodologies and ability in critical analysis) and subject specific skills (such as laboratory skills) (Dearing, 1997: chapter 9, recommendation 21). In this recommendation university is positioned as an 'enabler' (Fejes, 2010), or a body that helps students to develop their skills. At the same time, Dearing (1997) highlighted the need for individuals to develop, learn throughout life and adapt to the changing economic situation, i.e. students' 'initiative employability' was implicitly addressed. A similar tendency can be found in the Roberts Review (2002: 30), which focused on engineering, science and technology students, and emphasised a lack of transferable skills (such as communication, business awareness and teamwork) among them. Universities were criticised for prioritising the scientific knowledge of students and for not paying enough attention to transferable skills. The Lambert Review

(2003) explicitly referred to employability. It included a recommendation for Funding Councils to require university departments (or faculties) to publish employability information in their undergraduate and postgraduate prospectuses:

> Recommendation 8.1
>
> Funding Councils should require universities to publish information in their prospectuses on graduate and postgraduate employability for each department (or faculty, if datasets are too small) by 2006.
>
> This information should include:
>
> • Employability statistics and first destination data – to allow students to see whether particular courses are likely to be useful for specific careers.
>
> • Starting salary data – to give students an indication of the value that employers place on graduates from particular courses.
>
> • Other information relevant to specific disciplines.
>
> Lambert (2003: 108)

All the education reports mentioned so far have been based on the assumption that education has to contribute to the economy and universities need to address employer needs. All of them supported university-industry collaboration. In 2001 Sector Skills Councils (SSCs) were introduced, financed by the government and led by employers. Their aim was to address employers' needs for the workforce, by identifying skills gaps and ways to tackle them at all levels, including undergraduate and postgraduate. The Lambert Review (2003: 109), which focused specifically on university-industry collaboration, recommended that 'The Government should ensure that SSCs have real influence over university courses and curricula'.

The Browne Review (2010) has contributed to further changes in the system of higher education funding, stimulating universities to compete for students, and leading to students paying higher fees and hence as customers supposedly controlling the quality of higher education. In this report higher education was criticised for 'not being responsive to the changing needs of the economy' (Browne, 2010: 23). To support this, Lord Browne reports that 20% of employers experience a 'skills gap of some kind', and that 48% of employers reported students lacking business awareness (ibid.). Employability is referred to as one of the criteria for university assessment, and even a criterion on the basis of which some university courses will justify their existence:

> Employment outcomes will also make a difference to the charges set by institutions. Where a key selling point of a course is that it provides improved employability, its charge will become an indicator of its ability to deliver – students will only pay higher charges if there is a proven path to higher earnings. When complemented by the improvements we propose to information, this will help students make a better choice about what to study. Courses that deliver improved employability will prosper; those that make false promises will disappear.
>
> Browne (2010: 31)

In 2010, as a response to the Coalition Government programme to publish more information about the costs, graduate earnings and student satisfaction of different university courses, HEFCE asked universities 'to publish employability statements on the help they provide to students to improve their employability and transition into work' (HEFCE, 11 June 2010). The recent Wilson Review (2012) recommends that universities should further engage in collaboration with business. Acknowledging the lack of jobs with large corporate employers, universities are encouraged to provide students more information about opportunities in small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs) as well as about self-employment. The Wilson Review (2012) pays a lot of attention to the theme of skills. Chapter 4 of the review, titled 'Development of skills and knowledge for employment', starts with the following quote: 'Graduates of today just don't have the necessary skills to meet the needs of business today' (ibid.: 30). It is then expanded in the following way:

> This has been a consistent message from employers for decades. Each generation of graduates, as they become managers themselves, repeat the judgement that their predecessors made.
>
> As employability climbs up the agenda of university applicants, today's university leaders seek to ensure that their graduates are equipped with the right knowledge and skills for employment. This chapter analyses the strategies being adopted to address this long-standing issue.
>
> (ibid.)

Providing more opportunities for students to work while at university is posited as a way to improve graduates' skills.

Summary

The role of the university as a contributor to the economy has been emphasised since the 1960s, and this was the time when the issue of employability started being addressed. Up to the Dearing Review (1997), however, universities' contribution was seen as being the production of a more educated workforce. Since the 1990s, the ability of universities to address the needs of employers and the economy has been questioned, and they have become required to pay more attention to skill development in order to produce a flexible, adaptable (i.e. 'initiatively employable') workforce. More employer (primarily business) engagement in curricula development is now encouraged, and employability has become a measure of the quality of education. Students' 'initiative employability' is to be developed by paying more attention to skills gained at the university. Government policy is informed by skills gaps reported by employers, with more action to enhance these through closer collaboration with business.

2.4.2 Higher education policies: A critique

Higher education policies in the UK, as outlined in the previous section, were made on the basis of two assumptions. First, business is assumed to be the main partner of the universities. This assumption almost completely ignores the public sector, a provider of nearly 6 million jobs (ONS, 20 June 2012). These reports seem to equate the well-being of business (which the university provides by supplying a skilled workforce) with the well-being of society, which is a problematic logic. This is justified by the pursuit of economic growth, which is itself a questionable proxy for society's well-being. Even within the questionable neoliberal rhetoric that these policies follow, public sector organisations (such as universities themselves) compete and also contribute to economic growth. The reason for singling out business as the main partner of universities is not, therefore, clear. Second, it is assumed that the skills gaps reported by employers are real and need to be acted upon. The quote from the Wilson Review (2012) above demonstrates this well, by reading employers' consistent dissatisfaction with skills as evidence of a 'long-standing problem'. It does not, for example, consider the possibility that employers' reports on skills gaps are exaggerated (Taylor, 1998). In contrast, Livingstone (1999) argues that the work-related knowledge that people have exceeds the supply of jobs where this knowledge can be used. Similarly, for Brown and Hesketh (2004), many graduates can effectively work in graduate jobs. This point may be further supported by studies that have been conducted in the workplace. For example, Brown and Coupland (2005) observed graduates being 'silenced' in graduate jobs, hence the skills that they needed to show when applying were not being fully engaged. At the same time, jobs may be not as skilled as they are portrayed to be. For example, Costas and Kärreman (2011) found employees experiencing boredom and routine even in the very prestigious and supposedly highly skilled consultancy industry. So it is questionable whether there is a problem with skills and whether graduate jobs are actually as skilled as they are presented to be. Furthermore, providing more ways for students to engage in employability-boosting activities while at university does not mean that employers' reports on skills gaps will change.

The Wilson Review (2012: 31) sees skills development and the subject studied by students as being closely connected, and warns against teaching 'generic skills' separately from the degree studied. However, the review recommends that universities develop more opportunities for skill development outside the curriculum, where there is a risk of knowledge being sacrificed for the sake of 'skills'. To be competitive in the labour market, students, being responsible for their employability, will need to take the time to engage in more employability-related activities offered to them by their universities, with education becoming a smaller part in the whole 'university experience'.

Within research the integration of employability into the education system, in particular the curriculum, has been promoted (e.g. Fallows and Steven, 2000; Cox and King, 2006; Nilsson, 2010). Critical accounts on universities pursuing the employability agenda warn against the potential for a two-tier university system being created, with one tier producing leaders and another producing employees (Boden and Nedeva, 2010). At the same time, there has been a lack of critical empirical research dealing with employability at the university level, with some notable exceptions (e.g. Kalfa and Taksa, 2012; to some extent Costea et al., 2012). Costea et al. (2012) focused on a specific source of employability rhetoric that is available on university campuses: the job advertisements of selected recruiters. Kalfa and Taksa's (2012) study looked primarily at employability that is embedded in the curriculum. However, with employability rhetoric spreading into all aspects of the university, arguably redefining 'what universities are for' (Collini, 2012), accounts that analyse employability in a number of contexts within the university are needed. At the same time, the importance of analysing local contexts comes from the potential of rhetoric that exists at the macro level being redefined locally. For example, Williams (2005: 47) interpreted the introduction of employability skills frameworks as an attempt at 'normalisation' and suggested that this would result in the employability skills project being 'challenged, resisted, ignored, or appropriated in various ways by educators, trainers and learner-workers alike'. Kalfa and Taksa's (2012) study showed educators' resistance to employability rhetoric. However, there is scope for further analysis of local agency's engagement with employability.

2.4.3 Graduate employability as a case of 'initiative employability'

Harvey (2001) distinguishes between three definitions of graduate employability. All three definitions correspond to 'initiative employability', with the first one being the broadest and embracing the other two, with the potential to be applied both to students and universities. First is employability as one's capability of gaining initial employment, maintaining employment and obtaining new employment if required (Hillage and Pollard, 1998). It is on the basis of this definition that the criteria by which universities are measured as institutions which provide employability have been developed. These criteria are nature of employment, time after graduation, income and discipline (Harvey, 2001). The second definition is employability as 'the propensity of the graduate to exhibit attributes that employers anticipate will be necessary for the future effective functioning of their organisation' (Harvey, 2001: 100). The dimensions of this type of employability are various skills[3], like teamwork, communication and risk taking. The third definition is employability as 'the ability of the graduate to get a satisfying job', with the dimensions in this case being factors such as financial reward, levels of interest, and responsibility (Harvey, 2001: 100).

It is likely that, while at university, students will be most familiar with 'initiative employability' as reflected in the second definition, which has skills as its key component. First, while universities are measured on the basis of the work students get (six months after graduation), it is aspects of the second definition of employability that universities need to develop in students. For example, the definition of graduate employability provided by Yorke (2006: 8) in 'Learning and Employability Series'[4], belongs to 'initiative employability':

> a set of achievements – skills, understandings and personal attributes – that makes graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy.

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[3] Harvey (2001) calls them 'attributes'.

[4] 'Learning and employability' series is a set of guides published by the Higher Education Academy, 'intended for senior managers and staff in higher education institutions who are reviewing or developing strategies and practice for the enhancement of student employability' (HEA, 28 April 2006).

Graduate employability here is also connected to the idea of the responsible citizen who, by being employable, makes a contribution to the society. Notably, this definition of employability is often used to define graduate employability by universities' careers centres and a modified definition of it has been adopted in the 'Working towards your future' guide for students, published together by the Confederation of British Industry and the National Union of Students (CBI/NUS, 2011: 14).

Second, individual students during their job searches are expected to be selected on the basis of the second definition of employability. 'Employability skills' was the most important factor in recruiting graduates according to employers surveyed by the CBI (2011)[5], with 82% of employers valuing such skills (see picture 2.1 below for the definition of these skills).

Exhibit 19 CBI definition of employability skills

Self-management – readiness to accept responsibility, flexibility, time management, readiness to improve own performance

Teamworking – respecting others, co-operating, negotiating/persuading, contributing to discussions

Business and customer awareness – basic understanding of the key drivers for business success and the need to provide customer satisfaction

Problem solving – analysing facts and circumstances and applying creative thinking to develop appropriate solutions

Communication and literacy – application of literacy, ability to produce clear, structured written work and oral literacy, including listening and questioning

Application of numeracy – manipulation of numbers, general mathematical awareness and its application in practical contexts

Application of information technology – basic IT skills, including familiarity with word processing, spreadsheets, file management and use of internet search engines

Picture 2.1. CBI (2011: 23)

To be employable, one needs to have the skills employers want, which can supposedly be acquired and developed from different life and work experiences. There is also an expectation of 'marketability of cumulative personal skills' (Arthur and Rousseau, 2001: 373), i.e. it is expected from individuals that they will be committed to developing their skills according to employers' demands in order to stay up-to-date in the labour market. I

[5] The findings from this survey have informed Wilson Review (2012).

regard this expectation of having, acquiring and developing skills as the ‘common sense’ of skill ‘possession’[6], where skills are assumed to be tangible, identifiable and measurable. At the same time, skill ‘possession’ is not enough to guarantee employment. Whether students have the necessary skills is tested by employers as part of the recruitment process, during which students supposedly ‘demonstrate’ them. First, skills ‘demonstration’ involves articulating them. The position of the NUS, for example, sees students as having trouble with articulating skills rather than a lack of them (Stevens, 2012), which results in problems with employability. Second, ‘demonstration’ is ‘selling’ the skills to employers during the job search, which may be seen as another aspect of skills’ ‘marketability’ (Arthur and Rousseau, 2001). ‘Selling’ skills implies an attitude of ‘self-marketing’ (Fogde, 2011) with which the process of searching for a job needs to be approached.

The relationship between ‘possession’ and ‘demonstration’ is not necessarily in the (in) ability of students to ‘demonstrate’ their skills, which is what graduate employability rhetoric points at. It is much more complex and will be traced throughout this study. For example, students might want to present a certain image of themselves (Goffman, 1959) to employers, deciding what skills to ‘demonstrate’. This can be inferred from Brown and Hesketh’s (2004) study. They identified two types of student job-seeker, the ‘purists’ and the ‘players’. The former compete for jobs according to meritocratic rules while the latter compete according to market rules. An example they provide is that ‘[p]urists view the use of assessment centres as an attempt to match the right person to the right job, that requires a high level of personal disclosure to ensure that the recruiting organization has the necessary data to make an accurate judgment’ (ibid.: 252). ‘Players’, on the other hand, modify the presentation of themselves to try to match the image that they expect employers require from them. However, ‘player/purist’ is a simplistic dichotomy and the authors themselves admit that many people belong to neither of the groups and that with time and job-search experience the type which a person belongs to might change. This distinction is made on the assumption of the reality and to some extent objectivity of employability (although they do mention problems with ‘objective’ recruitment methods, see 2.5.1). As has been shown earlier (sections 2.2 and 2.3), ‘initiative employability’ is a

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[6] I chose the word ‘possession’ to characterise the three key points on skills within the graduate employability rhetoric for two reasons. First, using a noun makes having a skill more abstract, something one can detach from jobs and contexts, which goes in line with the way the concept of skills has changed (see 2.5.2). Second, ‘possession’ highlights skills becoming an object of exchange, which is central to employability rhetoric (see 2.3.1), where training opportunities and work experiences that give skills are exchanged for a lack of security in a job.

socially constructed category. Therefore, the student job search experience needs to be analysed against the 'common sense' of employability. In Sharone's (2007) study, the job search[7] itself was characterised as being a 'game', because its rules are socially constructed. Consequently, there are no 'purists'. This is an interpretation that is supported by this study. However, Sharone (2007) focused on the sequence of the job search, while I would like to focus on job seekers' engagement with the 'common sense' of 'initiative' employability through reflections on their 'possession' of skills and the 'demonstration' of these to employers. This might help us to get a more nuanced understanding of both the 'common sense' of 'initiative' employability and of how subjects engage with it (see more on this point in 2.6).

Summary

In this section I have looked at how graduate employability is addressed in relation to the 'common sense' of 'initiative employability'. Overall, the employability agenda, with a particular focus on teaching graduates how to become employable, has been emphasised more strongly in education policies since the 1990s. Universities were encouraged to pay more attention to the development of skills, and as a result 'initiative employability' came into education policy, rhetoric and practice. I also looked at particular examples of how 'initiative employability' was presented to students. Being employable is one's own responsibility and presented as equal to being a 'citizen', i.e. contributing to the community and the economy. The 'common sense' of graduate employability may be summarised as follows. First, to be employable, a graduate needs to 'possess' skills, i.e. to have them and to be committed to acquiring and developing them. Second, he or she needs to be able to 'demonstrate' these skills to employers during the graduate job search, which includes articulating and selling them because an individual's employability itself is not visible. Judgements about it can be made by employers, counsellors and individuals on the basis of measuring, enhancing, testing and selling skills. As a result, skills become the 'instrumentation' of employability (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005: 386). This point will be central to my critique of employability as a concept (see 2.5.2).

[7] Sharone (2007) did not study graduates, but since the approach to studying job search is relevant here, I have referred to it.

2.5 What is wrong with employability?

Although employability is a socially constructed concept and has been introduced by two powerful groups, employers and governments, as a substitute to job security (see the discussion in section 2.3), its image is nonetheless very positive. It is presented as empowering employees and citizens, as well as opening more choice for them. This rhetoric is of course questionable, but cannot be rejected straight away, without arguing what the problems with employability are. In this section three key aspects of the employability critique will be addressed. First, the 'initiative employability' rhetoric ignores structural issues which lead to problems or injustices in the labour market (2.5.1). Second, employability is a concept, the content and meaning of which are questionable (2.5.2). Within this subsection, I will introduce the critique of employability that exists in the literature and then take a step further by putting the concept of 'skills' under critical scrutiny. Third, I will criticise employability as a practice of constructing a certain subject, one that is needed for employers and the governments (2.5.3). Against this background of employability increasingly entering people's habitual experiences, I will then look at agency's potential response to employability rhetoric (2.5.4).

2.5.1 Employability and social exclusion

With neither employers nor governments taking responsibility for individuals' employability and acting only as 'enablers' (Fejes, 2010), individuals' employment is presented as lying primarily in their hands. Problems with employment are thus seen as the result of not trying hard enough. 'Initiative employability', then, is very close to the mid-Victorian understanding of employability, where a person's unemployment/unemployability was seen as the result of 'bad character' (see section 2.2). The difference is that while this view did not have any grounding before, nowadays there are many programmes paid for by governments and employers that are supposed to enhance individual employability. If this enhancement does not happen, by this logic it must be nothing else than the result of a person's 'bad character' and failure to try hard enough. Of course this is not the case and unemployment is often the result of structural problems that employability does not address. In other words, 'initiative employability' is a decontextualised concept that downplays the influence of structural issues on labour market outcomes and inequalities (e.g. Morley, 2001; Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005; Moreau and Leathwood, 2006) and individualises social problems (Holmqvist, 2009). The problems of employability and social exclusion have been highlighted for different social groups, e.g. age (Nielsen, 1999), social background (Brown and Hesketh, 2004; Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005; Morley, 2001), gender (Morley, 2001; Nielsen, 1999; Smetherham, 2006), disability (Chapman, 2009; Morley, 2001) and race (Morley, 2001).

The common message in this literature is that although employability speaks to the entire labour force, it usually works for those social groups which are already secure. 'Initiative employability' for these groups is something they invest in, something they make choices about, etc. However, for marginalised groups the link between employability and employment becomes problematic as a result of two issues. First is the limited demand for labour. Individuals may enhance their employability, but still fail to find employment as a result of the lack of labour demand rather than anything else. An example is MacDonald and Shildrick's (2011) study of youth unemployment. Unemployed young men were willing to work, were available for work and were embarrassed about not having work, but a lack of jobs in their area meant that their only experience of employment was temporary, precarious jobs for short spells in otherwise unemployed lives. Second, social exclusion may happen at the level of the job search, especially with the infinitely many grounds 'on which people can be legitimately rejected' (Brown and Hesketh, 2004: 187):

> ... out of the continuum of infinitesimal differences between performances [concourse (competitive recruitment examination)] produces sharp, absolute, lasting differences, such as that which separates the last successful candidate from the first unsuccessful, and institutes an essential difference between the officially recognized, guaranteed competence and simple cultural capital, which is constantly required to prove itself.
>
> Bourdieu (2005: 20-21)

UK graduates face both problems. First, the expansion of higher education since the 1960s has led to more graduate-level labour. However, 'the rise in credentials in no way reflects a genuine economic demand for more highly qualified labour, so often presented in government policy' (Tomlinson, 2008: 50). The supply of graduate-level labour exceeds demand for it (Brown and Hesketh, 2004; *The Guardian*, 16 November 2011), and the difference between the two has become more dramatic since the 2008 economic crisis (e.g. *The Independent*, 28 June 2011; *The Guardian*, 16 November 2011). This lack of jobs leads to the result that 'small decisions have major consequences for individual life-chances' (Brown and Hesketh, 2004: 202). Second, as a result of the expansion of access to higher education, the graduate labour market consists of people from a very diverse range of social groups who all compete for the same jobs. Proponents of social closure theories (e.g. Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977; Bourdieu, 2005; Collins, 1971; Murphy, 1988) have been pointing at the smaller chance that people from disadvantaged groups would be hired when competing for jobs with people from non-disadvantaged groups. Social closure covers a broad range of processes, from deliberate and conscious exclusion to more marked 'unwitting exclusion and both deliberate and unwitting inclusion' (Smetherham, 2006: 34). 'Best practice' of human resource management does not help to avoid social exclusion either (see Brown and Hesketh, 2004). For example, Newton's (1994) research showed how the 'objective' and 'efficient' assessment centre techniques that were supposed to ensure fair selection, when used in the British Army to recruit non-middle class officers, failed. This was due to the fact that middle class officers conducting the recruitment did not associate with the potential newcomers and 'objectively' rejected them on the basis of characteristics that signalled class, like accent and the presence of a moustache. Brown and Hesketh's (2004) research on graduate recruitment showed how supposedly 'objective' and 'rigourous' recruitment practices were guided by the social closeness of the chosen candidates to recruiters. In this study, employers were also more likely to prefer students from more prestigious pre-1992 universities. At the same time, Brown et al. (2003: 20) criticise conflict theories for being too simplistic in concluding 'that elites simply rig the competition in ways that guarantee their success, or that modern recruitment techniques amount to an elaborate hoax in a bid to convince us that the competition for jobs is fair rather than fixed'. A similar critique has been made by Tomlinson (2007, 2008). As a result, social closure theories or the further modified idea of 'positional conflict' (Tomlinson, 2007; Brown et al., 2003; Brown and Hesketh, 2004) were used to explain the differences in labour market outcomes for people with equal credentials.

Overall, the literature on employability and social exclusion primarily questions unequal employability and hence unequal access to employment by different groups of people. For example, Boltanski and Chiapello (2005: 385) criticise the fact that individuals are responsible for their employability, and suggest a 'right to employability' to be offered by employers. Part of the 'right to employability' would be the fair assessment of people's skills. It is the uncertainty of labour market outcomes and their unfairness under the 'new spirit of capitalism' that they criticise, rather than employability itself or, as Cremin (2010) elaborates, capitalism overall. Within research on graduates this argument has been summarised as ‘mismanagement of talent’ (Brown and Hesketh, 2004), with one of the problems being that ‘talent’ from disadvantaged groups has difficulty getting well-paid highly skilled jobs in the knowledge economy. For example, one of the conclusions of Tomlinson’s (2007: 303) empirical study is that ‘many graduates are marginalised from high-paid, fast-track employment, and that existing patterns of inequality are likely to continue well into the future unless employers find appropriate ways of managing the large bulk of talent entering the labour market’. The concept of ‘initiative employability’ as such and the celebration of its pursuit are usually not questioned within the literature that critisises employability for social exclusion. Following Cremin (2010) and Moore (2010), I argue however that the concept of employability needs to be put under critical scrutiny. This is exactly what the next section will focus on.

2.5.2 Employability: An elusive concept

Employability has gone beyond being simply a characteristic of the new relationship between employer and employee, and beyond being a criterion for career success[8]. According to Cremin (2010: 145), it has become a ‘condition for employment’. It has also settled at the centre of the relationship between the government and the citizen, with citizens referred to as paid workers (Cole, 2008). However, it is questionable what precisely employability means, if anything. For example, for Moore (2010: 42), employability does not hold any meaning ‘if it is not an experience lived and constructed by people whose relationship to their work is increasingly subordinated to global and local changes to labour markets’. Similarly, Cremin (2010: 133) has referred to employability as an ‘empty signifier’ that ‘draws together the fluff or a number of unconnected words’, such as teamwork, communication, flexibility and enthusiasm. It can hardly be measured whether employability has risen or fallen (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005). Even when one gets a job or promotion, the person cannot be sure why this has happened (Cremin, 2010).

These critiques of employability have not however elaborated where the emptiness of employability comes from. In this section I am taking a step further, which is in the following. The ‘common sense’ of employability has been identified through skills. Employability itself is not visible. However, it is ‘instrumentalised’ (Boltanski and Chiapello,

[8] Referring to ‘career success’, however, in no way means that I subscribe to it as an unquestionable category that all human beings need to strive for.

2005) through the notion of skills (see section 2.4), i.e. judgements about it can be made by employers, counsellors and individuals on the basis of measuring/enhancing/testing/selling a person's skills. Therefore, in this section I will engage more closely with the notion of 'skill' and argue that the way it is used most frequently today is itself elusive. I will start by pointing to a shift in the conceptualisation of the 'skill', with 'soft' skills becoming central to it[9]. Then I will briefly summarise problems with this conceptualisation mentioned in the literature. Finally, I will elaborate on a specific point that especially helps to illuminate the problems with employability rhetoric. Namely, this will be highlighting the problem of distinguishing the mundane from the extraordinary when evaluating one's skill levels.

The meaning of skill has changed in the late twentieth century. Traditionally skill in the workplace was associated with certain technical faculties of manual craft workers and technologists in specific jobs and limited within these jobs. This has changed since the 1970s and 1980s, and '"skill" has expanded almost exponentially to include a veritable galaxy of "soft", "generic", "transferable", "social" and "interactional" skills, frequently indistinguishable from personal characteristics, behaviours and attitudes, which in the past would rarely have been conceived of as skills' (Payne, 2000: 354). Payne (2000) explains this shift by three trends. The first two are a shift from traditional manufacturing industries to services and the rise of the so called 'knowledge economy'. The third is high youth unemployment since the mid-1970s, with policy programmes focused on making young people more 'employable', i.e. being able to adapt to labour market changes. So the redefinition of skill is the result of both changes in the structure of the economy and the labour market insecurities that global competition has brought. This way to refer to skills is central to employability rhetoric, where skills are positioned as not confined within a job and not having a limit, having to be constantly acquired and developed (see section 2.4). This contributes to the absence of limits for employability (see 2.5.3). For example, the 'Working towards your future' guide (CBI/NUS, 2011: 11) for students works exactly with this 'soft' and limitless conceptualisation of skills. In fact, it emphasises the point that specific technical skills may become outdated, which is not the case with what they call 'employability skills'.

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[9] Throughout this thesis when talking about skills, I will imply this particular conceptualisation of them. This also holds for the critique of the notion of skills in this section. So I do not question the concept of skill per se, but the conceptualisation of it that has become 'common sense' and is increasingly informing policies, practice and people's habitual experiences (see 2.5.3).

This conceptualisation of skill has been criticised for being decontextualised (e.g. Powell, 1968; Pye, 1968; Hart, 1978; Darrah, 1994; Hyland and Johnson, 1998; Dunne et al., 1997). Skills are assumed to be transferable across contexts (Holman, 2000), while both the transferability of skills from education to work and from one work context to another have been questioned (e.g. Hyland and Johnson, 1998; Atkins, 1999; Cranmer, 2006). Second, it is also questionable whether skills can be 'possessed' (Dunne et al., 1997), while skill rhetoric and related education policies has been about having skills, working on skill gaps, acquiring and developing skills required by employers. Third and most important for the discussion of employability, the complexity of skill is unclear. '[I]t is ambiguous whether the term indicates mere adequacy or superior, extraordinary ability' (Attewell, 1990: 423). Within employability rhetoric skills are positioned as abilities which make one 'stand out' from the rest, and as a result get, for example, a job or a promotion. At the same time, they can be gained from almost any experience - university, work, hobbies etc. The position within the CBI/NUS report (2011: 15), for example, is that everyone has skills, but they need to be developed to a high level so as 'to stand out from the crowd'. However, while skill as adequacy can be identified in certain activities, it is much more problematic to understand what a high level of skill looks like. This is exactly the point I will now elaborate on.

Hart (1978), for example, looked at 'reading skills', and distinguished two different capacities of reading. First is 'the capacity to translate marks on a page into sounds, into words, into meaning, and which involves visual discrimination, mastery of the convention that we proceed from left to right, memory and so on' (Ibid.: 207). This capacity is what may be called the 'skill' of reading. However, it is usually fully achieved by children by the time they finish school. The second capacity of reading is in 'comprehension and appreciating significance', which does not have a certain ceiling (ibid.: 207). However, this comprehension cannot be achieved through enhancing the 'skill' of reading. Similarly, for Powell (1968: 44), 'to be able to engage in an argument with some degree of skill, one needs to get the feel of a subject, to become sufficiently familiar with its factual, logical and procedural terrain to be able to move over it with some confidence and to follow the movements of others with ease'. In both cases skill is present, but it is mundane and secondary to the substance of the activity itself.

The same logic can be applied to skills that are often listed as making students employable. For example, to solve a problem, a person needs to be able to understand what the content of the problem is by applying their knowledge of the area where the problem lies, as well as evaluate different ways to solve it. There may be a certain skill of problem-solving, such as not delaying the decision for too long after a view on the problem is formed. However, this 'skill' is secondary to the knowledge base that the decision would be informed by. The same holds for teamwork. Working on a certain project in a team, one needs to know what his or her role is and to be able to do this role. The skill of teamwork here would be located, for example, in being able to talk to colleagues, listen to them and offer constructive criticism. However, such an activity is not particularly difficult. Teamwork (if read as 'cooperation') is a basic human activity and is as much inherent to human nature as competition and struggle (Kropotkin, 2009/1902). Even supposedly exceptional skills such as 'leadership', being hard to capture, have been characterised as a set of mundane activities that are done by managers (Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2003), or things that become visible only through mystification and sacralisation (Grint, 2010; Śliwa et al., forthcoming).

The mundane component of a skill is possible to identify, and it may also be possible to evaluate its level of adequacy. At the same time, it does not seem to be particularly hard to achieve an adequate level of skill in all of the cases that have been mentioned. However, what would a high level of problem-solving or teamwork skills look like? The CBI/NUS (2011) report suggests that students develop high-level skills by engaging in many different activities at university, work and in life. These achievements, they suggest, must be backed up with evidence. This may be, for example, a certificate that shows that a skill has been acquired. Or it may be an example of an accomplished activity, where a skill has been demonstrated. Even when the former is gained, it is the result of accomplishing an activity that supposedly develops or shows the skill. If an activity is accomplished (well), a claim can be made that this is the result of certain skills. So the only proxy for a higher level of skill is more experience of having accomplished activities that supposedly require or develop these skills. However, two questions arise here. First, would the activity not be completed if skills required for it were absent (Darrah, 1994)? Second, is the accomplished activity the result of skills, or is it the result of other factors (for example, knowledge, professional expertise, or luck)? Furthermore, it is questionable whether greater experience of accomplishing tasks that require certain skills leads to a higher level of these skills. During the job search, another complexity is added to evaluating skills. They are usually assessed on the basis of individuals' narratives about their skills and simulation exercises (like a group exercise in assessment centres). However, these can be learnt and manipulated by job seekers, for example, by exaggerating one's achievements in a certain activity.

In summary, employability is an elusive concept, the instrumentation of which depends on a conceptualisation of skill that is itself questionable. When a certain degree of skill can be found in an activity, it is mundane and cannot be the basis for 'standing out from the crowd' that employability calls for. The high skill levels required to be employable are elusive themselves. As a result, being defined through a set of specific skills and setting their extraordinary levels as the key criterion for employability, employability becomes empty of substantive meaning. However, this does not mean that employability or skills can be ignored. Skills' emphasis on cognitive, personal and social characteristics as well as attitudes, is a way 'to construct a particular worker-subject replete with certain desirable values, attitudes, behaviours and dispositions' (Payne, 2000: 356). This is exactly what employability does, and is what the next section will be devoted to.

2.5.3 Constructing and governing the subject

Employability has a normative character, prescribing what individuals should be and operating through a 'self-work' ethic (Heelas, 2002) or through self-government (Knights and Willmott, 1990). It 'displaces orientation of the subject from their current job onto the longer-term goals of career advancement or continuing employment per se' (Cremin, 2010: 136). Employability becomes a 'project of the self' (Grey, 1994), where work and life outside work are mobilised in its name (Cremin, 2010). This speaks to earlier studies on the career as a 'project of the self' (Grey, 1994) or a 'moral project' (McKinlay, 2002), where a career was key to individuals' self-management, discipline and conformity to employers' demands (Grey, 1994; McKinlay, 2002). For example, McKinlay's (2002) account on Scottish banks at the beginning of the 20th century shows how management controlled the lives of their employees, where this control was self-maintained by employees, via the importance they attributed to the career in the organisation.

However, while the career as a 'project of the self' was specific to certain contexts (e.g. particular organisations or occupations) and applied to those already in employment, employability as a 'project of the self' seems to have a broader and more normative scope. First, one is 'never employable enough' (Cremin, 2010). Based on skills, which do not have a limit and are not confined to a certain job or occupation, there are infinite ways to develop employability. This may be referred to as the 'principle of potentiality' inherent to employability, which is in 'the exhortation that every individual ought to see itself as always capable of "more"' (Costea et al., 2012: 35). Even though careers rhetoric and labour market policies shape the career as something that all individuals need to strive for (e.g. Korteweg, 2003), it is arguable that people can to some extent choose to be oriented towards a career or not. For example, in Tomlinson's (2007) study some students were more oriented towards family life rather than their careers, and ignored the very idea of the career as something they would base their life decisions on. However, '[t]he project of employability begins at the cradle, if it has not yet been extended to the grave' (Levitas, 2005: 121), and with employability being a condition of employment (Cremin, 2010), it is questionable whether one can choose not to be oriented towards employability. The employability rhetoric aims at converting all individuals, as well as social groups (see Vesterberg, forthcoming[10]), into employable subjects.

The literature looked at how individuals were constructed as employable subjects in the workplace (Fejes, 2010; Fejes and Berglund, 2009), in policies (Fejes, 2010; Williams, 2005) and through the job search (Sharone, 2007; Fogde, 2007, 2011). The employability's key principle that subjects should take responsibility for their employability has been discussed (Sharone, 2007; Fejes, 2010; Fejes and Berglund, 2009). For example, in Sharone's (2007) study, unemployment was shown to be constructed as an individual rather than a structural problem, as a result depoliticising it. Employers and the state are often constructed as 'enablers' who make 'it possible for the individual to make necessary choices to become employable' (Fejes, 2010: 99). Being a 'lifelong learner' (Fejes, 2010; Williams, 2005), having 'transferable skills' (Williams, 2005), being flexible (Fogde, 2007) and 'sellable' (Fogde, 2007, 2011) may be identified as the key features of employability. For example, in Fejes (2010) subjects are constructed as responsible for their employability through the rhetoric of 'lifelong learning' (found in policy documents at transnational and national levels, as well as in interviews). This makes assumptions about individuals being adaptable, flexible, as well as constantly updating their knowledge and skills.

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[10] This study looked at the interaction of employability and ethnicity, showing how the rhetoric of a labour market project in Sweden constructed a minority ethnic group (unemployed Somalis) as 'problematised others' and aimed to transform them into 'advanced liberal subjects' required by employability.

Consequently, individuals are not ‘dead selves’ (McKinlay, 2002) or ‘empty subjects’ (see Costea et al., 2012), but people whose (overabundant) individual qualities (ibid.) are mobilised in the name of employability. However, employability positions the worker as primarily dependent. No matter how committed an individual is to the development of his or her skills, it is the employer who decides whether they are ‘employable enough’. At the same time, not living up to what employability rhetoric demands is likely to result in being unemployable. For example, in Bergström and Knights’ (2006) analysis of the process of recruitment interviews it was the candidates’ active subjectification to the company’s practices and norms (as constructed during the interview) that led to a job offer. This results in individuals having to conceal the characteristics that do not fit into employability rhetoric, like shyness or mental illness (e.g. Fogde, 2007; Elraz, forthcoming). Alternatively, in Swedish context, not being employable enough might lead to being helped into getting a job, but via being coded as disabled despite not having any visible disabilities (see Garsten and Jacobsson, forthcoming).

Research on employability’s role in constructing and governing the subject has mostly analysed documents (e.g. Fejes, 2010; Fogde, 2007), interviews with counsellors (e.g. Garsten and Jacobsson, forthcoming), the interaction between job seekers and counsellors/recruiters, and subjectivities (co)constructed during this process (e.g. Bergström and Knights, 2006; Sharone, 2007; Fogde, 2011). However, the reflections of job seekers on the process of the job search have rarely been looked at. Sharone’s (2007) study is one of those where job seekers’ voices are heard. However, he primarily concentrated on the construction of the subject during the process of the job search. What researchers have so far overlooked are the reflections of job seekers themselves in response to the ‘common sense’ of employability while being engaged in the process of the job search. The study by Finch-Lees at al. (2005), although it did not focus on employability or the job search, looked at how employees were reflecting on the competency-based discourse constructed in an organisation. It is in this manner than I would like to approach the study of the graduate job search.

2.5.4 Agency response to employability rhetoric

Even though employability seems inescapable, this does not mean that there is no scope for agency response to it. This is what this section will look at, exploring the potential for resisting, manipulating and escaping employability rhetoric. Resistance may be a response of those who do not identify with the ‘common sense’. It may also come from the tension between ‘individualistic work ideologies’ (or the positive message of ‘initiative employability’) and the negative experiences of one struggling to find work (Sharone, 2007). However, in research on the job search, resistance has rarely been particularly noticeable (Fogde, 2011; Sharone, 2007)[11]. This is understandable as the practice of searching for a job, which includes writing the CV, going through interviews etc, is undergone to ultimately find a job, so the attitude to job search practices is likely to be instrumental (Grey, 1994; Fogde, 2011; Sharone, 2007). Individuals’ lack of power in the labour market serves as the material basis for a lack of resistance.

At the same time, a lack of resistance may be explained by subjects embracing the ‘common sense’ of ‘initiative employability’, or ‘individualised work ideology’ (Korteweg, 2003; Newell, 1999). An example of this ideology may be, say, talking about meritocracy when failing (see Newell, 1999). Sharone (2007) argued that even negative experiences during a job search resonate with and help to reproduce ‘individualistic ideologies’. He divides the process of the job search into two phases and explains the absence of resistance within each. The first phase is active and optimistic, when job seekers ‘embrace the self-help perspective with enthusiasm’ (ibid.: 412). Resistance does not take place there because job seekers engage in ‘professional work of job search’, thinking that the way they search is the determinant of the job search outcome. Job seekers are absorbed in a ‘work-game’ (Burawoy, 1979) with the desired outcome being to ‘win’, i.e. to get a job. During this process the rules of the game are not questioned. The second phase of the job search usually follows months of silence and rejections, where enthusiasm and confidence decline. With the ‘common sense’ that finding a job is one’s own responsibility, not finding a job leads to a sense of personal failure. Participants of Sharone’s (2007) research were usually ignoring any structural issues relating to their inability to find a job, like the situation in the labour market. He claims that self-blame comes as a result of playing the job search game: ‘[t]he initially galvanizing experience of being in control and of being able to

[11] Bergström and Knights (2006) identified active resistance to the company and its recruitment practices in their analysis of recruitment interviews. For them resistance was in the candidate not responding in line with the discourse constructed by the interviewer, and is something that resulted in not getting the job offer. However, while this shows resistance in interaction with employers, this does not necessarily imply resistance in the way it was conceptualised in this study. What the authors refer to as resistance may be treated as candidates’ not having learnt to play the game, for example. At the same time, it was the resistance to practices within the organisation (e.g. travelling, working overtime) rather than to aspects of employability rhetoric, which nevertheless had consequences for one’s employability.

"construct your own reality" boomerangs on the job seeker who is left with no one to blame but him or herself' (ibid.: 413).

Although the empirical evidence on subjects resisting employability rhetoric is limited, this does not mean that employability cannot be questioned. Agency response to the 'common sense' of employability may become more nuanced if constituent aspects of employability are analysed. Looking at student engagement with the notion of 'skills' and constructing themselves as employable through them may reveal this. Also, while resistance to the 'common sense' of employability may be hard to capture from the micro-interactions of career consultants/recruiters and job seekers, this may be more evident if the whole experience of a job search is traced. This is what will be done in this research, i.e. students will be tracked throughout the process of their transition from university to work.

Resistance to employability may take both active and passive forms (see chapter 1). Active resistance involves rejecting employability rhetoric (in total or in parts), and doing this openly. On the one hand, this may be expressed in certain actions, like not applying to places where employability rhetoric contradicts one's views or ideas. It may also be in shaping work orientations not in line with what employability asks for. For example, flexibility in the labour market is central to employability. Hence, being inflexible, or being committed to a certain job rather than employability on its own terms, may be seen as a form of resistance. Notably, in previous research students have been identified as committed to bureaucratic careers in organisations (Brown and Scase, 1994). Even with the rise of employability rhetoric, they were treating flexibility as a forced measure rather than something they were keen on themselves (Tomlinson, 2007). Resisting employability openly may also involve challenging the employability rhetoric during the job search, for instance by using irony or articulations of oneself as employable that do not fit into what is expected by employers. However, an individual needs to be well aware of the expected rhetoric to do this. At the same time, taking into account the high competition levels in the labour market, following such a resistance route is likely to challenge one's employability (see Bergström and Knights, 2006), and hence it would be a luxury to do so. Potentially, but very unlikely, this open resistance may even be a way to 'stand out from the crowd', becoming a competitive advantage. For example, organisations with 'fun work cultures' or 'authenticity' (e.g. Fleming, 2005; Murtola and Fleming, 2011) may allow explicit irony or critique of the workplace or the job. It is not completely unimaginable that such a culture could be extended to the process of recruitment too, with an applicant's rejection of employability rhetoric becoming a facet of employability itself. Much like ‘fun work cultures’, which arguably are a way to control employees and maintain the existing relations of power (Fleming and Spicer, 2003), openly resisting employability may be a way of only further reinforcing the rhetoric. Nevertheless, it is probably a step too far for advanced capitalist employers to take.

Taking into account the material condition of the need to get a job, it is likely that passive resistance to employability, i.e. challenging the rhetoric, in full or in part, seems more feasible. This is exactly where the voices of agency need to be listened to. Here resistance may be in denouncing some or all of the rhetoric, but at the same time not showing this to employers. Another agency position may be in manipulating the rhetoric. For example, this can be in ‘playing the game’ during the job search, but not articulating one’s denouncement of the employability rhetoric. With the ‘common sense’ of employability not being clear cut, but instead consisting of different elements, it may be that agency can embrace some elements of the rhetoric while resisting others. Consequently, it is important to look at the ‘microdialogue’ (see chapter 1) that may emerge as a result. Finally, even though employability is a condition for employment (Cremin, 2010), and it is impossible not to engage in managing it during the process of the job search, ‘escape attempts’ (Cohen and Taylor, 1992) from some aspects of employability rhetoric can potentially take place. For example, aspects of employability like the lifelong scope of it, or the willingness to constantly develop skills may potentially be ignored by some individuals. With the ever-increasing emphasis on employability that is communicated to individuals from very early in their lives, being oriented towards something completely different (without necessarily rejecting employability as such) may be treated as an ‘escape attempt’.

2.6 Conclusion: Conceptualising graduate employability

In this study I conceptualise the ‘common sense’ of ‘initiative employability’ as a socially constructed category that was introduced and spread by two powerful groups, governments and employers. Using Gramscian terminology, this has been done by coercion and consent (see chapter 1). Coercion has been in changing policies and workplace practices in organisations. Stimulating consent has been in presenting an ‘empowering’ image of employability and promoting it as giving more choice. This study conceptualises employability as a hegemonic project that helps to maintain existing power relations. The ‘common sense’ of graduate employability that exists at the macro level and which has been identified from literature and policies can be summarised as follows. Graduates need to ‘possess’ (i.e. to have them and be committed to acquiring and developing them) high levels of the skills required by employers and to be able to ‘demonstrate’ them during the job search. They also need to develop these skills throughout their (working) lives. The concept of skills, however, is elusive, as their ‘high levels’ are problematic to identify, so employability becomes not only elusive, but also empty of substantive meaning. However, it is a condition of employment (Cremin, 2010) and citizenship, which constructs and governs people throughout their (working) lives.

Three gaps in research have been identified. First, there is a dearth of in-depth studies of employability rhetoric within the university context. Second, in research on the graduate job search, attention has not been given to employability as a socially constructed concept, and hence the constituent aspects of the ‘common sense’ of employability have been analysed as ‘given’ categories. Analysing employability as a socially constructed category means that the reflections of participants on the ‘common sense’ of employability can be traced, rather than just their experiences of the job search. Third, within critical employability literature, it is usually the process of constructing subjects as employable that has been analysed, and as a result subjects’ reflections on the ‘common sense’ of employability during the job search experience have been overlooked. Consequently, the two employability-focused research questions that I would like to address in this study are the following:

RQ1: How is employability presented to students at the university? How does it correspond to the ‘common sense’ of ‘initiative employability’ identified at the macro level?

RQ2: How do students engage with the ‘common sense’ of employability during the job search?

The macro level ‘common sense’ can take a different shape locally, for example, by being resisted (Williams, 2005; Boden and Nedeva, 2010; Kalfa and Taksa, 2012), hence its presentation to students may be different. Consequently, RQ1 will look at the ‘common sense’ of employability at the local level and analyse how it corresponds to the one identified at the macro level. This study will focus more on employability at the university campus in general, primarily that implemented by the local careers centre.

RQ2 will look at students as 'dialogical selves' engaging with employability, potentially embracing, manipulating, resisting and escaping the rhetoric. It is important to note that these agency reactions to employability can co-exist due to, on the one hand, students' unfinalised identities, on the other, employability rhetoric consisting of a set of aspects. One such aspect is the 'common sense' of skill 'possession'. Another aspect is the idea that skills need to be 'demonstrated' during job search. For a more nuanced understanding of students' engagement with employability rhetoric, a useful distinction to make when exploring RQ2 will be to look at students' engagement with these two dimensions of employability during the job search, which are interlinked, with one feeding back to the other.

For a summary of the insights from this chapter and the research questions, see Table 4.1 below.

	'Common sense' of graduate employability	Addressed in	What for?
Macro level	- possession' of ('soft'/'transferable') skills - their marketability - attitude of a 'lifelong learner', who will enhance 'transferable skills' during the (working) life	Chapter 2 (based on review of literature and policies)	To identify the 'common sense' of graduate employability and gaps in the literature
Local level (structure): university	RQ1: How is employability presented to students at the university? How does it correspond to the 'common sense' identified at the macro level?	Chapter 6 (based on empirical study of the university context)	To analyse the local 'common sense' on employability, against which agency response can be analysed
Local level (agency): student job search	RQ2: How do students engage with the 'common sense' of employability during the job search? ('possession'/'demonstration')	Chapter 8 (based on empirical study of the student job search)	- To analyse graduate employability as a socially constructed category (addressing the gap in literature on the graduate job search), which will give a more nuanced understanding of the process - To give a voice to agency, assuming they can engage with the 'common sense' (addressing the gap in critical employability literature)

Table 4.1

Research questions 1 and 2 will be addressed in chapters 6 and 8 respectively. In short, they will look at the 'common sense' about employability that is constructed at the university and how students (as 'dialogical selves') engage with it during the job search. Chapter 3 will focus on developing the concept of 'consumption of work', which is closely intertwined with employability, the issue that will be brought up in chapter 9.

Chapter 3. 'Consumption of work'

3.1 Introduction

'Ours is a consumer society' (Bauman, 2005: 23), where consumption has become so important if not central for many of us (Campbell, 1987) and 'is laying hold of the whole of life' (Baudrillard, 1998/1970: 20). Consumption may be defined in two distinct but connected ways. First, consumption is the process 'through which economic resources are used up' (Campbell, 1987: 38). Second, consumption is 'the use of goods in the satisfaction of human wants' (Kyrk, 1923: 4, cited in Campbell, 1987: 38). The latter involves human gratification from the process of consumption (Campbell, 1987). The concept of 'consumption of work' described in this chapter, as well as the empirical part of this thesis, will primarily engage with this second definition of consumption. This, however, in no way undermines the importance of the former, which will also be discussed throughout this chapter, by referring to labour as the resource that is used up. In fact, this will help to elaborate on our understanding of the politics of consumption and position the concept of 'consumption of work' within it.

Both definitions of consumption imply that it has always existed. There have always been producers and consumers. However, consumption levels have not always been the same. These 'may alter as a consequence of either an innovation in the use of resources or a modification to the pattern of gratifications' (ibid.: 38). For example, a boost in consumption could be noticed during the Industrial Revolution (McCracken, 1990), i.e. when the way resources were used was altered. Certain consumer gratification patterns existed in sixteenth century Europe (Mukerji, 1983) and England (McCracken, 1990). The phenomenon of 'conspicuous', i.e. status consumption, was coined in the late nineteenth century (Veblen, 2007/1899) while luxurious consumption itself was not unheard of even in Ancient Greece, as briefly depicted by Plato (see Dunne et al., 2013). However, there are two key features of the 'consumer society' that distinguish it from consumption that occurred before. First, it is characterised by the phenomenon of mass consumption, which appeared in the twentieth century. Second, the 'consumer society' engages people 'primarily in their capacity of consumers' (Bauman, 2007: 52) while before people were first of all engaged as producers. Bauman (2005: 26) even claims that 'one needs to be consumer first, before one can think of becoming anything in particular'.

Consumption has embraced a lot of areas of life, becoming central even where it did not have such a role before (e.g. education, Williams, 2013). This chapter will look at one such area, namely work. More specifically, I will look at how work becomes the object of consumption via the commodification of the meaning of work, while the process of working becomes an act of consumption. This chapter will develop the concept of 'consumption of work' and proceed as follows. I will start by conceptualising consumption as a 'hegemonic project' (3.2). Here I will discuss the politics of consumption (3.2.1) and the forms of consumption that I will engage with in this research (3.2.2). An overview of literature that has looked at consumption entering work will then follow (3.3). It will end with a set of under-researched questions about 'consumption of work', which will determine the structure of the rest of the chapter. First, I will explore whether 'consumption of work' is a well-grounded phenomenon by looking at orthodox management literature (3.4). I will start by explaining employers' rationale for using marketing practices within the employment relationship (3.4.1) and will follow with an outline of these practices (3.4.2). Graduate jobs will be positioned as jobs that are especially targeted by them. Second, I will position 'consumption of work' as a work orientation that results from the commodification of the meaning of work (3.5). Third, I will review the literature on work orientations and position 'consumption of work' within other work orientations (3.6). Last and most importantly, based on all preceding sections, I will outline what the 'consumption of work' orientation means (3.7). Here, research questions for this part of the study will be raised. Section 3.8 will provide a summary of this chapter.

3.2. Consumption as a 'hegemonic project'

At the end of the nineteenth century Lafargue (1999/1880: 21-22) was already referring to the ideological function of consumption, writing that the main problem for capitalism was no longer about increasing production, but about 'finding consumers, exciting their appetites and creating artificial needs'. Ewen's (1976: 54) claim is essentially the same, except that he was referring to the development of mass consumption in the US in the 1920s, which was not an evolutionary development, but 'an aggressive device of corporate survival'. Increased levels of production in all industries due to the 'Fordising' of American industry required an equal increase in consumption of its goods. Stimulating mass consumption was a way to coordinate the aspirations of capital with those of labour, preventing worker resistance to monotonous and alienating work (ibid.). Consumption operates primarily through consent and may be viewed as central to maintaining capitalism:

> [T]he astonishing penchant for creating wholly new product development since the 1950s or so has placed the development of consumerism and a rising effective demand at the centre of the sustainability of contemporary capitalism in ways that Marx, for one, would have found hard to recognise.
>
> Harvey (2011: 95)

Economic growth does not depend so much on the '"productive strength of the nation" (healthy and plentiful labour force, full coffers and daring entrepreneurship of the capital owners and managers), as on the zest and vigour of its consumers' (Bauman, 2005: 27). As a result, consumption is often suggested as the solution to economic crises (Bauman, 2007).

Within my research, consumption is conceptualised as a 'hegemonic project', i.e. a practice that helps to maintain capitalism and which has entered people's daily lives and subjectivities. With consumption being political, what then is the politics of consumption? While the examples above speak of the ideological function of consumption, which is directed at consumers, the politics of consumption is usually referred to as being in the process of production, i.e. in the way labour as a resource is used. However, does this mean that the consumption side of the ever-expanding 'consumer society' has nothing to do with politics? In the following subsection I will argue that the politics of consumption stems from both aspects of consumption that I have outlined in the definitions above (3.4.1). I will also outline the potential for agency in engaging with the 'menu' of consumption. The description of the forms of consumption central to this research, namely communication of signs and hedonism, will then follow (3.4.2).

3.2.1 The politics of consumption

I follow Dunne et al. (2013) in that the politics of consumption is concealed from consumers[1]. However, it is not only the production process being concealed, but also the fact that consumer choice is a choice from a 'menu' (Korczynski and Ott, 2006;

[1] and often in research, with questions of consumption looked at separately from the questions of production (Dunne et al., 2013). However, this is not the focus of this particular chapter.

Korczynski, 2007). Within this section I will first outline the production-focused critique of consumption via the notion of 'commodity fetishism' (Marx, 2007/1867). Then, following Gramsci, I will show how the very act of consumption is also part of the politics of consumption and helps to maintain this hegemonic project.

The notion of commodity is central to understanding the politics of consumption. Marx defines commodity in the following way:

> A commodity is, in the first place, an object outside us, a thing that by its properties satisfies human wants of some sort or another. The nature of such wants, whether, for instance, they spring from the stomach or from fancy, makes no difference. Neither are we here concerned to know how the object satisfies these wants, whether directly as means of subsistence, or indirectly as means of production.
>
> Marx (2007/1867: 41-42)

The commodity is specific to the capitalist mode of production, the wealth of which is in the accumulation of commodities. A commodity has a use value and an exchange value. Use value refers to properties of the commodity that have the capability to satisfy human wants. At the same time, it is a product of human labour. Use values 'constitute the reality of all wealth, whatever may be the social form of that wealth' (ibid.: 42-43). However, it is under the capitalist mode of production that these also have exchange values. Exchange value is the value of the commodity on the 'free market' and represents an abstraction from use value: 'when commodities are exchanged, their exchange value manifests itself as something totally independent of their use value' (ibid: 45). As a result, the products of human labour 'appear as independent beings endowed with life, and entering into relation both with one another and with human race' (ibid.: 83). This is what Marx calls 'commodity fetishism', which is key to the politics of consumption. This politics is about hiding the human substance of the society of producers (Bauman, 2007: 14). The market itself, which once (in Ancient Greece) used to be the site of political debates over consumption, now serves to conceal its political aspect (Dunne et al., 2013). Even if consumers are aware of the processes of production behind their acts of consumption, they mostly act as if they are not (Billig, 1998):

> We all know this relatively distant world of production exists as the very condition of possibility for the relatively close world of consumption *and yet* we are very rarely disposed to think much more about it, let alone actually do anything disruptive in it.

Dunne et al. (2013: 208; original *italics*)

This point is a fundamental critique of consumption, which is rooted in the economic relations of production. It does not undermine the role of agency, but recognises its limited role in challenging power structures and the relations of production. However, following Gramsci, hegemony, although rooted in the economic, goes beyond it, into all other areas of life and habitual experiences. The role of the hegemonic project of consumption in the latter is also political and helps to maintain the hegemony. Even if the economic power is challenged, and the processes of capitalist production are undermined, for example, resulting in job losses or even closures of some capitalist organisations, this mode of production would not necessarily be challenged. In line with Gramsci, this would be due to consumers' attitudes taking longer to change due to the 'trenches', or the superstructures, built through the 'war of position' (see chapter 1). Therefore, focusing solely on production as the key to the politics of consumption underestimates the role of this hegemonic project on the side of consumers, especially with the seemingly never-ending sources for human gratification in consumption. Therefore, in this thesis, the politics of consumption is also seen to be in concealing its 'menu' (Korczynski and Ott, 2006; Korczynski, 2007) aspect.

Arguably, there is choice in 'consumer society', but this is choice from the 'menu' (Korczynski and Ott, 2006), i.e. what one is offered to choose from, despite the myths of individual sovereignty surrounding consumption and the 'fetishization of individual choice' (Korczynski, 2007). By allowing some choice, the 'menu' at the same time creates a sense of autonomy for those choosing:

> The restaurant menu is created to enchant and appeal to the customer, and it does this not only substantively through the descriptions of the available food, but also formally through the placing of the customer as the autonomous figure who chooses between available alternatives. This ritualized emphasis on autonomous choice can make the act of choosing as delicious as the actual food consumed. The customer here consumes the enchanting myth of sovereignty. For management, the genius of the menu is that it offers to the customer the image of sovereignty through autonomous choice, while at the same time constraining that choice.
>
> Korczynski and Ott (2006: 912)

The choice from the 'menu' is constructed within the power structures of the society. There is scope for agency here as one may embrace some aspects of the 'menu' while resisting and manipulating others (see chapter 1). However, this very choice maintains the hegemonic project of consumption. The ‘menu’ aspect of choice is concealed from consumers, with them feeling that they are making autonomous choices. When some patterns of consumption are challenged, for example, due to one’s concern about the processes of production behind them, others are not, as there is always something else to choose from the ‘menu’. For example, ‘ethical consumption’ not only leaves the mode of production unchallenged, but also offers plurality to the ‘menu’ of consumption. It reinforces the hegemonic project of consumption by potentially adding a source of autonomy to the consumer, but being the choice within consumption ‘menu’ at the same time. At the same time, in line with the conceptual framework (chapter 1), I do not rule out the potential for transcending the choice from the ‘menu’ in some way, for example, by making choices outside the ‘menu’ of consumption, or making ‘escape attempts’ (Cohen and Taylor, 1992). With individuals being ‘dialogical selves’, different, even contradictory agency positions can co-exist within one subject and shape his/her ‘microdialogue’ (see chapter 1).

3.2.2 Consumer as ‘communicator’ and ‘hedonist’

With both characteristics of the politics of consumption, as well as the theoretical framework of this thesis allowing for the role of agency, it is now time to identify the characteristics of consumers that I will be engaging with throughout this study. Two key types of consumers that will be worked with in this research are ‘consumer as hedonist’ and ‘consumer as communicator’ (Gabriel and Lang, 1996). They are central to modern consumption and are most relevant to the discussion of ‘consumption of work’ that will follow later in this chapter. Both contribute to the hegemonic project of consumption.

The consumer may be considered to be a ‘communicator’ when he or she consumes ‘to express social differences as well as personal meanings and feelings’ (Gabriel and Lang, 1996: 47). Within this category, to become an object of consumption, the object ‘must first become a sign’ (Baurdillard, 1996/1968: 200). Consumption is then ‘an activity consisting of the systematic manipulation of signs’ (ibid.: 200), and it is not the object itself, but the relationship that is consumed. Veblen’s (2007/1899) classic ‘Theory of the leisure class’ is an example of the analysis of ‘consumer as communicator’, with ‘conspicuous’, i.e. status, consumption being its perspective on the consumer. Although ‘conspicuous consumption’ is still relevant today (Patsiaouras, 2010), the ‘consumer as communicator’ idea is not limited to it. Baudrillard (1998) has also referred to ‘super-conspicuous consumption’, i.e.

discreet consumption. This is also a way for the consumer to communicate, but not through quantitative ostentation and money, but distinction and culture (ibid.: 55). Consumption, however, is not only the communication of status signs, but subjectivities as well. 'Subjectivity fetishism'[2] (Bauman, 2007) is then also one of the ways to look at 'consumer as communicator'.

However, 'consumer as communicator' does not explain the potential value for the consumer in the processes of consumption itself. While for 'consumer as communicator' the value from consumption is derived from the outcome of consumption (which is in the signs that objects of consumption communicate), for 'consumer as hedonist' the value is in the process of consumption itself and the feelings from it. For 'consumer as hedonist'[3] consumption is about pleasure-seeking, where pleasure 'is not a state of being, but a quality of experience' (Campbell, 1987: 60). Campbell (1987) divides hedonism into two types, 'traditional' and 'modern'. 'Traditional hedonism' relates to pleasure that comes from sensations attached to senses (hearing, sight, smell, taste, touch). Under 'modern hedonism' pleasure comes from emotions that accompany different experiences, even painful ones. Within 'modern hedonism', deferred gratification associated with Protestant work ethic (Weber, 1985/1905) may be understood not as a sacrifice of pleasure, but a source of excitement. Campbell (1987) talks about a shift from 'traditional' to 'modern' hedonism due to a rise in comfort, which dulls pleasure. As a result, 'pleasure may be sought in new stimuli, less predictable, less comfortable, more dangerous' (Gabriel and Lang, 1995: 104). However, assuming that 'traditional hedonism' has not died out completely, this thesis will work with both types of hedonism as key characteristics of the pleasure-seeking consumer.

Summary

In short, in this thesis consumption is conceptualised as a 'hegemonic project'. The politics of consumption lies in concealing (Dunne et al., 2013) both the human labour used in production, but also the 'menu' (Korczynski and Ott, 2006; Korczynski, 2007) aspect of

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[2] For Bauman (2007: 14) 'subjectivity fetishism' hides the 'too commoditized reality of the society of consumers' by constructing identities through the act of consumption.

[3] 'Consumer as hedonist' may also be informed by Bourdieu's (1984) social hedonism, which sees consumer as pleasure-seeking, whose taste is shaped by the class he or she belongs to. While this may be a useful angle to conceptualise consumers, it is not so relevant for this thesis. The main reason for this is that 'commodification of the meaning of work' is addressed to all students and does not discern them according to social backgrounds, so is intended to shape their taste for work in a common way.

consumer choice. Surrounded by the myths of individual sovereignty, consumers have choice, but it is limited to the choice constructed by the power structures (Korczynski and Ott, 2006). At the same time, the existence of choice from the 'menu' might help one feel a sense of autonomy. 'Communicators' and 'hedonists' (Gabriel and Lang, 1995) is what consumers are encouraged and constructed to be. Although partly being constructed by the hegemonic project of consumption, consumers are also 'dialogical selves' (see 1.2.2), i.e. have incomplete and unfinalised identities, hence are not defined by it completely. The notion of the 'dialogical self' and the concept of the 'menu' bring up the role of agency and help to avoid sliding into 'structural pessimism' (du Gay, 1996: 81-82). See Box 3.1 below, which depicts this summary.

Box 3.1 Consumption as a 'hegemonic project'

=> **consumer** (constructed as):

'communicator' (Gabriel and Lang, 1995) - consuming signs (Baudrillard, 1996)
- 'conspicuous consumption' (Veblen, 2007)
- 'super-conspicuous consumption' (Baudrillard, 1998)
- consuming subjectivities (including 'subjectivity fetishism': Bauman, 2007)

'hedonist' (Gabriel and Lang, 1995) - pleasure-seeking consumer (Campbell, 1987)
- 'traditional hedonism' (Campbell, 1987)
- 'modern hedonism' (Campbell, 1987)

agency - **'dialogical selves'** (Bakhtin, 1999) choosing from the **'menu'** (Korzcynski and Ott, 2006)

3.3. Consumption entering work

Arguably, work and consumption have always been intertwined, with the interaction of the two shaped by social and historical circumstances. For example, we can talk about working to consume for survival as a pre-industrial relation between the two (for the majority of people who lived at the time). Working hard to refrain from consumption might be seen as a characteristic of industrialisation and the Protestant work ethic (Weber, 1985/1905). Working to engage in consumption is then a characteristic of 'consumer society' (see also 3.5). This section explores the intersection of work and consumption that modern forms of work and its organisation within the 'consumer society' have brought. I argue that consumption has become central to the process of work. First, the rise of consumption rhetoric at work is looked at, which is in customer-focused rhetoric at work and the importance of the brand becoming central for organising production. Second, the potential of work itself to provide consumption experience is explored by looking at work as a site for consumption and at (the features and images of) work as an object of consumption. It is the latter way to look at the intersection between production and consumption that is key for developing the concept of 'consumption of work' throughout the rest of this chapter.

Since approximately the 1990s, consumption rhetoric has been increasingly entering work, which may be explained by the rise of service work and the more direct interaction of organisations with their consumers. First, this has led to a rise in customer-focused rhetoric at work (du Gay, 1996; Russell, 2011). For example, the retail organisation analysed by du Gay (1996: 145) was constructed as an enterprise where 'customers' needs and desires were to be satisfied, productivity to be enhanced, quality service guaranteed, flexibility increased and innovation fostered through the active engagement of the self-fulfilling impulses of all the organization's members'. Similarly, the rhetoric of customer sovereignty was the key principle of all practices targeting employees within the organisation researched by Russell (2011: 106), including training and development programmes as well as organisational decor and artefacts.

Second, in addition to managing consumption, the maintenance of the corporate brand has become central for organising production (Kornberger, 2010). The practice of 'employee branding', i.e. attempts by employers to make employees 'live the brand', has become increasingly widespread in organisations (see Brannan et al, 2011; Pettinger, 2004). A substantial contribution to this area comes from the book 'Branded lives' edited by Brannan et al. (2011), which highlights the contested issues around 'employee branding' practices. For example, Land and Taylor (2011) show how the image of the corporate brand at the organisation they researched did not correspond to management practices within it. Promoting alternative lifestyles as a brand to external customers, largely through employees, the work-life balance of the latter left much to be desired. Employees do not necessarily take 'employee branding' practices for granted, often demonstrating resistance to them (e.g. Russell, 2011; Tarnovskaya, 2011).

However, the interaction of work and consumption in contemporary organisations operating within the 'consumer society' goes beyond consumption-related rhetoric being central to production. Work itself seems to be able to provide a consumption experience. First, work is a site for consumption. For example, a job in the financial industry gives opportunities for conspicuous consumption (Patsiaouras and Fitchett, 2010) while at work, as depicted in films such as 'Wall Street' and 'The Boiler Room'. Attire, spaces and lifestyles associated with the process of work in the financial industry provide sign values of status. However, it is not only the financial industry with its hierarchical corporate cultures that provides opportunities for consumption at work. New forms of work organisation, which focus on looser structures and flatter hierarchies, have opened more opportunities for work as a consumption site. 'Fun cultures' (Butler et al., 2011) and authenticity (Murtola and Fleming, 2011) are examples of these new forms of work organisation. These provide characteristics of work that employees may consider to be genuinely important, and at the same time function as a form of neo-normative control (Fleming and Sturdy, 2009). In addition, these may create sign values associated with work (not necessarily connected to status) as well as opportunities for hedonist consumption (Campbell, 1987). Dale (2012: 13) refers to employees being constructed as 'the "consumers" of "cafeteria-style" benefits and development opportunities'. While 'cafeteria-style benefits' is another example of work as a site of consumption, the consumption of development opportunities implies the possibility of features of work itself or the images of work being consumed, which is what the next paragraph will focus on.

Second, more than just being influenced by consumption rhetoric and being a site for consumption, work too has been seen by some as becoming an object of consumption. For example, Brown et al. (2003: 15) note that work is presented as an object of consumption in orthodox management literature:

> Knowledge work is presented as a source of excitement, creative fulfilment and personal development, alongside monetary rewards including, salary, benefit packages and share options. Work is the new consumption!

The term 'consumption of work' or similar expressions have been used to highlight consumption entering into the heart of the employment relationship (Jenner, 2004; Korczynski, 2007; Dale, 2012). Jenner (2004) talks about graduates 'consuming jobs'. This comes from an empirical study, which showed how employers wanted to portray a particular image to potential recruits via recruitment materials. At the same time, not much information about the actual jobs was provided. Graduates, in their turn, reported that recruitment materials informed their job choices. Salomonsson (2005) discusses potential employees 'shopping for jobs' in cyberspaces. They surf for jobs and put those that they like into the virtual shopping basket. The only problem with this consumer good is that it needs to be affirmed by the 'seller', i.e. the employer. As a result, the job-seeker simultaneously becomes both a consumer - with the potential to choose and to influence the market - and a commodity that can in turn be rejected' (ibid.: 122).

This relatively new phenomenon of 'consumption of work' might be the ultimate merger between consumption and production. However, the studies mentioned so far, although helpful in highlighting 'consumption of work', do not explain what its scope is, what it means and involves, where it comes from and how it can be possible. They show that consumption has entered employment, and that work itself, rather than being just a means to consumption in leisure time, may provide some form of consumption. This is often done through human resource management (HRM) practices (Dale, 2012). At the same time, employees are expected to demonstrate certain subjectivities within organisations, which need to correspond to corporate values (Willmott, 1993):

> [T]he employee is expected to *actively engage* in the commodification of themselves, *performing* an appropriate organizational identity as a necessary part of being a successful employee.
>
> Dale (2012: 13; original *italics*)

In this sense, 'consumption of work' as a set of attitudes to work might not just be a matter of individual preferences towards work, but a normative orientation that employees have to adopt.

Taking the points that have been raised in this section as the first step, in the sections that follow, I am going to develop the concept of 'consumption of work'. To do this, three questions need to be addressed. First, is 'consumption of work' a well-grounded phenomenon? In other words, is there more evidence that it has been promoted to current and potential employees, and why has this been the case? Second, theoretically, is it possible to talk about 'consumption of work' at all? Third, if it is, what is 'consumption of work'?

3.4 Outlining the potential for 'consumption of work'

In this section, I will outline the potential for 'consumption of work', based on an overview of orthodox management and practitioner literature. I will discuss the rhetoric of 'war for talent' among employers and HRM practitioners (3.4.1). This rhetoric applies to the workforce in general and graduates in particular, with graduates likely to be the potential 'talent'. 'Employer branding' is one of employer responses to the 'war for talent' (3.4.2). The idea has gained popularity in practice, orthodox management and practitioner literature. Its aim is to make working for a certain employer desirable by the 'talent', which I argue shows that 'consumption of work' is a well-grounded phenomenon.

3.4.1 'War for talent'

'War for talent' is a phrase that is based on two key assumptions. First, it differentiates the importance of roles within organisations and assumes that corporate performance depends on a small number of 'talented' individuals (Michaels et al., 2001; Cohen, 2001). Second, 'talent' is limited (e.g. Chambers et al., 1998). So as to be able to compete globally, companies need to attract this 'talent'. Although the issue of global competition for a 'talented' workforce had been raised earlier (e.g. Reich, 1991), the phrase 'war for talent' was coined by the McKinsey consultancy company (Chambers et al., 1998; Michaels et al., 2001) and promoted by them, as well as other business consultancies (see Pfeffer, 2001; Brown and Tannock, 2009). The conclusion that a 'war for talent' was taking place in the corporate world was based on the results of the survey conducted by McKinsey. It involved 72 HR executives, 359 corporate officers and 5679 executives from 77 large companies and 20 case studies of companies who were acknowledged for their 'talent' (Chambers et al., 1998). The study showed that three quarters of respondents were stating they had 'insufficient talent sometimes' or were 'chronically talent-short across the board'. The conclusion was that 'war for talent' would be a defining characteristic of global competition and corporate performance of the future, and due to problems with talent identified already, this was a 'call to arms for corporate America' (ibid.: 2[4]). A variety of reasons were outlined as the causes of the 'war for talent', like a shift from an industrial to an information economy (hence higher demand for 'talent' by organisations), the propensity of people to switch from one workplace to another, which has come with the

[4] This reference is an online source, which does not contain numbers, so 2 here refers to the paragraph in the text where the used quote can be found. The same principle will hold to other quotes from this text.

rise of employability (see 2.3), as well as the challenge from smaller companies, who were sometimes competing for the same people (Chambers et al., 1998; Michaels et al., 2001).

It was noted that different companies would require different types of 'talent', which would likely be found in different social groups (Chambers et al., 1998). One of the groups where potential 'talent' is to be found are graduates. At the same time, the expansion of higher education is assumed to have done little to solve the problems with talent shortages (Brown and Tannock, 2009). In other words, not all graduates are assumed to be equally good at work due to skill shortages constantly reported by employers (see 2.4.1), so the 'war for talent' spreads to graduate recruitment as well (see Brown and Hesketh, 2004).

Despite some criticism of the 'war for talent' and examples of failures of organisations that have embraced it[5], the rhetoric has spread way beyond recruiting executives and graduates. It has also spread into the non-corporate sphere, being promoted within cities (Peck, 2007) and countries (Florida, 2005; see also Brown and Tannock, 2009), as well as integrated into social programmes (Porschitz et al., 2012).

What 'talent' actually involves is not clear (Lewis and Heckman, 2006): it is assumed that there is 'talent' and that it makes a difference, but it is not clear what being a 'talent' is defined by. It is usually noted that the constituent characteristics of 'talent' are to be understood in particular contexts, but whenever specific examples are provided, these are framed in terms of skills, a concept that is itself elusive (see 2.5.2):

[5] The notion of the 'war for talent' has been criticised from a variety of angles by scholars (e.g. Brown and Hesketh, 2004; Brown and Tannock, 2009), including in orthodox management literature (e.g. Pfeffer, 2001; Stumpf and Tymon, 2001; Somaya and Williamson, 2008). For example, Pfeffer (2001) outlined three main problems with the 'war for talent': emphasis on individuals rather than teams, glorification of outsiders, self-fulfilling prophecy (i.e. those labelled as 'poor performers' become poor performers, being asked to do less, given less attention etc.) and ignoring systemic and cultural problems that affect performance. Another major concern with the 'war for talent' is social exclusion (Brown and Hesketh, 2004; Brown and Tannock, 2009): not only is 'talent' socially constructed, it is disproportionately rewarded, and everything except 'top' talent performance is devalued. In other words, 'war for talent' is 'the intellectual justification for why such a high premium is placed on degrees from first-tier business schools and why the compensation packages for top executives have become so lavish' (Gladwell, 2002: 28). Ironically, one of the companies that was ahead of most in 'war for talent' was Enron (ibid.), probably one of the most epic corporate failures in history. Even though 'war for talent' was not the only reason for Enron's collapse, it could stimulate some re-thinking of this popular rhetoric.

... complex economy demands more sophisticated talent with global acumen, multi-cultural fluency, technological literacy, entrepreneurial skills, and the ability to manage increasingly delayered, disaggregated organizations.

Chambers et al. (1998: 8)

3.4.2 'Employer branding'

'Employer branding' is one of the responses to the 'war for talent'. It is also seen as an employer response to the 'new psychological contact', i.e. employability (Backhaus and Tikoo, 2004; Martin et al., 2005), a way to restore employee trust[6] by advertising 'the benefits they [employers] still offer, including training, career opportunities, personal growth and development' (Backhaus and Tikoo, 2004: 504). 'Employer branding' means that marketing practices enter the area of HRM, so it is HRM practitioners who are responsible for it. Within the 'employer branding' rhetoric, current and potential employees are explicitly addressed as consumers, with HRM leaders being expected 'to deliver value to employees as much as they do to consumers' (Sartain, 2005: 90). 'Employer branding' is seen as a way in which HRM can become more strategic and bring value to organisations (see Martin et al., 2005)[7]. Although 'employer branding' has mostly been discussed as the HRM strategy of primarily large corporations, it has also been advocated as a practice to be adopted within the public sector (Ewing and Caruana, 1999).

According to Backhaus and Tikoo (2004: 501), 'employer branding' represents a firm's efforts to promote, both within and outside the firm, a clear view of what makes it different and desirable as an employer'. It may be divided into two steps. First is having an 'employee value proposition' on offer for potential and current employees (Chambers et al., 1998; Michaels et al., 2001). Second is communicating this proposition to them, i.e. marketing the 'employer brand' internally and externally (Backhaus and Tikoo, 2004).

According to Chambers et al. (1998), the first step of the 'employer branding', 'employee value proposition', consists of the following. First, is the positioning of the organisation as a 'great company' to work for in employees' eyes, i.e. building the 'employer brand' (Ambler and Barrow, 1996). This may be in creating the image of a socially responsible company

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[6] see section 2.3.1 for the discussion of this issue within orthodox management literature

[7] 'Employer branding' has not been embraced by all HRM practitioners. It has met resistance from some of them, who saw marketing practices as manipulative and artificial (Barrow and Mosley, 2005). Another problem has been in HRM being seen as 'communicators' of the brand rather than the source its values (Martin and Beaumont, 2003).

(see also Bhattachariya et al., 2008; Cheese et al., 2008), an industry leader, a provider of training opportunities or a place that attracts ‘talent’. Second, these are ‘products’ on offer, i.e. ‘great jobs’:

> What a company can and should consider changing straight away are the particular products it offers: its jobs. If a company succeeds in attracting a target executive group with great jobs, the brand should take care of itself as the changing mix of employees reinforces the values the company is seeking to build.
>
> Chambers et al. (1998: 4)

‘Great jobs’ may be in having freedom and autonomy, providing challenges or career advancement. Third, these are compensation and lifestyle, such as high levels of compensation and respect for the employee’s lifestyle.

The characteristics of the ‘employee value proposition’ may be divided into the functional (e.g. salary, benefits) and the symbolic (e.g. prestige, social approval from working in the firm) (Backhaus and Tikoo, 2004), alternatively put as the ‘brand experience’ (Mosley, 2007) or ‘brand excitement’ (Sartain, 2005). Attention to the symbolic is considered to be a new feature of recruitment, which distinguishes ‘employer branding’ from traditional recruitment practices:

> Traditional recruiting focuses on functional employment benefits, such as job security; opportunities for creativity and individual growth; and compensation. But an employer’s intangible, emotional associations - “it’s fun to work at this company”, “we have passionate and intelligent culture”, “there is a strong team feeling here” - are just as important to recruits as similar associations with branded consumer goods are to potential buyers. So companies would do well to compare themselves with their peers on both functional and intangible dimensions.
>
> Hieronimus et al. (2005: 13)

Similarly, Sartain (2005: 90) talks about ‘branding the meaning’ when discussing Yahoo’s! ‘employer branding’ practices:

> By branding the meaning, promise, and overall employee experience, organizations can engage and enchant employees, giving deeper meaning to the promise that lies behind their daily efforts. This gives jobs a deeper resonance and results in an emotional connection that compels commitment.

In addition, some empirical evidence has shown the higher importance of the symbolic over the functional characteristics of employment for employees (Lievens and Highhouse, 2003). As a result, going beyond tangible characteristics of work into the symbolic, may be considered to be the central feature of 'employee value proposition'.

So far I have outlined what the orthodox and practitioner management literature sees as an 'employee value proposition'. The next step to win the 'war for talent' is in marketing this proposition to current and potential employees. 'Internal marketing', i.e. bringing the employer brand to employees of the organisation, has been highlighted as important in stimulating customer-focused behaviours by employees (Mosley, 2007). It is expected to contribute to organisation identity and organisational culture (that also feeds back to the employer brand), which would stimulate employees' loyalty to the brand and hence would increase productivity (Backhaus and Tikoo, 2004). The goal of internal marketing is to stimulate employees to 'live the brand' and hence be more committed as employees (Mosley, 2007). To attract 'talent' from the outside, companies are encouraged to engage in 'external marketing', applying branding techniques to recruitment:

> For a company to exploit its brand effectively when it fishes for talent, it must think of recruits as customers, use sophisticated marketing analysis to identify its key rivals, determining which corporate attributes matter most to specific types of recruits, and understand how best to reach them.
>
> Hieronimus et al. (2005: 12)

Backhaus and Tikoo (2004) explain the mechanism of attracting applicants. First, employer branding is expected to stimulate 'brand associations'. These 'can be verbalized, but also might reside at a more sensory level - in other words, consumers have a feeling about a brand, an emotional response or the memory of a smell, taste or other sensation' (ibid.: 505). 'Brand associations' in turn create a certain image of the employer.

There are many ways in which organisations can engage in 'external marketing'. These can be internships, joint projects with universities; mentorship programmes; events, workshops, campaign visits, seated dinners; campus presentations, career fairs; online games, sponsorship of awards for excellent students; direct marketing; direct-response marketing; print media campaigns, radio advertising (Hieronimus et al., 2005). These are also discerned by two scales, the number of people reached and the intensity of communication implied. All these can apply to the recruitment of students, while the first five marketing tools in the list apply primarily to students. It is also suggested to combine marketing activities with general corporate advertising (Edwards, 2010). So employers, when engaging with potential recruits, are expected to present both the employer brand and their corporate brand.

This section has shown that what I have referred to as ‘consumption of work’ in the previous section is indeed a well-grounded phenomenon. With the rise of ‘employer branding’ in HRM practice, work is presented as an object of consumption to current and potential employees. First, the ‘employee value proposition’ puts special emphasis on symbolic and intangible characteristics of work, constructing an attractive image of work. Second, this image is actively promoted to target audiences via ‘internal’ and ‘external’ marketing practices, in a way trying to sell this constructed image of work to them.

3.5 Commodification of the meaning of work

Having analysed the orthodox management and practitioner literature, it can be concluded that consumption has been promoted within the employment relationship. This is also a phenomenon that was primarily taking place in practice and which received attention in academic literature later. ‘Employer branding’ has been emphasised, with explicit marketing-related terms being applied to work. ‘Employer branding’ has also been the initiative of employers rather than employees. The promotion of the image of work as an object of consumption to current and potential employees is one of the aspects of the hegemonic project of consumption. The practice of ‘employer branding’ is the ‘war of position’, i.e. the process through which the hegemonic project of consumption is promoted within the employment relationship.

Within theoretical writings, the potential of work to be an object of consumption has been discussed by Bauman (2005) and Baudrillard (1998). Bauman (2005: 33) links the change of the status of work with the demand for aesthetic experience brought by consumption, as a result of which work itself can become an object of consumption:

> Like everything else which may reasonably hope to become the target of desire and an object of free consumer choice, jobs must be ‘interesting’ - varied, exciting, allowing for adventure, containing certain (though not excessive) measures of risk, and giving occasion for ever-new

> sensations. Jobs that are monotonous, repetitive, routine, unadventurous, allowing no initiative and promising no challenge to wits nor a chance for self-testing and self-assertion, are boring.

Bauman talks about work as an object of 'hedonist consumption' (Campbell, 1987; Gabriel and Lang, 1995), where the value of work is 'judged by its capacity to generate pleasurable experience' (Bauman, 2005: 33). He juxtaposes this attitude with the idea of work as a place for identity construction, 'moral improvement, repentance and redemption' (ibid.). For him work can still be a site for identity construction, but for a minority of people from privileged professions. However, Bauman's claim about work as an object of consumption remains undeveloped.

Baudrillard (1998) also mentions the potential for work to be an object of consumption. For him, leisure in democratic societies is a 'factor of cultural distinction and selection' (ibid.: 156). However, with the developing of leisure activities, they will become competitive and more disciplinary, so the privilege may change into spending less time in 'obligatory consumption' with particular types of work becoming the place and time where one could recover from leisure. Although he admits this is paradoxical, Baudrillard allows for the possibility of work to be consumed, as indeed 'anything can become a consumer object' (Ibid.: 157). However, he does not think this time has come yet, and that for a long while leisure will be valued. Later in the book he explains the problem with consuming work:

> [N]on-economic demand for work is an expression of all the aggressivity that has not been satisfied in leisure and satisfaction. But it can find no resolution by that route since, arising from the depths of the ambivalence of desire, it here reformulates itself as a demand or a 'need' for work and thus re-enters the cycle of needs, from which we know there is no way out for desire.
>
> Baudrillard (1998: 185)

Baudrillard (1998) sees a contradiction between needs and desires, with needs potentially being a means for satisfying a desire, but not being the desire itself. For him, work, lying within the realm of needs, cannot be the object of desire and hence consumption. By allowing for the possibility of consuming work and then denying it, Baudrillard almost contradicts himself. But the point he raises needs to be considered before the discussion of work as an object of consumption can be proceeded with.

Radin (1996) uses the concept of ‘incomplete commodification’ to depict the contested nature of some commodities. Rather than splitting the world into ‘commodities’ and ‘non-commodities’, ‘incomplete commodification’ allows for something to take both the form of a commodity and non-commodity, depending on meanings that people attach to these objects or processes. Work fits well into the concept of ‘incomplete commodification’. In fact, Radin demonstrates it using the example of work. First, she introduces the terms ‘work’ and ‘labour’, where ‘labour’ suggests the complete commodification of work, when work is done purely for money and hence is viewed as a need. This is where Baudrillard’s interpretation of work stands. Work, for Radin (1996), unlike labour, has meaning and hence goes beyond just selling one’s labour power. People may be willing to take some form of work even if they had a financial opportunity not to do so (e.g. Morse and Weiss, 1955; Vecchio, 1980; Bradley et al., 2000). This might be explained by work itself having meaning for them, like doing a job as a craft, for society or enjoyment, etc. So looking at work only as a need provides a limited account of why people work. Meaning does not belong to the transactional relationship of buying/selling the labour power.

As a result, in this research the conceptualisation of work is divided into work as a means to materialistic ends and work as a source of meaning (see Table 3.1). Work as a means to materialistic ends holds for almost all people, as the majority of them face the economic need to work. Work as a source of meaning holds for some people, as soon as there is some meaning attached to it.

Conceptualisation of work	
Work as a means to materialistic ends work is **commodified**: a person sells his/ her labour to an employer	**Work as a source of meaning** work goes **beyond the commodification** of labour: work brings meaning

Table 3.1

However, this distinction so far is not helpful in explaining how the ‘consumption of work’ may take place. The key to further conceptualisation lies in relation to meaning. In Radin’s (1996) example, this is what is not commodified. It is also the non-commodified meaning of work that Bauman (2005) refers to as the site of identity construction at work. However, within the literature that has been reviewed, it can be claimed that commodification of the meaning of work takes place. The meaning of work, having previously lain outside the market relationship, is now the target of carefully thought through marketing practices. I will now explain what I mean by the commodification of the meaning of work and connect it with the politics of consumption (see 3.2.1). Then I will use this notion to further develop my conceptualisation of work.

Commodification is when something that was not an object of consumption (i.e. a commodity) becomes one. The meaning of work becomes a commodity when it is produced under capitalist relations of production and gets an exchange value. As seen in section 3.4, the meaning of work is produced (by human labour) via employer branding practices. The exchange value of the meaning of work as a commodity is not a monetary one. The practice of meaning being produced and advertised to potential and current employees implies the possibility of an exchange. However, it is not a monetary exchange that we usually think of when discussing commodities. The meaning of work is exchanged for an individual's labour in addition to the monetary reward he/she gets. Although the meaning of work as a commodity is produced by human labour, which is concealed, this is not the key to making it part of the hegemonic project of consumption. The politics here is in the meaning of work entering the realm of consumption. So the meanings an individual attaches to work may not be the outcomes of his/her individual choice, but have been constructed by the hegemonic project of consumption. Furthermore, the commodification of the meaning of work adds a third dimension to concealment as a feature of the politics of consumption. Here, it is not only production and the choice from the 'menu' that are concealed, but the very fact of consumption. Consumers of the meaning of work may be unaware that they are engaged in the process of consumption as such.

With the potential for the commodification of the meaning of work explained, the meaning of work may be divided into two categories: being commodified and not being commodified (see Table 3.2 below). 'Consumption of work' is, then, in the commodification of the meaning of work. It occurs when work brings value or meaning as a result of the 'hegemonic project' of consumption being promoted within the employment relationship. So 'commodification of the meaning of work' refers to how work is constructed at the level of macro or local structures by groups having power. 'Consumption of work', in its turn, refers to individual work orientation. This work orientation, however, is necessarily the result of the 'commodification of the meaning of work'.

<table>
<tr><th colspan="3">Conceptualisation of work</th></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="2">Work as a means to materialistic ends

work is commodified: a person sells his/her labour to an employer</td><td colspan="2">Work as a source of meaning

work goes beyond the commodification of labour: work brings meaning</td></tr>
<tr><td>meaning is commodified (‘consumption of work’)</td><td>meaning is not commodified</td></tr>
</table>

Table 3.2

The paradox with the ‘commodification of the meaning of work’ is as follows. On the one hand, with the previously non-commodified aspect of work becoming commodified, work itself becomes more commodified. On the other, it may become more meaningful for those who work, i.e. they gain meaning at work through an act of consumption.

Within this section, the problem with work being within the realm of needs has been solved by identifying two key functions of work, a means to materialistic ends and a source of meaning. The literature in the area, both orthodox and critical, makes it possible to make the claim that a relatively recent pattern has been seen in employers commodifying the meaning of work. As a result, ‘consumption of work’ has been conceptualised as an orientation to work that is the result of the commodification of the meaning of work. In the next section, I will look at different work orientations (i.e. reasons to work) and position ‘consumption of work’ as one of them.

3.6 Work orientations

Psychological literature usually identifies three types of values/rewards that shape people’s work orientations: extrinsic, intrinsic and social (see Ros et al., 1999). Within extrinsic values work serves an instrumental function, being a means to material ends. Intrinsic values are the rewards from doing the job itself, like achievement and interest. The social values of work refer to relationships at work. These three categories imply two key divisions in work orientations: work as a means to materialistic ends (extrinsic) and work and its characteristics bringing value (intrinsic and social). This is a useful distinction that shows work going beyond necessity. However, this typology is derived from assumptions about people's personalities, and views work orientations as coming from them. However, it does not connect work values to the social or cultural contexts in which work is performed.

For Heelas (2002) work as an economic activity is necessarily connected to the cultural. Noon and Blyton (2002) divide reasons to work into economic and moral, where the 'work ethic', i.e. 'ascription of value to work' (Heelas, 2002: 78), refers to the latter. For them economic reasons to work include both 'working to live' and 'working to consume'. However, for Heelas (2002), work is always a means to some ends, where these ends may be materialistic or in work itself. So even working purely for the sake of economic reasons is a 'work ethic' for him. Applying Tipton's (1984) four 'styles of ethical evaluation' to work, Heelas (2002) provides four types of 'work ethic': the Protestant work ethic (Weber, 1985), 'organisational work ethic', 'instrumentalised work ethic' and 'self-work ethic'. Although these types of work ethic are not mutually exclusive, there are certain chronological benchmarks when one or the other type of work orientation may have been more visible. These correspond to the development of capitalism and its cultural dimension at a particular time. The Protestant work ethic (Weber, 1985) sees work as means to achieve salvation and was characteristic of orientations to work at the beginning of the twentieth century. At the same time, traces of the Protestant work ethic may still be found in some work (Bell and Taylor, 2003). The 'organisational work ethic' was prominent in the 1950s and sees work 'as a means to the end of professional or community status and career advancement, as defined by the organization' (Heelas, 2002: 80) with its rules and regulations. Here, a career within an organisation may be seen as the 'moral project' (McKinlay, 2002). The 'instrumentalised work ethic' sees work as an economic means to a consumer lifestyle, and has appeared in the UK since approximately the 1960s. The key pattern in this work orientation involves taking work as a means of satisfying the desires (rather than needs) that have been constructed by consumer culture (e.g. Lasch, 1977, 1980, 1984) with leisure being a site for identity construction (Featherstone, 1990). It has been argued that the consumer society and instrumental attitude to work led to the demise of interest in work itself (Berger, 1964; Gorz, 1985). The 'self-work ethic', being a characteristic of 'soft capitalism', according to Heelas (2002), returns the interest to work. Within this ethic work exists for the self to 'enrich and explore itself, in the process of dealing with its problems' (Heelas, 2002: 80). Work again becomes meaningful, involving an element of personal development and providing a means for 'psychological identity exploration and cultivation' (ibid.: 83).

These different types of work ethic are useful and allow us to connect the reasons why people work with the social and cultural. However, the question of where the social and cultural come from still remains. Heelas (2002), when talking about the 'self-work ethic', attributes the shift to this work ethic as a result of a new generation of people who demanded more meaningful work. However, the 'self-work ethic' to a large extent underlies the 'common sense' of 'initiative employability' discussed in Chapter 2, where it was also shown that the choice of employees themselves was probably the last factor that could have affected the shift to employability rhetoric. Rather, it was a structural change initiated by large employers and governments, which has developed a certain cultural rhetoric. The 'self-work ethic', which includes employability, lays the ground for 'infinite human resourcefulness' (Costea et al, 2007). The 'instrumentalised work ethic' also comes from the hegemonic project of consumption. So in this research, the work ethic is assumed to be linked with the cultural, which in its turn is constructed by relations of power. Following Anthony (1977: 2), historical and 'contemporary views about work which have been regarded as axiomatic are ideological in that they are intended to influence the behaviour of' the workforce[8].

Anthony (1977) traces work as an ideology from Ancient Greece, where it was not an ideology and was not taken seriously, through the Protestant work ethic and into the industrialised twentieth century up to the 1970s. Although the 'instrumentalised work ethic' and 'self-work ethic' are not the focus of the book[9], it provides a very elaborate account of the twentieth century work ethic before the boom of mass consumption. This is what Heelas (2002) identifies as the 'organisational work ethic', but there is more to it, as Anthony's (1977) analysis shows. First, he divides 'subordinates' into industrial workers[10]

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[8] Anthony (1977) uses the word 'subordinates', but I have substituted 'workforce' for it. The reason for this is that 'subordinates' imply paid work done within a certain setting. However, modern forms of work go beyond this (e.g. entrepreneurs), the citation used applies to them also.

[9] The latter is a more recent phenomenon. As for the first, it is mentioned briefly within the book and some thoughts on it are provided, but probably falling outside work itself and into the leisure life, this was not the author's focus.

[10] Anthony (1977) describes the time prior to the boom of the service economy. At the same time, his observations on this type of work may also be applied to this type of economy.

and managers, and looks at how the ideology of work targets these two groups. He sees managers as the group who were initially delivering the ideology of work to the shop floor. This ideology was coming from human relations and psychology theorists, who were 'promoting the development of organizations that are more humane and less irksome to their inhabitants, by sharing control, by allowing for greater participation, by recognizing the reality of conflict, by acknowledging the needs of employees for responsibility and growth' (ibid.: 255). Then the author highlights how managers themselves, becoming important elements in capitalist production, became the subjects of the same ideology of work. He calls it 'management ideology' and primarily looks at normative, psychology-based management education. These do not necessarily fall into the 'organisational ethic', and even though Anthony (1977) was writing before the rise of employability (see 2.3), he already spotted the potential loss of job security even by managers. The main feature of this work ethic is in making work a source of meaning not because of its nature, the outputs or social importance, but because of the way it is designed. This is what I will call the 'abstract work ethic'. It involves the introduction of 'abstract' elements to work, which may draw intrinsic rewards from it. Examples of these rewards may be teamwork (Sennett, 1998), job rotation and employee engagement. The 'self-work ethic' that Heelas (2002) talks about, being the product of job design, is also part of the 'abstract work ethic', and includes elements such as self-development at work and employability.

Anthony (1977) also notes that not all attitudes to work are the product of ideology. Some types of work may be considered satisfying in themselves; to these he assigns the term 'craft ethic'. Or, expanding on this point, some work may be done because of its social value, with professions such as doctor, teacher or fireman being examples. It is not necessarily the profession itself that is important here, but the context in which it is exercised. For example, someone with the credentials of a lawyer might choose the precarious and low-paid, but socially important, work of providing legal advice to vulnerable groups rather than use the same knowledge to work for large legal firms. These examples may be described as 'substantive work orientations'. Having said this, it is important to notice that this type of work orientation may have ideological elements too; for example, if someone is motivated to work in a particular organisation due to its corporate social responsibility[11] policies. So when categorising an orientation as 'substantive', this is something important to keep in mind. Furthermore, with the rise of new forms of work

[11] For a critical account on corporate social responsibility see Dunne (2008).

organisation like authenticity, self-management and fun work cultures (see 3.3), whether work orientations towards these are a product of the ideology of work or people's genuine preferences might be hard to identify. Based on the overview of the literature, work orientations in this research are categorised as follows.

Work orientations may be divided into two broad categories: work as a means to materialistic ends (extrinsic value of work) and work itself being of value (intrinsic value of work). Like Heelas (2002), I assign 'working to consume' to the 'instrumentalised work ethic' because of this orientation to work being rooted in the cultural rather than the economic. So work as a means to materialistic ends is divided into 'working to survive' (work as economic necessity) and 'working to consume' ('instrumentalised work ethic'). Work itself can bring value too. This category consists of 'substantive work orientations' and the 'abstract work ethic'. The former values work for being a craft, interesting and meaningful in itself, or being socially important. The latter values characteristics of work that do not correspond to the nature or content of a particular job, but to specific features of work that come from the way it is designed (by management). These may be features of work such as autonomy, variety of tasks involved, teamwork etc. The 'self-work ethic' also belongs to the 'abstract work ethic' and implies further abstraction of its meaning, where the value of work comes from opportunities for the self to develop, learn, enhance skills, and as a result of all these become more employable.

The patterns of work orientation that have been outlined, although having the potential to be associated with particular periods of time and social contexts, are not mutually exclusive. For Heelas (2002), it is the 'self-work ethic' that is the most visible work orientation now. However, as has been outlined above (3.1), we live in a consumer society, where consumption has entered and keeps entering all areas of life, so it might as well be the reason for people to work and cannot be looked at as secondary to the 'self-work ethic'. Table 3.3 below provides a conceptual map that has been derived so far. It provides a summary of work orientations discussed in this section and positions 'consumption of work' as one of them, with the commodification of the meaning of work being its discernible feature.

<table>
<tr><th colspan="5">Conceptualisation of work</th></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">Work as a means to materialistic ends

work is commodified: a person sells his/her labour to employer</td><td colspan="3">Work as a source of meaning

work goes beyond commodification of labour: work brings meaning</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="5">Work orientations</td></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="2">work as an economic necessity

working to survive</td><td rowspan="2">instrumentalised work ethic

working to consume</td><td>consumption of work

meaning is constructed via the hegemonic project of consumption</td><td>abstract work ethic
(incl. self-work ethic)</td><td>substantive work orientations</td></tr>
<tr><td>meaning is commodified</td><td colspan="2">meaning is not commodified</td></tr>
</table>

Table 3.3

3.7 'Consumption of work' orientation

In the way that work orientations have been categorised so far, consumption in connection to work is viewed as something that instrumentalises work and does not attach value to work, apart from the value of extrinsic rewards taken from it. At the same time, the 'instrumentalised work ethic' and 'abstract work ethic' have been viewed as parallel to each other, without an attempt to explore the way they are connected. Neither of them help to explain how consumption is promoted within the employment relationship either. 'Consumption of work' is a work orientation that helps to overcome both of these issues. In this thesis, it will be viewed not as a completely new and different work orientation, but a combination of these two types of work ethic that brings them together in a novel way. The 'consumption of work' orientation, like the 'abstract work ethic' and 'instrumentalised work ethic', is an 'ideology of work'. However, its main distinction from the two is that it is an ideology of work brought by the 'hegemonic project' of consumption. It is through 'employer branding' practices that the meaning of work may become commodified. The 'instrumentalised work ethic' and 'abstract work ethic' (primarily 'self-work ethic') are not characterised by this aspect. This is how the ‘consumption of work’ orientation is conceptualised in this study (see also Table 3.4 below).

Within the ‘consumption of work’ orientation, the ‘instrumentalised work ethic’ still uses work as a means to material ends. However, these ends are not in consumption outside work, but consumption that comes from work itself. The ‘instrumentalised work ethic‘ takes two key forms here. First, there is the ‘consumption of (the image of) work’. Here the consumer might be a ‘communicator’ as the work he/she does may communicate ‘signs’ to others. These signs may be in the ‘employer brand’, the industry one works in (e.g. banking), the job one does (e.g. a financier) or in the employer’s image as a recruiter. At the same time, the consumer may be a ‘traditional hedonist’ (Campbell, 1987), having an emotional connection to the brand connected with one of the senses (Backhaus and Tikoo, 2004). The second strand of the ‘instrumentalised work ethic’ entering ‘consumption of work’ is consumption through work processes. The process of work may offer one a certain lifestyle, which might involve travelling, a particular organisational culture with its way of dressing, organisation of space, etc. For example, a job in investment banking is likely to involve a lifestyle of conspicuous consumption (Patsiaouras and Fitchett, 2010). The ‘fun cultures’ at work (Fleming, 2005; Warren and Fineman, 2007) may also be considered to be an example of ‘instrumentalised work ethic’ within ‘consumption of work’. All these provide access to consumption that often happens outside work, but now work also provides access to it. These processes may be considered pleasurable and at the same time might show ‘signs’ to others, so within consumption though work processes, consumers can be both ‘hedonists’ and ‘communicators’.

The ‘abstract work ethic’ within ‘consumption of work’ is in the consumption of abstract features, processes and outcomes of work. These can be features of job design like teamwork and job rotation. At the same time, the ‘self-work ethic’ is part of this work orientation too and may be considered central to it, especially with the rise of self-management as a form of work organisation (Lopdrup-Hjorth et al., 2011). Consumption related to this work orientation would be primarily the consumption of processes related to self-development at work and employability. These may be learning and training opportunities offered by employers, acquisition of skills in a job, career development and the potential to keep getting jobs in the future. Employees here may be seen as ‘modern hedonists’ (Campbell, 1987), as pleasure may come from sometimes tedious and challenging processes (e.g. passing exams, taking part in boring skills sessions), but these will lead to the excitement of improved employability.

‘Consumption of work’ presents a ‘menu’ of work orientations that are on offer from employers. So for ‘consumption of work’ to take place at the individual level, the presence of one of the dimensions of this concept (see Table 3.4 below) in one’s work orientations is enough. From the overview of management literature (3.4.2), as well as critical literature (3.3), the set of work orientations surrounding ‘consumption of work’ seems to be the ‘common sense’ offered by corporate employers. This study will look at whether this is the case at the local level and explore how commodification of work takes place, summarised in the following research question:

RQ3: Is ‘consumption of work’ constructed as the ‘common sense’ work orientation? How does commodification of the meaning of work take place on the university campus?

Throughout this chapter I have discussed how the ‘consumption of work’ orientation is promoted at the macro level via the rise of ‘employer branding’. RQ3 will look at whether ‘consumption of work’ is promoted as the ‘common sense’ on campus and how this takes place. However, in line with the theoretical framework of this study, the promotion of a certain ‘common sense’ in no way implies that it will be automatically embraced by the agency. The engagement of students with the ‘common sense’ constructed on campus may be in embracing, manipulating and resisting it (actively or passively) or even transcending the ‘common sense’, shaping individual choices independently from it or thinking through ‘escape attempts’ (Cohen and Taylor, 1992). At the same time, with students being ‘dialogical selves’, it will be important to look at the co-existence of different agency positions in the same subjects. This would be a way to trace the ‘microdialogue’ within agency and the potential contradictions that the ‘common sense’ brings to students’ work orientations. As a result, the fourth research question of this study is the following:

RQ4: How do students engage with the ‘common sense’ work orientation constructed at the university?

While exploring this research question, it will be important to look at the interaction of ‘consumption of work’ and employability. First, although ‘employer branding’ is addressed to all potential ‘talent’ and hence may be the choice for many, only the selected few will be able to ‘consume work’, i.e. those who would be able to secure job offers in organisations that provide the opportunities to do this. Second, resisting ‘consumption of work’ might also be problematic for one’s employability. If this orientation to work is what employers expect, then articulating a subjectivity different from what is prescribed by ‘consumption of work’ might potentially challenge employability.

‘Consumption of work’ orientation		
work orientation	**consumption that takes place**	**examples of rewards**
‘instrumentalised work ethic’	- **consumption of** (the image of) **work**: ‘work’, ‘job’, ‘employer’ have ‘sign values’ (‘consumer as communicator’) - **consumption through work processes** (‘consumer as hedonist’, ‘consumer as communicator’)	- organisation brand, ‘top’ employer, ‘top’ industry - lifestyle associated with work: travelling, organisational culture (e.g. way of dressing, organisation of space at work)
‘abstract work ethic’ (especially ‘self-work ethic’)	**consumption of work processes and outcomes** (consumer as a ‘modern hedonist’)	- employability: learning, skills, career, getting jobs in the future - self-development (e.g. challenge in a job) - elements of job design (e.g. teamwork, job rotation)

Table 3.4

3.8 Summary

This chapter contributes to the area of the sociology of work by developing the concept of ‘consumption of work’. Although the notion of ‘consumption of work’ seems to be in the air in the literature, what it means and involves has not been elaborated. This is what has been done in this chapter after reviewing both critical and orthodox literature on consumption and work. First, it has been found that ‘consumption of work’ seems to be a well-grounded phenomenon, with employers presenting jobs as objects of consumption within the rhetoric of ‘war for talent’ as well as eliminating the negative consequences that employability has brought to employees' trust to organisations. Second, 'consumption of work' has been conceptualised as 'commodification of the meaning of work' by employers, which is part of the 'hegemonic project' of consumption. The practice of 'employer branding' is understood as a 'war of position', i.e. the way in which organisations invest in shaping the orientation to work (and subjectivities associated with them) of current and potential employees. 'Consumption of work' is the orientation to work that results from this 'war of position' if subjects 'embrace' this rhetoric. Hence 'consumption of work' has been positioned within the work orientations literature and conceptualised as an ideology of work that combines the 'instrumentalised work ethic' and 'abstract work ethic' (especially 'self-work ethic'). It combines other work orientations in a novel way and the 'commodification of the meaning of work' is its distinctive feature. At the end of the chapter, what 'consumption of work' involves is summarised. In short, this is consumption of (the image of) work and consumption through work processes (the 'instrumentalised work ethic'), as well as consumption of work processes and outcomes (the 'abstract work ethic'). These patterns of consumption associate with the 'consumer as communicator' and 'consumer as hedonist' (Gabriel and Lang, 1996). In this research, I will analyse whether 'consumption of work' is a 'common sense' work orientation and how the commodification of the meaning of work takes place on campus (RQ3, addressed in Chapter 5). Then I will look at how students as 'dialogical selves' engage with the 'common sense' work orientation constructed there (RQ4, addressed in Chapter 7). The next chapter will outline the methodology that the empirical part of the study was informed by, in line with the theoretical framework of the research (see Chapter 1).

Chapter 4. Methodology

4.1 Introduction

The purpose of this research is to look at student work orientations and the job search in detail, and to question assumptions about them both which are constructed at the macro and local levels. Such research involves identifying what these assumptions are, how they are present in the local context, and exploring students' subjective experiences and their articulation of these experiences. The methodology was chosen in order to fit this broad orientation of the research and to stimulate in-depth analysis of both the initial themes that I had in mind and to allow for new themes to emerge from the data. As a result, doing fieldwork was not just the result of the research questions I asked and the theories I adopted. Fieldwork constantly informed the conceptual stance of my research and its research questions, which in turn have been informing fieldwork. This will be highlighted throughout this chapter.

This chapter will proceed as follows. It will start by explaining why a qualitative research strategy has been chosen (4.2). The positioning of this research within qualitative research methodologies will follow, outlining why a critical perspective has been chosen (4.3). Then the research methods will be described in detail (4.4), all of which are compatible with the critical qualitative research perspective. The discussion of the process of fieldwork will then follow (4.5). Here the data that were gathered may be divided into data for the analysis of the student job search (4.5.1) and data for the analysis of context (4.5.2). They are tied together ontologically and epistemologically. It is on the basis of analysing the data on the student job search that I derived themes for the fieldwork on context. The penultimate section will focus on how the data were analysed (4.6). Finally, ethical considerations relating to this research will be discussed (4.7).

4.2 A qualitative research strategy...

A qualitative research strategy has been chosen for this study. Initially, when considering what angle to approach the topic with, I already had qualitative research in mind, and the 'critical' angle, which is the focus of the next section, came later. The main rationale for this was that most research into the student job search adopts a quantitative perspective (e.g.

Steffy et al., 1989; Barber et al., 1994, Harris et al., 1996; Saks and Ashforth, 1999, 2000), and as a result these studies do not present a nuanced view of the job search process, which qualitative research would provide. Furthermore, in existing research pre-determined analytical categories were brought into the field, often resulting in a reproduction of the taken-for-granted. By using this research strategy, previous research may have been neglecting important themes which were present during the student job search. Furthermore, in this research there was no discussion of analytical categories as social phenomena. I am not trying to question the need for this kind of research as such. However, in engaging with it I decided that there was a need for qualitative research which tries 'to appreciate inherent patterns rather than to impose preconceived ideas on the data' (Bryman and Bell, 2007: 407), and that this is what my research would be about. In designing this project, I wanted to allow themes to emerge rather than to have them imposed by me as the researcher, although I am well aware that qualitative studies are also shaped by the set of ideas brought by those conducting them.

A qualitative research strategy was chosen to explore people's wider perceptions (Miller, 1997: 12) during the process of the job search, as well as to analyse how 'patterns unfold over time' (Bryman and Bell, 2007: 418) through longitudinal interviews (see section 4.4.1 below). In addition, this research strategy has created new directions for this thesis, such as themes and research questions which had originally not been present. In particular, during the first round of the analysis of longitudinal interviews the theme of student work orientations, i.e. their preferences for jobs with particular characteristics, came to the fore. Most students spoke of work at MNCs and large organisations as 'common sense' best places to work at, and also expected their future work to be a pleasurable experience and a part of their lifestyles. This puzzling pattern led me to gather more data so as to analyse where these preferences may have been formed. Analysis of the local context as a space that may contribute to the construction of these preferences then emerged as significant. Additional data led me to the conceptual idea of a 'consumption of work' orientation.

The flexibility of a qualitative methodology and its ability to guide research in unexpected directions is a great advantage. However, this very advantage can become problematic for the research as it involves taking greater theoretical risks (Barley, 2006) and requires continuous questioning of one's theoretical assumptions, being flexible to amend them according to what the data suggest. Furthermore, with several promising themes coming up, I had to decide which of them to take up. At times when these theoretical risks were being taken, following Marshall (1984: 396), there was ‘a kind of fear that nothing is going to come out of the research and that I’m going to be left with a pile of tapes and nothing to say at the end’. In order not to lose focus, I decided to divide the data into core and supplementary, and concentrate on the themes coming from the former, complementing them with the latter.

The rigour of qualitative research is in ‘principled development of research strategy to suit the scenario being studied as it is revealed’ (Holliday, 2007: 6). In this research the methodology has been subtle enough not to involve a narrowing down to some pre-determined categories, but to be able to find and embrace themes that emerge from the data, and to modify research questions accordingly. Furthermore, in qualitative research it is important to show how research was conducted, step by step. Holliday (2007) compares this with solving maths problems at school when it is important to show workings rather than the answer. In this research a lot of attention has been devoted to the thoroughness of fieldwork, which will be demonstrated throughout this chapter. However, the principles of qualitative research are also diverse, and consequently in the next section this research will be located more precisely within one of the dimensions of the qualitative research tradition.

4.3 ...With a critical angle

From what has been discussed in the previous section, i.e. the fact that data have informed development of the theoretical perspective, this research may be read as a form of grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). However, that implies adherence to a set of specific procedures and methodological canons, as ‘otherwise researchers end up claiming to have used a grounded theory approach when they have used only some of its procedures or have used them incorrectly’ (Corbin and Strauss, 1990: 6). This relative rigidity of grounded theory relates to neo-empiricist research (see Johnson et al., 2006; Holliday, 2007), which assumes that social reality can be ‘scientifically explained’ through qualitative inquiry, with the role of researcher being ‘neutral’ within this process. However, such neo-empiricist assumptions about qualitative research are different from the stance taken by myself. In the previous section it was mentioned that I, as the researcher, needed to make choices regarding where to go with the data, which themes to continue working on and which to drop. Supplementary data were rich and interesting on their own, but it was my decision to classify them as ‘supplementary’, based on the initial aims of this research, my previous knowledge and background. This shows that the researcher is not a neutral technician (Taylor, 2001), but is actively involved in shaping the research purposes and 'constructing' the data (Alvesson and Skölberg, 2000). Hence, there is a need to clarify the positioning of this research within the qualitative research perspective. While doing this, it will become clear that my assumptions about reality and how it can be analysed are very different from those made in neo-empiricist qualitative research.

This research belongs to what may be called the critical qualitative perspective (Johnson and Duberley, 2003; Johnson et al., 2006; Holliday, 2007). Unlike a neo-empiricist (or naturalist) qualitative perspective, it is assumed that 'reality and science are socially constructed' (Holliday, 2007: 16). However, this principle holds not only for the critical qualitative perspective, but also for postmodern qualitative research, so a distinction between the two needs to be made. For Holliday (2007), critical qualitative research is a part of the postmodern perspective. Johnson et al. (2006) divide the postmodern perspective into two distinct categories: a 'soft'/'skeptical'/'resistant' perspective and a 'hard'/'affirmative'/'reactionary' one. Both are 'skeptical about the representational capacity of language', claiming that 'all linguistic manifestations are precarious, as there can be no single discoverable true meaning' (Ibid.: 144). The difference is in their ontological positions, where the 'soft'/'skeptical'/'resistant' perspective assumes the 'ontological existence of the social world' (Tsoukas, 1992: 648), while 'hard'/'affirmative'/'reactionary' postmodernism sticks to the subjectivist ontological status of social reality (see Alvesson and Deetz, 1996; Parker, 1992). The first category may also be referred to as the critical qualitative perspective: it assumes power beyond discourse, which produces 'hegemonic versions of reality' (Johnson et al., 2006: 147). This dimension of qualitative research is where my research is located. The assumption that discourse is the product of power relations goes hand in hand with a Gramscian theoretical perspective (see chapter 1), where power is rooted in economic domination, but creates social, cultural and political structures and practices, some of which are discursively constructed. This in turn fits with the way employability and 'consumption of work' orientation have been conceptualised in my research. Its aims are the 'denaturalisation' (Alvesson and Willmott, 1996) of hegemonic regimes of truth by analysing how they are constructed at the local level (the university) and how they relate to student work orientations and job searches.

It is important to note that it is not only the philosophical assumptions of critical qualitative research which are different from the more mainstream positivist research, but its aims, methodological commitments and evaluation criteria as well. The research questions in a naturalist (positivist, neo-empirical) study are ‘what’ questions while in a critical qualitative study these are primarily ‘how’ questions (Johnson et al., 2006). Due to their mainstream status in management research, positivist evaluation criteria ‘have gained a status of common-sense benchmarks which might be inadvertently, and inappropriately, imported into the assessment of management research when the latter deploys non-positivistic knowledge-constituting assumptions’ (Ibid.: 139). However, they are different from critical qualitative research, and it would be inappropriate to evaluate this study using positivist principles. Critical qualitative research assumes epistemological subjectivity (Johnson and Duberley, 2003). The methodological commitments of this study are primarily in the critical interpretation (see Denzin, 1998) of texts and interviews and to some extent in critical ethnography (see Morrow and Brown, 1994) so as to understand how hegemonic projects relate to local rhetorics and their interpretation by students who are engaged in job searches. This is a crucial part of ‘critical empirical research’ (Alvesson and Deetz, 2000) rather than theoretically critical research that uses orthodox research methods.

Within the wider field of critical qualitative research, this project is close to the specific methodology of critical discourse analysis (CDA, see Fairclough, 1995), an ‘interdisciplinary method that combines micro- and macro-levels of analysis to expose the ideological workings of language’ (Benwell and Stokoe, 2006: 9). However, there has been a tendency in organisation studies to use CDA as a ‘hard’/‘affirmative’/‘reactionary’ postmodern perspective, which Fairclough (2005) has been critical of. This is because he does not want to reduce the study of organisations to the study of language; rather, he wants to attribute importance to the analysis of the relations between structure and agency through discourse (ibid.: 916). Although Fairclough suggests critical realism as a potentially fruitful turn for CDA in organisation studies, the critical qualitative perspective of this research corresponds to this key principle of CDA. This research is concerned with issues of power, ideology, social structures and the ‘common senses’ created by them, and how agents (i.e. students) engage with them at the micro level. Furthermore, the Neo-Gramscian theoretical framework for the analysis of structure within this research fits well with the underlying assumptions of CDA. Theoretically CDA is indebted to Gramsci’s theory and has explicitly used the concepts of hegemony and ‘common sense’ (e.g. Fairclough, 2001).

There are also principles that need to be followed in CDA, which have been summarised by Benwell and Stokoe (2006). First, analysis needs to be based on close engagement with the language of texts. Within this principle it is important to emphasise that CDA is a critical perspective for doing research, rather than a subdivision of discourse analysis (Van Djik, 2001), and there are a number of ways to approach it:

> ... some versions of discourse analysis (which are typically Foucaultian in inspiration) limit themselves to identifying the presence and forms of combination of recurrent and relatively stable and durable 'discourses' in texts, whereas others carry out various forms of detailed linguistic analysis (e.g. analysis of grammar, semantics, vocabulary, metaphor, forms of argumentation or narrative, and so forth) and/or detailed analysis of other semiotic features of texts such as their visual aspects. Some versions of discourse analysis do both, and that is the position I adopt.
>
> Fairclough (2005: 916)

My research focuses on the first approach to CDA outlined above, working closely with the texts and the rhetoric that is present within them. When analysing data, it follows Chouliaraki and Fairclough (2005, see section 4.6). However, it does not carry any of the linguistic analysis of the data that would be expected in, for example, conversation analysis.

Second, 'language is context-bound and social phenomena can be properly understood only by paying due attention to the social and cultural contexts in which it occurs' (Ibid.: 44). In this research, careful attention has been paid to the rhetoric of employability and consumption at the macro level, and how these are rooted in power relations. Furthermore, two levels of micro-analysis have taken place: the analysis of local context and the analysis of student agency within this context. When 'common senses' in the local context were analysed, they were compared with the rhetoric at the macro level.

Last but not least, CDA acknowledges that any text can be interpreted in different ways and depends a lot on the identity of the interpreter (Chouliaraki and Fairclough, 2005). While gaining distance from the subject of research is always difficult, it is necessary for the researcher. To achieve this necessary distance, the researcher needs 'to be aware of the distinctiveness of one's own languages of description (the theoretical framework and the construction and analysis of research object) and be reflexive in managing their interplay' (Ibid.: 68).

4.4 Research methods: Interviewing, documenting, and observing

In total, three types of research method are used in this study: interview, documentary, and observation. All of them fit into the critical qualitative research strategy. For each of these methods, a number of datasets was generated. These datasets were divided into core and supplementary. This section will be structured around the discussion of the research methods used to gather the core datasets, and around how these are complemented by the research methods used to gather supplementary datasets. The core dataset for the analysis of job searches and work orientations (see chapters 7 and 8) comes from longitudinal interviews, and was supplemented by documentary data (4.4.1). The core dataset for the analysis of the construction of work orientations and employability at the local level (see chapters 5 and 6) comes from documentary data and observations at careers fairs (CFs), supplemented by interviews with students, employees of the Careers and Employability Centre (CEC) and the Student Union (SU), as well as observations at career consultations at the CEC. In the last part of this section I will reflect on the researcher's presence in interviews and observations (4.4.3).

4.4.1 Longitudinal interviews supplemented by documentary data

In this research longitudinal interviews have been used as a method to collect data for the analysis of job searches and work orientations. Longitudinal interviews have been used to analyse student engagement with the 'common senses' in chapters 7 and 8. They have also shaped the direction for further data gathering.

Interviews provide depth to the analysis of job searches and work orientations. In interviews data are not manipulated by hypothesis testing, but instead meanings that people attach to their words are interpreted (Marshall, 1984). The research might then provide the literature with new concepts and even new theories, addressing issues that have not been studied before. Interviews are thus a method which fits well with the aim of analysing how students engage with the 'common senses' around employability and work orientations. The interviews intended to cover broad, but nevertheless particular, themes of students' job choices and searches, which explains the choice of semi-structured interviews instead of more flexible unstructured interviews. Also students as a group have shown that they sometimes wanted guidance in terms of where the interview would go, so in that sense it was also useful to have a set of questions targeted at them.

Now, what does the longitudinal aspect of interviews add up to? First, it has given a full picture of the student job search, tracking students up to the moment of their graduation or even to the start of working life. One interview would give no more than a snapshot of students' job searches, without a chance to follow on some of the themes, clarify them, and see how the job search unfolds. Longitudinal interviews, for example, made it possible to return to themes from the previous interview in the interview that followed, and to build questions for each interview based on previous conversations. Second, longitudinal interviews enabled me to avoid imposing questions that I, as the researcher, was personally interested in on the students, so that the replies they were providing would be their own rather than framed in the way I wanted. For example, I was interested in the theme of skills from the very beginning, and how one needs to demonstrate them throughout the job search, and was interested in what students thought about them. However, taking the advantages of a longitudinal study, I chose not to ask them anything related to skills at all, so that students themselves could raise this theme in our interviews if they thought it was relevant. As a result, the theme of skills could be claimed as being a 'common sense' among students not because I made interviewees talk about it, but because this theme emerged in interviews.

These features of longitudinal interviews fit well with the conceptualisation of the subject as a 'dialogical self' (see chapter 1). First, the dialogical relationship of students with the rhetoric on work and employability can be highlighted with the help of a longitudinal study. Throughout their job search, by engaging in a 'microdialogue', students may be articulating different positions in relation to the 'common senses', which can be inconsistent and contradictory. Second, longitudinal interviews are likely to help establish trust between the researcher and the participants and hence stimulate the 'external dialogue'.

The main problem of a longitudinal study is that it required commitment from students, meeting with me three times and maintaining communication in between, during the busiest year for them. As a result, I got a smaller sample than I would get if I were asking people just for one interview. My one off interviews with students at the Graduate Recruitment and Placement Fair (GRPF) showed how much easier it was to find students for one interview, when during a week I easily interviewed 17 people who had been to the event. This was not the case with longitudinal study. Having sent hundreds of emails and contacted people personally, I managed to find 20 interviewees and tracked 15 throughout their job search. However, I decided it would be better to have a smaller, more focused sample rather than a large sample with me as a researcher not being able to grasp all the nuances of the student job search.

To help the interpretation of longitudinal interviews, documentary data, namely participants' CVs were gathered. These were not central to the analysis of students' management of their employability, but helped to interpret claims made by the researcher, as well as provided data on some themes that students did not reflect on during the interviews (e.g. mobilising the private in the name of employability).

4.4.2 Documentary data and observations at CFs supplemented by observations at career consultations and interviews

Observations and documentary data have given an insight into how hegemonic projects of employability and consumption are present within the university, and how campus space is a location for the enactment of rhetoric (Benwell and Stokoe, 2006). The analysis of the local context and 'common senses' that are present there (see chapter 6) has been crucial to discussing students' work orientations and job searches. Documents and observations of the context have helped to create 'benchmarks' for the analysis of agency. These have helped to avoid the assumption that the 'common senses' that exist at the macro level automatically take place in local contexts, and have instead allowed to see the presence and the shape they take locally. The core data for the analysis of context are documents and observations, which include the following: documents gathered from the CEC and CFs, participant observations conducted at three CFs. Documentary data consist of four formats: field notes, documents, objects and photos. Supplementary data are interviews with students at or after the GRPF, interviews with the CEC's employees and non-participant observations at career consultations. The details of all documents and observations that have been gathered are summarised in Table 4.1.

The primary advantage of analysing local context via documentary data and observations is the ability to encounter the 'real', i.e. to engage with real situations and real documentation, rather than these being retranslated by someone else. Documentary data help us to look at practices and 'common senses' at Aimfield University not through the eyes of individual stakeholders, but through data that describe and ascertain what happens in the local context. There are several features of documentary data that have made it central for the analysis of context in this research. First, parts of the documentary data show the official presentation of, for example, employability and employers on campus. This primarily refers to data created by the CEC, such as content from the website, which are available to all students and present the position of the CEC and the university on employability. With the help of these documents the local rhetoric may be analysed. Second, parts of the documentary data show 'common sense' at the university that does not necessarily present the official position of the CEC and the university. These are various recruitment materials distributed by employers on campus, often through the CEC. Third, documents help to provide factual data, i.e. a summary of events on campus or the description of employers that come to campus, which has been an important source of information for this research. It was necessary not to take for granted the statement that students are mostly exposed to MNCs, but to analyse whether and to what extent this was the case on campus.

The need to analyse context is based on the idea that by observing spaces and actions, we might receive an understanding that is different from the one that interviews would give and at the same time which may say more than documents. During participant observations at CFs, for example, I had a chance to observe participants of the event behaving 'naturally', undisturbed by the presence of the researcher. For example, student attention to the symbolic at GRPF, as well as to certain employers, was saying more than the mere presentation of some employers as being 'top' at the university (see chapter 5). Observing was a way to see agency in action within the analysed context, which in its turn contributes to the construction of the context itself. Observations of career consultations at the CEC were a way to see how the 'official' employability rhetoric was performed in practice, and to understand how it was manipulated by its carriers (see Newton, 1998). A concern with observations is that they are very much shaped by the person conducting them. This can be mediated by the assumption that knowledge obtained in research is partial, situated and relative, precisely because the researcher is not a neutral technician (Taylor, 2001). Another issue with observations arises when analysing non-linguistic phenomena, and stems from the impossibility of avoiding the articulation of these phenomena through language. In this research, this was the case for observations of spaces at CFs. For Benwell and Stokoe (2006: 241), ‘there is no clear distinction to be drawn between the worlds of objects and space, on the one hand, and discourse, on the other’ as physical entities ‘are designed just like language is, to have social semiotic value through and through’.

In order to support or contest the researcher’s analysis of university space via both linguistic and non-linguistic methods, semi-structured interviews with students at GRPF, the CEC’s employees and the SU’s employability officer were conducted. This helps to moderate the drawbacks of observations and documentary data, creating a more balanced and well-grounded account of the data. For example, interviews after GRPF showed that all students noticed the expensive cars at the entrance, and did not notice the less luxurious exhibits that employers were presenting (see chapter 5). This complemented my observation of the importance of the symbolic at the fair, which I could have otherwise treated as a product of my vision. Contesting what has been seen through researcher’s eyes is as important as supporting it. For example, looking at the programme of events on campus that was organised by the CEC, and conducting observations at CFs, almost led me to think that the CEC deliberately prioritised big corporate employers and graduate jobs over all other types of work graduates may do, as if they were the agents of these organisations. However, talking to people from the CEC’s team encouraged me not to rush to such quick conclusions, with the explanation being more complex and involving the ways in which work and funding of the CEC are organised. In short, running interviews with the CEC’s team and with students after GRPF were helpful in preventing me from locking myself into my own vision, and expanded my horizons to a certain extent.

4.4.3 Researcher’s presence in interviews and observations

The need to be reflective in research is important at various stages of it, such as when analysing data, or shaping the conceptual framework of the study. However, it is especially important when there is interaction with human participants.

For Holstein and Gubrium (1995) the communication of the interviewer and the interviewee is crucial in qualitative interviews. They argue that interviewees should not be treated passively, but stimulated to increase their reflective capacities. The interviewer should take active part in the production of the narrative. So my role has been not only in making people answer my questions, but stimulating them to reflect on their narratives. This leads to both producing research data and exploring 'the meaning of the research topic for the respondent' (Elliott, 2007: 22).

Another issue about the researcher's presence is how he or she is treated by research participants. For Miller and Glassner (1997) the reaction of respondents to interviewers on the basis of who they are presents an issue of practical, theoretical and epistemological significance. Researching adolescents presents unique concerns here (Ibid.). To reflect on how I was treated by research participants, I will discuss what identity I think each group of participants assigned to me, following Parker (2000).

In most interviews with students the identity that I had was of a fellow student, or even a friend. There was almost no social distance between us as I am also a student, almost of the same age, from a similar background (as some of them), with a life similar to theirs outside the university, who would face or has faced a similar experience of searching for jobs. This attitude was especially obvious during longitudinal interviews, where students saw me as someone to share their concerns about finding a job and future work orientations with. The two other identities that students assigned to me were an imaginary employer and a consultant. Students who treated me as an imaginary employer in longitudinal interviews were replying to questions as if they were practicing for the upcoming interviews. The information they were giving to me matched with the kind of information they would give to employers. Students who treated me as a consultant tried to get advice on their job searches from me. However, I limited my participation in students' job search experiences by staying away from helping them with any job-related advice. The identities of imaginary employer and the consultant were usually assigned to me at earlier stages of longitudinal interviews and with time I felt that students opened up more in all cases.

In interviews with the CEC's employees I was usually treated as a younger colleague, someone interested in the CEC's activities, but not having the practical experience and knowledge. This resulted in people I interviewed telling me the details of their roles within the CEC and explaining how everything worked. At the same time, as I was treated as a colleague rather than a friend, I think I was often getting the professional rather than personal positions of the CEC's employees. For example, when asking slightly provocative questions, the intention of which was to stimulate personal views, this did not always work and the replies did not go beyond the discussion of one's role. One way to respond to those replies was to become more provocative or to stop and switch topics. I usually did not push respondents too much, trying not to exercise duress, but at the same time being more persistent could have given me more interesting replies (see Wray-Bliss, 2003; Brewis and Wray-Bliss, 2008).

I was a participant observer at CFs. Like other students, I was going across the stalls, collecting brochures and chatting to employers. I believe my participation at the fairs was unobtrusive to other participants. Although I made observations about student behaviour there (e.g. number of people coming at different times of the day, their level of interest to different stalls at the fair etc); these were observations about them as a group rather than as individual people. In interviews that I conducted with students as part of the fair, the information about my research was provided to them. As for my chats with employers, I did not use the information from them in the analysis. These chats were primarily to help me with collecting the brochures, fulfilling the social norm of having 'small talk' with representatives of different organisations before grabbing the brochure.

The observations at the CEC were of a different nature. As I was observing consultations of careers advisors with students, I needed to gain access to them from a careers advisor conducting the consultation, and he/she then asked the student who attended the presentation for permission for me to be present there. So here both participants of the consultation knew about my research. During these consultations students were asking for advice and careers advisors were providing it. The consultations usually took exactly the same time as they would normally (which corresponded to the CEC's rules). The flow of the consultation seemed to be 'natural'. However, as I was the only 'intruder' in a somewhat intimate talk between two people, just observing, but not taking part in the talk, the content of what was said may have been disturbed to some extent. For example, students at the consultation could decide not to ask some questions that they would have asked otherwise.

4.5 Fieldwork: Data gathering

In this section I will outline the process of data gathering, or data construction (see Alvesson and Deetz, 2000) in a chronological order. This will be done in order to see what the research started with and how it developed, with data gathered initially suggesting data to be gathered at later stages of the research. The research was a seventeen-month (from

December 2010 to May 2012) case study at one higher education institution, a pre-1992 Top 20 UK university. This setting provides both boundaries and richness (Holliday, 2007) for the research. I started gathering data from longitudinal interviews with students who were engaged in the job search. These data were complemented by documentary data from their job search, i.e. student CVs. Second, data from careers fairs were gathered, including observations, interviews and documentary data. Third, data gathering at the CEC took place, including interviews with CEC employees, observations of career consultations and documentary data. Table 4.1 below provides a summary of data that were gathered during fieldwork, including their division into core (c) and supplementary (s).

Type of Data	What for?	Amount of data gathered
Data from monitoring the student job search - longitudinal semi-structured interviews (c) - documentary data (s)	analysis of work orientations and the job search (research questions 2 and 4) Used primarily in chapters 7 and 8	- 48 interviews with 18 participants, including 45 longitudinal interviews with 15 participants - CVs of 18 participants
Data from careers fairs - Observations at GRPF, sGRPF, DCF (c) - Semi-structured interviews with students during and right after GRPF (s) - Documentary data from GRPF, sGRPF, DCF (c)	analysis of the construction of work orientations on campus via careers events (research question 3) Used in chapter 5	- 3 participant observations conducted at three different careers fairs - 17 interviews with students - Documentary data from all fairs: 20 brochures from employers, 3 fairs' programmes, freebies, emails from the CEC and information from the CEC's website about these events; GRPF: photos
Data from the CEC and the SU - Interviews with the CEC's employees (s) - Observations during careers consultations (s) - Documentary data (c)	analysis of the construction of work orientations as well as employability on campus via the CEC and events organised by them (research questions 1 and 3) Used in chapters 5 and 6	- 9 interviews, including interviews with 4 advisors, the director, employability award coordinator and employer liaison manager - 1 interview with SU's employability officer - 4 non-participant observations at careers consultations - Documentary data: brochures, the CEC's career guide, employer rankings, finalist pack, data from the CEC's and SU's websites

Table 4.1. Summary of data gathered during fieldwork

4.5.1 Longitudinal semi-structured interviews (complemented by documentary data)

To find interview candidates, I decided to contact a wide range of Aimfield's students by email. I sent emails to students from five[1] different schools within the university, once directly, but mostly through programme administration staff. This method gave me three research participants. I also contacted the CEC, who advertised my research on the university's website. They also emailed 160 final year students who were on their Employability Award directly, saying that by taking part in my research, they could gain points for the Award. This resulted in attracting two more students. The Student Union also sent an email about my research to all its members, which did not result in any new research participants. I also used my own professional and personal networks to attract participants. My research was advertised by one of my (then) supervisors at his lecture, and I recruited one more person this way. Four students were recruited from a course where I was an assistant tutor, and four students from one of the student clubs I was engaged in. The rest were recruited through snowballing.

As a result, I recruited 20 participants. I conducted longitudinal semi-structured interviews with 15 of them, three interviews with each. Three more students did not fit the research as they were not searching for a job or had found one before the first interview, so I decided not to proceed with them. However, I kept one of these 3 interviews in the sample, as it was illuminating about how students' work orientations were constructed at the university, and contributed to the decision to analyse the context within the university. The other 2 dropped out at the second wave of the interviews, having spoken to me once. Although I did not receive a complete picture of their job search, I found the only interview they had given me raised the themes similar to those in other interviews, so I decided to include them in the analysis. The 2 students who dropped out did not differ significantly from other students in the sample, and their dropping out did not have any similar patterns. One stated a very serious reason connected with his family as to why he could not proceed with interviews while another interviewee just disappeared. As a result, I included 48 interviews with students in the final sample, 45 of them being longitudinal interviews with 15 participants. The length of interviews ranged from twenty minutes to an hour and a half. This very much depended on the participant and the state of the job search he/she was at

[1] I contacted 7 departments in total; 2 of them rejected my request to pass the information about my research to students.

when interviewed. Longer interviews by no means imply more important or content-rich data.

The sample contains students from a variety of programmes. However, the degrees of the majority of students (holds for 13 participants), as can be seen from Table 4.1, are related to Business, Management and Economics. This may be explained by two reasons. First, being based in the Business school myself, I had more ways to contact these students. I was directly emailing these students as a cohort, I was an assistant tutor to some of them and mentioned my research in class, and I could ask for my research to be advertised through lecturers. Second, to some extent it may be that people from these disciplines were more keen to take part in my project, for example, thinking that it might help them to find a job in the future or to cope with the process of the job search. However, this is still a diverse sample, with a variety of degrees present. The rationale for not worrying too much about the programme people study is that students need to construct themselves as employable in similar ways throughout the job search. The emphasis on employability is facing all current and potential employees, no matter what jobs they are searching for, be it a teacher, a doctor, a lawyer or an engineer. The focus on employability is also emphasised for all students at the university. The work orientations of participants may be more the result of the research sample. The students I was working with may have been more oriented towards 'consumption of work' than, for example, students applying to be teachers. Although this does not mean that the 'consumption of work' orientation does not exist in professions like teaching, it may have been less evident. Within the sample, the effect of degree on the research questions has been accounted for during data analysis. As for other parameters of the sample, the male-female ratio in the sample is 50/50. The ratio of Home/UK to overseas students is 2.6, while it was 5.4 for Aimfield University in 2010/11 and 2.3 for the School of Business and Economics[2].

Interviews were conducted at various places on and off campus. Five third interviews were conducted via Skype as this was more convenient for the participants. These were video interviews, which made them closer to the usual interviews. As a researcher I could not notice any difference in the way students talked to me in comparison with the two previous interviews. All interviews were recorded and then fully transcribed. For the first round of

[2] The information of Home/EU to overseas students has been calculated based on the official statistics of Aimfield University. The statistics used was for full-time students only, which corresponds to the sample used in this research.

interviews, I used a generic interview guide with broad questions [appendix 5]. Depending on where the interview went, I asked follow-up questions. As for the second and third rounds, I had a generic interview guide, and had some specific questions, tailored to the previous meeting with each interviewee [appendix 5].

Data gathering lasted from December 2010 to January 2012. The data from longitudinal interviews were the basis for the analysis in Chapters 7 and 8, hence I have provided all detailed information about the sample in Table 4.2 below. As students in this sample were referring to interaction with the CEC as well as attending events organised by it as a common theme, a decision was made to look more closely at the CEC's and employers' activities on campus. Last but not least, all students who participated in the longitudinal interviews also provided me with their CVs, which were used to complement the analysis in chapter 8.

Name	Gender	Nationality	Course	N of interviews	Range
1. Auriel	female	Overseas	BSc Economics with Sociology	3	Dec 2011 - July 2011
2. Rachel	female	UK	BSc Economics	3	Dec 2010 - July 2011
3. Derek	male	UK	BSc Geography with Economics	3	Dec 2010 - July 2011
4. Melanie	female	EU	BSc Communication and Media Studies	3	Dec 2010 - Dec 2011
5. John	male	UK	BSc Management Sciences	1	Jan 2011
6. Andy	male	overseas	BSc Information Management and Business Studies	3	Feb 2011 - Nov 2011
7. Peter	male	UK	BSc Management Sciences	3	Feb 2011 - Nov 2011
8. Hugo	male	overseas	MEng Mechanical Engineering	3	March 2011 - July 2011
9. Lyle	male	UK	BSc Computing and Management	3	March 2011 - Nov 2011
10. Simon	male	UK	BSc Economics	1	March 2011
11. Michelle	female	overseas	BSc International Business	3	March 2011 - Oct 2011
12. Beatrice	female	UK	BSc Information Management and Business Studies	3	March 2011 - Oct 2011
13. Jolene	female	UK	BSc Mathematics with Management	3	March 2011 - Nov 2011
14. Kelly	female	UK	Sport and Leisure Management	3	March 2011 - Nov 2011
15. Archer	male	EU	MSc Renewable Energy Systems Technology	3	March 2011 - Sept 2011
16. Anthony	male	overseas	MSc Renewable Energy Systems Technology	3	April - Sept 2011

Name	Gender	Nationality	Course	N of interviews	Range
17. May	female	EU	MSc Renewable Energy Systems Technology	3	May 2011 - Jan 2012
18. Holly	female	UK	BSc Politics with Management	1	May 2011
Summary	**9 (50%) - male 9 (50%) - female**	**10 (≈55%)- UK 5 (≈28%)- overseas 3 (≈17%) - EU**	**13 (≈72%) - Business/ Economics related 4 (≈22%) - Engineering**	**15 completed longitudinal interviews 3 one-off interviews**	**Range: December 2010 - January 2012**

Table 4.2. Summary of the longitudinal interviews' sample

4.5.2 Data from CFs, the CEC and the SU

The data that I gathered from CFs consist of observations, interviews and documentary data. The major chunk of these data comes from GRPF, complemented by observations and documentary data from sGRPF (spring Graduate Recrutiment and Placement Fair) and DCF (Springboard: A Different Careers Fair).

To conduct observations at GRPF, an event open for everyone, I needed to be there. So on 25 October 2011, the day of GRPF, I arrived at the start and left at the end of the fair. I observed inside and outside the space where it took place, writing notes in chronological order at different times during the day. These were mainly descriptive notes of what I saw. To be a real 'participant' observer, I approached employers and spoke to them, like all other students who came there. Usually I asked them to tell me a bit more about their graduate programmes before taking their brochures and picking up 'freebies'. I could not talk to all employers at GRPF, so I chose to come first of all to those whose stalls were especially busy with students.

The documentary data that I gathered during GRPF consist of the following: the programme of GRPF, brochures from employers, 'freebies' that they provided and photos of the event. Brochures are especially important as they were used to analyse the key constituents of the 'consumption of work' orientation. I collected the brochures from all employers I talked to, which were mainly banks and business-to-business companies. I complemented these with brochures from other sectors as well, like manufacturing and retail companies, so I could analyse the images of work in a range of organisations as wide as the range presented at GRPF.

My observations at two other fairs were shorter and more focused. I collected information about these fairs, employers' brochures and freebies provided by employers, as well as making notes on what was happening. At sGRPF (March 2012) and DCF (May 2012) I was more focused on the kinds and variety of 'freebies' employers provided as well as how they were presenting themselves to students. This was due to the fact that 'consumption of work' was a theme that had appeared in the data by then. I wanted to see whether the claims I was starting to make based on data from GRPF could as well apply to sGRPF, as this was the fair which attracted employers similar to GRPF. I also wanted to see whether there was a difference in the type of 'freebies' and employer presentation at DCF, a fair for alternative careers. Observations at DCF also focused on the kinds of organisations present, and finding out the percentage of these that were coming as employers, as this was not always clear from the information provided about the fair, both on the CEC's website and in the official programme. It was also important to see the scope of alternative careers offered to students. I collected all emails from the CEC regarding these events too, as well as publicly available information about them from the CEC's website.

I also conducted 17 interviews with students who came to GRPF, using my personal and professional networks and snowball sampling. There were also students whom I was almost randomly stopping at the fair. These were students from different departments and years, mainly undergraduates, but also postgraduate students, but they all visited GRPF. In comparison to students in the longitudinal interviews, this was a sample from a broader range of programmes, not skewed to any specific degree. None of these students had been interviewed by me before. All of them were provided with the information about the research. As the aim of these interviews was primarily to complement the observations at the fair and not to have a detailed analysis of these students' work orientations or job search experiences, I have decided not to present full demographic information about them in this chapter. However, when their replies are referred to in chapter 5, demographic information about them will be provided in brackets.

The interviews were semi-structured but focused, as most of them were conducted on the day, asking first of all questions related to their instant impressions from GRPF and how these connected to students' job preferences [appendix 6]. Their aim was to add to the information gathered from documents and observations, so they had a format of quick chats, and were usually 10-20 minutes long. The interviews were recorded and partially transcribed.

Data gathering at CEC and the SU took place from autumn 2011 to January 2012, and consisted of the following: interviews with the CEC's and the SU's employees, observations at career consultations and documentary data. 9 semi-structured interviews with the CEC's employees were conducted, including interviews with 4 out of 9 careers advisors, the director, the Employability Award coordinator and the Employer Liaison manager. The number of interviews conducted constitutes at least a third of the CEC's total number of employees. Access was gained through one of the careers advisors, who sent round an email to her colleagues about my research and then introduced me to some of them during a Christmas event at the CEC. This led me to contact people I met individually and ask them for interviews. The interviews usually lasted from thirty minutes to an hour. These covered specific roles within the CEC, how the work of the centre in general was organised, as well as issues that had come up in my research. In addition, I interviewed SU's employability officer. The format of this interview was similar to interviews with the CEC's employees. These interviews were helpful in getting a full picture for the analysis of university context. All interviews were recorded and partially transcribed.

I secured 4 observations at career consultations conducted by three different advisors. These consultations were of different length and conducted with students from different departments and at different stages in their education and job searches. I was allowed to be present in these consultations and to make notes. Documentary data gathered at the CEC and the SU consists of the following: career guides, brochures, employer rankings, the CEC's own employability guide, the finalist pack, information from the CEC's and the SU's websites. All non-website documentary data could be picked up by students for free from the CEC. All data from the website are available to the general public, so permission to use these materials was not required either.

4.6 Data analysis

This research primarily followed Chouliaraki and Fairclough (2005) to analyse the data. For them, in CDA the text is read in two ways: reading distanced from and reading through conceptual language. The purpose of reading distanced from conceptual language is primarily to understand what the text is about, or what happens in the text. Reading through the 'syntax of conceptual language' (Bernstein, 1996) re-describes empirical material and 'crucially involves making invisible categories become visible' (Chouliaraki and Fairclough, 2005: 67). Both readings are part of an interpretation. It is the interplay of these two readings that leads to an explanation. When conducting an interpretation in this way, one needs to avoid descriptions of the text that are self-confirming of a theory (Ibid.: 68). This principle of dual reading was followed throughout my data analysis. Even in observations and gathering non-textual data, one reading sought to understand what they were about in a manner distanced from my conceptual framework. Now I will describe each step of the analysis in detail. It will be structured by the core research methods of this study. First, the analysis of longitudinal interviews will be described, which will involve outlining the point during my analysis where the decision was made to gather more data and analyse context (4.6.1). Second, the description of the analysis of local context will follow (4.6.2).

4.6.1 Analysing longitudinal interviews

The data gathered from longitudinal interviews were transcribed verbatim and then coded, which has provided a systematic way of working with them (Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2008). This was done via an online program called Dedoose, which helps users to work with large volumes of data. This is a program similar to the more widely used NVivo. However, NVivo is designed only for Windows while Dedoose is compatible with any operating system, which is why I chose it. All interviews were uploaded to Dedoose and before coding, socio-demographic characteristics were added to each of them. These included the following: gender, nationality, ethnicity, class, programme, interview stage. Although the sample was small and finding differences between various socio-demographic groups was not the aim of the research, adding these factors helped to control for any potential differences or similarities. Then the data were coded. This was done through a close reading of each interview transcript several times, line by line. While reading, I was assigning codes to phrases that interviewees used. At the first stage of longitudinal interviews, codes were assigned to almost every sentence throughout the text. This can be explained by the openness of research questions and the willingness to search for potentially interesting patterns in the data. With the analysis becoming more focused, the number of codes being consistently assigned to interviews throughout the stages decreased. Codes showed the themes interviewees were bringing up. The aim of using them was to understand the text itself. Here are a few examples of codes that I was using in interviews: ‘ideal job’, ‘transferable skills’, ‘aspirations’, ‘rejections’, ‘applications’. The codes were then grouped into themes. For example, the theme ‘work orientations’ contained the following codes: ‘ideal job’, ‘good job’, ‘bad job’, ‘organisation’, ‘size’, ‘industry’, ‘aspirations’, ‘desirable work characteristics’. Consequently, a theme was also a descriptive category. When all the large themes were identified, each was analysed in detail. First, patterns within the theme were analysed. Then these patterns were linked to analytical categories from the conceptual framework. So within this analysis there was a separation of understanding between what the text was about and how it was understood through the conceptual syntax. It is also important to note that some conceptual categories were not there before the analysis of the data, or were there in a much more simplistic form. Throughout the data analysis, they were constantly modified and enriched through a more nuanced reading of the text that was distanced from the conceptual language.

In order to demonstrate how the analysis took place, I will proceed with the example of the category of ‘work orientations’. Before conducting my data analysis I did not have the analysis of ‘work orientations’ in mind. I was thinking about it as some sort of control category that would shape the student job search, but not as an underlying theme of my thesis, which it has become. Examining this category in detail will also help to lay the ground for describing how the analysis of Aimfield’s context took place. When the theme of work orientations appeared, I started analysing it in detail. The pattern was that work orientations had similar characteristics for many students. In short, usually graduate jobs in MNCs and large companies (code ‘size’) were stated to be preferable. In addition the ‘desirable work characteristics’ were often connected with the level of enjoyment one would get at work and associated with characteristics like travelling, learning, work as part of lifestyle (all part of ‘desirable work characteristics’ code). There were also other orientations that students had about work, like working in small organisations (‘size’ code) and helping society (‘aspirations’ code), but they were mentioned by fewer students. Seeing a particular tendency in work orientations, despite having students with different preferences in their sample, meant that I was puzzled about where these work orientations were coming from. Having looked at a different code, called ‘CEC’, I spotted a tendency for students to attend events organised by the CEC as well as consultations there. This led me to the idea that campus could be the environment that contributes to shaping student work orientations. As a result of working with these two codes, where a pattern within one provided a conceptual puzzle (‘work orientations’) while another proved a potential key to it (‘CEC’), I came to the decision to analyse how ‘work orientations’ were constructed on campus. As this was after the first set of interviews and a lot of students had been at earlier stages of their job search, I did not see any striking patterns in how students were managing their job search. However, having thought about ‘work orientations’ being constructed on campus, I thought that student understanding of the process of the job search and employability in general may also be coming from there. Ultimately, the plan for the analysis of context was to look at how both ‘work orientations’ and, broadly, ‘employability’ are presented or constructed on Aimfield’s campus (see section 4.6.2 for details on how the analysis took place). After the context was analysed, certain benchmarks for the analysis of longitudinal interviews were created, i.e. the ‘common senses’ that existed on campus were used to discuss patterns in work orientations and job searching among students.

4.6.2 Analysing the context data

The analysis of context data consisted of data for the analysis of how work orientations were constructed on campus and how employability was constructed. The first had the largest number of methods used and hence a larger part of this section will be devoted to explaining how analysis there was conducted.

To analyse the construction of work orientations on campus, the following process took place. First, I looked at documentary data gathered from the CEC (primarily web-pages and emails) to analyse how they talked about different CFs on campus. This revealed the categories of ‘top’ and ‘different’, where the first was used to present employers coming to GRPF and sGRPF and the second to present employers coming to DCF. Second, on the basis of the CEC’s documentary data about CFs, simple descriptive analysis was conducted to see what kinds of employers were coming to each fair. This was done to see which employers were presented as ‘top’ and ‘different’. Another purpose of it was to analyse the scope of the presence of ‘top’ and ‘different’ employers, avoiding unsubstantiated claims about MNCs being more visible on campus. The analysis revealed a difference in size and the level of internationalisation between organisations coming to GRPF and sGRPF in comparison to DCF. I did the same analysis for all employer events organised on campus. Third, observations were conducted at each CF, where encounters with real events took place. As a result of the observations, the patterns of employer presentation to students were analysed. These observations were supplemented by interviews with students and CEC employees [see the interview guide in appendix 7]. The analysis of these interviews was not as detailed as in longitudinal interviews. The main feature of them was that I used them to enrich and explain data on themes that were found during the observations. Consequently, I was specifically searching for themes related to those identified during observations. Observations were also supplemented by more documentary data, mostly in the form of brochures, 'freebies' and photos. This resulted in a broad theme of marketing jobs to students at GRPF and sGRPF. This was mostly related to marketing organisations, presenting themselves as brands. Last but not least, I analysed the content of recruitment brochures in terms of what characteristics of work they were highlighting to students. This was done via the analysis of both visual and textual material in the brochures, assigning images and texts to descriptive themes associated with various characteristics of work and organisations. The interplay between these descriptive themes and the theme of consumption, which was constantly present in these contexts, has resulted in developing the idea of 'consumption of work' orientation, which has become a central conceptual category of the thesis.

The analysis of employability was more straightforward. First, I analysed the language that was used to refer to employability, primarily in information from the CEC's and the SU's websites. These included the definitions of employability that were used, what employability included, how it was said to be developed as well as the scope claimed for it. I complemented these with interviews with the CEC's and the SU's employees and information about employability training that was organised on campus. This gave me a picture of the discourse and 'practice' of employability at Aimfield. Furthermore, by conducting observations, I could observe how the 'common sense' about employability was operating in real situations, and whether the meaning of it was manipulated by the participants of career consultations. As a result, I described the 'common sense' about employability at the local level, as a benchmark that could be used for the analysis of the student job search, and compared it to representations of employability at the macro level.

4.7 Ethical considerations

Two approaches to research ethics have been central to this study[3]. The first sees research ethics as a set of rules which govern how the empirical part of research is conducted. This is a perspective which frames ethics as a series of 'hurdles' (see Brewis and Wray-Bliss, 2008; Christians, 2005). These hurdles correspond to the four broad dimensions of potential ethical problems in research: harm to participants, lack of informed consent, invasion of privacy and deception (Bryman and Bell, 2007). The second approach sees research ethics as a form of critique, especially in its use to 'seek out silences' (see Brewis and Wray-Bliss, 2008: 1524) – something which is emphasised in critical management research (e.g. Alvesson and Deetz, 2000; Fournier and Grey, 2000). Here it is ethical to be critical (Pfeiffer, 2013), to look at power structures in society, or at issues of oppression and exploitation. However, the two approaches can be in conflict, primarily because being critical in theory has implications for how the research is conducted in practice. This is an issue of concern for (critical) management scholars (ibid.) and has not been an exception for this research. In this study, the categories of an ethical empirical research identified above have been drawn upon as fundamentals of ethical research. However, some if not all of these categories may be subject to questioning and interpretation, which is to some extent intensified by the critical theoretical stance of this research. I will now discuss each of the principles of an ethical empirical research and how these have been followed in this study. While doing this, I will reflect on some problematic issues that arose when conducting this research.

There has been no harm to participants as no real names have been used in the research, and the outcomes of research are not likely to affect people who have taken part here. All names were changed so that participants could not be identified. Also any words that may provide hints of who the participant is (and therefore potentially bring harm) have been changed into broad characterisations of these words. For example, when a participant openly referred to his/her country of origin (if it was other than the UK), and I used this quote in the text, I changed this word into 'country he/she comes from', and mentioned whether it was EU or overseas. One of the interviewees also asked me not to name the company she was working for after graduation, as this was requested by her contract of

[3] I am aware that these are not the only ways to approach research ethics. For example, a third approach can be in viewing ethics as a 'central warrant for research', where ethics in in 'the potential for a more explicitly positive engagement with respondents' (Brewis and Wray-Bliss, 2008: 1531). It includes continuously negotiating with the outcomes of research with the participants, including when writing up the results of the research and publishing. However, this approach was not part of this research.

employment. For this case, I have not been using the name of the company, but the industry, size and its international scope instead. The organisation that has been the research setting, i.e. the university, has also been anonymised. The same holds for various names that can identify what the setting is. As a result, names of buildings, as well as names of some programmes and bodies within the university have been renamed. However, due to the fact that publicly available data have been used in this research, this means that if needed, one can find the name of the research setting. This problem with anonymity has also been identified in recent research (Taylor and Land, forthcoming). These publicly available data contain the richness that has been necessary for the analysis of the university context.

In this research, all participants were provided with a research information sheet that summed up its aims and purposes [appendices 2, 3, 4]. Their rights as research participants were explained to them and the informed consent forms [appendix 1] were signed. Throughout conducting the research, however, I have noticed that there was no single way to interpret the principle of informed consent, or to identify a lack of informed consent. What information would be enough to ensure informed consent and the absence of what information would lead to a lack of it? In this research participants had general information about the study, but not specific information on theories used or the categories that the research was questioning. In other words, they knew of the themes the research would focus on (e.g. the job search, job choice, challenges and changes throughout this process for participants of longitudinal interviews), but not the critical theoretical stance of my research. There are two key reasons for this. First, the theoretical part of the research, although critical and trying to look at the 'common sense' categories and how these are constructed and interpreted in a specific context, was very open-ended at the start. Indeed, it was the students' replies themselves that were informing it. Second, the opening of the critical stance of my research would have affected interviewees' behaviour. Furthermore, the information provided to participants was also dependent on the context and the role of each group of participants (e.g. longitudinal interviews' participants, GRPF interviews' participants, CEC interviews' participants) in the research. The key difference was in emphasising why the data that would be gathered from them was needed for the research. So although informed consent is an ambiguous category in research, I have done my best to largely follow this principle in a consistent manner while conducting fieldwork. Also, if additional information about research was requested by participants, I provided it. For example, when I asked for access to observe career consultations at CEC, I was asked to provide more details of why I needed it, which I did. I also said that careers advisors could check my notes after each observation, as well as in the final text (however, just to check the wording and not the interpretations on the basis of it).

Informed consent may be one of the elements of the broader ethical principle of 'no deception'. Informed consent refers to no deception taking place prior to participants agreeing to take part in research, while 'no deception' refers to all stages of research. Overall, my purpose was to provide clear and accurate information about my research at all stages, and to ensure continuous participation in the project without deceiving the participants. During the interviews with participants, I was trying to be 'neutral', listening to what respondents were saying, being sympathetic, but not challenging the claims they were making or arguments they were putting forward. This approach to conducting interviews helped me to discover the 'common sense' categories and critically analyse them. However, I did not reveal my identity as a critical researcher to the participants. This indicates a contradiction between the researcher's identity while conducting fieldwork and outside of it (see also Pfeiffer, 2013). While being critical in theory is ethical, criticality is not always exposed in the process of data being gathered.

Every attempt has been made to avoid or minimise the invasion of privacy in this research. All interviewees and participants were aware of the fact that I was conducting research, knew exactly when they were taking part in it, and had information about it. Prior to interviews, I asked whether people were comfortable being recorded, and started the recording only after they had agreed. All participants agreed to be recorded. It was only when observing careers consultations at the CEC that I made notes, since these were sufficient for the purpose. In these consultations, everyone knew that I was present, but I was not engaged in the consultation itself, trying not to intrude into the usual flow of it. Although the flow of the consultation may have been undisturbed, my very presence as an observer could be intrusive. So as not to make the situation more uncomfortable for the participants, I decided that recording a consultation where the researcher would not be present would not be appropriate and hence decided to make field notes. Furthermore, none of the information about real participants has been shared with third parties, so what is anonymous on paper has also been anonymous beyond the written outputs of the research.

In short, this study has recognised the fundamental principles of ethical empirical research and tried to stick to them. However, these principles are not rigid categories, but can be interpreted in different ways by the researcher and also depend on the context and problem being studied. Some interpretations of ethical empirical research may contradict the principle of ethics as a form of critique. At such instances in this study, I, as the researcher, needed to draw the line and determine what it would be ethical to do depending on the context and consequences for my research aims.

Based on the methodology outlined in this chapter, the following four chapters will present the empirical findings of my research. Chapters 5 and 6 will focus on the analysis of the local context at Aimfield University, discussing the ‘common senses’ about students’ work orientations and employability respectively. Chapters 7 and 8 will look at how students engage with these ‘common senses’ while searching for a job.

Chapter 5. Commodification of graduate work

5.1 Introduction

This chapter looks at the presence of the ‘hegemonic project’ of consumption at the local level, focusing on the commodification of graduate work at Aimfield university. First, I identify that certain employers are presented as ‘top’ to students (5.2). These are multinational corporations (MNCs) and large for-profit organisations that have this image. They are not only presented as ‘top’, but are most visible on campus too, creating a ‘common sense’ that these are the best places for students to work at. Although events involving different employers and sectors also take place on campus, their proportion is incomparably smaller. This may be explained by the politics of employer presence on campus (5.3). MNCs and large for-profit organisations are keen on coming to campus and are ready to pay for it. The Careers and Employability Centre’s (the CEC) activity is partly sponsored by these organisations, and by working with them they can afford to support other activities, like working with smaller and local employers. Third, I look at the practice of ‘employer branding’ at Aimfield University, which addresses students as consumers (5.4). Within this section, first, I look at the ‘employee value proposition’ to explore what work for a ‘top’ employer looks like (5.4.1) by analysing employers’ recruitment brochures. Second, I look at how this image is communicated to students during the on campus marketing campaign (5.4.2). Third, I look at students’ and the CEC employees’ reflections on the marketing aspect of employers’ presence on campus (5.4.3). Section 5.5 is the conclusion.

5.2 MNCs and large for-profit organisations as ‘top’ employers

The data suggest that on campus events played an important role in informing students about the potential work paths they can take in the future, as well as shaping their work orientations. For example, Holly (female, Politics with Management, UK), got a graduate job at PwC. It was at the careers fair that she became aware of the company that has now become her employer:

> IR: At what stage did you become acquainted with PwC as a company?

> H: I knew of the name, and I knew it was like a huge company ... but I didn't really understand what they did, and then there were a few careers fairs, here at the university, and I met with some people from PwC... so I met them here.

The importance of events organised within the university in shaping student work orientations has also been mentioned by Samantha (the CEC's career advisor):

> S: ... Aimfield University is certainly geared towards corporate careers, certainly from the careers fairs, I think. So, the two fairs we run in the spring and the autumn, they're very much big corporate employers, so a lot of finance, a lot of professional services ... um, firms, that kind of thing. So if you're exposed to those kinds of organisations, it makes sense that you would think of those for career options.

According to her, being exposed to certain organisations, one starts thinking about them as potential employers. Samantha also mentions the kinds of organisations Aimfield students are exposed to, namely big corporate employers. Although this claim accurately depicts my findings, I am not taking this statement for granted. Instead, in this section I will show, step by step, how at Aimfield University certain organisations are more visible to students, and are presented as 'top'. These surround students throughout their time at university and it becomes 'common sense' that these are the best places to be at. The 'common sense' best are MNCs and large for-profit organisations with graduate programmes. To show this, I will look at a number of events on campus as well as essential information provided to students. First, I will look at careers fairs, which take place three times a year. Their main feature is gathering many employers in one place (5.2.1). Second, I will focus on other events on campus involving employers, which are spread throughout the year (5.2.2). Then I will look at information on university-to-work transition provided to students at the CEC (5.2.3).

5.2.1 Careers Fairs

There are three annual Careers Fairs at Aimfield: the 'Graduate Recruitment and Placement Fair' (GRPF), 'Spring Graduate Recruitment and Placement Fair' (sGRPF) and 'Springboard... "A Different Careers Fair"' (DCF)[1]. From the way these careers fairs are presented by the CEC, it is clear how employers coming to them are positioned. The

[1] These are all one-day fairs.

messages coming from the CEC contain characterisations of the fairs, from which it may be established which employers are considered to be the 'top' ones.

The GRPF is the biggest careers fair and it takes place in the autumn. It is positioned as the biggest fair in the Midlands, having attracted 140 organisations in 2011/12 and 120 in 2010/11, and attended by around 5000 students[2]. Below is an extract from an email reminding students about the GRPF, which was sent out by the CEC:

> 140 TOP employers will be visiting Aimfield for one day only to attend the BIGGEST careers fair in the midlands[3]. This fantastic line up of companies are coming to the careers fair in the hope to recruit a[n] Aimfield student or graduate which could be YOU!! And remember, 60% of the companies attending recruit from all subjects and the event is for all students, not just finalists!!
>
> 18th October 2011 [original emphases kept]

From this extract it can clearly be seen that these are 'TOP' employers coming to the Fair, which is something that the CEC wants students to pay attention to in its email, by writing the word in capital letters. The same holds for the sGRPF, which is smaller, having attracted 70 organisations in 2011/12 and 60 in 2010/11. On the CEC's website, the following information is provided about it:

> This [sGPRF] will provide you with the opportunity to network with a variety of top recruiters, find out information about Careers in other sectors and talk to exhibitors about further study.

Again the word 'top' comes just before recruiters, so this is what is supposed to attract students when going to this fair. These two fairs are similar in terms of the employers coming to them. The main difference is in scope. Another style of presenting the DCF is clear from its name. The word 'different' signals that the fair is different from the other two. This is also evident in the email that was sent to all students by the CEC.

> This is a very different and exciting careers fair and we have invited a range of organisations here to give you access to information, advice and opportunities in sectors ranging from Art & Design to Charities and from Sport to Summer Work and many more...
>
> 5th May 2011

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[2] i.e. around 27% of the whole university population, which is 18 220

[3] According to Linda (CEC's employer liaison team), this was the biggest one-day careers fair in the UK.

The DCF is presented as ‘very different and exciting’. However, it is not ‘top’. The word ‘top’ is never attached to the DCF, neither in emails nor on the website. This fair attracted 40 organisations in 2011 and around 50 organisations in 2012.

From the style of the CEC’s emails and texts used on the CEC’s website, it may be seen that ‘top’ employers come primarily to the GRPF, and in smaller numbers to the sGRPF. The scope of the fairs is also incomparable, with two big fairs with ‘top’ employers involving more than four times as many organisations than the DCF (see Table 5.1). Now that it has been established that ‘top’ employers could be found at the GRPF and sGRPF, the question that comes next is what a ‘top’ employer looks like. The GRPF helps to analyse this question for two reasons: employers coming to it are presented as ‘top’ and it attracts the largest number of employers in one place. It has also grown significantly over the past years. According to Linda (the CEC’s employer liaison team), the number of employers attending the GRPF has grown from approximately 40 seven years ago[4] to 140 in 2011.

All information about organisations at the GRPF comes from the Guide to it published by the CEC. Out of 140 organisations at the GRPF, 17 did not come to the fair to offer jobs (e.g. educational bodies and professional networks). Hence, there were 123 organisations recruiting for jobs. There were 11 small and medium-sized employers (i.e. organisations with fewer than 250 employees, which is the EU cap for medium-sized enterprises). This means that almost 80% of organisations at the GRPF and 90% of organisations that came to advertise actual jobs were MNCs and large for-profit organisations. 42 organisations that attended the fair were also in the *Times Higher* Top 100 Graduate Employers guide. This partly explains the success of the event, according to Linda (the CEC’s employer liason team):

> L: And in terms of employers, the list was fantastic, and therefore that attracted others, and therefore it attracted students. The best, the good names that you can get there, the more of them you can get, then the more successful the event will be.

She refers to employers that came as being ‘best’ or having ‘good’ names, hence diversifying employers in the hierarchy and discerning those with this attractive image from the rest. Even the opportunity to speak to these employers is perceived as ‘unique’:

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[4] A period of 7 years is used as they Linda has been in her role for this period of time while GRPF had been running earlier as well, since around 1993/1994, as Janet (the CEC’s director) said.

> L: So the students look at the list of exhibitors, and you know, all the top Times 100 employers are there, at this event on campus, which is quite, like, in some respects, the unique opportunity to talk to them, for students.

The GRPF used to be called the Engineering, IT and Finance Fair,[5] but as they started attracting more employers from a variety of sectors and some employers were recruiting for a variety of jobs within the organisations, they shifted to a more generic title. The jobs they are recruiting for are from four key dimensions: Business, Engineering, Finance and IT, and one organisation may be recruiting for a number of these dimensions. This division was drawn by analysing areas organisations were recruiting for. It also matches the one mentioned by the CEC's representatives during interviews with them. Knowing that 'top' employers are those who come to this fair and having looked at the type of organisations that came to the fair, it may be concluded that 'top' employers are MNCs.

The description of employers who came to the sGRPF largely corresponds to the GRPF both in terms of the types of employers that come and areas they represent. Out of 70 organisations at the sGRPF, 55 were employers, including 43 MNCs and large for-profit organisations (i.e. 78% of employers). The DCF was not only much smaller than the GRPF and the sGRPF, but the actual number of employers there was up to 10 with most of the exhibitors being professional networks, and voluntary organisations (e.g. offering gap year opportunities). Out of these 10 employers, 2 were also MNCs.

Some of the 'top' employers also seem to be more 'top' than others. The most attention at the GRPF was drawn to banks; there were often queues of people willing to talk to them. Janet (the CEC's director) refers to them as 'the very top end employers':

> There are the top, very top end employers, where, perhaps the, you know, we may have an entrée with some of the banks, where students may go into, say, operations, rather than, say, front end investments. But, that's fine because we're playing to the strengths of the students. So, we wouldn't necessarily say we have investment bankers, but we have students who go into, say, the operations or back desk functions with the investment bankers.

Fred (male, Politics with Economics, EU) did not like the GRPF as there were no organisations that appealed to him. He wanted to see at least one NGO, but there was nothing there. When asked whether he was interested in any organisations that came to the fair, he replied the following:

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[5] According to Linda (the CEC's employer liaison team)

> I would like to avoid it if possible. The idea of working just to make money is not what I want. I just can't imagine becoming an investment banker and having the sole purpose of life to make money, don't care about anybody else.

Out of all organisations that were at the fair he refers to investment banks, a very specific industry and not the most present at the fair. He refers to it as something which is an ideal for a lot of other people, but an antipode to his preferences. Indeed, most first year students I talked to after the GRPF, i.e. those who started exploring their career options from the very beginning of their studies, were interested particularly in investment banks. The 'very top' reputation of these organisations is alluring to some students. Despite expressing an interest in journalism when I met him a couple of weeks before the fair, at the GRPF Chris (male, Politics, overseas) was already looking into consultancy and banking, holding brochures of companies like Goldman Sachs, Nomura, Accenture and HSBC.

5.2.2 Other events involving employers

Apart from careers fairs, a lot of career-related events that involve employers are organised on campus. In contrast to careers fairs, these are spread over the study year with more intensity during particular months (e.g. October and November) and create employer presence on campus throughout the year. These include: employer events, spotlight forums and skills programmes.

Employer Events may be organised in the form of presentations and skills sessions. In 2011/2012 there were 90 employer events on campus, with 69 events taking place in October/November 2011 and 21 in February 2012. The year before, in October 2010, 34 organisations attended. Spotlight forums organised in October/November 2011 included 6 events altogether. With an extensive employer events programme, it is important to analyse what kinds of employers attend. In October 2011, 37 out of 44 events (i.e. 84%) were held by MNCs, and 39 (i.e. 88.6%) events by large for-profit organisations. In November 2011, 20 out of 25 (i.e. 80%) events involved MNCs, and 21 out of 25 involved large for-profit organisations (i.e. 84%). A similar picture was taking place in October 2010. Out of 34 events, 27 (i.e. 79.4%) were held by MNCs, and 28 (i.e. 82.3%) by large for-profit organisations. Events that were led neither by MNCs nor by large for-profit organisations were mostly held by non-employers. These were, for example, professional bodies, placement agencies and companies arranging gap-years.

In short, Employer Events usually attract MNCs and large for-profit organisations, and constitute almost 100% of organisations who come there as employers. Organisations that attend Employer Events were mostly recruiting for a wide range of areas that may broadly be categorised as business, engineering finance and IT. In terms of size, scope and areas, organisations that took part in Employer Events were similar to organisations that attended the GRPF or sGRPF. In fact, many of them took part in both. Most of these organisations were offering graduate opportunities, often delivered in the format of specific graduate programmes.

Spotlight forums are different in that they involve talks by guest speakers representing a certain professional area, not necessarily a particular organisation or employer. These also represent different types of potential pathways in the world of work in comparison to those offered by the GRPF and sGRPF. These correspond more to the types of organisations coming to the DCF. For example, spotlight events held in October/November 2011 included speakers representing freelance journalism, the charity sector and work in EU institutions. These are potential paths that are different from careers with MNCs. However, their presence and visibility is small compared to that of MNCs and large for-profit organisations.

Aimfield University also has four programmes that are designed to develop student skills. These are all led by the CEC in collaboration with employers. Again, it is MNCs that come to deliver these sessions, and hence pass students ‘knowledge’ on employability. This will be discussed in more detail in chapter 6.

From the analysis of events involving employers on campus it may be seen that it is MNCs and large for-profit organisations whose presence is most visible, despite the wide range of events that are organised.

Tellingly, according to Janet (the CEC’s director), it is not the employers who are most visible on campus who will provide the most jobs to graduates.

> J: And, I think one always has to go back to the fact that 80% of all graduates are employed in companies outside the big companies. The medium-sized companies is where most graduates will end up.
>
> IR: Mmm. So, that’s the case?
>
> J: Yes. I mean, you’ve heard of AGR, the Association of Graduate Recruiters, who always have the voice of, of the press. They would be the first to say their members probably provide about

> 16,000–17,000 vacancies each year. And what have we got? 100,000 graduates going on to the market? Where do the rest go? They go into medium-sized companies. Um, and some of those have been names we all know but they're not the really massive multinational companies.

While it is not MNCs and large for-profit organisations that will be employing most students, other potential recruiters are hardly visible on campus, as may be seen from the analysis of careers fairs and events involving employers (as summarised in Table 5.1 below). Why this is the case will be addressed in detail in 'The politics of employer presence on campus' section (5.3).

Events on campus where mostly MNCs are present	Events with mostly alternative employers
Graduate Recruitment and Placement fair (GRPF) 123 employers out of 140 exhibitors 112 - MNCs/large for-profit organisations	Different Careers Fair (DCF) 10 out of 50 - employers 2 - MNCs 8 - alternative employers
spring Graduate Recruitment and Placement fair (sGRPF) 55 employers out of 70 exhibitors 43 - MNCs/large for-profit organisations	Spotlight forums (6 in total)
Employer Events (90 in total) (e.g. October 2011, 39 out of 44 held by MNCs/large for-profit organisations; November 2011, 21 out of 25 involved MNCs/large for-profit organisations)	
Skills sessions (4, led by 9 different employers)	

Table 5.1 A summary of events involving employers on campus (2011-2012)

5.2.3 Careers Centre

The Careers Centre as a space has a lot of information for students, including a small library and brochures that people can pick up. The analysis of the library has not been part of this research. However, the brochures that one may pick up also contribute to the 'common sense' that MNCs and large for-profit organisations are the best places to work for. One may pick up employer rankings, like *The Times* 100 Graduate Employers, The Job Crowd Top 50 companies for graduates to work for, or Top 50 Placement & Internship Employers by Ratemyplacement.co.uk. These lists introduce the hierarchy of employers and show who the ‘top’ employers are. The ‘Finalist pack’, a bag with material offered to all finalists that they can pick up at the CEC, was also skewed towards the ‘top’ employers, as well as the Aimfield Careers Guide 2012, which could be found inside the bag.

The ‘Finalist pack’ contained information about the job search for finalists. It may be considered as essential information for students, all they need to know about the graduate job search in one bag. Indeed, the bag contained some essential information, like a schedule of Employer Events on campus, the full programme of events taking place in Autumn 2011 and Aimfield Careers Guide 2012, produced by the CEC. Also there was information about certain employers. On the bag itself there were logos of Jaguar Land Rover, IBM, Deloitte, BAE Systems, Ernst & Young and PricewaterhouseCoopers, all MNCs. The two logos that were not MNCs were ACCA, an accountancy network, and the College of Law. Inside the bag there were also leaflets of these organisations. Apart from them, the presence of other MNCs could be noticed inside the bag, which had flyers of Nestle, Unilever, GE, Enterprise-Rent-a-Car, Rolls-Royce, National Instruments and BDO.

‘The Careers Guide, Aimfield 2012’ (CGA 2012) is also worth paying attention to. It was organised into four sections: ‘Aimfield University and your career’, ‘Exploring your options’, ‘Applying for jobs’ and ‘Jobs and course providers’. ‘Aimfield University and your career’ provided information on services that the CEC provides and how to use them. ‘Exploring your options’ explained the various paths that graduates could take after finishing university. ‘Applying for jobs’ provided information on how to apply. The jobs and course providers section gave information on ‘*[l]eading employers* [my italics] and course providers who want[ed] to hear from you’ (CGA 2012: 3). This last section occupied 14 pages of this 44 page guide (i.e. 32%) and was the largest of all four sections. Here is part of the introduction to this section:

> The next 12 pages detail some of the opportunities available from *larger recruiters* [my italics] in traditional graduate career sectors. The Careers and Employability Centre hosts Graduate and Placement careers fairs in the Autumn and Spring term and in May you can go to the Springboard Fair which hosts companies from alternative careers areas - see our website for specific dates.

It was clearly specified that the section provided information about potential jobs from larger recruiters. Right after this text and mentioning the GRPF and sGRPF, the DCF was mentioned too, as well as that it represented careers which were alternative to those presented most prominently in the guide. Further down on the same page, the CEC said that they could help students if their interests were outside the area represented in the guide, which means they do not push students to necessarily apply to larger recruiters. However, they emphasise certain employers: the information students get is mostly about MNCs and large for-profit organisations and it is easier to become aware of these employers rather than any others. At the same time, there is again a link between large and leading. They are almost used as synonyms, ‘leading employers’ and ‘larger recruiters’.

Summary

Although a variety of organisations come to campus to take part in fairs and events, there are certain organisations that students see most and that appear as ‘top’ employers to them. In short, the ‘common sense’ that is created on campus is that the ‘top’ employers are MNCs and large for-profit organisations. The construction and promotion of this ‘common sense’ speaks to an ‘instrumentalised work ethic’ within the ‘consumption of work’ orientation, where the (image of) work itself becomes an object of consumption.

5.3 The politics of employer presence on campus

So far I have discussed which organisations are most visible on campus and are presented as ‘top’ employers. However, in the previous section I did not give any explanations for this, but just stated the facts. I will now discuss the politics of employers’ presence on campus and in various materials that are available to students. This will be done by analysing the interaction between the CEC and employers[6]. MNCs and large for-profit organisations are keen on coming to the university and they usually get in touch with the CEC themselves. Smaller employers need to be contacted by the CEC’s employer liaison team directly and encouraged to come. Here is how Linda (the CEC’s employer liaison team) summarises these aspects of her role:

> L: There’s sort of two elements to my role. Some of it is pro-active, some of it is reactive, and the reactive elements of it are ... there are a plethora companies out there who actively look to recruit graduates and in terms of Aimfield University, those companies are mainly Engineering, IT, Finance and Retail, with quite a lot of others as well, but these are the main sectors. Um, and also, Marketing and PR roles. So those companies actively come here and contact ourselves

[6] Factual information in this section comes mostly from the interview with Janet (CEC’s director) and Linda (CEC’s employer liaison team).

> and use our services and that type of thing. And then as well as that, we also look to try and encourage other companies to come along, who may not necessarily consider it. So, for instance, we put on an event at the end of the academic year called Springboard, and we will invite organisations to come along to that event, but are not represented at other fairs, such as media companies, art companies, design companies, sport, ergonomics, psychology, to try and actually have something on campus for all of our students, so we do try to ( ) as well.
>
> IR: And for Springboard, do you need to contact companies directly?
>
> L: Yeah, that's a lot more resource-intensive. They don't contact us, and we contact them... Springboard, we need to talk to them, encourage them, explain the benefits of coming along to campus...

From what Linda says it may be seen that the CEC is keen on working with a variety of employers. MNCs and large for-profit organisations, who are willing to come to campus themselves, need to pay for events that they attend, both careers fairs and employer events. It is only when they are providing a specific course for students, like a skills session, there is no charge. The DCF is an opportunity to invite organisations from sectors that are not present in other fairs and to attract smaller employers. In fact, the CEC has a strategy to work with smaller companies as, according to Linda, these are the organisations a significant percentage of students would choose (according to her, around 27%). These employers are not charged to attend events on campus. However, to attract these employers, Linda needs to be proactive, which is resource-intensive. The same is mentioned by Janet (the CEC's director), who says that there are no economies of scale when working with these organisations. Furthermore, the time-consuming work with each employer will not necessarily mean that they would be recruiting for many positions.

> L: We have a strategy as well to work with smaller companies, but that's quite resource-intensive, because you can work sort of, you can, you know, commit quite a few hours working with one small company and then, they can only sort of, have one vacancy at the end of it.

So it requires additional effort to attract those smaller organisations from unrepresented sectors, and even more so making them equally visible on campus. MNCs and large for-profit organisations come to campus as part of their recruitment campaigns and 'employer branding' practices, and are ready to spend significant amounts of money on these activities. So the visibility of these employers on campus is rooted in their economic power. However, the effects of this presence may go beyond the economic transaction and the contribution to winning the 'war for talent'. The presence of MNCs and large for-profit organisations on campus and being presented as 'top' employers may also act as a 'war of position'. The latter would be in stimulating student work orientations to be aspired to these organisations rather than alternative forms of employment, with MNCs and large for-profit organisations as 'top' employers becoming part of students' habitus. Even for the majority of students who would not be able to enter the 'top' world of work, this image might stay with them.

The CEC in turn is dependent on these employers for the funding they get, as it may be seen from Janet's (the CEC's director) quote below:

> J: The larger employers must be kept warm, as well because we depend upon them for our bread and butter, basically. They book into fairs year on year on year, come and do presentations, who attract the student audiences, who get the momentum going, in terms of student activity within the centre.

It is not only careers fairs and employer events that provide 'bread and butter' for the CEC, but various other forms of sponsorship too. The 'finalist pack' that was described earlier in this chapter (5.2.3) was financed by employers, and information about this could be found in the bag. This fact, while hinted at by the bag's content, has been confirmed by the information on the CEC's website. The GRPF 2011 was sponsored by Barclays Capital and Ernst & Young. The GRPF's guide contains advertisements for 18 organisations. The largest section of the CEC's Career Guide 2012, described above, was also sponsored by employers. A guide for employers on the cost of the CEC's services is publicly available on the CEC's website.

Getting funding from large employers, the CEC may afford to diversify the range of organisations coming. However, being dependent on organisations that pay for the CEC's services, the representation of organisations and sectors is likely to be skewed to those paying, which is exactly the case, as it has been shown throughout the previous section (5.2). MNCs and large for-profit organisations are in the centre, presented as 'top' and the information about other types of work paths comes in addition to this. Employer rankings and careers guides that students can find in the CEC, are also often funded by employers. For example, a ratemyplacement.co.uk's guide 'Top 50 Placement and Internship employers 2011-2012' is sponsored by PwC, Targetjobs's guide on various graduate jobs by Baker & McKenzie, Prospects' 'Real Prospects Directory 2011/12' by PwC. I will not go into the details of the content of these guides and the amount of advertising associated with them. Employer rankings are usually conducted within MNCs or large for-profit organisations as they recruit a lot of graduates every year and have graduate programmes. So the information on ‘top’ organisations is limited to these specific organisations.

In this section I have discussed the fact that MNCs and large for-profit organisations are most visible on campus and are presented as ‘top’ employers does not exist in a vacuum. This is a result of macro power relations, namely the power that they hold in global capitalism, entering the local context. ‘War of position’ is in the practice of these organisations coming to campus and creating the ‘common sense’ of them as ‘top’ employers. This is intended to attract students, of whom a minority could get a job in these places. The practice of coming to campus is paid for by these organisations and the CEC is dependent on this income. With this funding, the CEC may choose to contribute to the diversity of organisations that come, but the representation of MNCs and large for-profit organisations compared to any other organisations is still unbalanced.

5.4 Commodification of work: The practice of ‘employer branding’

From the discussion above on how MNCs and large for-profit organisations are keen to be present on campus, sponsor various events, and place their advertisements in materials that are distributed among students, it may already be spotted that their activities on campus very much correspond to the practice of ‘employer branding’, which involves creating an appealing employer brand that attracts ‘talent’. This section will look at this practice in more detail. Apart from making themselves visible to students, employers provide information on what it would be like to work for them via recruitment brochures. On the basis of the analysis of this material, section 5.4.1 will explore the ‘employee value proposition’ offered to students. Section 5.4.2 will look at the second step of ‘employer branding’ (as identified in section 3.4.2), namely the marketing campaign on campus, exploring the activities employers engage in to market themselves. The analysis here will be based primarily on observations of employer presence on campus. The discussion in both sections will be complemented by interviews with students (after the GRPF) and the CEC’s team.

5.4.1 ‘Employee value proposition’

This section will look at the ‘employee value proposition’ offered to students on campus, based on the analysis of textual and visual material in recruitment brochures. Five key dimensions of the ‘employee value proposition’ have been identified: the benefit package, organisational brand, lifestyle, self-development and employability. The benefit package can be viewed as part of an ‘instrumentalised work ethic’ while the last four dimensions contribute to the construction of the ‘consumption of work’ orientation. I will now briefly explain why the benefit package is not part of ‘consumption of work’. Then I will discuss each of the four dimensions of the ‘employee value proposition’.

The benefit package is a set of tangible benefits that employees get when working for the company. It may include medical insurance, corporate discounts, access to the corporate fitness club, etc. The benefit package may be viewed as income in kind, i.e. non-monetrary income. The availability of such a package positions work as a means to materialistic ends outside work and hence may be attributed to an ‘instrumentalised work ethic’. However, it neither offers ‘consumption through work processes’ nor ‘consumption of (the image of) work’ and is therefore not part of the ‘consumption of work’ orientation.

The organisational brand is one of the dimensions of the ‘employee value proposition’, which positions (the image) of work as an object of consumption and contributes to shaping the ‘consumption of work’ orientation. All organisations associate their brands with the symbolic, via constructing ‘sign values’ around them. These were often associated with opportunities for hedonism too. These were both the image of the corporate brand and the employer brand that organisations were constructing.

For example, Aston Martin primarily emphasised their corporate brand in the recruitment brochure. The logo of the company was placed on a white background on the front cover, and there was nothing apart from it there. In the brochure itself, all visuals depict Aston Martin’s products, their cars, and clearly emphasise the ‘sign value’ of this product. Hence the brand is associated with style, status and conspicuous consumption, which employees of the organisation can partly share and ‘communicate’ to others. At the same time, the brochure is image-intensive, with five Aston Martins appearing on a six-page brochure. Abercrombie & Fitch is another example of emphasising the corporate brand. Their logo was placed on the black background of the front cover. Within the brochure every second page has a visual image associated with the brand. These accompany both information about working at the company and the range of brands within it. In fact, if one does not pay attention to the text, from the images only it is hard to tell that this is a recruitment brochure and not a catalogue of their products. Eight images out of twelve contain some form of nudity and most of them are explicitly sexual. The first page of the brochure, for example, depicts a sensual kiss. Here students are addressed as 'traditional hedonists', emphasising pleasures associated with the senses, which the consumption of the brand can bring. While nudity comes as no surprise on one page, where the brand that produces underwear is presented, it is not clear why a half-naked male body also accompanies pages with content on diversity and inclusion.

Most organisations, however, put more emphasis on their brand as an employer. This is often done by placing a slogan that summarises in a short phrase or sentence what working in this particular company means on the front cover of the recruitment brochure. For example, Amazon's brochure says 'Work hard. Have fun. Make history'. This constructs their employer brand as having a 'sign value' of being 'fun' and 'important' at the same time, something that employees who work there could embrace and 'communicate' to others. 'Have fun', however, not only constructs a certain 'sign value' of the employer brand, but also hints at a 'fun' lifestyle at work that employees can have, addressing students as 'communicators'. This brings us to the discussion of lifestyle as another dimension of the 'employee value proposition'.

Lifestyle in the brochures was presented via three key categories: organisational culture that one may engage in at work, ethical lifestyle, and adventure. The 'Have fun' opportunity that Amazon emphasised in their brochure hints at 'fun work cultures' at the organisation, which might imply creativity, flatter hierarchies, authenticity and other elements. It was a different organisational culture that could be captured from images of most banks and business-to-business organisations (e.g. Nomura, RBS, Morgan Stanley, Citi, Accenture, HSBC, Ernst & Young). These usually use pictures of skyscrapers (see picture 5.1), office spaces and the business area they are based in (e.g. the City of London) in their brochures, which symbolise hierarchy and being serious about business. Students here are addressed as 'communicators' of status, success and prestige.

All organisations, irrespective of whether they present work as 'fun' or work as a competition for status, provide opportunities for one to engage in an 'ethical lifestyle' through work. Each company has at least a page in the brochure devoted to its corporate social responsibility practices. For example, one has the following content:

> Our Community programme provides graduates with lots of opportunities for involvement; past activities have included transforming a network of run-down footpaths through our support of Raleigh, mentoring young offenders as part of our work with the Prince's Trust and trekking from coast to coast in Costa Rica to help change the lives of the UK's most disadvantaged young people.
>
> Capgemini graduate brochure (2012: 13)

Here students are addressed as 'communicators', who can show to others that they are 'ethical' by engaging in organisational initiatives. At the same time, the quote above accentuates the experience these socially-responsible activities provide. So students are also addressed as 'modern hedonists'. It is not just helping young people, but helping them through acquiring life experiences while trekking coast to coast in Costa Rica.

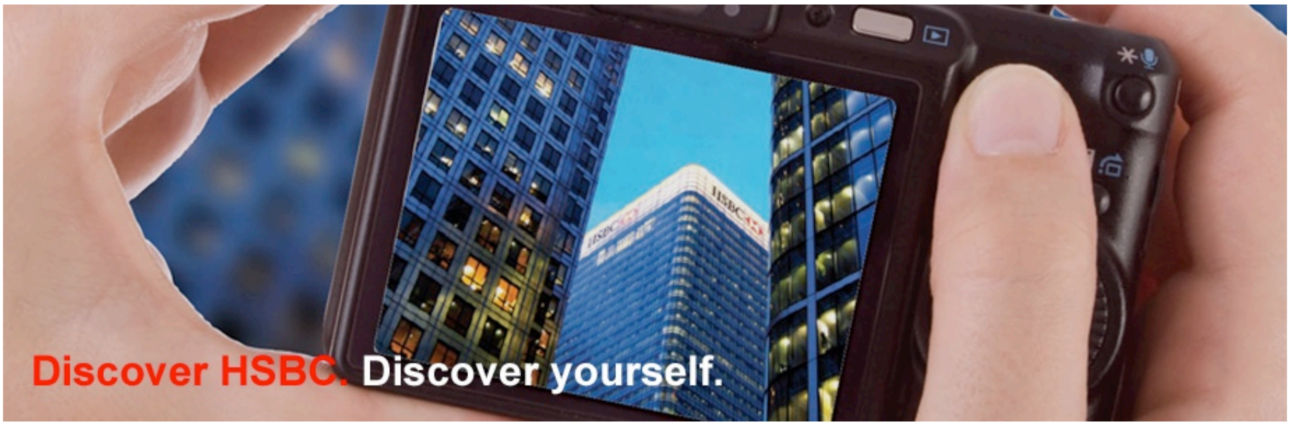
Organisations often emphasise the opportunities for travel and adventure that working for them offers. For example, Nomura's front cover, apart from office buildings, depicts a globe. Within the brochure itself, there are images of the key landmarks of different countries, like the Eiffel Tower, the Leaning Tower of Pisa and Taj Mahal. This demonstrates both the scope of organisation's operations and the opportunities for working and travelling globally that it provides. PwC's front cover (see picture 5.1 below) depicts people engaged in an extreme sport. Throughout the brochure, all pictures show a dynamic lifestyle associated with travelling and adventure. In fact, the brochure does not have a single picture demonstrating work or organisational space. The slogan that supports this picture is 'It's the experience that stays with you'. Here students are addressed as 'modern hedonists', who receive pleasure from the variety of experiences (including extreme and challenging ones) available through work processes.

The portrayal of lifestyle in recruitment brochures is not limited to depicting the possibility of 'consumption through work processes'. PwC's slogan mentioned above might refer not only to the adventures and travelling that work provides access to, but to work itself and the experience it gives, such as opportunities for self-development and employability. Self-development and employability are parts of an 'abstract work ethic' ('self-work ethic' in particular). However, being presented within the 'employee value proposition' and promoted to students opens the opportunity for these processes themselves to be consumed. HSBC's slogan 'Discover HSBC. Discover Yourself' (see picture 5.1) and

Accenture's 'Be > You Imagined', which appear on the front covers of their brochures, are also examples of self-development as part of the 'employee value proposition'. All employers highlight the opportunities for enhancing employability offered by them. These include formal trainings and development opportunities (e.g. training for a professional qualification), joining the in-house Business Schools, networking events, mentorship schemes, etc. Many of them also highlight that work at this particular organisation will help employees to develop their skills. At PwC, for example, 'you'll learn most from an outstanding variety of work, picking up business, personal and technical skills you can use across PwC and throughout your career' (PwC graduate brochure, 2012: 21). However, it is also emphasised that although organisation provides all these opportunities, 'enabling' (see chapter 2) them to become more employable, it is the responsibility of the individuals to take care of their employability. For example, it can be seen in the quote of one of HSBC's employees:

> Your own progression and growth is solely down to you, you have to drive your own development. There are, however, plenty of people to help you with this. Programmes are designed to push and test individuals to get them to draw on skills and strengths they never knew they had.
>
> HSBC graduate brochure (2012: 16)

'Consumption of work' orientation positions (the image of) work and experiences associated with it as acts of consumption The key elements of 'consumption of work' are 'top' employers/industries (as discussed earlier in this chapter), organisational brand, lifestyle, self-development and employability. They offer a certain 'menu' of work orientations to choose from. For example, one can choose to work for an organisation with a 'fun' culture or a more bureaucratic corporate culture. However, both would be choices from the 'menu' of 'consumption of work'. Students are addressed as consumers, sometimes explicitly (see picture 5.3), which the next section will discuss in more detail by analysing the marketing campaign on campus.



Picture 5.1 Front cover of HSBC's 2012 graduate brochure

Picture 5.2 Picture from the front cover of PwC's 2012 graduate brochure

Our business areas

We tackle a huge range of burning business issues and complex commercial challenges. And our ideas boost the performance of all sorts of organisations. So it's not surprising that we offer a massive variety of career paths. Over the next few pages you can start to explore the possibilities. And as there are so many, you're bound to discover something that fits you perfectly.

[From PWC's 2012 graduate brochure: p. 4-5]

Picture 5.3 Using the metaphor of shopping to depict choice available to students

5.4.2 The marketing campaign

While recruitment brochures provide students with an idea of what it would be like to work for a particular employer, allowing them to fantasise on this theme, events on campus provide them with a more dynamic experience. During the marketing campaign students are addressed as consumers by both the CEC and employers. This is demonstrated in the email from the CEC about the GRPF sent to all students:

> This is for ONE DAY ONLY so make sure you are there to meet employers, hear about all their amazing recruitment opportunities and pick up a few freebies as well!! Even if you are unsure about your career or don't really feel prepared, come along anyway and chat to the friendly exhibitors.
>
> As well as the fair there will also be a BBQ outside and luxury cars for you to look at and to sit in, from Aston Martin and Jaguar Land Rover.
>
> [email from the CEC, 18 October 2011]

From this email it can be seen that the GRPF is not just an opportunity for students to meet the 'top' employers, but an event that allows them to engage in consumer pleasures. The CEC mentions 'freebies' that students may pick up as well as luxury cars, which are the two major ways of addressing students as consumers during the marketing campaign. Being given 'freebies' addresses students primarily as 'traditional hedonists', giving them something that can engage their senses. However, it can go beyond it and address students as 'modern hedonists' and 'communicators' too. The presence of luxury cars on campus provides temporary access to objects with 'sign value' of status and prestige. As students can also look at and sit in the cars, they are also addressed as 'traditional hedonists'. Both 'freebie' marketing and temporary access to objects with sign value will now be discussed in more detail.

'Freebies'

Giving out 'freebies' is the most common way to engage students as consumers. After all, not all organisations can provide objects with sign values. 'Freebies' are often advertised by the CEC. Employers bring them to fairs and meetings with students. It is almost a must to have some 'freebies' on the stand. At the sGRPF, for example, I have not noticed any organisations without 'freebies'. Every stand had something to offer. When passing through a stand that was actually selling snacks, I initially thought this was another organisation. The most common 'freebies' were sweets and pens. However, there was a whole variety of products: thermo cups, bags, red double-deckers, deodorants, toys and rainbow springs.

One may also differentiate in terms of what the stands offer. These may be just 'freebies', or a whole experience. Steve (male, Sport, UK) liked Aston Martin's stand for its 'coolness' and different ways to engage the students: a video, freebies, car parts:

> S.: [Aston Martin] had a little video of the car and stuff. They had parts of their cars, engineering examples, I guess. Stuff that sort of engages you, I guess.

Indeed, a lot of organisations at the sGRPF had screens on their stands, which were there to demonstrate what the organisation was doing, trying to engage the students. One organisation invited students to enter a competition and win a giant Chupa-Chups by subscribing to their email list. Just by coming to the sGRPF and taking part in filling in a questionnaire, one could win an iPad, and this was advertised on the door of the front entrance to the fair. At the DCF organisations also usually offered some 'freebies' to students, but the variety was not as huge as at the GRPF and sGRPF.

The 'finalist pack' that was financed by employers and had information about them, as well as employer events on campus, also contained 'freebies'. This was advertised both on the website and on the wall on the way to the CEC, mentioning 'goodies' that were in the bag. Here is how the finalist bag is presented on the CEC's website. On top there is a picture of the bag with some of its contents, including the 'goodies'. In fact, only the 'goodies' are recognisable. We can clearly see a Dove deodorant and a Kit-Kat chocolate while the text on the brochures is too small to recognise what it represents. Right under the picture, the following text can be seen:

> **Finalists - Come and get your Finalist Pack from the Careers and Employability Centre - free chocolates and goodies with every bag!**
>
> The bag contains information on: employer presentations, employer information, Careers and Employability Centre leaflets, Lynx Aftershave, Dove Silk Body Wash, Chunky Kit Kats, Pens, Mints and Mars Confectionary (TBC) - whilst stocks last.
>
> [all emphases are original]

Picture 5.4 'Finalist pack'. The picture on the left shows the finalist pack that I got and the picture on the right is taken from the CEC's website (name of the university has been removed).

The informative part of the bag and the consumer part of the bag are listed in one line, giving these items the same importance. Finalists who are looking for jobs are also consumers, so the bag contains all they need. 'Whilst stocks last', however, even seems to put more emphasis on the consumption rather than the informative aspect of the bag. 'TBC' that is put in brackets after Mars Confectionary is written in capital letters, unlike any other word in the text, signifying the importance of not misinforming the customer. The bag that I got at the CEC contained the following 'freebies': a Unilever deodorant (with a £1 sticker on), a shower cream, and a KitKat. Nestle (producers of KitKat) directly address the student-consumer by writing 'How many graduates does it take to make your KitKat?' on the box.

Apart from coming to campus for recruitment related events (fairs, presentations), some employers come to campus specifically to campaign. PwC is one of the most actively present employers. Apart from coming to various events on campus, they also organise a number of massive marketing campaigns throughout the year. They offered free lifts on Tuk Tuks in 2011 and free flipbooks for students in 2012. Some of their events match the widely celebrated holidays too. For example, on Valentine's Day they came on campus with 'Valentine ballons', heart-shaped red balloons, with a PwC logo and the following quote 'we're at the heart of the best opportunities'. Apart from this, they were giving away heart-shaped chocolates in red foil and encouraging people to take part in a prize draw and win an 'exclusive £100 meal at a great restaurant'.

Another company, Jaguar Land Rover, also came to campus around Valentine's Day to give students free fish and chips. Here is how the CEC presented this event:

> Need something to warm you up on a cold day? Well we've got the solution for you. Jaguar Land Rover will be visiting you soon, giving away FREE fish & chips on your campus, so you can enjoy a taste of a Great British favourite, courtesy of another Great British favourite.

The key branding here is in that both Jaguar Land Rover and fish and chips are British favourites. This marketing campaign was also explicitly linked with graduate recruitment. The aprons of the people serving fish and chips as well as the napkins and the van itself all had the information that Jaguar Land Rover was in *The Times* Top 100 Graduate Employers.

While 'freebies' are primarily a source of 'traditional hedonism' and appeal to students' senses (taste, sight, etc), some of them also address students as 'modern hedonists' and 'communicators'. 'Exclusive meal at a great restaurant' will satisfy the winners' senses, but at the same time going to that 'great restaurant' may be a way to communicate his/her status to others. Furthermore, the mere experience of taking part in the game addresses students as 'modern hedonists'.

Temporary access to objects with sign value

Apart from 'freebies', Jaguar Land Rover and Aston Martin provide students with access to objects with 'sign value'. Their cars were at the GRPF in 2010 and 2011. In 2010 there was no parking near the fair venue, so the cars were parked in the middle of students' way and on the grass. There was a lot of interest in them. In 2011 I observed the cars on campus throughout the whole fair. There were four cars in total, a new Land Rover 'Evoque', Jaguar 'XKR' and two Aston Martins. Some of them had their boots open. Whenever I looked at the place where the cars were, there were at least 20 people around throughout the day. Students who were walking past the cars were turning their heads while walking away (see picture 5.5 below). Company representatives were almost unnoticeable, it was only the sign-object that was allowed to shine. These were the 'sign values' of status and prestige, symbolising conspicuous consumption, that students had temporary access to. Students were taking photos of the cars, or of themselves with the cars in the background. This experience engaged students' senses, addressing them as 'traditional hedonists', allowing them to look at the cars and sit in them. Student experience of feeling these luxury products went beyond these: they were also allowed to press the gas pedal when in the car, which created a very specific and loud noise.

The students I talked to at the GRPF all noticed the cars, unless they were coming from a different side of campus, which meant they could enter the fair not seeing the cars. Most of them were surprised to see the cars at the GRPF, but it was usually a pleasant surprise, like for Chris (male, Politics, overseas):

> IR: Did you see, um, did you notice those cars outside?
> C: Yeah, they're so nice, like Aston Martin, and was it a Jaguar, I don't know. I want to go inside (laughs).
> IR: Can you?
> C: Yeah, I saw, like, couple of guys going inside, like, being amazed.
> IR: Was it a surprise for you?
> C: Yeah, a complete surprise. But I can see why they did it (laughs).
> IR: Why do you think?
> C: Um, to advertise their companies, companies slash products.

Chris is willing to engage in 'traditional hedonism' by going inside the cars, to feel the objects that most students cannot possess now. He also notices that this was a form of promoting the product and the organisation, to make it more attractive in the eyes of potential employees and customers. Other students assessed this as a 'smart' marketing solution. However, the function of these cars goes beyond the purposes of exhibitors, were they to promote the company, the product or to attract 'talent'. The luxury cars were complementing the image of 'top' employers. Engaging students' senses helps to symbolise what working for a 'top' employer will be like and what one would be able to 'communicate' to others. This brings a hint of potential lifestyle, most likely a lifestyle of abundance and conspicuous consumption. Some of the respondents, when looking at the cars, foresaw them possessing such a car in the future. For example, Sophie (female, Economics, overseas) is not interested in cars themselves, but looking at them makes her think that she would like to have a 'fancy' car in the future:

> S.: don't think I will be interested so much in it [working for one of these car manufacturers], because ... I'm not interested in cars [laughs]. I'm not very passionate about cars. I, I like cars, and I obviously want a fancy car, but I don't know if I would ... it would sustain my interest very long.

Although Walter (male, Mathematics, UK) was not interested in organisations that came to the fair, seeing the cars led to him project himself driving them:

> W: Yeah, the cars, the get you like, I was, ah, that's what I'm gonna be driving.

So as to show that I am not overstating the role these luxury cars were playing on campus, I would like to refer to another exhibit outside the venue of the GRPF. These were two huge Caterpillar diggers standing outside the building, around 15-20 meters away from the cars (see picture 5.6 below). These were orange diggers with the flag of the employer on. There was nobody nearby when I came up to them. One of the representatives was keen to talk to me, and spent around ten-fifteen minutes chatting. During this time, only three people came up to the diggers and quickly left. The representative of Caterpillar admitted it was hard for them to compete with the cars. Throughout the day, a similar level of attention was drawn to the diggers. Furthermore, when I was talking to people who attended the fair, right after asking students about cars, I asked whether they had seen the diggers. However, most of them said they had not seen them. Those who did were not as excited about them. Despite the diggers also allowing students to engage their senses, they do not want to consume the diggers as these are not sign-objects. The CEC also did not mention anything about the diggers in their email.

Picture 5.5 Luxury cars at the GRPF

Picture 5.6 Caterpillar diggers at the GRPF

5.4.3 No surprise

The fact that students are addressed as consumers is something that the CEC's employees and students are aware of and find normal.

Linda (the CEC's employer liaison team) referred to employers coming to campus as part of their marketing campaign:

> L: ...and then we also have companies who come to see me on face-to-face basis and ... ask for help in their marketing strategy on campus. And that relationship then ... can then develop into something a bit more ... deeper, and that will involve me, um, looking at their opportunities, looking at how their company operates and is structured, and ... ways in which they can market themselves to students that enhances their general marketing strategy, um, and also looking at what type of students they want best to target, and how to target those students.

So part of Linda's role is in advising companies how to market themselves on campus, and 'target' the right customers. Janet (the CEC's director), when asked about the practice of luxury cars being presented on campus as part of the GRPF and who initiated it, stated that it was all employer driven and described them as having ‘strong marketing teams’:

> IR: ... Is it, and I was surprised when I saw it [luxury cars] last year because it was something that I didn’t expect and it was near the William Hicks building. Then, this time I saw this practice again. Who initiated it?
>
> J: The employers, the employers will. It was Aston Martin, Jaguar Land Rover. I think we had, was it Caterpillar or JCB brought their diggers as well, and they regard it as a real opportunity to showcase their cars and attract the good engineers. And then they can go in and talk to the employers about their, about career opportunities. So, it’s really them wanting to attract students. Employers try so many things. I mean, today I noticed that somebody was, I think, it was PricewaterhouseCoopers were going to have Valentine balloons at William Hicks this afternoon, because it’s Valentine’s Day. And, then Jaguar Land Rover are having a fish and chip van on campus. So, they all try new things. We’ve had hot air balloons. Um, you know, and all sorts of things. We’ve had street runners, parkour type people and all that sort of thing to attract students and catch students’ attention.
>
> IR: Yes, it is interesting in a way because, definitely, there is a lot of competition amongst students to get into those jobs [=
>
> J: [Absolutely
>
> IR: = but they still keep this pace, in terms of attracting them.
>
> J: Yes, employer, and it’s all employer driven. Linda will work hard to make sure that that can happen if an employer comes to us. But, those big employers who do these things, they will say “We want to do this”. They will have very strong marketing teams. They will believe if they can do something like that, they can attract the best for their business.

Janet (the CEC’s director) sees marketing campaigns on campus as something normal. She speaks positively about them overall, listing numerous catchy marketing campaigns employers have initiated and referring to employers as having ‘strong marketing teams’. It seems that she is pleased by the attention employers give to students as consumers and the effort they put in attracting them.

Likewise, some students I talked to at the careers fair actually recognised the marketing aspect of the fair. Walter (male, Mathematics, UK) referred to organisation representatives as salesmen, noticing their salesmen techniques.

> IR: Were they [exhibitors] friendly?

> W: Yeah, yeah, they were really friendly, like salesmen-friendly, as any salesman would be. You know, they try to speak to you, you walk past, and they try to speak to you like that.

This was in them trying to catch his attention while he was walking past the stands, and to attract him to their 'products'. Another student referred to his experience of looking around the fair as 'window-shopping'. Being in his second year, he was not interested in applying yet, and came to the fair to have a look around.

Chris (male, Politics, overseas) appreciates being addressed as a consumer by employers:

> C: ...and Accenture, like ... I think they're advertising for like graduate schemes and like placements, and like all the ads are really good, because throughout my 3 years at university I've seen them, so, um consistently advertising to students.
>
> IR: Yeah
>
> C: Um, look, look at the brochure, it's like, hard copy, like, you can tell they're really into recruiting (laughs).

For him, this is a signal of serious intentions on the side of the employer, that they are interested in recruiting Aimfield students. He recognises that he is a customer, and evaluates the process from a customer's perspective, i.e. whether the service is good, assessing employers' interest in its 'clients' this way.

In a 'consumer society' one expects to see objects of consumption in the most unexpected places, and appreciates being addressed as a consumer. None of the respondents were critical about the cars' presence at the GRPF or thought this was inappropriate. Some people were skeptical about the cars, saying they did not attract them. However, these replies were still given from a consumer perspective (i.e. whether this marketing trick worked or not) rather than questioning the approach to students as consumers in general.

5.5 Conclusion

This chapter shows that the pattern towards the commodification of the meaning of work identified at the macro level accurately depicts what happens at the local level, i.e. at Aimfield University. This phenomenon is rooted in the economic power of MNCs and large for-profit organisations, who are keen to come to campus as part of the 'war for talent' rhetoric and advertise themselves to students. Their economic activity on campus contributes to the funding that the CEC gets. However, this economic activity goes beyond the competition of employers for 'talent' and contributes to the creation of a certain image of work. Employer presence on campus is part of the 'hegemonic project' of consumption. The practice of 'employer branding' is the 'war of position', which promotes 'consumption of work' as the 'common sense' work orientation. First, this 'common sense' is in positioning MNCs and large for-profit organisations as 'top' employers. Organisations of different sizes and from non-business sectors are neither 'top' nor very visible to students. Although the CEC can redistribute the funding they get from these employers to diversify the range of activities on campus, which they do, the proportion of events involving MNCs and large for-profit organisations is incomparably larger than that involving any other organisations and professions. Second, four out of five features of the employee value proposition fit into the 'consumption of work'. Work is presented as a site for hedonist consumption (both traditional and modern) as well as a provider of signs that can be communicated to others (both status signs and subjectivities). Third, marketing campaigns on campus are the dynamic part of the 'war of position', which actively promote 'consumption of work' orientation to students. This is done via engaging them as consumers and providing them with various consumption experiences during employer events, and showing what it would be like to work for them. The marketing aspect of 'employer branding' is something that is acknowledged by both the CEC's employees and students, and seems to be accepted as 'normal'. From what employers are doing on campus, it might be inferred what kind of students they are looking for. The ideal-type student is a student-consumer, who reacts to employer marketing campaigns and embraces the images of work created by employers. Although the 'top' employers provide jobs only for a small minority of students, their visibility to everyone on campus creates an image of them as desirable employers that might stay with both those who manage to get in and those left overboard.

This chapter, via looking at the presence of power at the local level, has analysed how 'consumption of work' is constructed as a 'common sense' work orientation. However, constructing 'consumption of work' as a 'common sense' work orientation by employers does not mean that students will necessarily shape their work orientations around it. Student agency has not been analysed in this chapter and will be addressed in Chapter 7, where student work orientations will be looked at in more detail. I will analyse the 'dialogical selves' engaging with the 'common sense' of 'consumption of work' constructed on campus. The next chapter will look at the 'common sense' about employability that is constructed on campus, keeping in mind that employability is exactly what the opportunity to 'consume work' is dependent on.

Chapter 6. The overwhelming emphasis on employability

6.1 Introduction

The employability agenda is very much present at Aimfield University, and is noticeable in a variety of bodies within it, spreading beyond the CEC into the Student Union (SU), university departments and the university in general. Employability surrounds students in whatever they do at the university. There is also a particular notion of employability that is communicated to students: this is the notion of 'initiative employability'. This chapter will be structured as follows. First, the employability agenda within the university will be addressed (6.2). The discussion here will be around the rise and presence of the employability agenda on campus (6.2.1) and employability programmes that are offered to students (6.2.2). Second, I will look at the meaning of employability that is communicated to students (6.3). This will include the definition of employability used by the CEC (6.3.1), its scope (6.3.2) as well as what it constitutes (6.3.3). The communication of employability rhetoric to students at career consultations will then be considered (6.3.4). Finally, deviations from and manipulations of the employability rhetoric at the local level will be addressed (6.3.4). The conclusion will then follow (6.4).

6.2 Employability agenda at Aimfield University

Looking at various bodies within the university, it may be seen how employability has become a word that has to be there, no matter what is discussed, be it the strength of a certain degree programme, taking part in volunteering or joining the model United Nations group on campus. The employability agenda has spread beyond the activities of the CEC and become one of the key issues in the university as a whole, entering departments and the student union (SU). This section will discuss this rise of employability in more detail.

6.2.1 The rise and presence of re-articulating the usual

In this subsection I will first discuss the rise and presence of employability at different bodies within Aimfield University (the CEC, SU and university departments). Second, I will also pay attention to this rise taking place primarily at the rhetorical level, with the activities of various bodies within the university being re-articulated through employability.

In 2010/11 Aimfield's CEC changed its name from 'Careers Centre' to 'Careers and Employability Centre', emphasising employability as one of its main activities. This took place after an Employability Award was established and resulted in planning the CEC's activity more around employability. Employability is often addressed in career consultations with students, assessed in mock interviews and developed with the help of a variety of courses that are aimed at employability (see section 6.2.2). It may be stated that the CEC plays the most important role in working on the employability agenda within the university. First, its activity is explicitly about employability, which is also reflected in its name. This is not the same for the SU and departments, which add employability to their own agendas [at least at the moment]. Second, currently they are the only provider of formal programmes that target employability, designed together with employers and providing formal recognition on completion. The CEC's role within the university has also become more important with the development of employability, as reported by Janet (the CEC's director):

> J: And, so, instead of being some organisation up the hill that provides vacancies with strange people who sit in rooms and do interviews with students, we were actually seen as helping students and, by default, helping departments to get better results in terms of students getting better jobs. Which means their degree programmes and courses were regarded more highly and, so the university, you know, benefitted as a whole... And now, of course, we can use it to actually put ourselves on committees and in places that we couldn't do previously.

From what Janet says, there has been a power shift within the university with more power going to the CEC. Samantha (the CEC's employability advisor) made a similar point, but also mentioned the centrality of the CEC in terms of employability:

> S: I think the name change was a good one at the time because, um, different other people at the university might be getting on board with employability agenda. We like to see ourselves quite central at the university in terms of the employability offering. So politically I think it was quite a good thing to do.

Aimfield's SU also deals with employability. In 2011 the role of Employability Officer was introduced. This intends to gear students towards employability by recognising the skills they have gained through various activities within the union. As explained by Jack, who holds this position, currently employability at the SU is about giving student activities an employability focus, 'turning skills they've [students] got into employable skills'. The SU has always organised various training sessions for its members, especially for students involved in running student societies and organisations. Now these sessions are re-articulated as contributing to employability. This is how a 'development training sessions' webpage of Aimfield's SU is now presented (the same holds for various organisations within the SU like societies, volunteering, media etc):

> Here at **Aimfield Students Union**, we **value** our **volunteers** and ensure everything **YOU** do is **developed** and targeted towards **employability.**
> So what are you waiting for, sign up today and start developing **YOUR skills** for **YOUR future!**
>
> [original **bold**]

This is the start of the text on a student development page, and it begins by addressing the employability agenda. The text highlights how what students currently do at the SU is beneficial for their future, which is closely connected with enhancing employability via developing skills. It is only after this text that the information about the actual purpose of these sessions is provided:

> **Aimfield Students Union is here to support you and develop you further to ensure what ever position you take on you receive the support that is required.**
>
> [original **bold**]

University departments have also been going down the employability route. A lot depends on the particular department and people running it. However, in some departments employability is actively addressed. This happens by emphasising employability to prospective students, appointing employability officers within departments and running employability-related modules. The latter already exist, for example, in the School of Business and Economics, School of Art and Design and School of Geography. Departments often ask the CEC to help them with designing the employability modules, but they are usually delivered by academics. Also, according to Valerie (the CEC's employability team), there is still not that much activity within the departments aimed at formal employability modules:

> Aimfield is still much focused on the academic qualifications, so that comes first, but other things you do might help you in getting a job.

At the same time, departments choose the way they are going to address employability. Within the university, there is an online learning system with outlines of all modules in different departments. In each module specification one can find an outline of the skills that students get from doing it. A module is not only about gaining knowledge of a specific subject, but should also give skills. For example, when studying Genetics and Cell Biology, students also acquire the skills of teamwork and presentation. ‘Courses with employability in mind’ is something that is emphasised in Aimfield’s employability statement:

> Employers are not only involved in the design of many of our courses but also contribute to their teaching and assessment. Many of our academics continually liaise with employers to ensure their research and teaching maintains its relevance and we also offer sponsored opportunities with some of the UK’s biggest employers.

This statement is in line with the Lambert (2003) and Wilson (2012) reports on higher education, which both call for more university-business collaboration. Notably, collaboration with ‘UK’s biggest employers’ is highlighted.

From the discussion so far it may be seen that employability is part of the overall university agenda and has been on the rise in recent years. This rise has primarily taken place at the level of rhetoric, through re-articulating the activities of various bodies within the university as being connected with employability. Everyone I interviewed at the CEC mentioned that employability was nothing new for them, and that their activities had always been about employability. Below is a quote from Janet (the CEC’s director) that emphasises this:

> J: I would say that we’ve always really been about employability. Careers services, particularly as long as I’ve been here in the last 22-23 years, we’ve always been about employability. We’ve been about helping students to go through what I first saw, when I sat out there for an interview, as the five stages of career choice. And, that was about employability. It was about giving the people the skills to maintain employment throughout their lives in areas that they were most fitted for.

Samantha (the CEC’s career advisor) makes a similar point, but also emphasising the marketing aspect of employability:

> S: It’s [employability] always been there. The interesting thing now is that it’s turned into this marketing-type concept, where, you know, we’re delivering on employability... It’s just now, trying to translate the activities we’ve always done into this nice marketing package for all

> external stakeholders. So whether they be parents, whether they be the senior management within the university, or whether they be the students...

Nonetheless, after the change of name, more programmes and events that explicitly focus on employability appeared. When asked why this has been the case, here is what Janet (the CEC's director) replied:

> J: Well, at the bottom level, a lot of other universities were doing it. Uh, it was seen as a very good thing because the one thing that students, like a lot of us, don't like doing, is reflecting. And, that doesn't help when it comes to the way that career progression happens these days. So much is about being able to market what you've got to offer.

So the drive towards employability was a way to follow the same trend that was taking place at other universities. This need to follow the trend is surrounded by positive rhetoric about what employability has to offer. In the extract above, Janet mentions reflection and self-marketing. These are important parts that constitute the hegemonic project of employability, and will be discussed in section 6.3.3 below.

While the CEC has gone beyond only re-articulating their usual activities by introducing new ones, the SU's actual activities have not changed at all with the rise of employability. What happened is that training and involvement in the SU's activities have been re-articulated through employability. According to Jack (the SU's Employability Officer), as of now the employability agenda at Aimfield's SU is primarily about making the connection between what happens within it and employability. This involves, for example, explaining to students what skills they have on the basis of what they had done at the SU.

However, there are plans to develop employability at Aimfield's SU. One is related to incorporating SIFE[1] into the Student Union. SIFE is a global not-for-profit organisation with branches at many university campuses. It organises community projects, is financed by employers and focuses primarily on employability. This is one of the projects where employability becomes the primary reason for taking part in volunteering. However, Aimfield's own volunteering organisation does not seem to be much different and has employability emphasised on their website. Below is the information from the organisation's main page:

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[1] SIFE stands for 'Students in Free Enterprise'

> There is so much to get out of volunteering. You will meet so many new people, have so much fun, learn new skills, get the chance to make a real difference to people's lives and your CV will massively benefit from the extra experience...

Here it may be seen that employability-related issues, the 'fun' of doing it, and 'making a difference' are on the same level of importance. Employability is even paid slightly more attention as two points that relate to employability are mentioned – CV development and skills. In the outline of one of the projects, V-teams (where students who do not engage in volunteering on a regular basic can participate), there is no mention of the importance of what is actually done within the volunteering organisations. It is about employability (getting extra CV experience), combined with 'fun' and 'freebies':

> [V-teams] are a great way to get involved in volunteering without committing too much time every week. You can just sign-up to any of the community projects we have going on whenever you want and get yourself some extra CV experience as well as your Volunteering t-shirt of course. You are guaranteed to have a great time and meet loads of fantastic people.

6.2.2 Employability programmes on campus

Apart from addressing employability at the level of rhetoric at Aimfield, there have also been increasing attempts to credentialise it. These may be seen in existing and provisional employability programmes on campus (by the CEC and SU), endorsed by employers or the university, that formally recognise that one has been working on his/her employability. In this subsection I will look at employability programmes run by the CEC as well as the programme the SU is planning to introduce.

At the moment, the CEC has five employability-related programmes that students may take part in while at university [see Table 6.1 below]. These are: 'Employability Award', 'Insight into Management', 'Top Graduate Skills', 'Accelerate your Career' and 'Career Management Skills'. The Employability Award and Accelerate your Career are new while others existed before. Completion of an Employability Award results in a certificate that appears on the student transcript and degree qualification. Completion of the other four results in employer-endorsed certificates. So they all credentialise one's employability.

Programme name	length	who can take part	focus	in collaboration with	Certificate
Employability Award	1-3 years	need to start as 1st-2nd year students	employability	supported by employers	Yes (university endorsed)
Insight into Management	3 days	2nd, penultimate year students	business games/ skills	Rolls-Royce, RSM Tenon	Yes (employer endorsed)
Top Graduate Skills	5 days (5 1.5-2 hour sessions)	finalists	commercial awareness, communication, leadership, negotiation, team-building	IBM, PwC, Rolls-Royce, Ernst&Young, Accenture	Yes (employer endorsed)
Accelerate Your Career	3 days (2 full days and 1 afternoon)	finalists	skills/job search/ career	Accenture, IBM	Yes (employer endorsed)
Career Management Skills	5 days (5 1-1.5 hour sessions)	open to all, but primarily for finalists and taught masters students	job search	Grant Thornton, Caterpillar, PwC, Deloitte	Yes (employer endorsed)

Table 6.1 Employability related programmes organised by the CEC

The ‘Employability Award’ is the longest programme (it takes 1-3 years to complete) and requires more commitment than the others. It is a voluntary scheme students may take part in. It recognises students’ ‘personal development gained through participation in skills-related activities’ outside their degree. To get it, students need to get a certain number of points. These points are awarded for participating in various activities outside their degrees. These may include work experience, taking part in university societies, volunteering, etc. Apart from just completing these, students also need to fill in a completion form (1 page long, or longer if the student wants to write more) and submit a mock application form with typical application questions like what their greatest achievement was, the greatest challenge, etc. Currently the level of Award completion is around 50% and one of the CEC’s targets is to increase this rate. The next potential step, according to Valerie (the CEC’s Employability Award Coordinator), might be a Leadership

Award, which would be designed as a further step for students who get points quite quickly for their Employability Award. However, she is not sure whether they will implement it, with increasing the Employability Award’s completion rate being the priority. Also the CEC is piloting a smaller, but similar, scheme for postgraduate students.

‘Insight into Management’ is a three-day programme that provides an introduction into business and management. It mostly focuses on business games and skills. The fee for the programme is £55. Although the CEC does not put this programme in the category of skills programmes, in terms of the content it is similar to them, apart from the business games that are more visible in ‘Insight into Management’.

‘Top Graduate Skills’ is a programme that has been running for twelve years and probably appeared during the first rise of the employability agenda within British universities (see 2.4.1). It is a scheme where the CEC ‘has joined with five top employers to offer undergraduate students a series of interactive sessions which will help you to understand and learn how to develop the skills most sought by graduate recruiters’. According to sessions organised, these are teamwork, leadership, communication, negotiation and commercial awareness.

‘Accelerate Your Career’ was a new programme for 2011/12. Students can sign up for either this programme or ‘Top Graduate Skills’, and only in cases when there is spare space can they attend both. The focus of ‘Accelerate Your Career’ is on skills as well as the job search and career management.

‘Career Management Skills’ is a programme that is focused primarily on going through the process of the job search and the sessions organised within it are on how to fill in applications, pass psychometric tests, and perform at interviews and assessment centres. In this sense, the content of ‘Accelerate Your Career’ is somewhere in between ‘Top Graduate Skills’ and ‘Career Management Skills’. These are all schemes that students can write about in their CVs. Their key purpose is to boost the CV by employer- and university-endorsed certificates.

Although no formal employability schemes outside the CEC are offered at the moment, according to Jack (the SU’s employability officer), the SU might establish its own award in collaboration with the NUS. This will be called ‘Student Skills Award’ and is currently being piloted, with Aimfied being one of the participating universities. Similar to the CEC's Employability Award in principle, the difference would be that it will include a narrower set of activities (i.e. only those done within student unions) and will be nationally recognised. It will aim 'to bring big graduate employers, charities, universities and students' unions together in partnership to accredit the skills students gain outside of their studies at university' and will be organised around the nine skills demanded by employers: team working, problem solving, communication, self-management, business and stakeholder awareness, leadership, application of numeracy, application of IT, specialist skills.

Summary

The employability agenda that exists at the macro level, pushed by governments and employers, has entered the local context of Aimfield, making bodies within the university shape their activities in ways that address employability issues. While the CEC has always been about employability, despite being named differently before, for the SU and university departments the need to work explicitly with employability has taken place recently. However, addressing employability has primarily taken a rhetorical turn, with the usual activities these bodies are engaged in being articulated as connected to employability. Credentialising employability has also been taking place with the CEC introducing more formal programmes that are supposed to recognise students' employability and skills. These are usually supported by large employers, the same employers that are presented as 'top' (see chapter 5). All this contributes to the image of employability as important and even central to one's time at the university. The way it is communicated to students is the issue that will be addressed in the following section.

6.3 'What is employability?...much more than just getting a job': Presenting employability to students

In this section I will discuss how employability is presented to students. Despite employability being addressed by all bodies within the university, it is primarily the CEC that explains what the word means. Therefore, it is by looking at information from the CEC's resources that I will analyse how employability is presented to students. The CEC has a leaflet devoted to employability, explaining what it means and why it is important. It is available both on the CEC's website and in printed form. It is called 'What is employability?... much more than just getting a job'. Already from the title of the leaflet it may be seen that employability has a positive connotation and goes beyond 'just getting a job', appealing to its 'potentiality' (see 2.5.3). Now I will look at how the CEC presents employability in more detail, first by analysing definitions of employability used by the CEC, then its scope and finally what employability is constituted by.

6.3.1 'Initiative' definition of employability

Overall, there are three definitions of employability used by the CEC on their website. They all fit into the definition of 'initiative employability', emphasising the importance of one's work on his/her employability. The university is positioned as the 'enabler' that provides opportunities for this and places a 'high value' on employability-related activities outside the curriculum.

One of the definitions from the CEC's website is the following:

> *Employability is the potential of the individual to be employable (Lee Harvey, 2003[2]).*
>
> That potential comes from a complex mix of skills, knowledge, aptitudes, abilities, self-confidence, work and life experience and your own awareness of your potential in the employability stakes.
>
> [original *italics*]

In this definition it is assumed that employability resides in the individual and is closely connected to the limitless category of 'potential'. One's own responsibility for employability is emphasised. While it is implied in the definition above, it is stated explicitly in other sections of the CEC's website. There is a section in the employability leaflet that invites a student to take responsibility for his/her employability:

> **Take responsibility for your employability**
> Make the most of any work experience, volunteering or other opportunity to put into practice what you have learned at university, to develop your leadership or negotiation skills or other attributes that contribute to your employability. Create your own opportunities!
> Self-awareness is important. The process of identifying your skills gaps and acting on this knowledge and doing something to fill the gaps is a process that will continue into your working life.
>
> [original **bold**]

[2] The CEC refers to Harvey's (2003) definition of employability.

From this text it may be seen that employability is about the individual, making the most of his/her opportunities, creating their own opportunities etc. If there is a 'gap' in skills, the individual needs to act upon it.

It may be concluded that the 'initiative' definition of employability is accepted at Aimfield, where employability is the concern of those supplying their labour to the labour market. The university, in its turn, helps students to enhance their employability. Students are made aware of the tough labour market conditions, but employability is presented as a solution to this, a way to 'stand out' from other candidates. The Vice Chancellor's comment on the 'Employability Award' demonstrates this:

> In a competitive recruitment market, we are well aware that it is becoming increasingly important to differentiate yourself from other graduates gaining a good degree qualification. The University places a high value on our students' participation in extra-curricular activities which help to develop skills that are transferable to a commercial environment.

Getting a good degree qualification is seen as something that is common and that a lot of students already have. So these are skills that will make one 'stand out'. At the same time, in this statement it is claimed that the university welcomes the employability agenda by placing a 'high value' on what happens outside the student degree. By doing this, it is implied that the university experience at Aimfield should not just be about studying, but in taking part in extracurricular activities that develop employability as well.

Nowhere is it stated that employability and its increased celebration in recent years is the consequence of labour market conditions or that despite being 'employable' many students will struggle to find jobs, or will have to go for precarious positions. When employability is presented to students, nowhere can alternative voices be heard; the rhetoric within the university clearly reflects the macro level rhetoric of 'initiative employability'.

6.3.2 Scope of employability: More than just getting a job

The definition of employability I have referred to so far does not explicitly emphasise that it goes beyond obtaining a job (although the word 'potential' implies this). However, other definitions more clearly highlight this. In the CEC's employability leaflet employability is defined in the following way:

- Employability involves the development of a set of **fundamental skills and attitudes** and is **more than simply applying for and obtaining work**.
- It is about having an awareness of your level of skill and acquiring transferable skills that are **further developed in the workplace**.
- It is being able to demonstrate your employability to potential employers through self-knowledge of your skills, attributes and personality.

[original **bold**]

Here it is explicitly stated that employability is 'more than simply applying for and obtaining work'. Consequently, the question is what the scope of employability is and where it spreads. From the data publicly available at the CEC, I have identified three dimensions, in which employability goes beyond 'just getting a job'. It is the potential for success, spreading into one's personal space and developed throughout one's [working] life.

First, employability is about success in a job, which the definition on Employability Award's webpage demonstrates:

> A set of achievements – skills, understandings and personal attributes – that make graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations (Yorke, M. 2004[3]).

This definition suggests employability implies success. Being employable, one is 'more likely to gain employment and be successful'. Notably, the 'more likely' adds some uncertainty to the definition and does not exclude that being employable does not guarantee one would be employed or successful.

Second, employability goes beyond the job itself, entering one's personal space. Almost everything that students may do apart from their studies may contribute to their employability. With having a good degree becoming insufficient to get a job, employability is enhanced by mobilising personal interests and experiences. These make one 'stand out' from the rest, and need to be exposed to employers. The Vice Chancellor's comment on Employability Award emphasises the role of extracurricular (and personal) activities in employability:

[3] The CEC refers to Yorke's (2004) definition of employability.

> Through the establishment of the Aimfield Employability Award, the University is recognising how important extra-curricular activities are in enhancing your employability.

This is not just about mobilising one's personal life in the name of employability. Students are taught how to do this in the workshops offered by the CEC. For example, one of the themes of the 'Accelerate Your Career' course is 'using social media in career planning and personal branding'.

Third, the scope of employability is about lifelong learning and developing professionally and personally throughout people's [working] lives. Thus, employability at the university is presented as the basis for employability that will be developing when one has already entered the world of work. From the CEC's employability leaflet students may see the ongoing importance of employability that spreads into their working lives:

> **Continuous Professional Development**
> Many employers have appraisal and review processes which help you to continue to develop, both professionally and personally. You may engage with your employment area's professional body to help you with career progression or you may decide to take further qualifications. Whatever you do, you will always be developing skills and attributes and reflecting on your progress, so starting the process of reviewing your employability while you are a student is a good habit to get into.
>
> [original **bold**]

This development in a job is presented as not only professional, but also personal development, both of which feed back into one's employability.

The view on employability going beyond getting a job was shared by the CEC's employees as well, which Samantha's (the CEC's career advisor) citation demonstrates. During our interview I mentioned the following quote by Hawkins (1999: 8): 'to be employed is to be at risk, to be employable is to be secure' and asked what she thought about it. Here is the reply that I got:

> S: [Laughs] I'm a hundred percent behind that, because effectively it is the same as give man a fish and he'll eat for a day, teach him how to fish and he'll eat for life. For me, it's just a restatement of that particular metaphor. Because effectively by understanding and developing your employability skills, you're able to survey the employment landscape, understand the trends, see where your skills may fit into that, address the gaps in your skill set, make those connections through networking that will get you to the next position, and your next position,

> and your next position, and strategically manage your career. To me, that's the essence of employability.

Here employability is viewed as something that, when grasped by students during their time at university, will help them during their future working lives. And the CEC has the central role in helping students to understand this.

Overall, employability is presented as limitless and based on the principle of 'potentiality'. Going beyond getting a job and being the criterion for one's success, its development is unlimited in time and space, engaging one's professional and personal lives, and needs to be constantly worked on.

6.3.3 What constitutes employability?

With 'initiative employability' presented as 'common sense' to students at Aimfield University, as well as positioned as a limitless project of the self, it is now time to analyse what constitutes employability. Skills are emphasised in all three definitions of employability that have been mentioned above. In these definitions an individual's potential (to be employable), achievements and development that make up his/her employability are all understood through skills. So skills as the 'instrumentation' of employability holds for how employability is defined at Aimfield. The CEC highlights the following skills in its employability leaflet:

- Communication skills - oral and written
- Teamworking
- Organisation/planning
- Adaptability/flexibility
- Problem-solving
- Presentation
- IT skills
- Commercial/business awareness

This list of skills broadly corresponds to the list of skills required by employers identified in chapter 2. These are predominantly 'soft', transferable skills that are listed in the employability leaflet and taught in various skills sessions organised by the CEC. For example, within the 'Top Graduate Skills' programme the following sessions on five skills 'most sought by graduate recruiters' are organised: commercial awareness, communication, leadership, negotiation and teamwork. 'Accelerate your Career' is supposed to develop the following skills: teamworking, communication, problem solving, networking, commercial awareness, understanding organisations, relationship building, emotional resilience and creativity. From skills that are targeted by the CEC, it can be seen that they correspond to the conceptualisation of 'soft'/'transferable' skills (see 2.5.2).

Skills are also presented as the criterion on the basis of which employers discern exceptional employees:

> Employers have a wide range of graduates to choose from and are looking for potential employees with an 'edge'. To ensure that your CV, application or interview stands out from the rest, you have to be able to demonstrate that you have the skills that they are looking for by providing good examples of how you have acquired those skills.
>
> [quote taken from the CEC's website]

To be selected by employers, students need to have the skills required by employers, and to be able to 'demonstrate' that they have these skills during the process of job search. According to the quote above, this 'demonstration' takes place by 'providing good examples of how you have acquired those skills'. However, how exceptional skills can be discerned from average skills is not clear. This does not become clear from consultations with career advisors either. In fact, the CEC does not offer students any ways to assess their skills.

Emphasis is put on students' narrative accounts of activities, where skills have supposedly been acquired/developed/shown. This highlights a broader tendency of the understanding of skill at Aimfield: articulation of one's skills becomes a necessary criterion for both 'possession' and 'demonstration' of skills.

'Possession' of skills is primarily about a person's articulated construction of him/her having, acquiring and developing skills. The CEC's activity is directed towards students' constructing themselves as skilled, through making students 'reflect' and helping them to 'become aware' of their skills. For example, Lindsey (the CEC's career advisor) explained the benefits of taking part in Employability Award through reflection:

> L. (to student): Employability Award is not compulsory, but a kick in the back to keep you reflecting. If you've completed it, it means you've been reflecting. The main aim is to write it in your CV.
>
> [6 February 2012, observation 3]

The CEC's employees report students' lack of reflection on their skills. This lack is seen through problems with articulating skills. In the quote below Valerie (the CEC's employability team) demonstrates what not being able to articulate the skills means:

> V: We knew that employers were having candidates interviewed and the students weren't able to articulate um the skills that they were getting from their activities. So, um, for example, if a student was working part-time in a bar, they would say 'well, I've only been doing bar work', when actually, you see, well, you've been time managing, you've been managing difficult people, you've been managing money, you might have had to manage other staff. You know, there's a range of skills that they weren't actually articulating. But I think it's really important to have that structure we put in the award.... We're bridging that gap between what students are doing and then being able to demonstrate this to employers'.

This position within the CEC is similar to the position of the NUS mentioned in chapter 2, i.e. students are assumed to be skilled, but having problems articulating what their skills are. Valerie, like other people at the CEC, sees how skills can be gained by engaging in day-to-day mundane activities. This 'knowledge' is passed to students at career consultations, through which they learn how to articulate themselves as skilled.

Articulating skills is necessary not just for the 'possession' of skills, but for their 'demonstration'. Not articulating themselves as skilled would make students appear as lacking skills to others (including employers). While constructing themselves as skilled is the first step towards being recognised as skilled by others. However, there is another aspect that is necessary for the 'demonstration' of skills: selling.

Articulation of skills is not enough to 'demonstrate' that one 'possesses' skills to employers. Articulation of skills needs to go in hand with a 'selling' attitude. Talking about the job search using the language of selling, marketing and branding seems to be absolutely normal and is actively used by the CEC's advisors and in sessions organised by the CEC. The very role of the CEC may be seen as helping students to sell their skills, as it may be seen from Janet's (the CEC's director) statement below:

> J: And, there are so many graduates in the marketplace that you have to find an effective way to help students to learn how to sell themselves. And, it's not something that some people find naturally very easy, at all. I don't need to tell you all this. But, you know, you probably have already heard this. The thing is that we will have the brightest and best and most able students out there, and they will not be selling themselves, on paper, in the right way, to the right employer.

Janet talks about students not selling themselves 'in the right way', which implies a certain attitude or pattern of behaviour with which a job search needs to be approached. So part of the work the CEC does in helping students to 'demonstrate' their skills is to form the 'right' attitude to selling themselves. This is demonstrated in Valerie's (the CEC's employability team) quote below:

> IR: You've mentioned that they [students] don't sell themselves well enough. How is that? And is there a need actually to sell yourself?
>
> V: Yeah [sighs], because we do quite a lot of work with them at the careers centre, about, sort of, you're a brand, you're a product, and that's one way looking at it. It's not the only way obviously, but you are a product, and that company wants to buy you, if you use that sort of analogy, and so, you've obviously got to think about your skills, your personality fit, you know, what the company wants. So you are packaging yourself, especially if you're applying for different jobs, it's like writing a CV, or you're writing an application, you don't write the same one for everybody, you tailor it according to the job you're applying for. So it's the same sort of process really, as when you are writing an application form, you are tailoring it, tailoring yourself to fit the job that you're applying for.... And that's a good analogy to make to students, because they realise there are lots of brands and products around these days, so if we say you're not actually selling yourself well enough, and they watch the Apprentice and things like that, you know, so they know it's something that means more to them and say to them...

Sessions such as 'Selling yourself in interviews' are listed on the CEC's Skills Programmes, like 'Accelerate Your Career'.

6.3.4 'Initiative employability' at career consultations

During the career consultations, the rhetoric of 'initiative' employability was also communicated to students. First, this was in putting emphasis on skills, primarily their articulation, as their 'possession' was assumed. Second, this was in promoting the 'right' attitude to skill 'demonstration', i.e. being ready to actively sell one's skills. I will use Elaine's (the CEC's career advisor) consultation with a research student to demonstrate this.

> At the consultation with a student, Elaine asked him whether he knew what he wanted to do after graduation. The student's reply indicated a clear picture of the route he was going to take and the type of role he wanted. Despite this clear picture of what the student wanted to do, Elaine emphasised that it would be hard to get a job if he did not have a clear picture.
>
> E. [to student]: You're very skilled and talented, but if you don't know what to do, it will be hard to find a job. You're further than that of course.
>
> [16 December 2011, observation 2]

Here Elaine emphasises that it may be hard to find a job, but she connects it not with any structural issues, but being rooted in the individual (not knowing what to do), which is central to 'initiative employability'. At the same time, by referring to the student as 'very skilled', a high level of skills that employers claim very few students have is assumed and not put under question. The emphasis on the need to 'demonstrate' skills goes throughout the consultation, but here is one specific example:

> Having skimmed through the student's CV, Elaine says the following:
> E: I'd like to see more about skills here. If these are skills the researcher needs, you should illustrate that.
>
> The student responds that he is a bit concerned that when he lists skills, it looks as if this is everything he has done. Elaine, in turn, suggests him to use 'for example' to show that the list of skills is not confined to only those skills he has mentioned.
>
> [16 December 2011, observation 2]

From this example it can be seen that emphasis on skills needs to be placed explicitly rather than inferred from the experiences the job candidate has mentioned in the CV. So 'articulation' of skills, i.e. stating that one has them, is a necessary condition for skill 'demonstration'. The students' response to Elaine's comment may be interpreted in two ways. First is that listing a limited number of skills in the CV might lead employers to think he does not have other skills they want. This is the interpretation Elaine reacts to. Advising the student to use 'for example' is an instrumental way of showing that the list is not a complete one. A second interpretation of this response is also possible. It may be that the student questions the centrality of skills to employability, thinking that what he has done already and can do in the job in the future cannot just be pinned down to skills and goes beyond them. However, no attention is paid to this interpretation of the student's response.

Furthermore, not having an attitude of a keen 'seller' of skills is something Elaine challenges in the student:

> Student: Maybe it's a silly question, but can the employer think that I'm too old, and they'd want somebody fresh from the university?
> E: You're not going to sell yourself this way. Your job is to sell yourself the best as you can. It's your job to tell them what you have what they don't have yet.
>
> [16 December 2011, observation 2]

When the student asked the question, having some doubt about who employers want, there could be lots of ways to reply to this. For example, that this was a myth, or that organisations would want people as qualified as him for the role he was looking into. However, Elaine immediately decided to challenge his doubts, as she saw these as obstacles to the student's employability. She immediately switched to the 'right' attitude and the 'right' way to demonstrate skills, i.e. the importance of selling. Her tone seemed to be even threatening, making it clear that the student should not think in such a way as this would affect his employability. The comment she gives is normative, stating that being a keen seller is necessary to be employable and not questioning this condition. Their meeting was summed up in the following way:

> Elaine: What you've got to sell is your high level skills, your research skills. Don't underestimate this.
>
> [16 December 2011, observation 2]

6.3.5 Deviating from and manipulating the employability rhetoric

The rhetoric of employability at Aimfield University closely connects with the rhetoric that exists at the macro level (see chapter 2), which this chapter so far has demonstrated. However, some deviations from the rhetoric and manipulations of it have also been noted, and this section will be devoted to them.

Although it is 'initiative employability' that is constructed as the 'common sense' of employability at Aimfield, this does not mean it is automatically shared by the people through whom this 'common sense' is promoted, i.e. the CEC's employees. For example, Elaine (the CEC's career advisor) emphasised the importance of structural issues in determining one's employability:

> IR: As someone who has been studying youth unemployment ... I mean, do you have any concerns with employability? Do you see any problems with focusing on employability or something like that?
>
> E: It's a good question. Yeah, I think, well, the focus always has been on working, and that is ok, if there are jobs around there to be had, but there has to be the balance. It's ... you can give somebody all the employability skills in the world, and they will be perfect, but if the jobs are not out there for them, you know, it doesn't really help them... Um, I do think, and what I've seen with so many more people getting degrees, is that the demand for degree levels, then goes up, and there aren't necessarily all enough jobs to go round. And then I do find it sad when they have to take a job that doesn't need a degree, and that also then concerns me, because what about the people who don't have degrees who would normally have done those jobs. Um, but there's never a right solution, is there? [laughs]. Governments just do whatever best they can in the circumstances.

However, Elaine keeps these reservations about employability to herself, and it is the 'initiative' employability rhetoric that she communicates to students (see 6.3.4).

The 'common sense' of initiative employability is not necessarily shared by students either. This is demonstrated in Valerie's (the CEC's employability team) quote below:

> V: It's quite challenging as a lot of these students [postgraduates] are international students, and maybe don't understand the concept of... not so much of employability, but the concept of... I don't know, it's a funny thing to explain to them really, how to sort of get to self-awareness, because if you come from a different culture, I mean, thinking about China, for example, you might be sort of thinking, I do this, a degree, I do this degree, and then I get a job. So they don't think so much about having to demonstrate skills. So, it can be quite a challenge, but equally, we want to offer all students the opportunity to develop employability, because, you know, they might be working in any country, it's not necessary that they're going back to their home country.

Valerie talks about postgraduate international students sometimes not grasping the tenets of employability, and it is hard to explain to them why self-awareness and demonstrating skill are so central to employability. However, this non-grasping may also be understood as not taking the 'common sense' of employability for granted. Valerie, however, does not challenge her own thinking about employability. International students' difficulty of understanding why they need to demonstrate skills during a job search is perceived as the result of coming from a different culture. As a result, the role of the CEC is seen as making these students understand ‘initiative employability’, which is implied in the last sentence of the quote above.

Manipulation of employability rhetoric takes place in the process of giving advice to students. In particular, it happens when career advisors give students advice on skills. According to employability rhetoric, getting a job is the result of having the right set of skills for this particular job and demonstrating these skills to employers. When applying for the job, this means that a student needs to make sure that the skills he or she is writing/talking about correspond to those the job description asks for. However, not all students know this, which results in career advisors making them aware of this implicit rule, and show them how to play the job search game. The example from one of my observations of a CV/cover letter check at the CEC demonstrates this:

> The student was applying for a placement in marketing and wrote about teamwork, planning and analysis as being her skills. This looked fine on the application, but the careers advisor asked her to find the job description for the placement and discovered that skills that were asked for there were initiative, problem-solving and working autonomously. The advisor suggested to leave the skills that the student had already mentioned as they would be needed anyway, but making sure the ones from the job description were there too.
>
> [19 November 2011, Observation 1]

Here the career advisor teaches the student how to play the game by making her aware what to pay attention to. If the student does not write about skills that are mentioned in the job description, this does not mean that she would not be able to do the job she applies for. Furthermore, examples of activities she would use to demonstrate other skills may be the same examples she could use for demonstrating the skills required by employer. However, no explicit mentioning of them in the narrative of the cover letter and the CV might make employers conclude that she does not have these skills, which is what the career advisor warns her about.

At the same time, one is usually advised to apply for jobs where his/her skill sets lie. However, in the observation above the career advisor did not ask the student whether she had the skills required by the employer, i.e. her suitability for the job. This demonstrates the general tendency that I have observed at the CEC, i.e. the ‘possession’ of the ‘right’ skills is not questioned, and it is the articulation of the assumingly present (high level) skills that students are guided through.

Summary

In summary, students at Aimfield are informed about the importance of ‘possessing’ (i.e. having, acquiring and developing) and ‘demonstrating’ skills to be employable. A necessary condition for both is the articulation of skills, i.e. constructing oneself as skilled through certain narratives. Problems with the articulation of skills is what the CEC sees as the cause of students’ problems with employability. At the same time, articulating skills is not enough for the ‘demonstration’ of skills. During a job search, articulation of skills needs to come with selling, a particular attitude to articulating one’s skills. This is another aspect that students lack, according to the CEC. The role of the CEC is to help students articulate their skills, as well as learn the ‘right’ way of selling them. As a result, at careers consultations, the rhetoric of ‘initiative employability’ is communicated to students. However, this understanding of skills leaves out the high versus average skill rhetoric on the basis of which employers discern ‘talent’. There is no way the CEC evaluate whether students’ skills ‘stand out’ or not. The advice is given to students on the assumption that they have the skills required by employers, helping only with articulation and the ‘right’ attitude. This demonstrates the manipulation of the skills rhetoric that takes place at the local level. The CEC’s advisors also show students how to play the job search game, i.e. what to pay attention to while applying, manipulating the rhetoric in a way that helps students appear as employable. Deviation from employability rhetoric also takes place at Aimfield. This might be in not taking ‘initiative employability’ for granted, or reporting students not taking it for granted. The latter, i.e. student engagement with employability, is what chapter 8 will be devoted to.

6.4 Conclusion

The rise of employability has taken place at Aimfield University at all levels, with employability becoming an important item on the agenda of various bodies within the university. This matches the increased attention to employability in higher education policies in recent years (see chapter 2). New programmes within the university devoted to employability have appeared (e.g. the Employability Award), as well as new roles (like Employability Officer at the SU).

The rise in programmes that formally recognise students’ development of their employability may be seen as a way to credentialise employability. This credentialisation continues with more programmes planned to be introduced (both within the CEC and other bodies at the university). The programmes that are currently provided are often co-run with MNCs and large for-profit organisations. Most of what is offered to students for their employability development is not compulsory (although this may be the result of the sample that has been chosen). So the change has primarily taken place at the level of rhetoric and has been in re-articulating the activities done within different bodies at Aimfield with more emphasis on employability. Employability is promoted primarily by stimulating consent, with its rhetoric becoming an integral part of the university's and students' activities. Overall, the rise of employability at Aimfield demonstrates a Gramscian 'war of position', with rhetoric and practice aimed at making employability contribute to a certain 'common sense'.

It is the 'common sense' of 'initiative employability' that is promoted to students at Aimfield. Students' responsibility for their employability is emphasised, while the university is positioned as the 'enabler'. Employability is presented as going beyond getting a job in three directions: it is key to success in the labour market (and in life), a lifelong project, and individuals' private experiences are mobilised in its name. Skills are presented as being the central component of employability and their high levels are key to employees with an 'edge'. Articulation of skills is key to both 'possession' and 'demonstration'. At the same time, articulating skills is not enough for one's employability, with selling them in the 'right' way being important to 'demonstration' of skills to employers. The CEC's role is both in helping students articulate their skills and guiding them towards this 'right' way of selling them. Notably, the CEC does not assess students' skills. Their role is to provide opportunities for skill development and to help students learn to articulate them and have the 'right' attitude, often manipulating the employability rhetoric. When the CEC, for example, organises mock interviews with students, this is the articulation of skills that it assessed. Students' 'possession' of skills is not questioned. In helping students to articulate the skills, the CEC emphasises how skills are present in day-to-day activities that almost all students engage in. However, what makes one's skills exceptional is not addressed. Exceptionality of skills, and ultimately employability, is dependent upon employers' decisions during the process of recruitment.

Although 'initiative employability' is the 'common sense' at Aimfield and informs the CEC's practices, it has been seen throughout this chapter that this rhetoric may take a different shape in practice and is also not necessarily accepted by everyone. The former has been noticed in the CEC's advisors showing the students the implicit rules of the job search game, as well as in not questioning students' 'possession' of skills. The latter holds for some employees at the CEC, as well as for students, who sometimes do not understand or question the assumptions of 'initiative employability'. Chapter 8 will look in more detail at how students as 'dialogical selves' engage with employability rhetoric during the job search. Prior to this, in chapter 7, students' work orientations will be analysed in relation to the 'common sense' of the 'consumption of work' orientation (see chapter 5).

Chapter 7. ‘Consumption of work’ and other work orientations

7.1 Introduction

This chapter focuses on students’ work orientations and is based fully on the data collected from longitudinal interviews with students. While chapter 5 suggests that at Aimfield University campus the image of graduate work is constructed around the ‘consumption of work’, this chapter gives voice to students, analysing how they as ‘dialogical selves’ engage with the locally constructed ‘common sense’. Students’ preference for flexibility, which, they treat as the ability to exercise choice in the labour market, is brought up in section 7.2. This is primarily a choice within consumption, with students’ work orientations being shaped by the constitutes of the ‘consumption of work’ (7.3-7.5). First, students’ preferences towards consuming (the image of) work at certain organisations/jobs/industries are discussed (7.3). This section highlights particular organisational features which provide meaning for students (7.3.1-7.3.3). It also pays attention to alternative voices, which resist the ‘common senses’ about these features (7.3.2). Second, student preference towards consumption through work processes are looked at (7.4). Third, students’ willingness to consume work processes is outlined (7.5). The ‘consumption of work’ orientation, despite being embraced by most students, is not the only work orientation among them (7.6). Section 7.6.1. looks at cases where work is primarily a means to a consumer lifestyle (that is not connected with work). The cases of orientation towards a ‘substantive work ethic’ are discussed in 7.6.2. The interactions of both with the ‘consumption of work’ orientation are considered here. Section 7.7 is the conclusion.

7.2 No job for life, or the virtue of flexibility

For most students it was ‘common sense’ to be flexible, changing jobs throughout their life. They were talking about flexibility as something positive, explicitly stating how they liked change and did not want to stick to one job, with the ideal job consisting of different projects. Kelly’s (female, UK, Sport & Leisure Management, L1[1]) quote demonstrates this:

[1] indicates the interview stage for longitudinal interviews

> K: ... I like to be busy a lot of the time so er I'm not really driven by ... making money, I just ... I like challenge. I like to be kind of stimulated. I like to have my brain working so ... and I like – and I like change as well so ... something that allowed me to kind of perhaps move around the world, different parts of the world and kind of have different projects and different deadlines.

Change, moving around and project-based work with different deadlines are among the key features of ideal work for her. This orientation towards flexibility is a choice within the 'new spirit of capitalism'. Engaging in different projects is not only desirable on its own, but is also a way to enhance employability. This is what Michelle's (female, overseas, International Business, L1) quote demonstrates:

> IR: ... And in what way you would like to grow within the graduate job or another type of job that you'd get?
> M: I'd like ... ideally international communication with different markets. I'd like to own projects such as say for a marketing company – whether it's my own – well not my own one, but something that I've helped create, something I can see my result in it and say this happened, because I've done this and that. And I'd like – I'd like to work on particular promotions and just be able to own projects. And then when I write in the future in my CV or my LinkedIn profile I'd like to be able to say I've – I've worked on these campaigns and you can go online and see them and see what they're like and see what I've done within them.

From what Michelle says here, we can see that employability is not the only aim of what she is doing, although she does consider how the projects she has done will look on her CV and LinkedIn profile, and how they will be perceived by others.

Jolene (female, UK, Mathematics with Management, L1) had ideas of the kinds of projects she would want to engage in later in life. Thinking of going into teaching in around fifteen years and willing to start from a graduate job, her attitude to flexibility is summarised below:

> J: I don't think ... I'm not the type of person that will look at one job and that's it for life. I'm definitely one that will change.

Derek's (male, UK, Geography with Economics, L1) preferences are similar. He knows that he would like to become a teacher in the future:

> D: But since I've been at university ... becoming a teacher is being more ... like more attractive ... um, but then at the same time also having a different job, like prior to being teacher, because there's nothing that's gonna stop you changing like your career ... your career path. Being able to do both will be good.

In a labour market characterised by flexibility, Derek is confident that teaching is something he can postpone till later in life, unlike the graduate jobs he wants to start his working life with. Derek also uses flexibility to defend his decision to do teaching later in life:

> D: it is a lot about like job satisfaction, which is why I'm looking to being a teacher, cause I'd really enjoy being able to pass them my knowledge. Cause what I've always found at school was that some teachers who were younger and still had a passion for the subject and as a result ... the students also found it a lot more interesting whereas you had people who've been in the job for a very long time, um ... who, it seems to be it's just like recounting things they've done so many times that they no longer found it interesting, and then the students didn't find it interesting either.

For him too much time in one job can even be harmful for the profession, referring to teachers who get bored of the subject. So flexibility is seen as something that helps to maintain interest as well as bring experiences and knowledge from previous projects to each next project. Kelly's (female, UK, Sport & Leisure Management, L1) understanding of what makes a good teacher is similar to Derek's:

> IR: Why did you want to be a teacher and why were you not encouraged to proceed with it?
> K: I wanted to be a teacher because ... I like working with people and – and kids as well specifically. But I wasn't ever ... encouraged to because my Mum used to say it wouldn't challenge me enough – she said I would – I would get bored ... and I should do something else and be a teacher later ... and I think she's probably right actually. And all my best teachers were older anyway ... cause they all had good stories.

Although Kelly and Derek have different views on what age makes a good teacher, their reasoning takes place along similar lines. For them a good teacher is someone who has done other things in life, so that he/she is not bored, and so that the knowledge from other work (in particular from the commercial world) can be passed to pupils. So it is the variety of experiences in life that is valued by students rather than experience and expertise gained within the profession.

Flexibility, which was introduced as a result of labour market insecurity and marketed as providing choice and employability, has become a desirable characteristic of modern working life. At the same time, flexibility for students has certain limits. Although willing to be flexible, they do not want it to be employer-driven. In other words, they want to exercise their choice in the labour market. These are primarily choices within 'consumption of work', as sections 7.3-7.5 suggest.

7.3 Consuming (the image of) work

This section is devoted to one of the aspects of the 'consumption of work' orientation - consuming (the image of) work. First I look at student preferences towards multinational organisations, treating them as 'best' places to work at (7.2.1). Second, students referring to organisational brand as a preference for the place they would like to work at is discussed (7.2.2). Third, the alluring image of finance shared by many students is highlighted (7.2.3). Finally, alternative voices, which challenge the 'common sense' understanding of an ideal graduate workplace, are explored (7.2.4).

7.3.1 MNCs as 'best' organisations to work for

As it has been discussed in chapter 5, MNCs are presented as 'top' employers to students and are the organisations that are most visible on campus (5.2). It is also implied that these are the places where the 'best' students would end up working. However, whether this image is unquestionably adopted by students is another issue and is exactly what this section is devoted to.

The data indicate that the majority of students were interested in working for big employers. They not only preferred to work at MNCs, but perceived them as being the 'best' places to work at, which corresponds to the 'top' image of these organisations created on campus. The fact of a company being big or international was a reason on its own for applying there. Andy's (male, Information Management & Business Studies, overseas, L1) case demonstrates well what is common for many students in the sample:

> A: So for ideal job, at the moment I'm interested in HRM, so I'm trying to apply for obviously HR positions, and basically the bigger the company the better.

When asked what an ideal job would be for him, Andy first mentioned the area that he was interested in, and then what immediately followed was the size. During the interview he mentioned other areas apart from HR that he was thinking of applying to. However, he allowed no flexibility for the size:

> A: Well, I'm trying to like keep the plank [bar] quite high. Cause I don't know, I feel like yeah, keep applying for big companies or internationals, and then after I'm really pressured, like after this year, if I don't get a job this year, I'll go for masters. If I don't get a job then, that's when I'm gonna lower my plank. Well, I think for now, you should go for as high as possible.

This quote shows that getting a job in a smaller company would be the last resort for Andy. He equates looking for a job in a smaller organisation with lowering the plank, and this is something he would do only if he cannot get a job after the masters. When we met for the third interview (L3), when Andy was already doing a masters degree, he was still firm on the size of organisation, while being open to the area he was going to:

> A: ... but, I think, in general, the career I'm pursuing hasn't really changed. I'm still going to be going for big companies, Unilever or Procter & Gamble, or those really big companies. Basically, I'll do as many applications as possible, like, for administrative positions. It's really hard, like, people when they want a human resources person they want, like, someone with experience of things. A really great deal of experience. I don't really qualify for that one, I guess ... but I keep trying [sniggers]
>
> IR: Yeah, and administrative? So, do you mean managerial, more managerial?
>
> A: Yes, like. I don't mind. For me, I'm interested in both, like, marketing or project management, or human resources. Like, you obviously can't get all of them. So you just reading the company's job description to see what they offer and then just charge which one to go for.

Size for Andy is a preference on its own. He embraces the 'common sense' that big organisations are the 'best' employers, and it is one of the main driving factors for his job choice.

Jolene (female, UK, Mathematics with Management, L1) not only characterises big organisations as the 'best' she could do in terms of finding a job, but applies this 'best' to the people who work there:

> J: They [MNCs] seem just like the best that you can do. Er. Like if you work – to me if I work in a littler bank It's not the best bank in the world ... whereas if I work for another bank it's like the best bank in the world so I'm working with the best people in the world.

This explanation of her willingness to work in a big company corresponds to the image of the ‘top’ jobs for the ‘best’ students that is implied on campus.

The preference to work for big companies, and why students perceived these places as ‘best’, were explained both within the rhetoric about MNCs that was present on campus as well as going beyond it. The most common explanations for being willing to work in MNCs were employability and training opportunities. Derek (male, UK, Geography with Economics, L1) explained his preference towards working in large organisations by both. First, he talked about how large organisations would make him employable, indicating he has done something ‘major’:

> D: ... whereas I think that in a large company though you’re kind of ... not worth as much to the company as a whole, I think it has a lot more scope for being able to reach the potential and then ... if you’re gonna say that you worked for like a large company, I think if you want to go anywhere else, employers will gonna take a lot of notice of you cause you know the company you’ve worked for who had a very good reputation rather than you saying that you’ve worked for like a small accountancy firm, there’s no proof that you’ve done anything major. I think this gonna stop ... well, positively, not as positively as if you say you’ve worked for um PricewaterhouseCoopers or KPMG.

Although he mentions being ‘not worth as much’ to a big company, their name would work for him, and this is something he takes into account when applying for jobs. Second, Derek did not expect smaller organisations to provide training and hence develop:

> D:... I just feel that a larger company is gonna provide more scope for ... for a career in that company rather than joining a small company who aren’t able to train you, but then you find two or three years down the line and you’re still like in the same position as you were when you joined without being able to ever progress, you know, to reach the potential...

Both training opportunities and employability in general correspond to the ‘employee value proposition’ communicated to students on campus. However, there were also explanations students mentioned that went beyond it. Jolene (female, UK, Mathematics with Management, L1) started her response to my question from a remark that was different to the one above. It was that these organisations were powerful. This claim was followed by Jolene laughing, as if denouncing this explanation as not being serious, and proceeding with the one cited above. However, she was not the only one mentioning this, as it also holds for Beatrice (female, UK, Information Management & Business Studies, L1):

IR: What do you think attracts you in these [big] organisations?

B: I think more than anything it's just feeling part of something that's influential, big – like I said the status bit is quite important.

Here Beatrice says that working in a big company would make her part of something influential, as if she herself would feel empowered by it. Although in chapter 5 as well as in the assumptions of this research it has been assumed and shown that MNCs are the ones having power both at the global and local levels, they do not position themselves as such on campus. This shows how a rhetoric that does not directly come from corporations is created by students. Although they embrace the image of MNCs as the 'best' places to work for, they explain it in their own ways. While power is not the aspect that companies explicitly promote, students feel it is there and make this one of the explanations for being willing to work in these places.

7.3.2 Organisational brand

Organisational brand has been shown to be important when choosing where to work. Although it is not only MNCs and large for profit-organisations that have brands, these are the organisations whose brands students in this sample talked about. There were three key patterns of explaining why brand was an important criterion of work choice.

First, students in the sample wanted to work for a place that would be recognised by others. An example is Beatrice (female, UK, Information Management & Business Studies, L1):

B: You know I like – [laughs] – I like to think that my parents would be proud you know. Saying oh my daughter works somewhere, they'd go oh where? ... So you know the chances are the kind of people they talk about it – to – would know what organisation – so yeah, there's that side of it.

For Beatrice parental pride will be coming not from what she does, not from how she identifies with the job, but from others knowing about the place she works at, i.e. recognising the company brand and seeing her through it.

Peter's (male, UK, Management Sciences, L3) case is another example of the importance of the brand being recognised by others. He found a job in sales in a small company near home. However, when interviewed a couple of months since he started the job, he was already actively applying to other places, saying that he wanted to work for a global company. One of the main explanations of his willing to move was exactly the unrecognisability of the company he worked for:

> IR: Um, so with your current job it's not the money that's the problem. So there is the chance to earn the money. So it's something different that is the problem?
>
> P: It's not sort of, I mean if I told you I work for [name of the company] that doesn't mean anything to you. You know what I mean, it doesn't resonate. You don't know what it is. There's no prestige about it at all. Um, I mean I don't feel any ownership of it. I just feel as if it's a young person's job who's sort of passing through. Um, possibly paying off debts. Possibly in between sort of maybe travelling or saving up to do something. I don't think it's a long term job, you know.

For Peter the dissatisfaction from the current job comes from the fact that it does not mean anything to other people as they do not recognise it as a brand. As a result, at the time of our third interview, he was applying to places like Barclays, Aldi, Asda, etc – all brand names that people know.

Second, students associated themselves with being consumers of particular brands, and this made them interested in becoming employees of these organisations. This has been the case for Derek (male, UK, Geography with Economics, L1), who replied as follows when asked why he had applied to John Lewis:

> D: I think a lot of it is first impressions, cause (pauses), um, well like in my life, I've always been around companies like John Lewis who've always been in the high street, so I've got kind of a mindset that it's a good company to work for because I've been there and spent money there, and I know it's a good company, which then leads me to believe that they will be a good company to work for as well.

Third, students were interested in organisations with recognisable names as this would make them employable. An example is Anthony (male, overseas, Renewable Energy Systems Technology, L1):

> IR: You're saying that they are all good companies [big companies that he was applying to]. In what way they are good?
> B: Well they have a lot of scope in which they could er – a lot of scope for renewables. They have large renewable programmes, a lot of them. (pause) And they – you can get experience

> from them. So I think – that's why they're all good companies. And – they also have the large name that you know – it looks good on a CV to work for these big companies.

Although this is not the first explanation for Anthony willing to work in big companies, but it comes up. Anthony mentions that the 'large name' of these companies is something that will enhance his CV. The way he looks at the recognisable name of these organisations is different from the examples above. While in previous examples the recognisability of the brand was the reason to apply on its own, in Anthony's case the recognisability of the name is expected to serve his own purpose, i.e. making him more employable.

7.3.3 The alluring image of the financial industry

The research sample consisted of people from a broad range of disciplines, and although financial industry was not considered by some students in the sample at all, it was the most popular destination among students. However, it is not just the level of interest that students showed to finance in comparison to other industries, but the image that it had. There was a certain aura about the financial industry that was not the case for any other industry that students in the sample considered. Finance had an image of a 'top' industry, a place that is associated with the consumer lifestyle through work and the sign values of status and prestige ('consumption of work' orientation), as well as opportunities to earn a lot of money and become an active member of the consumer society ('instrumentalised work ethic'). This aura around the financial industry is something students become seduced by even before the university. This may even be a reason for them to attend it. Rachel (female, UK, Economics, L1) was already thinking of investment banking before coming to the university:

> IR: And as for investment banking at grade twelve, where do you think ideas of that job ... were coming from? So why you were thinking that this would be a good ... job to do?
>
> R: You know, cause ... that was quite superficial, so I just thought ok I'll just be wearing my suit, (work) in the City, just walking around having my own office, and ... that's that's how I just pictured it, but I don't think it's really like that, it's so competitive, so I don't know, now I'm just thinking, no, it's definitely not for me.

The suit and the City were the images coming up when Rachel was thinking about her future work, particular sign-objects of the financial industry. Although now she talks about her thinking as superficial and is not going into investment banking, she has still chosen the financial industry.

Beatrice (female, UK, Information Management & Business Studies, L1) had a similar image in mind, which had been with her since college:

> B: Yeah. I don't think I had a particular job in mind when I was younger. However the business – business has always been a theme I think ever since er college. So definitely – business – like it was a general business job. I just imagined myself in a suit. You know like working in a very very big – you know even now that I go to London I still admire the big tall buildings that people go in and out. And you know I'm like one day I want to work for you [laughs]. And er I - I find that er finance sector – cos I'm not very good with numbers, finance sector is almost like a challenge. It's something that's er – I find is quite a challenge to get into. And yet that's the one that ... in some ways attracts me more.

There is a certain image of the self that comes from the financial industry. This can be clearly seen in what Peter (male, UK, Management Sciences, L1) says:

> P: ... I love the sort of image that it will put up, you know, 'yeah I'm a banker, and drink at this sort of coffee house and got a leather briefcase', no problem with that at all – the lifestyle.

These are lifestyle images that come with banking for him, and he does not mind having such an image of himself.

Despite this attractive image of the financial industry and the (consumer) lifestyle associated with it, students did not deny that it was money that primarily motivated them. This holds for Peter (male, UK, Management Sciences, L1):

> IR: Why do you think this industry ... why banking and insurance companies?
> P: I just think that it's got the ... you hear about it on the news all the time and you know I was thinking that people had sort of ... you know one place where they have earned so much money while they have been there. I think on my placement year I was on about £14,000 per year and the same students who were at the bank, they were on £38,000 so the difference there ... you know I was unknowing at the time that this was going on but erm, yeah I just really saw the difference in the quality of life you could have with that actual money so that's why I thought I'll have a look at this.

Simon (male, UK, Economics, L1) was also motivated by the amount of money he could potentially earn in the financial industry, but he tried to explain his choice as more than just money-motivated and something that he really liked doing as well:

> IR: ... When do you think you understood that you would like to do this, working in the...?
> S: Oh, definitely, university. Prior to coming to university I wasn't too sure. Like the average Charlie, I just wanted to make a lot of money and coming to university that's changed, it's become ... I want to make a lot of money in doing what I like to do. So yeah coming in to university for my first year just you know being involved. There's loads of recruiters on campus as well. They do a good deal publicising themselves. With my course as well, I have seen a few great examples, I've seen quite a few students who have done a placement with banks half the year and come back and the changes are great. I mean, the perks are great and that's all sort of motivating in that sense. The earning potential in the city is just ridiculous. I mean you're starting off at £40,000 average, so it's just as good as the law firms whereas you don't get an average graduate job. I mean, forgive me if I'm wrong, that in between the range of £23,000 to £26,000. That is a big difference.

However, from what he was saying it is clear that earning potential is the biggest motivating factor to join banking.

One student, John (male, UK, Management Sciences, L1) who was applying for jobs within investment banking, despite making a choice towards this industry, demonstrated some distance from it:

> IR: What is the kind of job you are looking for currently?
> J: Ah, something, something to do with banking, something in the financial industry, in the City.
> Me: Could you explain why, how you [came...?
> J: [Why is because I live in London, so that's convenient. Ah, and then, there's financial benefit, ah, something, something I'm interested in. Yeah, just for the lack of a better idea. I thought why not give it a shot.

John demonstrates his attitude to the choice he is making with irony. He starts explaining his choice with convenience, then lists a couple of the usual reasons that people give when applying to banking, and then denounces his choice by mentioning the 'lack of a better idea'. Later on in the interview he talked about other jobs he has always wanted to do, and these differed dramatically from the banking industry.

7.3.4 Alternative voices

Not everybody embraced the ‘common sense’ of MNCs as being the ‘best’ places to work at. However, most students who were making an alternative choice or making their job choice irrespective of size, acknowledged that working for MNCs was the ‘common sense’ among others, and articulated their choice around it. This can be seen in their narratives almost always being structured in relation to this ‘common sense’, overcoming it, resisting it, or defending one’s choice from it.

Archer (male, EU, Renewable Energy Systems Technology, L1) talked about how he overcame the idea that big companies were the best employers:

> A: ... when I was young I was picturing myself you know doing – working in like a big company with a - like wearing a suit and stuff like that [laughs]
>
> IR: When was it?
>
> A: Er. I was like fifteen - fourteen, I’d say I wanted to be a consultant. I didn’t even know what a consultant was, but I wanted to be a consultant in a big company ... and I wanted to travel the world and work in many countries and stuff like that – and learn languages and experience different things. But [laughs] it – it changed a bit.
>
> IR: [Yeah.
>
> A: [Er [and I moved -
>
> IR: [Where do you think that image was coming from?
>
> A: Movies mostly I guess [laughs]

This willingness to work for a big company, a product of the dominant rhetoric, although denounced by Archer now, is a typical characteristic of the choices of other students in the sample. However, he has overcome this and now has a certain idea of the area he wants to go into, renewable energy. This becomes the most important factor in choosing a job. Although Archer mentioned that he would prefer to start working in a smaller company, organisation size was not a factor of job choice on its own for him.

Another example of not embracing the ‘common sense’ of MNCs as the ‘best’ places to work is active resistance towards working in a large organisation, as demonstrated by Melanie (female, EU, Communication and Media Studies, L1):

> IR: So something that I’d like to start from. What thoughts do you have about the kind of work you’d like to do or organisation you’d like to work for and why?

> M: Aa ... I definitely know that I don't want to work in a large company, I don't want to work in a corporate, I don't to go into the corporate career where everybody wears a suit and there are like thousands of employees, that's very impersonal. So I'd rather like to be in a small/medium-sized company ... but to be honest I'd rather actually ... I think I'm better at working on my own ... as such, so like working for myself, and ... you know, actually rather than working for a company I'd prefer having my own company being self-employed.

In the excerpt above Melanie's first reaction to the question on her ideas about future work is rejecting the idea of working in a large company. This may be classified as her resisting the 'common sense' that exists on campus. Notably, Melanie uses the same sign-object, the suit, that others used to explain their willingness to work in MNCs, to demonstrate the impersonality of these organisations. Impersonality is what corporations are associated with for her. Similarly, Kelly (female, UK, Sport & Leisure Management, L1) referred to large companies as being 'too strategic'. Being 'impersonal' as an image of MNCs does not match the image provided in graduate brochures.

Another way to refer to 'common sense' while raising an alternative voice was defending it. Kelly (female, UK, Sport & Leisure Management, L1), who was searching for jobs in small companies, had to defend her choice against the image of large companies being the 'best':

> IR: Have you ever been questioned your choice in terms of not choosing this traditional graduate route within a large company [and -
>
> K: [Oh yeah - my mum. My mum er she works in marketing now. She's – she's very successful, she's ... absolutely brilliant at what she does. But she always put quite a lot of pressure on me to go into kind of a traditional graduate scheme and – and - she used to say it was like finishing school. She - she did a [laughs] she did a graduate scheme with Harrods, she did a sales graduate scheme. And ... she said for her it was absolutely fantastic. So she always put quite a lot of pressure on me to do that.

Despite the popularity of the financial industry among students with many of them seeing it as the most desirable one to get into, there were also students who openly criticised it, not accepting its alluring image. This included cases of active resistance. Auriel (female, overseas, Economics with Sociology, L1) talked about the choice she was making in opposition to the choice of finance and banking that her classmates from the Economics department were making:

IR: ... What are your professional interests?

A: I think my ideal job would be to work for a think-tank or an NGO. That would be like ... my dream... but many want and few are chosen, so ... yeah, if not that, the consultancy, I just don't wanna work in a bank. I don't wanna work in finance or ... banking, or, yeah.

IR: Could you expand a bit more on that, ... [why NGOs, why ...?

A: [WHY, just because I have no interest in it. Not because of like the financial crisis, I'm just not interested in finance. And cause I'm doing Economics, and it involves maths, people usually pre-think oh, you're doing Economics, you wanna be a banker=

IR: = Ugm, yeah, no more choice.

A: Yeah [laughs]. I don't want to be a banker, you know, I'm interested in research, and how research could be applied to affect everyday life, but ... from the economic nature ... rather than ... rather than social issues.

Here Auriel opposes the image that an economist necessarily wants to work in the financial industry. In the way her reply is structured, it may be seen how her choice is made against the 'common sense' one (at least within Economics). She names consultancy as another option, but not finance and banking. She mentions that this is not as the result of the financial crisis that she is not interested in banks. This implies that she does not necessarily oppose the industry on the moral grounds, or due to the lack of jobs there. What she opposes is the socially constructed popular choice of banking that a lot of students embrace.

Whenever Archer (male, EU, Renewable Energy Systems Technology, L3) was referring to something 'bad' or something polar to what he was searching for, he was mentioning banking:

IR: It's quite interesting that er whenever you're referring to something like polar to what you're searching for [you're mentioning -

A: [Sorry, what?

IR: Something polar to ... something [opposite.

A: [Yeah.

IR: You mention banking. Why?

A: Because I think it's exactly the opposite of engineering or – cause it's not creating anything. It's not producing anything. It's just er ... winning stuff. It's just betting and - [laughs].

IR: [Laughs].

A: And just making money out of money. They're not doing anything - in my opinion ... and it's exact opposite of engineering. Engineering – in engineering you have a product at the end, a real thing you know.

Archer's own confidence in the choice he was making was in contrasting engineering, which is 'real' for him, to banking, which is in 'making money out of money'.

7.4 Consuming through work processes

The ability of work to provide consumption opportunities without leaving its realm was another aspect key to student work orientations. The potential to consume through work processes includes travelling, access to consumer lifestyle through work and organisational culture.

A lot of students referred to travelling when talking about ideal life situations, answering the question what they would do if money were not an issue. In the real world, work that involves travelling is something that brings them closer to this ideal. A lot of students wanted their work to provide travelling opportunities, to be able to work globally and visit the world through work. This was one of the reasons for Derek (male, UK, Geography with Economics, L1) to apply for a graduate position in buying and merchandising:

D: ... I also applied for um John Lewis, um as Buying and Merchandising graduate, and the reason I applied for that is because that was what my dad used to do. Um, he he had a successful career as like a buying, buying-merchandising manager for like a number of companies. When I was younger I always thought that was a brilliant job cause he got to travel around the world, met lots of people, you know had a really good time as well as working, paid well, it just seems like an attractive job so I applied for that. Um, yeah, but there's there's no kind of one area or one specific kind of thing that I'm looking to be employed in. As long as it's ... fun job I'll be happy to give it a try.

Derek talks about work as more than just work, but a place where he would be having 'a really good time', which is made up from the potential for travelling and meeting new people. Through travel, work processes (e.g. business trips, training) can provide hedonistic experiences for him.

For Beatrice (female, UK, Information Management & Business Studies, L1) travelling is also key to an ideal job:

> B: Well like I said I like moving around so for me working in a desk by myself isolated would not be my ideal job. My ideal job would be to do with people, ideally move around, possibly even er go outside the city, travel a lot – and so on. That would be my ideal job.

Apart from travel, access to a consumer lifestyle provided through work processes also attracts students. Lyle (male, UK, Computing & Management, L3), as a newcomer to a major computer technology corporation, has already experienced this access to a consumer lifestyle through work processes:

> L: All the new recruits, all the new teams that were recruited for those offices, everyone was there putting into the Malaga office where we had our training and we were put up in a hotel, all expenses paid, taxis, food, clubbing, everything, was paid for by the company.

Lyle's employer provided travel opportunities for new employees and paid for a trip to Spain. What the employer paid for during the trip is associated with a certain lifestyle (e.g. clubbing, food, taxis). This is a lifestyle of abundance, where all is paid for, which can give both hedonist experience for consumer-workers and signify a certain status as well. The fact that travel and expenses were paid for by the company was something that Lyle mentioned a number of times during our third interview (L3), where his impressions from the job he got were discussed. He saw this generous attitude of his employer as an investment in him:

> L: So they invest. [Name of employer] spend loads of money where they're involved, giving perks such as flying out to different countries, meeting new clients, giving laptops, phones, giving (permission), um, whatever you want, they will invest in you.

From how Lyle reflects on it, it seems that this investment in the form of access to a consumer lifestyle through work processes is something that he enjoys, and the experience he wants to tell about to others.

Organisational culture is also something that students found important. In general, the preferences for organisational culture can be divided into those providing sign values of 'status' and 'fun' or 'authenticity', metaphorically characterised as being for or against the suit. As can be seen from quotes that have already been used in the text, the suit is the item of clothing that was most often mentioned in student interviews. Sympathy towards a suit was usually demonstrated by students who were willing to work for MNCs, especially in the financial industry, being a part of the corporate environment. The suit is not just an element of clothing, it has a sign value of status, which implies one's access to a consumer lifestyle and can be communicated to others. At the same time, people who were against the suit were associating it with an impersonal corporate environment. However, their views on the characteristics of suit-less jobs were different. For example, for Melanie (female, EU, Communication and Media Studies, L1), the suit is a feature of work in MNCs, and this is what makes all MNCs unattractive to her. However, for Archer (male, EU, Renewable Energy Systems Technology, L3), the suit was a feature of only some MNCs, primarily banks, those places where he did not want to work. From the quote below it can be seen that Archer equates the absence of a suit with a 'relaxed' atmosphere in organisations:

> A: ... And then he [Archer's potential manager] came down. He was very friendly as well. We talked – we talked about various subjects, not only like er – on Name Of The Company and stuff like that. We talked about – we talked about [country where he comes from] for example and he asked me you know what's going on and stuff like that. Er – yeah. ... they were very relaxed you know the way they dressed, so that was also good – you know they were not with er suits and ties.

Archer talks negatively about 'corporate' employers, but as it turned out during the interview, not all corporations are 'corporate' for him:

> IR: Would you consider them [E.ON] a corporate employer or you =
> A: = Not really, not – I mean they are a corporation, but ... it's – again from people that I – that work there I don't hear stuff like you know having ... a very competitive environment or it's ... relaxed. You learn a lot at E.ON. So I applied – I applied to E.ON, but I got rejected.

Archer talks critically about the typical 'corporate' hierarchies, which associate with a 'suit' for him while those that seem more relaxed attract him more. This may imply that he would embrace 'fun work cultures' or 'authenticity', which are a popular form of work organisation today. Jolene (female, UK, Mathematics with Management, L1) also talks about not being willing to be in 'pressured' organisations:

J: Er. But I don't think I'd like to be in a pressured one where it's very strict and strategic. I don't think many places are like that at the moment. I think they tend to be a bit more open.

For Jolene being 'strict and strategic' is associated with pressure. However, she thinks employers are not like this now, adopting other organisational cultures. This may mean that companies are successful in promoting an image of them as 'relaxed' places, potentially using fun and informality at work as control. Both types of organisational culture are, however, choices from the 'menu' of 'consumption of work' (see 5.4.1).

7.5 Consuming work processes

Another key aspect of student work orientations is in valuing work processes and outcomes connected with self-development, which correspond to the 'abstract work ethic' and in particular the 'self-work ethic' (see chapter 3). Potential for self-development is also one of the aspects of the 'employee value proposition' marketed to students on campus (see 5.4.1), being one of the features of the 'consumption of work' (see chapter 3). The particular characteristics of work that students articulated as important are learning (7.5.1) and challenge (7.5.2), which will now be discussed. However, while students' orientation to learning in this study leads me to claim that they engage in consuming this work process, I cannot do the same in case of challenge, and leave this up for the readers to decide.

7.5.1 Learning

Training is part of employability deal, which job security in organisations was substituted for (see chapter 2). It was offered as part of the 'employee value proposition' on campus (see 5.4.1). Learning was considered as very important in a job by students. It is exactly employer-endorsed learning primarily in the form of training that most of them were oriented towards. In addition, these were abstract features of training that students were referring to as desirable in a job. This allows me to claim that students were consuming this work process.

The opportunities for learning provided by employers were a reason for treating MNCs as best places to work at. Here is how Jolene (female, UK, Mathematics with Management, L1) explained her choice of working in corporations rather than taking the teaching route:

> J: So I've ... I have ... sort of leaned towards ... I think I want to be in education for longer. So with the job that I've chosen it's sort of – it's got my good points about it ... like my strengths are in that job. But also ... sort of ... not sure what I'm trying to say... And it also means I have to carry on learning so I've got another like fifteen qualifications I need to get and stuff. And I think that's my main thing. Like obviously with teaching you have another year ... and you're in ( ) forever. But I wanted to carry on studying. But I didn't really want to do a Masters. Not yet. So that's why. ... That's one of the plus things about the – like the route I'm looking at.

Jolene likes the perspective that she would get various professional qualifications and hence appreciates the opportunity for 'lifelong learning' offered in MNCs. At the same time, she compares it with the educational experience she could have doing a PGCE or a Masters. The main difference is in the number of years she would be spending in each. She does not touch upon the content of the experience that these various learning opportunities will provide. It is continuous self-work that students like Jolene are oriented to, as seen through their preference for learning. However, it is a very specific form of learning they are interested in, i.e. which is employer-endorsed, and usually delivered in the format of training. For Lyle (male, UK, Computing & Management, L3), the formal qualifications provided by his employer were one of the most important benefits of the job he got after graduation:

> L: They have the top training package. So, it's one of the best. They have a scheme for a diploma in technology. So, that is offered to you after twelve months. After six months you start your diploma. There's about six or seven different modules that you do in the [name of institution]. And, then you're given this Diploma in Technology from the [name of institution]. And there's another program which they have for sales. So, once you've completed the sales program, you get a qualification, a graduation in that. And that is recognised globally. So, if you've got that then you've basically got a degree in sales. If you've got the other one, you've got a degree in technology. ... So they invest. [Name of organisation] invests quite a lot of money into their employees.

The provision of training makes Lyle feel he is being 'invested' in. The global recognition of this training is a way to enhance his employability.

The lack of formal training within a job made some students feel unsatisfied with the jobs they got after graduation and resulted in them wanting to change. This was one of the reasons for Peter (male, UK, Management Sciences, L3) being dissatisfied with the job he got after graduation and starting to search for jobs with global employers:

> IR: Yeah. So, big firm what would it give you? In comparison to the small one.

> P: Room to progress, I think. Um, sort of resources to study. I've seen a lot of people and they really haven't stopped doing their examinations. They're straight on to finance modules, insurance modules and, if you like you know, after they do that they're sort of progressing, really, and getting qualifications and it doesn't stop at university, really. So, I think I miss that all and in a company so small they're not going to pay for all that for you. In places like, you know, banks and stuff like that it's sort of progression oriented and things.

Not doing 'examinations' that other graduates were doing was a sign that he was not given enough by his employer.

Seeing training as an important aspect of a good job was so strong among students that even those making alternative choices were affected by it. Kelly (female, UK, Sport & Leisure Management, L3) resisted the idea of working in a big organisation (see 7.3.4) and found a job she wanted in a small marketing company. During our third interview (L3), despite her being satisfied with what she was doing and being given responsibility, she was already looking into graduate positions with large employers. Lack of training was the primary explanation for her willingness to change:

> K: I think I see myself here, maybe, for not much longer than a year. Uh, just because ... because of what I mentioned earlier. We don't get much formal training, because it's a very small agency there's not much structure. And, whilst, um, there's a higher chance that you'd be promoted quicker, um, I think it, I think I would benefit a lot from being in a larger company and, kind of, learning from a more corporate structure, perhaps. Um, so I'm actually looking into maybe a grad scheme.

However, when asked what training she wanted to get a job in a bigger place, here is what Kelly replied:

> K: ... Um, so I think I would like, I would see myself in a management role. Um, in the next 5 years or so, whatever. But I would like, I think I would benefit hugely from having some formal management training. I studied management as part of my degree. Um, but I think it's really important to have some practical management training. Uh, and I think that would be really beneficial, definitely. Um, and also just things, things like, um, economics and accounting, that type of thing that, um, I'm not very good at but I think is always useful to know more about, so. And I think there's opportunities to do that kind of thing in corporate grad schemes.
>
> IR: In a bigger place, yeah. In what way you would see economics and accounting and those kinds of things which are, well, related to what you are doing? Or how can it benefit you?
>
> K: Um, well I think it's always good to have a base knowledge of that kind of thing, just so you can, you understand more about the business generally. I think one day I want to start my own

> business, so, um, at some time. I think for that reason it would be useful to understand a bit more about it. Um, yeah, I think generally, and because actually being in a small agency is great for the fact that we do have input in the new clients that the agency is taking on. We do have some kind of influence in the direction that the agency is taking, so, um, to have an, um, economic perspective of that thing would help because it means you're kind of just a bit more educated in your opinions.

Being in a marketing role, Kelly thinks she lacks trainings in management, economics and accounting. It is the presence of formal training at work rather than its content that is necessary, even training that is not directly related to what she is doing. The lack of formal training does not satisfy Kelly's orientation towards consuming work processes and outcomes. However, the problem is not only the lack of training, but the challenge it creates for her employability:

> K: ... I don't know. I'm kind of thinking about it [changing employer] already because I want to be prepared for my next step, whenever it's going to be. But, um, I think, I think I've always thought that you need to get as much benefit for your later life from whatever you're doing now. So obviously I think it's good to think about your next step after this.

In summary, students were oriented towards learning provided by employers, and its absence could lead to changing jobs. Students embraced the 'lifelong learner' attitude, but it was confined within the boundaries of employer-endorsed learning, usually in the format of formal training, which is part of the 'employee value proposition' advertised on campus. The content of these formal trainings was a secondary issue, with students hardly specifying what they wanted to learn from these trainings and why. Michelle (female, overseas, International Business, L3) was the only exception. Although learning was something she saw as necessary in her job, her understanding of it went beyond formal training that employers provide:

> M: ... So, I actually make a point of separating half a day every week to just read and research. So, that is development for me. But that is really key.

Michelle created her own learning and organised it in a way that suited her, while the absence of formal training did not make her think she was not invested in enough.

7.5.2 Challenge

Challenge was mentioned as part of the 'employee value proposition' in orthodox management and practitioner literature discussed in chapter 3. Within the empirical data, employers promoted self-development at work as one of the features of the 'employee value proposition' at Aimfield (5.4.1). It may be inferred from the brochures that challenge, as one aspect of self-development, was also part of this proposition. At the same time, challenge as a rhetorical device was not central to describing self-development in the brochures. As was noted in chapter 5, more symbolic phrasing was used for this. 'Be > You Imagined' by Accenture or 'It's the experience that stays with you' by PwC speak of opportunities for self-development at work, and although this implies challenge in a job, the implication is made somewhat indirectly. The images of people engaging in extreme sports that can be found in some brochures (e.g. PwC, Mitsubishi UFJ) imply challenge more directly, but this choice of visuals was not made by all employers. Therefore, students' orientation towards challenge might mean that students are consuming this work process as part of self-development offered by employers. At the same time, this orientation is not necessarily the result of being promoted to students as part of the 'employee value proposition'. So by placing challenge within the section I would like to highlight that it can be 'consumed' as part of self-development offered by employers, at the same time leaving it for the readers to decide whether references to challenges by students means they have embraced this feature of 'consumption of work'. Throughout this subsection I will highlight how some students are oriented towards challenge and at the same time how this feature for them comes from job design, and therefore is part of an 'abstract work ethic'.

Kelly (female, UK, Sport & Leisure Management, L1) was one of the students who considered the 'challenge aspect' of a job as motivating:

> K: ... I think I'm motivated by kind of responsibility and er I've – I've always ... throughout my career and at university I've always been involved in kind of voluntary positions er that have involved kind of organising events or – or er ... kind of managing people. Er. And – and that's always motivated me more. It's – it's been the sort of challenge aspect as opposed to the reward aspect.

By contrasting the challenge aspect of work with the rewards aspect, she highlights how the intrinsic value she gets from the process of work itself ('self-work ethic') is more important than the monetary benefits she gets from it. For Kelly the challenging aspect is in responsibility, being involved in organising and managing. Hence 'challenge' is about action ('doing'). Action was always present when students were referring to challenge. For example, Jolene (female, UK, Mathematics with Management, L1) does not like 'being sat down doing nothing' and likes 'to be challenged and doing lots of different things'. So challenge as 'doing' is opposed to 'doing nothing', or the absence of action.

Furthermore, for students challenge involves going beyond just action and was often talked about as 'doing' something interesting and non-routine, involving variety and change. An interesting job is a job that is not boring:

> D: ... it seems you're valued within the company, you're not just another, you're not just like another number that adds some more income, that you're actually given responsibility and kind of like um tutored and mentored to become a better ... person and being better at your job rather than just sitting at a desk like punching numbers into your computer and then not getting any satisfaction and like value in whatever you're doing.

Here Derek (male, UK, Geography with Economics, L1) contrasts being given responsibility, tutored and mentored as opposed to 'punching numbers', i.e. doing something boring. From what he says it is clear that not any action is a challenge. 'Punching numbers' for Derek is not one. Likewise, for Anthony (male, overseas, Renewable Energy Systems Technology, L1) challenges go beyond action:

> A: Back on to what er – what I wouldn't like about a bad job. Er. A job where you're not challenged. I love challenges ... Day by day I'm in a job where I do the same old thing every day, no ... I - I wouldn't like that job ...

It is doing different things as well as new things that make a challenge for Anthony. Similarly, for Lyle (male, UK, Computing & Management, L1), the absence of change in a job is a characteristic of the absence of challenge:

> L: ... a bad job is where you're just stuck in a ... job where there's no way of promotion, or ... you're just doing the same thing on a daily basis, you're not learning anything new, nothing challenging.

'Challenge' is a category that is valued by students on its own, characterising action, variety and change. However, it is an abstract category, not being tied to any particular jobs or even particular dimensions of 'doing' these jobs. According to students' reflections on challenge, it is more about how one's job is organised. Then it is a product of management, being given or allowed, it is ‘to be challenged’. The promise of ‘top’ employers corresponds to offering this ‘challenge’ to their employees. By loving challenge and seeing it as a desirable work characteristic, students engage in modern hedonism. Challenge is not necessarily a pleasant experience, but it contributes to one’s self-development, it is part of the ‘self-work ethic’. At the same time, loving to be challenged and successfully going through challenges is a way to enhance one’s employability.

However, despite this image of a challenging job as desirable, a number of students were aware that ‘challenging’ jobs would not necessarily be so ‘challenging’, in a way being skeptical about the promise of challenge by employers. For example, Simon (male, UK, Economics, L1) talks about the limit of challenges:

> S: ... I wouldn't want to be in a job where there's not much motivation and incentive, where I'm doing the same thing every day. No, that's not for me.
> IR: Do you think it could be different every day for the kind of job you're choosing?
> S: I used to. But having spoken to people who do work ... I've spoken to like two, three, four people on a personal level who do work with investment banks and no, it doesn't seem to be. You know they say, yeah, well its challenging, in this and that and after three to six months you sort of ... it hits a plateau .... So it’s just on the same level and it’s kind of boring, you know, blah, blah, blah, blah, ... but when you look at most of these companies and stuff these days they do give you chance to move around within the organisation ... to do slightly different roles, so I’m not too concerned about that.

Although initially stating he would not want to do ‘the same thing every day’, he recognises that this will probably be the case in the job he is choosing, with his job even becoming ‘boring’ after three to six months. However, for him this is mediated by the ability to ‘move around’ within an organisation. Although not part of the excerpt above, it is even more mediated by the earning potential. Likewise, Anthony (male, overseas, Renewable Energy Systems Technology, L2) talks about his job as potentially boring:

> A: So it’s a lot of legislation, seeing consultants about documentation – they have to do environmental assessment which is a lot of paper – paperwork. You probably have to meet with a lot of er locals to see how the – the proposed wind farm will impact their operations and what not. So it’s a – that is a pretty boring job [laughs]. [Having to do – cause you do all this paperwork - and these environmental assessments are like hundreds of pages thick. So I could see myself would just be writing and having to correspond with different people all the time and - just a lot of writing. ... It could be boring.

7.6 Other work orientations?

'Consumption of work', as has been shown, is the work orientation most of the students embraced. In contrast, the importance of other work orientations in shaping students' preferences towards work were not as pronounced. This section looks at these other work orientations. One is 'working to consume (outside work)', which corresponds to one of the forms of 'instrumentalised work ethic', where work is only a means to materialistic ends that enable people to consume outside work (7.6.1). The other is 'substantive work orientation', which can be in 1) seeing work as a craft and 2) in professional/social values of the job/profession or the context in which these were performed (7.6.2). These different types of work orientation are not mutually exclusive and can co-exist in students' ideas about work. However, this section pays particular attention to instances where they are in conflict, as it highlights how students as 'dialogical selves' navigate between them.

7.6.1 Working to consume (outside work)

Within this category students referred to work as the means of earning money to afford a consumer lifestyle, but not being part of this lifestyle. It is the earning potential of jobs that they were motivated by. This holds for Simon (male, UK, Economics, L1):

> IR: Why do you think that's important? Having this earning potential.
>
> S: Incentive. I mean money is one of the biggest incentives you need. I think, you know, if you are doing an incentive based job, it will get the most out of you at the same time. I like the reward culture if I can put it that way. Although it's led to risky behaviour and stuff like that but I mean there has to be an incentive; I want to have a reason to know that I'm going to go to work and I'm going to have to push myself in exceeding at work. Why? Maybe because I want to make the cash bonus at the end of the month or maybe because I'm trying to get a promotion and I want to have something to drive me; I wouldn't want to be in a job where there's not much motivation and incentive, where I'm doing the same thing every day. No, that's not for me.

Money was also the key motivator for Lyle (male, UK, Computing & Management, L1), who explicitly connected it with the consumer lifestyle he could get outside work:

> L: ... Well obviously money motivates everyone. So the more you earn obviously means that you have a better life. You can get what you want rather than having to worry about anything. Whereas the only reason I like commission structured jobs is because I know I am good at sales

> and if I can go out there and be earning more than what my basic salary is, rather than sitting in an office working nine to five and be paid like £18,000-£20,000 and that's it - full stop then at least it gives me that basic plus on top of that commission structure which allows me to live a better lifestyle. So it is something that motivates me more.
>
> IR: Yeah. What do you understand by a better lifestyle?
>
> L: Well obviously luxury items like ... you can get what you want; better car, buy a big house and just things like that for standard living. So it gives you a better lifestyle in that sense.

Although these students demonstrated an attitude to work as a provider of access to consumption outside it, it was usually not the only value they saw in work. The 'consumption of work' complementing the importance of monetary rewards was desirable for all students. For example, Lyle's access to the aspects of 'consumption of work' he finally got through the job was something he appreciated (see 7.4 and 7.5).

However, students with this work orientation were ready to sacrifice 'consumption of work' in favour of earning potential. Beatrice (female, UK, Information Management & Business Studies, L3) is one example. When we met for the third interview, she was working in door-to-door sales, a non-graduate job, and although she was not earning much at that point and her parents opposed her choice, it was the opportunity to earn a lot that motivated her:

> B: The reason why I'm obviously choosing this job is because a lot of people that have been with the company about two years or so are actually either owners, or a step away from being owners. Now, in the office, the opportunities to grow with the business are, I can't find, I will never find another job like that in that I can grow so much. Because I am hard working. I think I am hard working. I'm not so much academic. I'm, you know, if someone says you go out there and you knock on a certain amount of doors I will do it. Well, I have to do now. Even now I'm not doing well currently, just earning wise. £100 a week or less. So I obviously have to get better because I could be earning up to £2000 a month. That's just for that. Then you grow in the business. And then you end up, like, just earning money. Because obviously the quicker you get, the more money you get. So then you can get money from the job from people that you are training.

Beatrice explains the willingness to earn a lot of money so as to be able to afford a consumer lifestyle outside work, with a big house and privileged education being parts of it. She also wants her parents to experience this lifestyle as it is something that is unaffordable for them at the moment:

> B: Um, is basically people at the office, they went off to, what's it called, basically on holiday for a business meeting, right. But it wasn't a business meeting, it was more like a holiday. But they did it as a reward for them. And they showed pictures and videos and they were all completely blown away at the fact that it wasn't a five star, it was more than five stars. The place was absolutely amazing, absolutely incredible. I was, like, I'd love, like I wouldn't mind not doing that. I don't have, I don't have ambition to go on holidays like that because it was the hotel that was amazing with me, and I might just not do that. Going to travelling, whatever. But, I'd love for my parents to experience that, experience any luxuries really. So, I was just looking at it going, oh my God. I'd love it if my parents, could you imagine. Because if their reaction was like that and they're quite young, they've seen a lot more than my parents, and they've experienced a lot more. Imagine what my parents would be like.

Peter's (male, UK, Management Sciences, L1) story is along similar lines. He was aware of how 'cut throat' a headhunter's job can be, but he was still able to accept it because of the earning potential and the lifestyle it could offer him:

> P: Another one was ... I think I've applied for this year, I don't know if you read on the letters, was recruitment – headhunting? ... which is quite cut throat really as an industry. It's the same sort of thing but the rewards are massive I think for that ( ), a potential to earn £90,000 a year, a company car - £45 000 worth, holidays and dinner at the Ritz and stuff like that so, it just ... probably be the worst job in the world and you know I'd be on the phone to people and they'd be telling me to ... you know, where to go and whatever, but, it's the benefits that outweigh what you go through ... well, not what you go through, I'd put up with working the hours and getting told where to go for the rewards basically, so ... I know how to sort of, shut myself off and leave my work life at work and my home life at home so I think I would be good in that sort of industry.

It can also be seen from this quote how 'consumption of work' orientation co-exists with seeing work as a means to consumer lifestyle outside work. Peter mentions having a company car worth £45 000, which shows his orientation to consume through work processes. At the same time, he speaks about his leisure time outside work, mentioning holidays. Both correspond to 'instrumentalised work ethic'. Although this orientation was particularly strong for Peter, he was not alien to other aspects of 'consumption of work'. However, students for whom the earning potential of a job was particularly important, were ready to sacrifice 'consumption of work' if it was not possible to combine the two.

7.6.2 Substantive work orientation

Very few students were treating work as a craft or articulating the importance of professional or social values of the job in shaping their choices. Tellingly, students did not pick the corporate social responsibility rhetoric that featured in all corporate brochures as a characteristic of the 'employee value proposition', offering an 'ethical lifestyle' to their employees (see 5.4.1). This was not a theme that students would raise and explain their choice with. Despite the overall trend, there were some notable exceptions. May (female, EU, Renewable Energy Systems Technology, L1) is one of the students whose work preferences were shaped within substantive work orientation:

> IR: What ideas do you have about the kind of the job you'd like to get and the organisation you'd like to work for?
> B: The kind of job I would like to get is ... related with engineering, because my background is very technical, it's physics. It's ( ) exercise my specialisation in my undergraduate. I have the renewable energy systems technology Masters. So I want to find jobs in the energy field, - engineering and designing of wind farms, maybe solar cells... and that sort of jobs.
> IR: Yeah. Why are you interested in this area – in renewables?
> B: ... Because I guess that is the – is the – is the most likely option for energy. So I guess it has – it will have a lot of opportunities, it will have a lot of vacancies. So the probability to get a job in this area will increase eventually. It was very important for – I mean for the society to keep a balance between renewable energy and fuels. So I – I feel like I am helping on one hand and doing work – work that I like on the other hand so - it's a kind of balance.

In the quote above May explains what exactly she wants her job to involve (designing wind farms/solar cells). This interest is directly connected with her education and with the specific technical knowledge and skills she acquired. She also mentions that this is what she likes doing, i.e. she finds value in the process of work itself, which implies that work is a craft for her. At the same time, May articulates the social function of her work as something that also motivates her to work in this area. Valuing these characteristics of work contributes to a 'substantive work orientation'. There were elements of 'consumption of work' in May's orientation too. At the start of her job search she was especially interested in working, as she put it, for 'big and famous' companies. However, from the very beginning this was not the key preference for her. The preference towards working for these organisations was also the object of May's rethinking throughout her job search. Having started a job in a small organisation by the time of our third interview, her orientation changed completely. This shows that different types of work orientations are not mutually exclusive, with students as 'dialogical selves' navigating between aspects of these orientations that they find important.

Archer (male, EU, Renewable Energy Systems Technology, L1) is another student for whom societal contribution of the job was important. Having overcome the idea of being a consultant in a big company (which is part of a 'consumption of work' orientation) he is now willing for his work to bring something 'good' to the society. It is by this drive that he explains his decision to work in renewable energy:

> IR: How did you come to that idea of renewable energy? Why – why this?
> A: Er. Well, I did engineering – mechanical engineering. I didn't like it that much so I stopped and moved onto business. I didn't like that either. I – I would consider the essence of the thing – I can see the contribution to the whole thing... And er yeah I thought – I – I want to do something nice, something good for the environment, for the society – for anything. ... So I thought what could I do where I could use my – something – some of my skills that I've gained through my first degree so I – I don't let it go to waste. So I thought maybe renewable energy was the thing. And I tried it.

Archer explains his will to contribute to the society through overcoming a period when he was captured by the attractive images of work in big companies and learning about the world:

> IR: Where does the will to contribute to the society come from?
> A: Well, you know during my university years I started learning about what's really going on in the world [laughs]. When I was – when I was young I just didn't know anything, I was just watching movies and – you know [laughs]. I saw the guys with the suits and I thought they were cool and said OK let's be one of them. But now I am learning about what the guys in the suits are doing so ... I don't like it very much ... and I want to do with my life, something good.

For Archer doing something 'good' with his life is necessarily connected to contributing to the society, and this factor was important for him when determining his educational and job routes.

As has been mentioned before, there were very few people like May and Archer. However, more students were referring to 'substantive work orientations' when talking about imaginary situations. The socially important job that was most commonly mentioned by students was teaching, which seemed to be the job that symbolised all the 'good' one could be doing, but which students were not considering entering right after graduation, if at all. When Lyle (male, UK, Computing & Management, L1) was asked what he would do if he did not need to earn money at all, here is what he replied:

> L: Well I – I – if I – if I didn't have to earn money then I'd just have – I'd have to do gardening, just do something just to occupy my time. And I'd probably go and ... do something like teaching ... er ... like try and teach ... kids ... anything that I've experienced in life ... er and just talk to them. Because obviously it's not a money perspective, it's just to ... do something for – for other people. And like ... so whatever I've been through, what I've managed to learn, is to pass that knowledge on to other people.

Here Lyle connects teaching with 'doing something for other people', hence his imaginary motivation here may be characterised as 'substantive work orientation'.

Peter's (male, UK, Management Sciences, L1) reasoning was similar:

> P: ... I can't really think of something right now that would give me that sort of, I don't know, reward in ... you know come home from work every day and feel like you've made a difference. I think something like that would be teaching or maybe being a doctor which is like really sort of out of my ... it's not really the route I want to go down to be honest. But, yeah at the moment it's just the salary that I'm entirely motivated by. I'd like it to be sort of rewarding as everybody would but I don't see myself going down that route. Maybe later on – when I'm a millionaire!

He is aware of the potential to get intrinsic value from doing a job that 'makes a difference', but defers it until potentially later in life, when his pursuit for money will have been satisfied.

Derek (male, UK, Geography with Economics, L1) wanted to become a teacher, but also mentioned deferring this till later in life:

> D: As a result, I don't know what I want to do. I have an incline that I'd like to become a teacher at some point in my life, but I don't think I'm gonna be doing that until ... later on. First, before I'm going to long-term teaching career, I'd like to try like a job in the city, but what job, I have absolutely no idea. At the moment I'm just applying for anything that sounds like it could be half-interesting rather than focusing on a specific job or a specific area I'd like to get into.

Before going into teaching, he wants to try a different job, about which he has no specific idea (hence applying to anything sounding half-interesting). Whenever Derek was asked about an ideal job, or how he has come to the current ideas of what he wanted to do in life, he always referred to teaching. His orientation towards teaching was substantive, he could see getting intrinsic value from the profession itself. However, this orientation is postponed until later in life, to first of all engage in ‘consumption of work’.

In referring to professions like teaching, students treat them as jobs into which they might make an ‘escape’ in the future or in an imaginary situation. They think of the possibility of ‘escaping’, but build their work orientations around ‘consumption of work’. Discussing teaching may then be a legitimising device, which, anchored in a moral rhetoric, allows students to explore the ‘consumption of work’.

7.7 Conclusion

This chapter has looked at students’ work orientations. Regardless of the type of job they would get and their satisfaction with it, students treated flexibility as a virtue. They were not committed to a job for life and wanted to exercise choice in the labour market. The macro level rhetoric of employability as providing ‘choice’ through flexibility (see chapter 2) was embraced by students. It was mostly a choice within ‘consumption of work’ that they were willing to exercise. The three aspects of this work orientation were key to shaping the preferences of the majority of students.

First, students’ choice of places to work were often shaped by criteria such as size, global status, and the brand, with finance being the industry with a particularly alluring image. At the same time, there were clear alternative voices to this aspect of ‘consumption of work’. The choice of these students was shaped by different categories, and they articulated it as opposite to the ‘common sense’ one, sometimes through active resistance to it. However, this does not mean that resisting one aspect of ‘consumption of work’ implies resisting the whole work orientation. Other aspects of ‘consumption of work’ were as appealing to some of these students as to those who did not question the ‘common senses’ about the best places to work at.

Second, for many students the understanding of good work was closely connected to ‘consumption through work processes’. Students here were positioned as modern and traditional hedonists as well as communicators. They wanted to travel and enjoy this experience through work (modern and traditional hedonism). At the same time, they expected a consumer lifestyle of abundance, where the employer paid for pleasures such as food and clubbing (traditional hedonism). The ‘sign values’ associated with organisational culture that could be communicated to others were also appealing to students (e.g. wearing/not wearing a suit). While some of these could seem to be contradictory preferences, they are choices from the ‘menu’ of ‘consumption of work’ (see chapters 3 and 5).

Third, an orientation towards ‘consuming work processes and outcomes’ existed in students’ preferences for learning and (potentially) challenge. Learning was mostly understood through the provision of employer-endorsed training. Challenge was articulated as an abstract action that was not confined within a job, but provided by employers. However, although challenge may be ‘consumed’ as part of the ‘employee value proposition’, it is problematic to claim that this was the case from the data of this study.

Although embracing some and rejecting other aspects of the ‘consumption of work’ was possible in students’ ideas about work, these were not easy to combine in practice. The inability of ‘alternative’ organisations to provide elements of ‘consumption of work’ made students feel that part of their preferences about work were not satisfied. In this study, this conflict made students doubt their choices and consider applying for positions where ‘consumption of work’ would be satisfied.

‘Consumption of work’ was not the only work orientation that students articulated. For a number of students it was important that work was a means to a consumer lifestyle outside work. ‘Substantive work orientation’ shaped the choices of a small minority of students. Often a number of different work orientations were combined in students’ preferences about work, with ‘consumption of work’ almost always being part of them. However, it is the relationship between ‘consumption of work’ and other work orientations that is particularly important. Students who saw work as providing access to a consumer lifestyle outside work were ready to sacrifice the ‘consumption of work’ for earning potential. A small number of students who expressed a ‘substantive work orientation’ were ready not to engage in ‘consumption of work’, with the substantive element being more important. Deferring the ‘substantive work orientation’ till later in life so as to engage in ‘consumption of work' was however more common. Referring to 'substantive work orientations' in the future or in an imaginary situation might be treated as 'escaping' the 'common sense', which, rooted in a moral rhetoric, at the same time legitimises the current choice of 'consumption of work'.

There was no section within this chapter that singled out employability as a desirable characteristic of work for students. This is because, as has been seen throughout this chapter, employability surrounded almost all desirable characteristics of work. It was not the only reason for students' choices, but it was something they always thought about. It shows the scope of employability spreading beyond getting a job, which is part of the 'common sense' about employability at Aimfied (6.3.2). With employability being an elusive category, the potential to acquire and develop skills comes from almost anywhere, but especially from various experiences within the 'consumption of work'. This point will be discussed in chapter 9. The next chapter, chapter 8, will explore students' engagement with the various aspects of the 'common sense' of employability while managing it during the job search.

Chapter 8. The graduate job search: Managing employability

8.1 Introduction

In this chapter, by looking at students actively managing their employability during the job search, their relationship with employability rhetoric is analysed. First, the 'common sense' of skill[1] 'possession'[2] among students is examined (8.2). This section shows that students mostly embrace this rhetoric (8.2.1), with only a few cases of questioning it (8.2.4). Even students who have not been aware of the skills rhetoric before (coming from countries with different job search principles) get used to it quickly and start using the language of skills to manage their employability (8.2.2). At the same time, the way students talk about skill 'possession' highlights its elusive meaning (8.2.3). However, the skill rhetoric is not only about skill 'possession', but skill 'demonstration' with articulating and selling skills being key to it. This is where, despite students embracing the rhetoric of skill 'possession', active manipulation of the rhetoric takes place: students are playing the job search game (8.3). During this game they learn to adapt by 'demonstrating' skills in the way employers require, the key to which is conforming (8.3.1). At the same time, the need to conform and present oneself in such a way is questioned by students (8.3.2). However, even questioning some aspects of the skills rhetoric does not undermine the scope of employability, with students managing it before and during the job search, mobilising their private lives in the name of employability (8.4). With rejections being an inevitable part of the process of job searching, the penultimate section of this chapter (8.5) is devoted to this theme. The last section is the conclusion (8.6).

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[1] I would like to remind the readers that by referring to 'skill' throughout this thesis I do not mean any notion of skill, but a particular conceptualisation of it that has become 'common sense' and is increasingly informing policies, practice and people's habitual experiences. Within this conceptualisation skills are 'soft' and not confined to a job (therefore, are transferable across contexts). See also section 2.5.2.

[2] I would also like to remind the readers about the rationale for referring to 'possession' and 'demonstration' when discussing skills. This distinction was drawn from the discussion of graduate employability rhetoric. On the one hand, students' employability was positioned as dependent on them having the skills required by employers and their commitment to acquiring and developing them. I called this skill 'possession', which is what the activities at the university 'enabled' students to gain. On the other hand, 'demonstration' of skills consists of 'articulating' and 'selling' them, which can only partially be 'enabled', which students manage themselves during a job search and which is ultimately up to the employer to assess. It is on the basis of this dynamic process of skill 'demonstration' that employers assess whether students have the skills needed.

8.2 The ‘common sense’ of skill ‘possession’

Skills are a key component of employability, both at the policy level (see Chapter 4) and within the rhetoric present at Aimfield University (see Chapter 6). Their ‘possession’ contributes to individuals’ employability and is tested at all stages of the student job search. Skills are supposed to differentiate students with equal credentials and it is their high levels that supposedly make the ‘talented’ students ‘stand out’ from the rest. Unsurprisingly, skills were a theme that all students referred to during the interviews, although there were no interview questions that were directly addressing them. Within this section, the largely embraced ‘common sense’ of skill ‘possession’ among students is discussed. First, students’ referring to having, acquiring/developing and describing themselves through skills is examined (8.2.1). Second, the cases of two students discovering the skills rhetoric are discussed (8.2.2). Third, the elusiveness of the meaning of the skills rhetoric is identified (8.2.3). Fourth, instances of questioning the ‘common sense’ are brought up (8.2.4).

8.2.1 Embracing the ‘common sense’

Students talked about skills as if they could be ‘possessed’, were tangible and identifiable. There were three main patterns of discussing skills, which are not mutually exclusive. The first was in students talking about having certain skills. For example, here is how Hugo (male, overseas, Mechanical Engineering, L1) talks about the importance of having a certain set of skills:

> H: I think they’re the most important ... skills. I mean ... cause it’s so competitive you know. When you go ( ) you need to – if you want to excel in your field I think you need to first of all be a good team player as all – most of the projects are team based – know how to work in a team. And also you need to you know – I think – even if you’re not a leader per se – you should have some leadership qualities where you can, you know, manage a team, you know manage what they’re saying, and you know get everyone’s views and come up ... come up with you know like a decision. I – so I think leadership skills, communication - also interpersonal skills, you know, working with people, understanding them you know and ... I think that’s very important.

Hugo speaks about skills in a normative way, i.e. that one needs to have them to excel. In line with the positioning of skills within employability rhetoric, he connects skills with ‘standing out’ as a professional.

The second pattern was in students talking about skills as something to be acquired and developed, which Lyle's (male, UK, Computing & Management, L1) quote demonstrates:

> Although if I don't get a job by the time I've graduated, that might mean I might need to do some more work, to gain more training, gain more skills, might need to do a few work qualifications or training, maybe do a few training courses in communications or whatever to actually prove to them that I'm actually capable of doing this and I've achieved these qualifications in my previous experiences, come back with that...

Lyle treats not getting a job as a signal that he would need to acquire and develop his skills. He speaks of a formal way of doing it, through a training course that would give him a credential 'proving' he has the skills employers want. Other students in the sample talked about acquiring and developing skills via other means, like volunteering, work experience and activities outside work.

Although it was not articulated by the majority of students (it pertained to four people in the sample), the third pattern was in students describing themselves through skills rhetoric. This can be demonstrated by an excerpt from the interview with Derek (male, UK, Geography with Economics, L1):

> D: ... I see myself as quite pro-active student, enjoying student life, um, I'm quite sporty, outgoing, social, um, I don't know I just ... I think I'm quite an alright person.

The first term Derek refers to when describing himself is pro-active, which is a skill[3]. Both Hugo (male, overseas, Mechanical Engineering, L1) and Peter (male, UK, Management Sciences, L2) were referring to leadership when characterising themselves. While Hugo thought he was a 'natural leader', Peter was not sure whether he was one yet, but aspired to become one:

> P: Maybe I'm not a born leader, though I'm not sure.
>
> IR: What do you think yourself?
>
> P: I think you know there's something that some people are born with it of course but like, obviously it is a learned skill as well, so I like to think, in a few years or whatever I'll give it a go

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[3] Brown and Hesketh (2004), when comparing selection criteria of employability in the 1990s and 2000s, refer to pro-activity as a term that emerges in the rhetoric of the 2000s to substitute capability, which was the term for the 1990s. Capability relates to 'the identification of future leaders and individuals who can "add value" through their "raw talent" and "charismatic personality"' (Ibid.: 150), which is no longer enough. Proactivity relates not only to the possession of capability, but shows that the person 'has demonstrated the capacity to get things done' (Ibid.: 150).

and learn how to be (a leader) or whatever ... and when in your job feel more comfortable you become sort of, you sort of ... you sort of emerge as a leader or whatever. I don't know how you do it. I definitely want to be a sort of, well everyone wants to be a sort of leader or manager of whatever one day but, maybe I'm not sort of naturally born to be one. But I think definitely over time ... even now I feel like I am becoming a bit more of a leader, you can do it like a clothing company, make an active effort to sort of take charge or whatever so.

8.2.2 Discovering the skills rhetoric

Not all students were aware of skills rhetoric before starting their job search. Two students in the sample came to the UK from abroad to do a Masters course and had not been applying for jobs in the UK before. May (female, EU, Renewable Energy Systems Technology, L1) first encountered the emphasis on skills when coming to the CEC:

M: They [CEC] helped me how to present the – the CV. I mean the information was good but the – the thing that was wrong with my CV was the – I'm used to do the CVs in [name of the country] way, so that is not valid here in the UK - at least the – the way of – of (presenting) the ideas. So they helped me in order to organise the ideas to look better. And to show better my skills for example. To put a specific – specifically - for example, from this year to this year I have this role in the company and this gave me these several skills. That er – I didn't have it before, going to the careers centre, so they helped me a lot.

...

IR: And the [name of the country May comes from] format of the CV, what is it like?

M: It's not umm... it's like saying I have this education, I have worked in this company doing this, but the [name of the country] format does not show so explicitly the skills, for example. And in the [name of the country] format, for example, you don't put your interests. And here it is important to know which interests um this person has.

The skills that May had in her CV were teamwork, self-confidence, decision-making, leadership, creativity, capability to meet deadlines, problem solving, working under pressure, and communication skills, which are all 'soft' skills. So having accepted the 'knowledge' about skills and the importance to have them explicitly emphasised in the CV, May embraced the previously unfamiliar rhetoric.

Like May, Anthony (male, overseas, Renewable Energy Systems Technology, L1) was not familiar with skills rhetoric before coming to the UK. The quote below shows his reaction to skills questions in applications:

> A: It's [applying for jobs] challenging in the sense that OK you – you'll think you just send them a CV, send them a covering letter and that – that is it. No, it doesn't stop there – they have like these special online application processes - and that in itself is like an exam ... Like you're studying for a degree... and I find it a challenge sometimes. They [employers] twist the questions in certain ways - and there are some really (pause) abstract questions like ... like for instance I applied to Eon UK and they ask you give me a – give me one experience in your life where you demonstrated leadership skills... It was a question on those lines.

He refers to the question on skills (leadership in this case) as 'abstract', because it has not become part of his familiar landscape yet. However, by interpreting such questions as part of the challenge, skills start making sense for him. The unfamiliarity with the demand for skills makes him treat questions on them as something that needs to be overcome so as to get a job.

Anthony and May were aware of how the job search process worked in their countries, but when they came to the UK and started their job search, they became came across the skills rhetoric. This shows that it has not become universally used yet, at least at the level of individuals. The standards of job searching differ, so the 'knowledge' about what is needed to be employable varies in different countries. This allows students from abroad to look differently and potentially critically at what is taken for granted in the UK. This echoes the comment made by Valerie (the CEC's employability team), that it is a challenge to explain to international students why they need skills (6.3.5). In this sample May embraced the rhetoric immediately, while Anthony was more distant and even critical about it during our first interview. However, when asked in interview 3 why he thought he would be a good employee, he answered using exactly the language of skills:

> IR: So – apart – yeah – putting aside the application and what you're supposed to write there, er you yourself what would you think – I don't know – your strong qualities for getting into the company? So why you would be a good employee – something like that?
>
> A: Well provided that my skills are on par with what they want - my keen eye for detail. My er – well I work very hard. I'm not lazy. I think I have very good er communication skills – both written and verbal. So I think those will be strong points. Er what else can I think of?... I'm willing to go the extra mile....

So even if he has not completely and unquestionably accepted the 'common sense' of skills, it now comes 'naturally' as part of his vocabulary.

8.2.3 The elusiveness of the skills rhetoric

While skills were ‘common sense’ for some students and becoming ‘common sense’ for others, the question of what constitutes the ‘instrumentation’ of employability deserves attention. When reflecting whether he was a leader, Peter (male, UK, Management Sciences, L1) mentioned that ‘everyone want[ed] to be a sort of leader or manager’, using the two words interchangeably, which raises the question of whether there is any difference between the two. Similarly, when Hugo (male, overseas, Mechanical Engineering, L1) talked about what leadership involved, he mentioned managing, knowing what to say and making decisions, which also does not show much difference between a leader and a manager. Later in the interview, Peter claimed that he could see a leader, but his expression of what ‘natural born leaders’ looked like was summarised somewhat abstractly:

> P: ... you know there are some guys there and some girls who were just cool, calm and confident in any situation so that's probably the best leaders that I could think of. But they have a certain look about them as well. Do you know what I mean? They sort of stood out from the crowd, so I think that's what the natural leader part of them. But I don't know, they spoke more clearly, more sort of thorough in what they were saying, they sort of said much more in much little ... they said less sentences but said much more that other people, so they didn't tend to waffle. So a lot of sort of body language involved, maybe that's something. You know they were using their hands a lot and all that. And basically, yeah they performed the best anyway so.

For him, being a leader is in looking like a leader, i.e. being confident, speaking clearly and concisely, and having a certain body language, none of which imply anything about the leader’s interaction with others or where they would lead.

Using the example of leadership, it may be seen that skills, although embraced by students as an identifiable tangible category, have an elusive meaning. Answering what having skills involves is problematic. If a single skill is interpreted, the meaning of it is hard to be captured. If an attempt to do this is made, it is mundane (e.g. managing) or has a close connection to one’s personal characteristics (like charisma, potentially class) rather than with the activities the leader is involved in. However, this elusive meaning of skills is central to employability.

Students, treating skills as what made them ‘stand out’ from the rest, did not characterise every experience as giving them skills, and were selective in what counted as such experience. So despite embracing the same ‘common sense’ of skill ‘possession’, the understanding of how they can be gained was different among students. Here is how Andy (male, overseas, Information Management & Business Studies, L1) refers to the acquisition of skills:

> A: It was optional for me. Some guys, they still continue this, few of them, for chartered organisations to get some more experience, which is I guess good, they gonna get, what’s it, diploma of professional studies, DPS, yeah. I guess it’s good, but it’s still kinda wasting all the year, because chartered organisation gives you a bit of good experience, so they might get a job later, but you don’t really get that much of transferable skills.

Andy speaks about skills as something that not every experience gives. For this reason doing something through which he would not acquire them is a waste of time for him. From what Andy says, the experience not giving skills is actually work experience, so we can see that for him these are mainly non-work activities (like sport and extra-curricular university activities) that develop one’s skills.

May (female, EU, Renewable Energy Systems Technology, L1) also thinks that not every experience gives skills, but her understanding of what develops them is completely different from Andy’s. This can be demonstrated by her reply to the question whether her classmates without work experience could apply to the same positions as her, although she had three years of experience in a different industry:

> M: Yes, I think they can. The difference is that this experience has provided me with several skills, for example, that they do not have. Because when you’re working, you acquire skills, even if it’s not your field, you acquire several skills, like ... for example, working under pressure, being used to giving the work on time, um, being able to react and respond in different situations, in different troubles, these type of skills that you do not acquire at university, but you learn them at work.

She refers to skills she has acquired through her work experience that can be transferred to jobs she is applying to, saying that university cannot give these skills. May’s interpretation of how skills can be gained is opposite to Andy’s, although both of them are speaking about them as something significant, something they reflect on.

Looking back at the discussion in Chapter 6 (6.3.3), within the CEC both experiences the students mentioned here would lead to them acquiring skills. According to the CEC, they can be acquired in almost any experience. At the same time, it is on the basis of them (their 'demonstration', to be more precise) that people are selected for jobs. So, to make sense of the category of skills that students embrace, they interpret it in more normative ways, creating boundaries for what can count as building a skill and what cannot.

8.2.4 Questioning the 'common sense'?

Despite taking skills as an unproblematic category by the majority of students, four of them brought up points of their critique. Archer (male, EU, Renewable Energy Systems Technology, L1) disliked questions on skills, both in applications and in interviews:

> A: ... The long ones [applications] are bad cause you spend a lot of time to answer these questions that they're asking. And most of the time in order to find things to say you mostly end up lying [laughs] to fill their profile of accepted candidates.

Here Archer does not take the skills rhetoric as 'natural'. In our second interview (L2) he also noticed the absence of meaning in answers to these questions without making a story:

> IR: What are the kind of questions that make you lie?
>
> A: Teamwork and stuff like that. You have to bullshit, you have to use the STAR approach, you know – situation, task, action, response [the last one is supposed to be result]. Those are the questions that you have to lie [laughs].
>
> IR: Yeah. Why is that – that you have to lie there?
>
> A: Well you – you don't lie lie, you don't lie lie, but you make up a story. You – you say it the way they want to hear it, you don't say the way it actually happened because that – then it wouldn't make any sense. You just make a story like that... If you said what er actually happened ... you cannot – you bullshit it a little bit.

The issue that Archer brings up here is that skills are captured only through a narrative highlighting how they were used or acquired. However, to highlight a skill, the story needs to be articulated in a certain way, which makes the story itself superficial.

Michelle (female, overseas, International Business, L1) referred to replying to questions on skills as ‘window dressing’ and mentioned she did not like this emphasis on skills:

> M: ... I don’t like that much focus on skills because like – ‘Tell us a situation when you did that’. People not make them up, but you window-dress your situations. The skills which were relevant for the job they could see from my CV... I mean he wanted someone who’s good in Maths. I did an A-level in Maths in one year. It’s a hard A-Level, people do it two years, they fail, they don’t get an A in it. It was my first year in England and I did it in one year and got an A. That is an evidence of my skill. And I don’t see a reason for them to ask me ‘So tell me something about when you were good in Maths’ when I am already showing it.

Here Michelle challenges the point that was emphasised in careers consultations, i.e. that skills need to be explicitly stated by students rather than implied from the experiences they list in their CVs and cover letters (see 6.3.4).

The critique of the selection process for its emphasis on skills also applies to the skills rhetoric itself. Skills become identifiable only through creating a narrative, in which their presence is articulated. However, when doing this, the narrative distances from the original event that took place. Archer’s and Michelle’s reflections on skills may be seen as passive resistance to the skills rhetoric. Students are usually criticised for not being able to articulate their skills, which is not the case for these two students, as can be seen from the excerpts above. They were aware of how they needed to articulate their skills, but were skeptical about it, highlighling the superficiality of this process. At the same time, they were primarily skeptical about how they as applicants were accessed, but did not explicitly question the ‘common sense’ notion of skills. For example, in our third interview (L3) Archer again mentioned that he disliked long questions on applications most out of the whole job search process. When asked to clarify why, he started explaining it by his laziness and by them being hard, taking time and energy, almost blaming himself for such an attitude.

Summary

Overall, from this section it can be seen that students embrace the skills rhetoric, accepting skills as tangible and identifiable, something that they need to ‘possess’ (i.e. have, acquire and develop) to be employable. With this rhetoric being strong and an integral part of the job search, it is embraced even by people who have not come across it before. However, the way students talked about skills reveals their elusiveness, with the impossibility of seeing what makes skills ‘stand out’ as well as contradictions around how they are thought to be acquired. Through a critique of questions on skills in applications, students have brought up the issue of them being captured through superficially constructed narratives, where a narrative articulates the skill, but distorts the story itself. However, this critique of the skills rhetoric was articulated only by two students, with others seemingly embracing it without question. However, embracing the rhetoric does not mean that students are not using it instrumentally, manipulating it in the interests of their employability. This engagement of the ‘dialogical selves’ with the skill rhetoric will be discussed in the next section.

8.3. Playing the job search game

This section looks at students’ playing the job search game. Although the ‘common sense’ of skill ‘possession’ may have been embraced by most students, it was manipulated in the process of ‘demonstrating’ skills (8.3.1). First, students did not question whether they had the skills required by employers and always acted as if they did. Second, ‘demonstrating’ the skills was about playing the game. Throughout the job search students, through trial and error, were figuring out what employers wanted and were adapting accordingly. However, not all students were unquestionably accepting this need to adapt, showing instances of passive and active resistance (8.3.2).

8.3.1 ‘Demonstrating’ skills

Overall, students knew that they needed to present themselves to employers in a certain way, which Archer’s (male, EU, Renewable Energy Systems Technology, L1) quote demonstrates:

> IR: What do you think that profile looks like of the candidate that would be accepted?
> A: It differs from company to company. If you look at the website you will find their core skills and what they look from people and you have to make sure you put them in the application.

From what Archer says, it may be seen that students do not assess whether they have skills that employers demand or not when applying for jobs, but ‘make sure’ that they put them in applications. Students’ approach to applications was in applying wherever they wanted to apply, and assuming they had the necessary skills for the job. Irrespective of what skills they thought they had and what they thought about the notion in general, students were trying to 'demonstrate' that they had all the skills employers asked for. So there was no questioning of whether the students actually had the adequate level of skills required for the job. This echoes the advice to given to students at the CEC (see chapter 6). Simon (male, UK, Economics, L1) was the only interviewee who reflected on his lack of certain skills in a job application, which resulted in no reply from the place he had applied to.

Apart from presenting themselves as having the skills employers asked for, whichever these were, students were aware of the marketability aspect of the job search and spoke about particular ways of presenting themselves to employers. Below Auriel (female, overseas, Economics with Sociology, L1) speaks about how she is working on her CV:

> A: ... To make you come to life on paper you need to give examples of you being active and demonstrating these skills that they [employers] want, so that's what I'm trying to do. I've structured it in such a way that you've got different skills and I've got bullet points with me describing me in this situation showing me demonstrating these skills that are that they want and hopefully that should, that should do the trick [laughs].

She is aware of what employers want and tries to structure the CV accordingly. 'Demonstrating' skills through structuring them in a certain way is an instrument of presenting oneself, which 'should do the trick' of attracting the employer. Jolene (female, UK, Mathematics with Management, L1) was talking about a certain way of filling in her applications, which involves showing different skills in the answers to the different questions that employers ask, thereby demonstrating a variety of skills:

> J: Like I do sit there and think right what's this questions asking me, what skills shall I show here, and try and make sure that I don't show like the same skill in three different things. Like I make sure I try and be like well this – this question I'll have that skill in. The next question I'll have another skill, another question I'll have another skill in instead of ... Trying to mix it all up.

Students were engaged in playing the game during other stages of the job search too. Here is how Hugo (male, overseas, Mechanical Engineering, L2) talked about the assessment centre in which he took part:

> H: So yeah I took the role of leader as soon as I started so I was basically controlling all activities and what we were doing so it was quite good. I think I did well, as an individual and also as leading a team. So let's see.

IR: How did you manage to do that, to take the role of the leader - was there anyone else who did so?

H: I just sort of, as from the start I just started saying let's do this, everyone sort of looked at me as the leader so it was left to me, so I thought it was a good idea because I read that in one of the magazines that you should do that.

IR: In which magazine? Graduate related?

H: Yeah, it was Target Jobs I think.

IR: I see yeah.

H: There was this one guy who got many interviews and he got a lot of job offers, he was writing why, so he said in group exercises you should try to take the leader's position all the time because sometimes if you don't then it's kind of hard to judge your capabilities because you're just a team member and you're not doing anything, not saying anything. So the less you say the less chance you have to basically do well. The more you talk, not you should talk like random stuff, but you talk relevant stuff you know, give relevant ideas and also take ideas from everyone else so look at what everyone else is saying so take their ideas as well; so mostly companies like a person who can naturally lead and also get everyone's ideas and then come up with a solution.

Although Hugo described himself as a 'natural' leader, he needed to figure out how to show this at the assessment centre, which he did by taking the advice from one of the specialist graduate magazines.

The understanding of how to play the game 'right' does not come at once and needs to be figured out by students during the process of job searching. Anthony's (male, overseas, Renewable Energy Systems Technology, L3) example demonstrates this:

A: But what I've learned from the careers centre is that they look at all those things [qualifications and skills]. Those are the things that sell you. So that's what I think... As well as how I answer these questions that (might seem dumb). And I think that's my weak point sometimes. Or I might come off as self-centred depending on how I answer the questions. Or they might ask you like, oh, me, in a team situation, this – this happens. What would you do? And yeah I might not answer how they might like. I've had an application like that I think. I can't remember for which company.

IR: How do you understand selling yourself to employers and what one needs to do – er – to do it well?

A: Well, it's a really delicate balance between showing confidence and showing off your skills, but at the same time not coming off as arrogant and self-centred. That's what I think. And I don't think I've achieved that balance as yet in terms of er expressing it on paper. I think it's a very fine balance between those two things.

Similarly, the excerpt below shows how Peter (male, UK, Management Sciences, L1) wrongly figured out how to answer employers' questions at the interview:

> P: ... they were 'why do you want to be an investment banker' – not investment banker – 'why do you want to work in this industry?' and I said 'it's rewarding and I see like a lot of societies relying on banking for the quality of life, I just feel like a social responsibility aspect of it, like me doing a good job would basically ... I don't know, it's like politics really you know, you do a good job and you're serving the country really or the world and the quality of life ... it's like throughout the ages back and bonds and this sort of thing has built empires and I just think it's a massive, massive part of society and like I just think it was completely the wrong answer because he was like 'no its about the money!' [laughs]

Emphasising the social function of the financial industry was what Peter thought would be a good answer, presenting himself as someone believing in combining social responsibility and material benefits the job would bring. However, the interviewer denounced this line of reasoning as inappropriate. This made Peter think of how he should have responded, and how to play the game during an interview in the future:

> P: And I thought of that because I mean, it's part of the inspiration behind ... it's just about ... I probably should have said ... if I was thinking about it now I would just say I've never really pushed to my limits and in an industry so volatile and big as this I can really see how far I can go, something like that would have been good but like ... I wanted like ... a pursuit of happiness Will Smith moment, but it just never came.

It may be concluded that conformity to whatever employers require and figuring out how to do this seems to be the key skill that makes one employable during job search. 'Demonstrating' skills during a job search is in learning to play the game, i.e. figuring out how to write and speak about one's skills in the way that employers want. In this case practice makes perfect, and with more experience in attending interviews and assessment centres, it was becoming easier for students to 'demonstrate' their skills. Derek's (male, UK, Geography with Economics, L3) case illustrates this:

> D: And obviously I got like interviewed as well and asked questions, but it was – they were questions that I'd been asked so many times that I kind of knew answers to. Because each person would ask you pretty much the same question – why do you want to go into you know

> recruitment and why you're gonna be good at it – so you know I kind of had just a list of answers that I'd just reel off - knew them by heart by then [laughs].

8.3.2 Questioning conformity: A moment of resistance?

'Demonstrating' skills to employers necessarily involved playing the game, i.e. assuming that one had the skills employers asked for and figuring out what to say to employers and how at various stages in the job search to 'stand out' from other candidates. However, this process implies conforming to whatever employers ask for, and approaching the job search accordingly. The problem here may be in having to present oneself in a way that contradicts the way students would present themselves if this was not a criterion for their employability. While most students did not express any concerns about this, it was not the case for four students in the sample.

Employability rhetoric requires the marketability of one's skills, which involves them being not just up-to-date, but one's ability to actively promote them to employers. At the same time, during the process of the job search skills are assessed on the basis of an articulated narrative that highlights these skills. As a result, the narrative becomes central to the marketability of the skills, and the grander the narrative, the more marketable the person's skills would seem. However, the very construction of these grand self-promoting narratives seemed to be artificial to some students and contradicting the way they wanted to present themselves. This holds for Andy (male, overseas, Information Management & Business Studies, L1):

> A: I think like one of the major things that changed [during the job search] was when I was writing CV, for example, I tried to be I don't know I guess it derives from my [his nationality] roots. I'm trying to be like direct, direct, open and honest, kind of basics. But when I was doing my CV and I went for the CV check, she was saying I was just like too open and like, it doesn't promote me. So like basically the person to get like a highly competitive job position must promote himself, sell himself, but I can't really do that. It's just not in my nature. So I had to like adapt to that and like when I was doing several CV like workshops, yeah, she made me sort of make any little bit sound amazing kind of thing, but sometimes it's not, I don't know how to say, it's just like makes the entire thing really biased. Like some of my friends, they say things on the CV that weren't true actually.

Later in the interview he said that things that sounded amazing in the CV were in reality just standard, which was the main problem of employability rhetoric for him.

Similarly, Auriel (female, overseas, Economics with Sociology, L1) felt uncomfortable about the way she needed to hype her skills to employers:

> A: Yeah, I'm trying to make the CV as best as it can be and yeah, my cover letter really good, but it's so hard not to sound like you're very arrogant. Cause I'm not an arrogant person, but I think when it comes to job hunting, you have to be 'I'm the best, I'm the best, you want me', and it's so out of my personality that I almost feel like a fool when I'm saying yeah, I'm the best, blah-blah'', but I feel like these recruiters, they should know that it's not genuine.

The way she thinks about herself (i.e. as not arrogant) does not match the way she needs to present her skills to employers. For Derek (male, UK, Geography with Economics, L3) adapting his behaviour in the interview to what employers wanted, based on the feedback he had been given earlier, resulted in a job offer. However, he was not positive when reflecting on his job search experience:

> D: The – the job kind of – er search and not being massively involved in money but being more about the kind of job satisfaction. But then as I've kind of progressed through it my view on that has changed in the fact that I've had to kind of hide my real person from the – the interviewers because someone's already – you know I've previously been told that I'm not good enough for the job because I'm too honest. So then you know that honesty is then hidden from you know these people that have actually gone and employed me because I've you know kind of said that I'm something else to what I am in reality. So you know I think the job hunt is – well finding a job is almost – it's like kind of – it's flawed essentially because I reckon nearly all the people that get jobs don't get a job because it's their real – you know their real person, who they're really about, it's how well they've said things that the company want them to say. So that's – yeah something that is – has made me more aware that it's not necessarily about who you are or what you've done, it's about how well you can fabricate you know. Something that may not necessarily be true, but that may be appealing to a – like an employer – which kind of defeats the object of them employing you in the first place – because they're not employing you, they're employing you know sort - like a story that you've made up to like display a point.

Conforming to what was expected of him in an interview made Derek disillusioned about the job search process. He was aware that it was through pretending that he was recruited. However, when asked what he thought about his future job and whether it would be affected by him pretending to be what he was not, Derek was still positive and hoping that the flawed job search process would stop the moment he was hired.

The cases that have been mentioned so far may be considered as instances of passive resistance. Students did not unquestionably construct themselves the way employers required. Although this informed the way they were presenting themselves to employers, in private conversations students were sharing their concerns and discomfort about having to do this, showing the unwillingness to conform. Archer's (male, EU, Renewable Energy Systems Technology, L1) case may be considered as active resistance. Not willing to construct himself as someone he did not associate himself with, Archer limited the number of applications to places where he thought he would need to compromise himself most:

> IR: How do you feel about that – lying or pretending to have those core skills they emphasise?
> A: Well I – that's why I haven't applied to many big ones, I don't like doing it. And I think that – it's not that I don't like doing it that much, it's just that I think that what's the point in doing it if you're not that person that they're looking for, so why should I be bothered to be that person?

Here Archer shows that he is ready to sacrifice his employability so as not to make compromises with himself. The phrase 'why should I be bothered to be that person' demonstrates the strength of his position, which is a challenge to conformity.

8.4 The scope of employability

According to the employability rhetoric at Aimfield University (6.3.2), the scope of employability goes way beyond getting a job. Employability was presented as a criterion for success and a lifelong project, where people's private lives also contribute to their employability. Students' work orientations were largely in line with this rhetoric, with students willing to be flexible in the labour market (7.2), as well as choosing jobs with employability in mind (see chapter 7). During their job search experiences, other facets of the scope of employability were spotted.

First, students were referring to actively managing their employability before job search, which adds to the image of employability as a lifelong project. Students talked about their past experiences as having been done with employability in mind. This was in reflecting on how to 'stand out' from the rest, by creating experiences that would enhance one's employability and provide relevant examples for employers. Michelle (female, overseas, International Business, L1) is a good example:

> M: I like to think I'm different, but that's I guess what everyone likes to think. I've tried to set myself apart by making the digital marketing blog... So I think there's loads of interest for it, but not everyone is willing to pursue their interest. They just put it in the CV as in I'm interested in it, but...

Michelle created a blog that was closely linked to the area of marketing she was interested in. As the first reason for doing this, she mentioned 'setting herself apart' from others. While other students just mentioned they were interested in marketing, Michelle was thinking of ways to communicate this to employers and make her more employable.

Attending skills courses organised by the CEC was the most common way in which students consciously managed their employability before starting job search. Below Beatrice (female, UK, Information Management & Business Studies, L1) provides the rationale for doing it:

> B: Well, the workshop that I did I've got a certificate for it and that's pretty much why I did it. I didn't do it because I knew I was going to get some skills that I didn't already know. All it was was a presentation about little things – and a bit of group work. And you know I – I've done that before. It's – it doesn't – it's just slides that they read out. It's not the most helpful thing you know. But they're really big businesses so er when you have that on a certificate... It looks a lot better. So that's why I did it.

The way she talks about this course shows that she is skeptical about the actual content and whether it helps to develop skills, taking them quite instrumentally. She sees courses provided by the CEC as having the potential to increase employability, but unlike the CEC, who present them as developing skills, treats them as an opportunity to get a credential (from a big employer). This also shows that playing the (job search) game starts before one starts searching for a job.

Second, throughout the job search students were mobilising their private experiences so as to be employable. With the potential for skills to be acquired from any experience, students often used examples from beyond their work and studies to talk about skills. Most students mentioned their hobbies and interests to employers, showing a part of their private lives, what and who they were outside work and studies. These were not just listed, but expanded on to provide examples of skills acquired. Michelle's (female, overseas, International Business) CV can be used as an example:

> I have an immense interest in archaeology and I pride myself in being a member of [name of the centre]. It is a scientific institution for young talent from across the country.
> I have written and presented a research paper on [name of the project]. It was a result of a year-long research and I have successfully presented to a scientific panel.

With the supposed transferability of skills, Michelle's example here shows who she would be outside work, and implies a number of skills, like presentation skills, research skills, being committed to long term goals and having talent in general.

Similarly, Anthony (male, overseas, Renewable Energy Systems Technology, L1) used experiences from his private life in replying to questions on skills in applications:

> A: I try to look back at instances in my life. So like for instance I was the president of my church's youth group - and I describe like the situations where probably I've organised events or ... kind of er - was a liaison between the church's hierarchy and the group ... those will be situations I'll kind of describe in those applications.

While Anthony's example fits with what is asked in the application, he exposes something that may be deeply personal and important for him, his religion, and talks about it in a way that presents himself as an employable individual.

Overall, it was normal to talk about private experiences for the sake of employability, hence giving the employer not only what would be required for work, but the 'personality' as well. This shows the integration of personal life into working life: work and life boundaries are blurred even before finding a job. This may be a part of the job search game that students actively engage in, and they all accept the mobilisation of the private in this. At the same time, this raises the question of whether personal life becomes constructed with employability in mind. This is what the local context at Aimfield called for (see chapter 6). Although this was the case for a number of students in the sample, there was not enough data to comment on it in detail.

8.5 Rejections

The contemporary job search is not only about managing employability, but also about facing rejections. There were no students in the sample who got a job on the first attempt –

all got rejections or ‘no replies’ from employers. For most students these were hard to face. One interviewee, Auriel (female, overseas, Economics with Sociology, L1), was slow to start applying as she was afraid of being rejected:

> A: Well, they [an employer] say they want people with predicted first class and I am but like, in my second year, I got just below First Class, so I'd probably be eliminated in the first stage. That's what I thought anyway so I just didn't apply [laughs], I was too scared of the rejection! I only had it once, like when I was my second year so...
> IR: The rejection?
> A: Yeah, from them. So, I decided not to apply.
> IR: Why, you are scared about getting rejected?
> A: It's not nice! It's very discouraging ... you have to be tough skinned and I guess I'm not. I really don't like people saying they don't want me so I just didn't bother and stuff. I know I probably should have applied, take the risk unless you don't know, but I guess it's just perseverance, but I was scared, I just don't like getting rejected [laughs].

Although Auriel’s case is exceptional, it highlights other students’ attitudes to rejections too. They described being rejected as ‘heartbreaking’, ‘disheartening’, ‘a confidence knock’, etc. Below is an example of how Jolene (female, UK, Mathematics with Management, L1) treated rejections:

> J: I think it’s a big confidence knock. It does take you back a bit and you are a bit – you are a bit gutted for a few days. You’d be like oh I wish I got that. Cause when Deloitte rejected me, cause that was where I wanted to work, I was really gutted and I didn’t really want to apply for a job for a while and it was a big set-back.

Generally, the more students were applying, the more ‘normal’ rejections were becoming, as Andy’s case demonstrates (male, overseas, Information Management & Business Studies, L1):

> A: ... last year I did like around ten applications as well, so I guess after a year failing so many times, it comes easier [laughs]. I was like alright, I tried.

Archer (male, EU, Renewable Energy Systems Technology, L1) was the only case of taking rejections more ironically, referring to them as ‘part of the game’:

A: It's [rejections] part of the plan – it's part of the game [laughs]. I don't feel bad. I feel better when I receive a rejection than when I don't receive anything at all. At least I ... you know they - pay – give you some attention.

Although other students did not articulate it this way and were not as easy-going about rejections, they reacted to rejections as 'being part of the game'. Being rejected did not stop most students from applying for jobs, only temporarily. They did not make students question their ability to do the job either. As a result, rejections were mostly a way for students to act upon their employability. A number of students considered investing in skill 'possession' (e.g. attending employability courses, gaining skills via volunteering) if they were unsuccessful for a long time. However, it was mostly the 'demonstration' of employability that students acted upon, i.e. figuring out how to play the game. Usually this was in figuring out how to 'demonstrate' their skills. For example, this could involve amending their CV, as was the case for Andy (male, overseas, Information Management & Business Studies, L1):

A: So I was like down I guess [when rejected], well, it's natural reaction, but it made me sort of well obviously it pushed me to improve, so I redrafted my CV another like three times I guess by now.
IR: Yeah, I see.
A: So I think it's a natural process of just pushing you further, like finding this and this that you could improve.

Getting a rejection was also one of the very few points in the job search where students criticised organisations they were willing to work for. This may be explained as follows. Having been rejected, students were particularly keen to get feedback from employers. Knowing where the 'problem' was and acting upon it was treated as potentially 'enabling' them to become more employable. As a result, not getting replies or receiving standard rejection letters, which was usually the case, made students frustrated and disappointed, thinking they had wasted time. Here is how Simon (male, EU, Economics, L1) criticised employers for impersonal feedback:

S: It's [application process] very challenging and you do all of that and then they say 'no, I'm sorry we can't take you on'. It's highly de-motivating. I mean it would be great if they said okay no, but this is where you messed up so next time around you know you can improve yourself. But they just send you, I mean ... even worse you never hear it from them. The ILO job - never heard from them and thank god I didn't have to do any of those online tests but there's loads of other jobs where you don't hear from them or they send you a generic email: 'Oh yes, we are sorry to inform you or we have carefully considered your application' ... there's so many of those e-mails and you know people know that when you read the first line and you can just go ahead and delete it.

Similarly, this was the case for Peter (male, UK, Management Sciences, L1):

> P: I despise them [rejections] really because you know, you spend that much time researching the company and like different aspects and the correct things to say and then you just get a standard rejection letter; it's a bit sort of disheartening...

Peter makes a somewhat resistant response to such an attitude from employers, by treating companies as they treat him:

> P: ... I just think, you know, treat the application process like they treat you and just apply for everything and the more sort of options and applications I make the more chance ... it's the law of averages really.

Getting feedback was more likely at further stages of the application process. This was the case for Derek (male, UK, Geography with Economics, L3). The feedback also had an 'enabling' effect. Having acted upon it, Derek got the job:

> D: ... I definitely learned from that experience of having the interview cause then I learned that you know it's not necessarily what you want to – what you want to tell them, it's kind of what they want to hear is the thing that's gonna er – you know, put you in good stead with them.

However, although he was glad to get the job, the very feedback he got from the previous employer made him feel disappointed:

> D: ... And they said they would have employed me and they would have offered me the job but I was too honest - in the – in the interview. Which was really disappointing cause I think if you're not going to be offered a job and the excuse is going to be you're too honest, I just don't – I can't really see how you cannot employ someone for being honest. Because the company themselves were saying we're different from all other recruitment firms because we have integrity and we're honest about what we do and we're like, we're transparent in how we like operate kind of thing. And for them to then turn around and say yeah you've got too much integrity and you're too honest was just like really – like confusing but annoying at the same

> time because it was just contradictory of what they were about. And they said the one thing that let me down was obviously being too honest and – like I said – they said what's your plans for the future in like say 20 years and I was like well I don't really have any plans for looking that far ahead but the only – the one plan that I do have is that – well not really a plan, but I kind of have an aspiration to be a geography teacher at some point in my life. And that was the thing that they highlighted is – that kind of thing – so – that was that one down the drain.

This was in recognising that he was rejected for something small and insignificant, not related to his ability to do the job, but resulting in not getting it, that made Derek disappointed. The disappointment spread beyond the content of the feedback itself, to Derek treating the job search process as flawed (as he said during our third interview).

Rejection, then, may be a point of sensation, a point for questioning not only how the job search process is organised, but also the idealised images of employers and work. However, in this sample this questioning only resulted in students applying more, or, as in the case of Derek, treating the job search process as flawed rather than, for example, changing his work orientation.

8.6 Conclusion

This chapter has looked at students engaging with employability rhetoric during the job search. Most students embraced the 'common sense' of skill 'possession', referring to having skills, acquiring/developing them and even sometimes describing themselves through them. Even students who discovered the skills rhetoric only after coming to the UK embraced it, and it also shaped their very way of talking about the job search. Students who were skeptical about skills were primarily voicing their concerns through issues arising around the 'demonstration' of skills, but not going beyond this critique and into questioning the 'common sense' itself.

At the same time, the necessary 'demonstration' of skills during the job search allows me to characterise the students as players, who were aware of certain rules that they need to follow to be more likely to get a job. They were actively manipulating the skills rhetoric during the job search by not questioning whether they had the skills needed for the jobs for which they were applying. This corresponds to the way students were led to manipulate the skills rhetoric at the CEC (6.3.5). Manipulating this rhetoric was also manifested in 'demonstrating' skills in a certain way (e.g. not repeating the same skill in different application questions). However, the rules of the 'game' were neither clear nor universal for all employers, and through trial and error, as well as using various advice available, students were figuring out what these were. Learning that it was 'demonstrating' what the employers wanted them to show, rather than what students thought they 'possessed', was the primary condition for achieving employability. In other words, there was a need to conform to whatever employers wanted at the risk of being deemed unemployable otherwise.

However, there is a tension between the 'common sense' of skills 'possession' and the way they need to be 'demonstrated' during a job search. If a person embraces the 'common sense' of skill 'possession', it is likely they will think that they are good at some skills and lack others. However, when they need to 'demonstrate' these skills, it becomes insufficient to have some skills and reflect on them. They need to present themselves as being the best, and act on the assumption that they have any skills required by employers. This is the moment when students might start questioning the rhetoric of skills that they have been embracing. This is what happened to some participants in this research. Conforming to whatever employers wanted was not a comfortable situation to be in for a number of students, leading to dissatisfaction with the job search and signs of resistance. Students were especially uncomfortable about the need to overstate their previous experiences and present them as something extraordinary, which they knew was not the case. While this dissatisfaction was something students usually kept to themselves, there was just one case of active resistance, where the student refused to be the person organisations required.

Rejections were another point in the job search that made students question the process and criticise employers. Being a negative experience in general, rejections usually made students realise that being rejected had nothing to do with the ability to do the job, and was usually connected with how they 'demonstrated' their skills to employers. However, students' dissatisfaction here did not result in disillusionment with the skills rhetoric or the employers they were applying to. It was getting standard rejection letters and not getting feedback from employers that made students disillusioned. In other words, students treated rejections as a way to work on their employability. Not being provided with advice on this by employers is what made them frustrated.

However, these were not only rejections that motivated students to enhance their employability. Students showed that the project of employability for them started long before the job search. Furthermore, to 'demonstrate' their skills to employers, students were using examples from their private lives, making these examples work in the name of employability. None of the students questioned this all-embracing character of employability. However, this alone does not necessarily make them employable enough. Only 3 out of 15 students in the sample got the job they initially wanted, while others got their second choice job, or none at all. So even actively managing the all-embracing scope of employability throughout an individual's (working) life does not imply that he or she will be employable enough to be employed, to get desirable employment or to receive a promotion. At the same time, resisting the employability rhetoric is likely not only to undermine one's employability, but also to make the access to the 'consumption of work', which most students in the sample were oriented to (see chapter 7), less likely. The close connection of the 'common senses' of 'initiative employability' and 'consumption of work' will be highlighted in the next chapter, where the themes from data analysis (chapters 5, 6, 7 and 8) will be discussed.

Chapter 9. The normative emptiness of ‘consumption of work’ and ‘initiative employability’

9.1 Introduction

This chapter is devoted to the discussion of the empirical findings of this thesis in the context of relevant conceptual and empirical literature. I start with a discussion of the ‘consumption of work’ orientation (9.2). Here I argue that there was a strongly normative image of work constructed on campus. ‘Consumption of work’ was the ‘common sense’ work orientation, which was actively marketed to students while other work orientations were marginalised (9.2.1). While it was embraced by most students, it was not the only work orientation around which their preferences were shaped. As ‘dialogical selves’ students navigated between different work orientations (9.2.2). There were instances of resistance to the ‘consumption of work’. However, this resistance was ‘fragmented’ and alternatives were fantasies of escape rather than students’ actual choices (9.2.3). The lack of students making alternative choices, however, comes not only from the hegemonic project of consumption in action on campus, but also from its connection with employability. This conclusion gives rise to the question of whether employability itself is normative, which is discussed in the following section of this chapter (9.3). Here I make an argument about employability as a normative lifelong project of the self. First, I look at employability as a ‘lifelong project of the self’, where constant enhancement and selling of skills are necessary to maintain a position in the labour market (9.3.1). Then I look at the problem with the ‘common sense’ conceptualisation of skills that leads me to observe hints of resistance during the process of job search (9.3.2). In the final section of this chapter I comment on the ‘normative emptiness’ of the ‘consumption of work’ orientation and employability that can be traced throughout this chapter and the thesis in general (9.4). Also, despite the outlook for any resistance being very bleak, I make a comment on the potential for individual resistance in rejecting both ‘consumption of work’ and employability at the same time, and therefore shaping one’s work and life according to an alternative set of principles. Finally, I reflect on the possibility that the conclusion is the result of using data concerning students at a specific point in their lives, as well as the specifics of the dataset itself (9.5).

9.2 'Consumption of work'

In this section, first, the 'common sense' of 'consumption of work' constructed on campus is discussed (9.2.1). While a certain variety of work characteristics is offered, these are all part of the 'menu' of 'consumption of work' (Korczynski and Ott, 2006; Korzcynski, 2007). Second, I look at how students as 'dialogical selves' navigate between a 'consumption of work' orientation, which most of them embraced, and other work orientations their preferences were shaped by (9.2.2). Here I pay particular attention to instances when these were in conflict and students had to make choices. Finally, I look at instances of resistance to 'consumption of work', as well as fantasies associated with escape (9.2.3). I characterise this resistance as 'fragmented' as it challenges only some items on the 'menu'. At the same time, the fantasies of escape do not present a completely alternative world view, being shaped in addition to and partly within the ethic of 'consumption of work' and potentially serving as rhetorical devices to legitimise 'consumption of work'.

9.2.1 The 'menu' of 'consumption of work'

Employer activities on campus were shaped by the context that the university and in particular the CEC were facing, especially the partially commercial aspect of the CEC's activity. This highlights the financialisation of the university (Beverungen et al., 2009), with increased corporate funding and emphasis on university-business collaboration (see chapter 2). Within this context, it was primarily MNCs and large for-profit employers who were interested in the CEC's services and ready to pay for them, as part of their HRM practices. On-campus presence is, then, one of the ways that corporations enter people's daily lives. As a result, students were continually exposed to a selection of employers promoting a specific image of work and work orientations. The presence and activity of these employers corresponds to the practices of 'employer branding', which have been promoted in orthodox management and practitioner literature (e.g. Sartain, 2005; Backhaus and Tikoo, 2004; Mosley, 2007). This is an example of human resource management going beyond corporate boundaries (Costea et al., 2012), shaping the work orientations of students, the majority of whom would never be employable enough (Cremin, 2010) to get jobs in MNCs.

'Employer branding' may be viewed as the 'war of position' through which the 'consumption of work' orientation is constructed as 'common sense'. The way that the symbolic elements associated with work (Backhaus and Tikoo, 2004) are highlighted, both in graduate recruitment brochures and in the way organisations presented themselves on campus, was one of the key aspects of the ‘employee value proposition’ that I considered. Symbolic elements associated with work especially relate to the ‘instrumentalised work ethic’ within the ‘consumption of work’, but are not limited to it (see chapter 5). A lot of effort was put into stimulating so-called ‘brand excitement’ (Sartain, 2005) and ‘brand experience’ (Mosley, 2007) among students. These were marketed through the corporate presence on campus. Students were addressed as communicators (Gabriel and Lang, 1996), traditional and modern hedonists (Campbell, 1987). The empirical material showed that ‘consumption of work’ goes beyond cafeteria-style benefits (Dale, 2012) and the aesthetic (Bauman, 2007) characteristics of work. ‘Consumption (of the image) of work’, ‘consumption through work processes’ and ‘consumption of work processes’, as outlined in the conceptual framework (see chapter 3), were all part of the ‘employee value proposition’ and the marketing campaign on campus.

First, ‘consumption (of the image) of work’ was seen in constructing ‘sign values’ associated with MNCs and large for-profit employers, the financial industry and organisational brands. MNCs and large for-profit employers were presented as ‘top’ to students and were also the organisations they were mostly exposed to. Organisations of different size and from non-business sectors were neither ‘top’ nor very visible to students. ‘Sign values’ of status, prestige and conspicuous consumption may be referred to as characterising the financial industry. There were different ways to build ‘sign values’ around the organisational brand, highlighting the ‘sign values’ of the corporate brand, the employer brand, or both.

Second, the opportunity of ‘consumption through work processes’ existed in getting access to ‘sign values’ as well as hedonist experiences through the process of work. Within this dimension of ‘consumption of work’, access to different lifestyles was offered and marketed to students. These were organisational culture, ethical lifestyle, and adventure. For example, some organisations promoted ‘fun work cultures’ (e.g. Butler et al., 2011; Fleming, 2005) while others promoted more hierarchical corporate cultures where employees would engage in conspicuous consumption (Patsiaouras and Fitchett, 2010). This was done through such symbolic objects as a suit, or the visuals of working spaces, as well as through branded employees (Brannan et al., 2011; Pettinger, 2004) at careers fairs. All organisations promoted access to an ‘ethical lifestyle’ via the presence of corporate social responsibility in recruitment brochures. They also provided opportunities for adventure and travel within a job.

Third, even some aspects of the work process were marketed to students as consumer experiences, becoming part of the symbolic meanings of the images and slogans in the recruitment brochures. Opportunities for self-development and employability were key to the ‘employee value proposition’. Training was one of the central elements of employability on offer, being part of the employability deal of MNCs (see chapter 2). These address students as ‘modern hedonists’ (Campbell, 1987), for whom hedonism goes beyond engaging the senses and may even be associated with unpleasant experiences. Self-development at work, being a part of work design, may fit into the rhetoric of authenticity (Murtola and Fleming, 2011) and self-management (Lopdrup-Hjorth et al., 2011), which have become popular in organisations. These take characteristics of work that may be viewed as genuinely important by employees and turn them into management tools, for example, as a form of neo-normative control (Fleming and Sturdy, 2009). This study shows that these characteristics of work can also be commodified.

In summary, the image of work within the ‘consumption of work’ orientation is closely associated with consumption opportunities. Here the meaning of work is derived from the process of consumption being promoted by employers, with the help of the symbolic images in recruitment brochures, as well as the marketing campaign on campus. There is choice within ‘consumption of work’, with the potential for students to prefer some aspects of it and be indifferent to or reject others. There is also some variety on offer, like choosing more relaxed ‘fun cultures’ or hierarchical corporate cultures, or being against or for the suit. However, these are choices from the ‘menu’ (Korczynski and Ott, 2006; Korczynski, 2007). At the same time, ‘consumption of work’ is a normative work orientation. Being the ‘common sense’ work orientation on campus, other work orientations were marginalised. This image not only marginalises the visibility of other work orientations on campus, but limits students’ choices by challenging their employability, which is what will be covered in the following two sections (9.2.2 and 9.2.3).

9.2.2 ‘Dialogical selves’ engaging with ‘consumption of work’

Students’ work orientations, as chapter 7 showed, were very much shaped by the ‘common sense’ of ‘consumption of work’. However, with students being ‘dialogical selves’ (see chapter 1), preferences towards certain aspects of different work orientations at the same time were common among them. This combination of work orientations was also something students were thinking through and reshaping throughout their job search.

This section first looks at ‘consumption of work’ as the work orientation that most students embraced. Then I look at how students navigated between different work orientations during their job search, paying particular attention to instances of conflict between them.

Organisational size, brand and the financial industry were all associated with certain ‘sign values’ for students. Large employers were considered the ‘best’ employers to work for, which corresponds to the image of these organisations as ‘top’ that was constructed on campus. Organisational brand was either something students wanted to associate with as consumers of the products of this brand, or as the employer brand. The very recognisability of a certain organisation due to its size or brand were important for students. The financial industry was usually associated with ‘sign values’ of status, prestige and conspicuous consumption. While the ‘sign values’ associated with (images of) work were considered to be important by most students, this aspect of ‘consumption of work’ was the one that met the most resistance from other students (see also 9.2.3). There were students who were oriented towards smaller employers, did not attribute a particular attention to the brand and despised the financial industry, shaping their preferences in contrast to the ‘sign values’ associated with it.

‘Consumption through work processes’ was a less contested aspect of the ‘consumption of work’ orientation, most likely due to the broader ‘menu’ it offered. Students were oriented towards travelling, access to consumer lifestyle and organisational cultures that work provided. These were articulated as important both due to the opportunities for hedonism and communication of ‘sign values’ that they provided. There was some diversity within the orientation to organisational culture among students, which may be divided into being for or against the suit. Students who were for the suit were usually strongly oriented towards ‘consuming (the image of) work’. Students who were against the suit were usually the ones who rejected the previous aspect of ‘consumption of work’. Notably, students did not refer to the ‘ethical lifestyle’ offered as part of the ‘employee value proposition’ as important to their choices.

Training and challenge were the processes of work that students were oriented towards. These are both aspects of the ‘abstract work ethic’, which is an intrinsic work orientation, where value from work comes from its abstract features, like the way it is designed. Being part of the ‘employee value proposition’, these processes may also be ‘consumed’. While this was something I argued in the case of training, I could not claim this in the case of challenge (see 7.5). Employability was another process of work that students were oriented towards, which infiltrated all other aspects of work orientations. Notably, almost all features of ‘consumption of work’, especially ‘consumption (of the image of) work’ and ‘consuming work processes’ were perceived by students as contributing to their employability. It was not just training that students thought would provide employability, but the ‘sign values’ of status associated with images of MNCs, the financial industry and well-known brands, as well as their recognisability.

Alternative choices were doubted by students as they challenged some of the aspects of ‘consumption of work’ that were important and desirable to them. For example, working for a brand that did not have a ‘sign value’ that could be communicated to others made work less meaningful for some students. The preference for a choice of training programmes within an organisation, which would enhance employability, is another example in which the ‘consumption of work’ took precedence over other considerations. This connection between ‘consumption of work’ and employability further strengthens the normative aspect of this work orientation (see 9.2.1) and makes alternative choices even less likely to take place. However, there were also cases when ‘consumption of work’ was ready to be sacrificed for the sake of an ‘instrumentalised work ethic’. There were also cases of students navigating between a ‘substantive work ethic’ and ‘consumption of work’, for whom aspects of ‘consumption of work’ were less important than the substantive elements, or became less important while rethinking their preferences throughout the job search. The examples in which ‘consumption of work’ was not as important, or was ready to be abandoned by students, do not undermine its centrality in shaping the preferences of most students in the sample. However, those few instances of resisting the ‘common sense’ or going beyond it deserve a more detailed discussion, which is what the next section is devoted to.

9.2.3 ‘Fragmented’ resistance and ‘escape attempts’

Passive (Scott, 1990) or ‘decaf’ (Contu, 2008) resistance are common forms of resistance in the workplace. Distancing from work may take place through humour, irony and cynicism (e.g. Fleming and Spicer, 2003), which become ways of everyday coping, but do not challenge the causes of this resistance or the power structures which shape them. Surprisingly, then, this form of resistance was almost entirely absent in students’ narratives about their choice of work. For example, nobody sarcastically or ironically commented on the features of work they were choosing, such as training, or the attention companies pay to culture, whether it is a culture for or against the suit[1]. Although these were mostly choices within 'consumption of work', students seemed to have taken them seriously and at face value. However, although passive resistance to 'consumption of work' was minimal, there were instances of active resistance to some aspects of this work orientation. For example, the choice of small and medium-sized employers rather than MNCs, or rejecting the financial industry while being an economist, can be considered as instances of active resistance. At the same time, other aspects of this work orientation, such as training, were embraced. In other words, even though some elements of 'consumption of work' were openly rejected by students, this was resistance to some items on the 'menu' and not the 'menu' itself (see 9.2.2). I would like to refer to this phenomenon as 'fragmented' resistance.

'Fragmented' resistance arises from the concealed nature of the politics of consumption (Dunne et al., 2013; see also chapter 3). However, it is not only the process of production that is concealed here, but the fact of consumption. Nothing that the students said in interviews indicated they were aware that they were consuming an image of work produced via 'employer branding' practices and employers' presence on campus. Even though they may have noticed the marketing aspect of the recruitment campaign, they did not associate their choice of work with the process of consumption. The 'menu' aspect of consumer choice is also concealed. By not challenging the 'menu', 'fragmented' resistance thus does not challenge the hegemonic project of consumption, which has produced 'consumption of work'. For the potential of it to be challenged, students need to become aware of the fact of consumption taking place. Once this is revealed, 'fragmented' resistance may turn into active or 'decaf' resistance. Active resistance might involve rejecting the whole 'consumption of work' orientation and shaping one's work orientations around an alternative. At the same time, passive or 'decaf' resistance would be manifested in choosing 'consumption of work', but perhaps being more distanced from or ironic about the work characteristics on offer.

'Fragmented' resistance to elements of the 'consumption of work' orientation is not the only way to see agency in action. When answering questions that allow them to fantasise, students gave their visions of a potential alternative future. Some students saw it as only a fantasy while others spoke about it as a potentially realisable goal or even as something

[1] However, this type of resistance not being present in the data does not mean it is not present it students heads or lives, or that it will not appear once they enter the workplace (see 9.5 for more discussion of this).

they would definitely do later in life. However, even the latter by no means necessarily implies that the alternative choice will be made in the future (e.g. see LaPointe, 2011). These fantasies may be treated as ‘escape attempts’ (Cohen and Taylor, 1992). It is in these fantasies that, although not resisting ‘consumption of work’, students were going beyond the ‘menu’ offered by it. The motivation behind these fantasies of escape corresponded to a work ethic different from the ‘instrumentalised’ and ‘abstract’ meaning of ‘consumption of work’. The escape to being a teacher, the most frequently mentioned fantasy, was often explained by the importance of this profession to society or by seeing it as a craft (Anthony, 1977), i.e. as a ‘substantive work orientation’ (see chapter 3). Students not embracing the ‘ethical lifestyle’ that was offered to them as part of the ‘employee value proposition’ might mean that they saw a distinction between the two ways of contributing to society. At the same time, using the moral anchoring associated with ‘escape attempts’ might have served as a rhetorical device that legitimised students’ orientations towards ‘consumption of work’.

From students’ speaking of ideal situations, the following may be inferred. If they had unlimited resources, if work were not a necessity, students would probably be more likely to construct their work choices around substantive work orientations, with it being their moral choice. Notably, however, this does not mean that fantasies of escape, in going beyond ‘consumption of work’, would be consumption-free, and that ‘substantive work orientation’ would be chosen instead of ‘consumption of work’. The fantasies of escape in students’ accounts appeared when students were to imagine they had enough money so they did not need to work. Therefore, they are not some completely alternative views of the world in which being part of the ‘consumer society’ is not central to people’s lives. Consumption would still be at the forefront of students’ choice, and only if they were consumption-abundant would they search for an escape in substantive work orientations. At the same time, in their escape fantasies students were mostly referring to the societal contribution of what they would be doing. Work as craft, which is another element of a ‘substantive work orientation’ (see chapter 3), was present in accounts of very few of them. Students saw their experiences outside work as being transferrable to the alternative work of teaching they could do in the future or in an ideal life situation. There would be no return to the professional values of the job if these escape attempts were ever to materialise, even, or especially, in the world of consumer abundance.

9.3 'Initiative' employability

This section discusses the 'common sense' of 'initiative employability'. First, based on the way employability was presented to students on campus, I argue that it is a lifelong 'project of the self' (Grey, 1994) (9.3.1). Here I make a distinction between career and employability as lifelong 'projects of the self' by highlighting how employability is wider in scope and is also a normative project, with few chances for people to avoid it. Second, I look at students who are managing employability during a job search, showing that manipulating the skills rhetoric by conforming to employers' demands is key to one's employability (9.3.2). At the same time, this leads to instances of resistance to the otherwise embraced 'common sense'. This resistance is mostly 'decaf' (Contu, 2008), while active resistance involves challenging not only employability, but changing one's work orientations.

9.3.1 Employability as a normative lifelong 'project of the self'

The 'common sense' of 'initiative' employability (Gazier, 1999) was promoted to students at Aimfield, which corresponds to the rhetoric of graduate employability at the macro level (see chapter 2). The students' responsibility for their employability was emphasised (see also Fejes, 2010; Fejes and Berglund, 2009), while the university was positioned as the 'enabler' (Fejes, 2010). This involved providing students with opportunities to enhance their employability while at university, and highlighted the value Aimfield put on employability at the rhetorical level. However, the university's role went beyond that of 'enabler': it was an active agent in the construction of the norm of employability. The need to have, acquire, develop and sell one's skills was central to this norm, with the risk of being deemed unemployable being the alternative. The importance of employability was emphasised on campus, and was presented as something students should act upon throughout their (working) lives. In other words, employability was positioned as a lifelong 'project of the self' (Grey, 1994), indeed stretching from the cradle to the grave (Levitas, 2005). Furthermore, rooted in the British context and informed by policies within this country, employability rhetoric addressed all students irrespective of where they came from (see chapter 6). So while employment (and hence employability) is at the centre of the relationship of a particular government with its citizens (Cole, 2008), employability rhetoric transcends citizenship in aiming to convert everyone into employable subjects (see Vesterberg, forthcoming).

The attitude to employability as a lifelong 'project of the self' was visible in students' accounts too. First, employability was part of their aspirations about work, and informed students' choices. Flexibility was treated by most students as a virtue, as the ability to exercise choice in the labour market. They were willing to be flexible and rejected the idea of a job for life. This was flexibility both in the type of work they would want to do, as well as the areas they would work in. This empirical outcome is different from the findings of previous research. In Brown and Scase's (1994) study, students still embraced the image of a bureaucratic career within one organisation, and hence flexibility to change jobs was not central to their preferences. In a more recent study by Tomlinson (2007), students articulated the need to be flexible as a result of the end of a job for life. They treated flexibility as a necessity, a part of the new reality in the labour market that they needed to face. This difference in outcomes might be the result of this aspect of employability rhetoric becoming more embedded in students' habitual experience.

Second, most students started working on their employability long before the job search, highlighting it as the drive for their future plans and the central element of their work orientations (see 9.2.2). The choice of work paths and employers was often justified by employability. This again speaks to previous studies on careers (Grey, 1994; McKinlay, 2002), where the career was the key motivation for self-management at work. At the same time, while careers were very much linked to a particular profession in these studies, or (a type of) organisation, employability is different. It blurs the boundaries between different types of jobs, professions, organisations and life even further. The scope of actions to which employability can be attached seems to be immense. Furthermore, these studies speak of careers for careers' sake, being part of a moral project (McKinlay, 2002) of the self-work ethic (Heelas, 2002). This thesis, however, highlights how employability is not important only in itself, but in giving the opportunity for 'consumption of work' (see 9.2.2). The provision of employer-endorsed training and work experience makes one more employable to work for employers with 'sign values' (e.g. 'top' employers, recognisable brands). Through access to these employers the opportunity to 'consume through work' processes, i.e. having a certain organisational culture and lifestyle brought via working, become more likely. Alternative choices (i.e. those outside the 'consumption of work' orientation), on the other hand, challenged employability, and were hence doubted by students (see 9.2.2).

More than just being a lifelong project to be constantly worked on, an individual's life at and outside work contributes to their employability. People are not 'dead selves' (McKinlay, 2002) or 'empty subjects' (see Costea et al., 2012), but their creative (and human) potential is mobilised in the name of employability (ibid.), further blurring the boundaries between life and work. Work both shapes employees' personal lives (e.g Grey, 1994; Land and Taylor, 2011) and demands these lives to be brought back to work. This was especially evident in this thesis, where students were primarily drawing on their experiences outside work and studies to construct themselves as employable. With skills being central to employability and at the same time assumed to be present within a variety of contexts, students were actively encouraged to mobilise their private lives in the name of employability. Using examples of extracurricular activities was suggested as a common way to prove students had the necessary skills. A lot of extracurricular activities were advertised to students through employability, encouraging them to construct the personal with employability in mind (see chapter 6).

From what has been said so far, employability may be claimed to be a lifelong project of the self, where one's self, including life outside work, is mobilised for its sake. This conclusion very much resembles Grey's (1994) career as a 'project of the self', where the private lives of employees were also very much embedded in their careers. McKinlay's (2002) account of Scottish banks at the beginning of the twentieth century also raises the issue of the close connection between careers and personal lives. Are there any differences, then, between career as a 'project of the self' and employability as a 'project of the self'? I argue there are, and although the two are closely linked, the latter is not simply a restatement of the former. I see the key difference between the two in the normative aspect of employability and its scope. Employability is part of the policy rhetoric, which is enforced at different levels and within different contexts (e.g. unemployment policy, educational policies). Careers can also be normative. For example, Korteweg (2003) showed how single mothers in the United States were pushed into 'getting a career' as a result of change in government legislation. However, in this case the 'career' is a by-product of the rhetoric at the job search centre. Employability, on the other hand, is at the centre of policy rhetoric. Not being able to live up to employability rhetoric marginalises individuals more than not pursuing a career. One can choose whether they are going to have a career or, for example, an orientation towards non-market roles (see Tomlinson, 2007) and (for instance) view the job in an instrumental way, as a means to pay the bills. However, with employability being a condition of employment (Cremin, 2010), irrespective of whether one wants a career, or whether he/she is in employment, the lifelong 'common sense' of 'initiative employability' needs to be lived up to. Failing to do this, resisting the rhetoric or trying to escape it by constructing one's life around an alternative set of values may result in becoming unemployable. More than this, people who do not actively construct themselves as employable might be framed as abnormal, or even 'disabled'. The latter is inferred from Garsten and Jacobsson's (forthcoming) study of Swedish public services, where those unable to find a job for a long period of time were coded as disabled, despite not having any apparent disabilities. Furthermore, unlike a career, employability becomes normative and enters people's lives long before they enter organisations (see also Costea et al., 2012); for example, being central to one's time at the university, both within formal education (see chapter 2) and outside it, as this section has highlighted.

In summary, despite being an empty signifier (Cremin, 2010) that is based on an elusive concept of skill (see chapter 2), employability is a normative lifelong 'project of the self'. Even though the potential for resisting employability and the possibility of escaping from it seem limited, the hints of resistance to the rhetoric will be looked at in the next section, in addition to discussing how students play the job search game.

9.3.2 The problem of skill[2] and hints of resistance during the job search game

At Aimfield skills were presented as the central component of employability and their high levels were key to employees with an 'edge' (see chapter 6), this being the 'instrumentation' of employability (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005). Employability-boosting activities on campus focused on the acquisition and development of skills. At the same time, the importance of awareness of skill gaps, and understanding how to work on these, were stressed. The assumption at Aimfield was that although many students had the necessary skills to become employed, it was problematic for them to 'demonstrate' them. This rhetoric of skills at Aimfield contributed to a certain 'common sense' about what an employable job candidate looked like and how they would present themselves to employers. According to this 'common sense', constant acquiring, developing and selling skills were necessary to maintain a position in the labour market. This corresponds to the

[2] I would like to remind the readers that by referring to 'skill' throughout this thesis I do not mean any notion of skill, but a particular conceptualisation of it that has become 'common sense' and is increasingly informing policies, practice and people's habitual experiences. Within this conceptualisation skills are 'soft' and not confined to a job (therefore, are transferable across contexts). See also section 2.5.2.

position of a ‘self-steering subject that shapes norms of self-promotion, self-evaluation and working on the self’, who is always ready to sell themselves (Fogde, 2011: 78). However, employability went beyond selling skills. In this sense, skill ‘demonstration’ is a broader term to work with. The key to ‘demonstration’ was both articulating and selling skills, but also manipulating the skills rhetoric, which is where the tension between individuals’ evaluations of their skills and employers’ requirements were taking place.

Students mostly embraced the skill rhetoric and used it to talk about their employability, being keen to provide examples of skills they had, and how they were or could be acquired and developed[3]. They took the category of skills as a measure of employability, and evaluated their employability through it, without questioning the notion itself and its elusiveness (see chapter 2). Even those students who were new to the rhetoric of employability and skills soon became familiar with it and were actively using it to describe themselves and their position in the labour market. At the same time, while engaged in impression management (Goffman, 1959) in the game of job search (Sharone, 2007), students actively manipulated the rhetoric of employability to ‘demonstrate’ their skills. The ‘demonstration’ of skills existed in creating narratives about situations where they were acquired and developed. The ‘articulation’ of skills, i.e. being able to talk about them, may be seen as the basis of skill ‘demonstration’. However, two key aspects come in addition to it so as to ‘stand out’. These are ‘selling’ the skills to employers and conforming to whatever employers require. The former involved presenting mundane narratives about skills as extraordinary. The latter speaks to McKinlay’s (2002) study of careers in Scottish banks, where conformity was key to a career within the organisation. Similarly, this speaks to Bergström and Knights’ (2006) study of recruitment interviews, where following the line recruiters were pursuing in the interview was a way to be recruited, while not following it could lead to rejection. However, the findings of this study also show that conformity is not a clear-cut category, and involves interpretation. It was often through trial and error, through being rejected, that students were figuring out what employers wanted and thus how to conform. This demonstrates an instrumental attitude to employability (Fogde, 2011; Grey, 1994) as a set of principles that need to be followed in order to get a job. As a result, none of the students were ‘purists’ (Brown and Hesketh, 2004). A ‘purist’ attitude to the job search involves competing for jobs according to meritocratic rules. However, learning to

[3] I would to remind to the readers that having, acquiring and developing skills have been referred to as the ‘common sense’ of skill ‘possession’ in this thesis (see chapter 2 for the rationale behind this).

manipulate the rhetoric of employability was key to navigating the process of the job search.

A tension for students arose in embracing the 'common sense' of skill 'possession' and understanding their employability through it, on the one hand, while manipulating it and having to conform to any characteristics required by employers on the other. This stimulated students' 'microdialogue' (Bakhtin, 1999; see chapter 1) and made some question the process of the job search. There were, however, a minority of students whose 'microdialogue' around this issue was expressed externally in the interviews. These students were concerned that they needed to present themselves in a way that was not comfortable for them. The aspect of selling themselves, by exaggerating their skills and making every tiny bit in the application sound extraordinary, was something students did not like, thinking it was artificial. This result goes in line with Fogde's (2011) study, in which not all the participants were comfortable with selling themselves. However, the very need to conform and to pretend to have the skills that employers wanted was another aspect of 'selling' that some students did not like. So it was not just the lack of confidence or shyness of some students that were the obstacles to selling themselves, but the unwillingness to conform as well. The difference in these two ways of being uncomfortable with the process of job searching is significant. The first way shows how the values of some students do not correspond to what is required for being employable, and run the risk of not getting a job if these values are 'demonstrated' to employers. However, there is no resistance here[4]. The second way of responding to employability rhetoric demonstrates resistance. Students criticised the need to conform in interviews, by not accepting conformity as part of skill 'demonstration'. These students' voices present the very resistance that has not been spotted in critical research on employability so far. In Fogde's (2011) study, although students were negotiating, adopting and contesting the assumptions about how to market themselves during the interaction with career coaches, they did not openly resist self-marketing as such. A number of students in this study resisted by questioning the need to conform rather than to present themselves the way they thought was appropriate. Students resisted both actively and passively. Passive resistance was seen in questioning the need for conformity, but amending behaviour to that expected by employers. Active resistance was seen when students did not apply to

[4] This, of course, depends on how one defines resistance. This claim is based on the definition of resistance in this study (see chapter 1), which is in articulation of not (fully) accepting some or all aspects of the rhetoric.

employers who were perceived to require conformity to a degree they considered unacceptable. This type of resistance is, then, closely connected to the choice of work.

9.4 Conclusion: Normative emptiness and the potential for individual resistance?

As has been argued throughout this chapter, the ‘consumption of work’ orientation and ‘initiative employability’ are both normative ‘common senses’, which have mostly been embraced by students. The ‘consumption of work’ orientation is closely tied to hegemonic projects of both consumption and employability. First, it positions the image of work as an object of consumption and the process of working as an act of consumption. This was promoted as the ‘common sense’ work orientation on campus. Second, ‘consumption of work’ is also likely to enhance employability. Work orientations outside the ‘menu’ of ‘consumption of work’, on the other hand, do not bring the pleasure of consumer experience, and may also challenge one’s employability. These are the two key reasons for the majority of students in this study being oriented towards ‘consumption of work’. Employability, however, was an important reason for students willing to sacrifice alternative work orientations in favour of the ‘consumption of work’. As a result, the emphasis on employability necessarily marginalises alternative work choices, such as substantive work orientations. Employability itself is a normative lifelong project of the self, which shows a certain attitude that labour market participants should have. Students mostly did not question this attitude, and were willing to be flexible, being concerned with their employability and not questioning the blurring of life-work boundaries demanded by the attitude.

Both ‘consumption of work’ and employability are empty of substantive meaning. Within the ‘consumption of work’ orientation the meaning of work comes from the process of consumption and the abstract characteristics of work, which are connected with work design. The professional or social values of a job are not part of this work orientation. Employability in its turn is an empty signifier (Cremin, 2010) for which infinite human potential needs to be mobilised (Costea et al., 2012). It is based on an elusive notion of (‘soft’/‘transferable’) skills, where the key skill is conforming to whatever employers ask for. In addition, employability further takes the meaning away from ‘work as craft’ (Anthony, 1977) by not attaching skills to any particular profession and positioning them as transferable across contexts.

As a result of the 'normative emptiness' of 'consumption of work' and employability, even fantasies of escape, which could present completely alternative views on the world and on work, are tied to their core principles of flexibility, ('soft'/'transferable') skills and consumer abundance. Resisting some aspects of 'consumption of work' while embracing others is 'fragmented' and does not challenge this work orientation. Questioning only the process of recruitment as a result of having to conform is 'decaf' resistance (Contu, 2008) that does not challenge the employability rhetoric. The potential for individual resistance might then lie in challenging 'consumption of work' and employability together, and constructing one's work and life choices around a completely different set of values.

9.5 Epilogue: Reflections on the conclusion

However, the conclusions of this study may be specific to the context in which the data were gathered. The data in this study and the themes that came from it are the product of the specific position of students who were in the process of transition from university to work. With most students not having much work experience yet, they may be more open to the images of work constructed by employers and the marketing practices through which these images are promoted. This does not mean they will not rethink their work orientations once they have entered work. For example, they may do this by questioning whether the images promoted by employers actually live up to the promise (see for example Costas and Kärreman, 2011). Students may also question the images of work they embraced earlier, potentially constructing their work orientations around a different set of meanings.

Similarly, students' relation to employability rhetoric might change when they are in a job. Before entering the world of work, being pressured by the need to find work in an extremely competitive labour market, students might not have the opportunity to think through the various aspects of employability. Once in the job, this may change. For example, some might rethink their work orientations towards values outside employability, and as a consequence the very way they speak about work might become less employability-centric. They might also be willing to set boundaries on what they do and do not mobilise in the name of employability. Alternatively, the various aspects of 'consumption of work' and employability might be engaged in from a 'cynical distance' (Fleming and Spicer, 2003) or actively resisted. However, on entering the capitalist world of work with its norms and rules, there is also a risk of failing to escape, becoming the 'dead man working' (Cederström and Fleming, 2012). So the context in which the data for this study were gathered is important to examine.

The conclusions of this study might also be the outcome of the specific sample that was analysed. For example, most of the students within the sample, although not necessarily studying for a business or economics degree, had some connection to it. So the sample itself may have consisted of students who were more likely to be oriented towards 'consumption of work' and employability. Students with a different set of attitudes, or even active resistance to the 'common senses', may have been uninterested in this study. Indeed, the degree was one of the important socio-demographic characteristics. For example, most students with a 'substantive work orientation' were doing non-business degrees, like Renewable Energy Systems Technology. Furthermore, students with more work experience were more likely than others to have less idealised views about work and organisations, and were more likely to resist some aspects of the 'common senses' constructed on campus. Having said this, other socio-demographic characteristics like gender, ethnicity, nationality and class were also controlled for when analysing the data, but have not revealed any substantive differences between groups within these categories. At the same time, with the research designed to be an in-depth one, the sample might have been too small to capture differences at the group level.

Chapter 10, the next and final chapter of this thesis, will summarise the findings and the argument, as well as outline the contribution and implications for future research.

Chapter 10. Conclusion

10.1 Introduction

The final chapter of this thesis is structured as follows. First, I outline the summary of the thesis, addressing the research questions of the study (10.2). Second, I list the contributions of this thesis to the literature in (critical) management/organisation studies and, more widely, the social sciences (10.3). Finally, I suggest directions for future research, which stem from the outcomes and limitations of this thesis (10.4).

10.2 Summary of the thesis

In this section I will summarise the theoretical, conceptual and methodological frameworks that have been used in this research (10.2.1). These have been developed in chapters 1 (theoretical framework), 2 (conceptualisation of employability), 3 (conceptualisation of 'consumption of work') and 4 (methodology). Then I will address each of the four research questions of the study, based on the data from chapters 5, 6, 7 and 8. I will first address the research questions related to employability (10.2.2) and then the research questions related to work orientations (10.2.3). The analysis of the data in light of the theoretical, conceptual and methodological frameworks of this study resulted in the 'normative emptiness' argument developed in chapter 9. The summary of this argument is provided at the end of this section (10.2.4).

10.2.1 Summary of theoretical, conceptual and methodological frameworks

Within this section I will first summarise the theoretical framework of the study. Second, I discuss the way 'employability' and 'consumption of work' were conceptualised, which were informed by the theoretical framework. Finally, I summarise the methodology of the research.

The theoretical framework of this study was informed by the works of Antonio Gramsci and Mikhail Bakhtin, and complemented by literature on resistance. Macro and local structures were interpreted and analysed with the help of Gramscian concepts. The engagement of agency with local structures (the university in this study) was analysed with the help of the 'Bakhtin-inspired theory of the subject. To analyse local and macro structures, the concepts of ‘hegemony’, ‘war of position’ and ‘common sense’ were adopted from Gramsci’s work. ‘Hegemonic project’ was another concept used to refer to specific dimensions of hegemony, i.e. employability and consumption in this study. The notion of ‘common sense’ was central to this research. ‘Common senses’ about employability and work orientations at macro and local structures were identified, and agency’s engagement with them were analysed. Subjects were assumed to be ‘dialogical selves’ with incomplete and unfinalised identities. To classify individuals’ responses to ‘common senses’, four non-mutually exclusive categories were used: embracing, manipulating, resisting (actively or passively) and escaping. These were looked at as (fragmented) articulations of the dialogical engagement of subjects with ‘common sense’. The way people speak about ‘common sense’ was assumed to represent their position towards it to some extent, but not defining them as subjects. When the relationship of a ‘dialogical self’ to ‘common sense’ was analysed, I was not searching for a coherent subject position, paying special attention to interpreting incoherences, which are part of the ‘dialogue’ (‘microdialogue’ and ‘external dialogue’).

In this study employability was positioned as a hegemonic project that helps to maintain existing power relations. As a result of the Gramscian reading of the academic and policy literature on employability, I identified ‘initiative employability’ (Gazier, 1999), a specific form of employability rhetoric, as the ‘common sense’ that was constructed and spread by two powerful groups, governments and employers. This ‘common sense’ assumes individuals’ responsibility for their successes and failures in the labour market, positioning employers and governments as ‘enablers’ (Fejes, 2010). This ‘common sense’ was constructed via a combination of coercion and consent. Coercion was seen in changing labour market policies and workplace practices in organisations, which employees had limited options to resist. Stimulating consent was seen in surrounding employability with a positive rhetoric, promoting it as ‘empowering’ and giving more choice. The ‘common sense’ of ‘graduate employability’ was largely in line with ‘initiative employability’, and can be summarised as follows. ‘Graduate employability’ involves ‘possessing’ high levels of skills required by employers, i.e. having them and being committed to acquiring and developing them. Second, it involves being able to ‘demonstrate’ these skills during a job search, by articulating and selling them to employers. This conceptualisation of employability is closely tied with the notion of (‘soft’/’transferable’) skills, where the latter are the ‘instrumentation’ of the former (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005). So I based my critique of employability on a critique of this particular notion of skills. As a result of this conceptualisation, analysing employability through skills in this research has laid grounds for a nuanced analysis of both the rhetoric, its inconsistencies and subjects' engagement with it.

'Consumption of work', which involves the 'commodification of the meaning of work' by employers, was positioned as part of the 'hegemonic project' of consumption. It is a work orientation within which images of work are presented as objects of consumption and the process of work itself as an act of consumption. These are promoted to employees via the practice of 'employer branding', which has been understood as a 'war of position'. The rise of 'employer branding' practices and attention to them in the literature has been the reason for considering 'consumption of work' as potentially the 'common sense' work orientation promoted by employers. 'Consumption of work' was not presented as a completely novel set of attitudes to work, but conceptualised as work orientation that combines an 'instrumentalised work ethic' and 'abstract work ethic' (especially a 'self-work ethic') in a novel way. 'Commodification of the meaning of work' is its distinctive feature. This work orientation was also understood via the notion of the 'menu' (Korczynski and Ott, 2006; Korczynski, 2007) and hence viewed not as a work orientation consisting of some homogenous features, but one offering choice. 'Consumption of work' consists of 'consumption (of the image) of work', 'consumption through work processes' and 'consumption of work processes and outcomes' The first two are part of an 'instrumentalised work ethic' while the latter is part of an 'abstract work ethic'. Various aspects of this work orientation were associated with the 'consumer as communicator' and 'consumer as hedonist' (Gabriel and Lang, 1996).

The methodology of this study was chosen so as to stimulate in-depth analysis of the key themes. At the same time, the fieldwork was constantly informing the conceptual stance of this research and the research questions, which in turn were informing the fieldwork. This study followed a critical qualitative research strategy, with interviews, observations and documents being the methods used within this strategy. Within the wider field of critical qualitative research, this project is close to the specific methodology of critical discourse analysis (see Fairclough, 1995), which is theoretically rooted in Gramsci's work. The data gathered were divided into data for the analysis of the student job search and data for the analysis of context, with subdivisions into core and supplementary datasets within each. They were tied together ontologically and epistemologically. Longitudinal interviews were key to the analysis of students' agency for two reasons. In line with a Bakhtinian framework for the analysis of agency, the 'external dialogue' was thought to be more revealing when there was more communication between the researcher and the subject, which longitudinal interviews provided. Time was thought to stimulate articulation of the 'microdialogue' externally due to potentially more trust to the researcher, as well as the 'common sense' being thought through. Interaction with 'common sense' in different contexts was also thought to intensify this interaction between the 'microdialogue' and the 'external dialogue'.

10.2.2 Addressing research questions 1 and 2: Employability

RQ1: How is employability presented to students at the university? How does it correspond to the 'common sense' of 'initiative employability' identified at the macro level?

It is the 'common sense' of 'initiative' employability that was promoted to students at Aimfield. Students' responsibility for their employability was emphasised, while the university was positioned as the 'enabler'. Employability was presented as going beyond getting a job, being key to one's success in the labour market (and in life) and a lifelong project for which private experiences were expected to be mobilised. Skills were presented as being central to employability and their high levels defined employees with an 'edge'. Articulation and selling them in the 'right way' were highlighted as key to employability. These were also indicated as the areas where students had problems. The prevalent assumption was that students 'had' the 'high levels' of skills required by employers, but could not articulate and sell them 'properly'. The CEC's role was in 'enabling' students to articulate and sell their skills. This rhetoric was communicated to students via the various opportunities for skill development that were provided on campus, the number of which had been increasing over the years. It was also communicated to students in the informational material on employability that the CEC provided, as well as through career consultations with students.

Although 'initiative' employability was the 'common sense' at Aimfield and informed the CEC's practices, there was manipulation of the rhetoric at the local level, as well as some evidence of deviation from it. The former has been noticed in the CEC's advisors showing the students the implicit rules of the job search game, as well as in not questioning students' 'possession' of skills. While helping students learn how to articulate and sell their skills, the employability rhetoric was manipulated by the CEC's advisors, who were showing students how to play the job search game. This was in assuming that students had 'high levels' of any skills required by employers, as well as in showing students how to spot what exactly these were from job descriptions, and in making these explicit during a job search.

The latter holds for some employees at the CEC, who raised issues of employability being problematic in times of high unemployment, irrespective of the levels of skills students 'had'. At the same time, I have not spotted evidence of such critiques of employability communicated to students. Deviation from the rhetoric was also in some students not understanding or questioning the assumptions of employability or ('soft'/'transferable') skills, and, as reported by the CEC's advisors, was more typical for students from outside the UK, and amongst overseas students in particular. However, students' confusion at the rhetoric was interpreted as them 'not understanding' it, and the CEC's task was to make the importance of employability clear to them, converting everyone into employable subjects.

RQ2: How do students engage with the 'common sense' of employability during the job search?

When analysing the 'dialogical selves' engaging with the rhetoric of employability, it is the dynamic relationship between the 'common sense' of skill 'possession' embraced by most students and their reflections on skill 'demonstration' during the process of job search that is most notable. The conflict between the two in the narratives of some students is where hints of resistance could be found.

Most students in the study embraced the 'common sense' of skill 'possession', referring to having, acquiring and developing skills, and even sometimes describing themselves through them. Even students who discovered the skills rhetoric only when coming to the UK embraced it, and it also shaped their way of talking about the job search. At the same time, students were playing the job search game while 'demonstrating' their skills to employers. They were aware of certain rules that they needed to follow to be more likely to get a job. Playing involved actively manipulating the skills rhetoric during the job search. First, this involved assuming they 'had' the skills needed for the job, which corresponds to the way students were taught to manipulate the rhetoric by the CEC. Second, this was in ‘demonstrating’ skills in a certain way, like not repeating the same skill in different application questions for the same job. However, the rules of the ‘game’ were neither clear nor universal for all employers, and through trial and error (including rejections), as well as using available guidance, students were figuring out what these were. Learning that it was ‘demonstrating’ whatever skills the employers were willing them to show (i.e. conforming to employers’ demands) rather than what students thought they ‘possessed’ was the primary condition for achieving employability.

This contrast between embracing the ‘common sense’ of skills ‘possession’ and constructing oneself as employable through it, and the need to conform to whatever employers ask for, led to a minority of students reflecting on the skills rhetoric and showing signs of resistance to it. These students were uncomfortable about the need to overstate their previous experiences and present them as extraordinary, which they knew was not the case. This shows passive resistance to employability rhetoric as a result of the inconsistency between two of its aspects (‘possession’ and ‘demonstration’ of skills). However, students usually did not voice this dissatisfaction during the recruitment process and did not make alternative work choices either. There was just one case of active resistance, where the student refused to be the person organisations required him to be, by not applying to employers where he thought he needed to compromise the way he presented himself too much.

Despite the resistance of a small number of students to the ‘demonstration’ aspect of employability, the ‘common sense’ of employability was not questioned. Employability was central to most students’ work orientations. First, they were willing to be flexible in the labour market. Second, the project of employability started long before the job search and was something that future work choices were dependent on. Third, to ‘demonstrate’ their skills to employers, students were using the examples from their private lives, making these work in the name of employability. None of the students questioned this all-embracing character of employability.

10.2.3 Addressing research questions 3 and 4: Work orientations

RQ3: Is ‘consumption of work’ constructed as the ‘common sense’ work orientation? How does commodification of the meaning of work take place on the university campus?

The pattern towards 'commodification of the meaning of work' identified at the macro level accurately depicts the construction of work orientations at Aimfield University. 'Consumption of work' was constructed as the 'common sense' work orientation on campus. Work was presented as a site for hedonist consumption (both traditional and modern) as well as a provider of signs that can be communicated to others. Construction of symbolic images associated with these was key to the promotion of the 'consumption of work'.

First, (the image of) work itself was constructed as an object of consumption, with certain 'sign values' surrounding it and addressing students as 'communicators' of these signs. MNCs and large for-profit organisations were presented as 'top' employers, while organisations of different sizes and from non-business sectors were neither 'top' nor very visible to students. 'Sign values' also surrounded organisational brands, highlighting both employer and corporate brands. These could be, for example, 'sign values' of status and prestige, as well as fun. The financial industry had an alluring image, with 'sign values' of status and conspicuous consumption being central to it.

Second, work was presented as a site for consumption ('consumption through work processes'). This was in getting access to 'sign values' as well as hedonist experiences through the process of work. Access to different lifestyles with different consumer meanings was offered. Organisational culture with a 'menu' consisting of 'fun work cultures' or more hierarchical corporate cultures where employees would engage in conspicuous consumption was one of them. All organisations promoted access to an 'ethical lifestyle' via the presence of corporate social responsibility in recruitment brochures. They also provided opportunities for adventure (including travel) within a job.

The extensive use of visual images associated with adventure was interpreted as symbolising not only work as a site for consumption, but work processes themselves as consumer experiences addressing students as 'modern hedonists'. The two key work processes on offer were opportunities for self-development and employability, which are both part of the 'self-work' ethic. The provision of training, as one of the central elements of employability, being part of the employability deal, was emphasised by employers.

The 'consumption of work' orientation was promoted to students via a marketing campaign on campus, often involving 'branded employees' (Brannan et al, 2011), which is the dynamic part of the 'war of position'. This was done via engaging students as consumers and providing them with consumption experiences like 'freebies' or temporary access to objects with sign values of status during employer events. During the careers fair students were addressed both as hedonists and communicators.

RQ4: How do students engage with the 'common sense' work orientation constructed at the university?

Even though students as 'dialogical selves' navigated between different work orientations throughout their job search, 'consumption of work' was central for most participants in the study.

First, students' selection of places to work were often shaped by criteria such as size, global status and brand, with finance being the industry with a particularly alluring image about it. At the same time, there were clear alternative voices against this aspect of the 'consumption of work'. The choice of these students was shaped by different categories, and they articulated it as opposite to the 'common sense' one, sometimes through active resistance to it. However, this does not mean that resisting one aspect of 'consumption of work' implies resisting the whole work orientation. Other aspects of 'consumption of work' were as appealing to some of these students as to those who did not question the 'common senses' about the best places to work at.

Second, for many students the understanding of good work was closely connected to 'consumption through work processes'. They wanted to travel and enjoy this experience through work (modern hedonism). At the same time, it was a consumer lifestyle of abundance they expected, where employers paid for pleasures such as food and clubbing that they as employees would engage in (traditional hedonism). The 'sign values' associated with organisational culture that could be communicated to others were also appealing to students (e.g. wearing/not wearing a suit).

Third, an orientation towards 'consuming work processes and outcomes' was seen in students' preferences for learning and (potentially) challenge. Learning was mostly understood through the provision of employer-endorsed training. 'Challenge' was articulated as an abstract action that was not confined within a job, but was provided by employers. However, although challenge may be ‘consumed’ as part of the ‘employee value proposition’, it is problematic to claim that this was the case from the data of this study.

Navigating between different work orientations was possible in students’ ideas about work, but was not always easy to combine in practice. The inability of ‘alternative’ organisations to provide elements of ‘consumption of work’ made students feel that part of their preferences about work were not satisfied, so it was a question of which preferences were stronger. Choices in favour of ‘consumption of work’ were made due to the lack of ‘sign values’ provided by alternative employers as well as the risks to employability due to alternative employers being less likely to propose the same employability deal as MNCs. There were instances when ‘consumption of work’ was sacrificed too. Students who saw work as providing access to a consumer lifestyle outside work were ready to sacrifice ‘consumption of work’ for the earning potential. A small number of students who expressed ‘substantive work orientation’ were ready not to engage in ‘consumption of work’, with the substantive element being more important. Deferring the ‘substantive work orientation’ till later in life so as to engage in ‘consumption of work’ was, however, more common. Referring to ‘substantive work orientations’ in the future or in imaginary situations might be treated as an ‘escape attempt’, which, being rooted in a moral rhetoric, at the same time legitimises the current choice of ‘consumption of work’.

10.2.4 Summary of the argument

In summary, the analysis of empirical material shows that strongly normative images of work and employability were constructed on campus. ‘Consumption of work’ was the ‘common sense’ work orientation while ‘initiative employability’ was the ‘common sense’ about employability constructed on campus. The former was closely associated with consumption opportunities, marketed to students through corporate presence on campus. Employability was presented to students as a lifelong project of the self, where constant enhancement and selling skills were necessary to maintain a position in the labour market, at the risk of being deemed unemployable otherwise. However, the normative aspect of ‘consumption of work’ and employability were not only in them being the ‘common senses’ on campus. They were also closely connected and mutually reinforcing. Employability was a component of the ‘consumption of work’ orientation, but also a criterion that allowed for this work orientation to take place. However, what is perhaps even more important, ‘consumption of work’ contributed to one’s employability, while alternative choices challenged it. So employability marginalises alternative work orientations. This relationship of employability and ‘consumption of work’ was evident in students’ accounts. ‘Consumption of work’ was central to shaping students’ work orientations and only a few of them resisted some aspects of the ‘common sense’ or shaped their work orientations around alternative meanings of work. However, those who made alternative choices articulated doubt about these, due to either these not providing them access to ‘consumption of work’, or challenging their employability. So the normative aspect of employability and ‘consumption of work’ was strengthened by the close relationship between the two, and employability being the lifelong project of the self.

At the same time, both employability and ‘consumption of work’ were argued to lack substantive meaning. Within the ‘consumption of work’ orientation, the meaning of work was associated with features external to the process of work or the outcomes of it, being in consumption and abstract features of work design. Employability was argued to be empty as it was rooted in the rhetoric of (‘soft’/‘transferable’) skills, the high levels of which were elusive while the low levels were not particularly hard to achieve. At the same time, the empirical data showed that during job search conforming to whatever employers wanted students to show and figuring out how to do this was the primary condition for achieving employability. Despite the emptiness of ‘consumption of work’ and employability, they are normative and guide students’ decisions on their future lives. Both were mostly embraced by students and were central in making their decisions during the transition from university to work. Even though resistance to some aspects of both was taking place, it was ‘fragmented’ and not challenging the ‘common senses’. The issue with committing to an alternative was in the mutual interconnectedness between the two. As a result, I suggested that to challenge the ‘common senses’ at the individual level, they needed to be resisted together, constructing work and life choices around a completely different set of values.

10.3 Contributions

This section outlines the conceptual, theoretical, methodological and empirical contributions of the thesis. First, I highlight its theoretical, conceptual and methodological contributions (10.3.1). The theoretical, conceptual and methodological contributions of this thesis have been merged under the same heading to show that they have been closely connected and mutually informing. In particular, I specify the contribution of my work to the take on Gramsci in critical management/organisation studies, as well as the fruitful combination of Gramsci and Bakhtin that has informed the theoretical framework of my research. Second, I discuss how the empirical outcomes of this thesis contribute to research on universities, student work orientations, job search and employability (10.3.2).

10.3.1 Theoretical, conceptual and methodological contributions

This study contributes to the area of critical management/organisation studies by having closely engaged with the work of Antonio Gramsci. This was done in a way different from how previous research engaged with Gramsci's work. While earlier studies mostly looked at single Gramscian concepts to analyse a certain phenomenon, this study used a whole set of concepts that were connected into a single framework for the analysis of the 'common sense' at the macro and local levels. This also allowed me to connect power relations at the macro level and the rhetoric they produce to how power is present at local levels, and consider how it shapes habitual experiences of people. The combination of Gramsci and Bakhtin is also a fruitful one to engage with, both in critical management/ organisation studies and beyond. Although the compatibility of the two theorists was noticed before in political studies (Brandist, 1996a, 1996b; Ives, 2004), in this research the concepts adopted from both were combined in a way that was not discussed earlier. Furthermore, with the help of the methodological framework, the theoretical framework was illuminating for the analysis of empirical material. It was the longitudinal aspect of this research and the analysis of the 'common sense' at three levels (macro, local structure, local agency) that provided a nuanced understanding of the processes studied, and brought up the consistencies and discrepancies between them. In particular, the notion of 'dialogical selves' adopted from Bakhtin's work allowed me to analyse the complex relationship of students with the 'common senses', without assigning their attitudes to predetermined categories.

This study also adds to our understanding of the 'politics of consumption'. Following Gramsci, it shows how it is rooted in the economic relations of production, but goes beyond it in highlighting that it is not only the process of production that is concealed (Dunne et al., 2013). Other aspects of concealing in the 'politics of consumption' are the 'menu' aspect of consumer choice, as well as the fact that even consumption itself can be concealed from consumers, even though it is taking place. The two latter aspects of the politics of consumption hold for the phenomenon of 'consumption of work'.

The conceptual contribution of this study is the development of ‘consumption of work’. This or similar expressions have been referred to in earlier research (e.g. Dale, 2012; Bauman, 2005; Salomonsson, 2004; Jenner, 2004), but the meaning of it was not clear. Grounding it within the literature on work orientations and highlighting commodification of the meaning of work as its specific feature, I identified three dimensions of ‘consumption of work’ orientation. This concept can be further worked with in conceptual and empirical research. Although open for modifications, I hope it has set ground for discussing one of the important ways in which consumption has entered work. Furthermore, with this concept articulated, ‘consumption of work’ can be positioned as one way in which modern workplaces are understood, and potentially even as a characteristic of the relationship of modern employees with work, which goes beyond the ‘self-work ethic’ (Heelas, 2002).

This study also adds to the previous critiques of employability (e.g. Cremin, 2010; Moore, 2010; Costea et al., 2012). It positions employability as a normative lifelong ‘project of the self’ (Grey, 1994), which is empty of substantive meaning. The claim on emptiness of employability comes from looking at the notion of (‘soft’/‘transferable’) skills, which is central to employability, being its ‘instrumentation’. While employability rhetoric asks for ‘high’ or ‘exceptional’ levels in skills like teamwork, problem-solving and communication, these are elusive. When a degree of skill can be identified in an activity, it is mundane or not central to the activity itself. As a result, being dependent on an elusive understanding of skills, employability is empty of substantive meaning. Furthermore, when analysing one’s employability during job search, I have used the division into the ‘common sense’ of skill ‘possession’ and their ‘demonstration’ during their job search, which has been conceptually helpful for analysing subjects’ engagement with the rhetoric and spotting instances of resistance.

10.3.2 Empirical contributions

Within this section I outline three key empirical contributions of this research. First, it is the in-depth analysis of the ‘common senses’ constructed at the local university context, and in particular in the university’s activities outside education and research. Second, these are empirical contributions related to the theme of work orientations. Finally, there are empirical contributions related to the theme of employability and the graduate job search.

First, the empirical findings of this research contribute to the understanding of the university as an ideological space, by providing an in-depth account of the construction of 'common senses' there. Lack of critical research on employability in local university contexts was highlighted in chapter 2 (except Kalfa and Taksa, 2012; Costea et al., 2012). By working closely with the university context and providing an in-depth analysis of how the 'common sense' of employability is constructed within it, this thesis has contributed to this area of research. By analysing employer branding practices on campus, this research has provided a critical account on 'employer branding' as a Human Resource Management (HRM) practice too. It shows the ideological role of HRM and how it transcends organisational boundaries, adding to previous research on the theme (e.g. Costea et al., 2012; Dale, 2012). This study analysed a whole set of material related to employer branding, both the content of recruitment brochures and the marketing campaign on campus. In particular, this study has focused on university practices, which are not education and research related. Such a focus is especially important for the following reason. With the rise of the employability agenda the extracurricular time of students at the university becomes more and more important for their employability (as highlighted in chapters 2 and 6), as skills gained in these activities are considered to make one 'stand out'. At the same time, when local communities at the universities resist changes to university practices, these are primarily the values of higher education that are defended. However, paying attention to these non-educational spaces and activities at the university is the key contribution of this thesis to empirical research on the university as an ideological space. I argue that university needs to be researched and considered as a whole. Otherwise, the potentially valuable educational part of universities' activities would be a drop in the ocean in comparison to the uncritical takeover of the non-educational activities at the same universities.

Second, this study provides a detailed empirical account on students' work orientations, exploring their ideas about work, the particular features of this work and the different work ethics these are rooted in. It closely works with the conceptual phenomenon of 'consumption of work'. Its empirical contribution is in identifying 'consumption of work' as the 'common sense' work orientation that is constructed on a university campus and embraced by most students. However, the comparison of students' preferences about work with the image of it presented at the university is particularly important. It is especially notable how not all aspects of 'consumption of work' were embraced by students. This was the case for the 'ethical lifestyle' promoted by organisations as part of the 'employee value proposition' via corporate social responsibility rhetoric. Although students were talking about socially important jobs like teaching as 'escape attempts', anchoring them in moral rhetoric, they did not see this anchoring as coming from corporate employers. This study also adds to empirical accounts of students' attitudes towards flexibility as part of their work orientations (Brown and Scase, 1994; Tomlinson, 2007). It was internalised as a need, as a result of loss of job security in previous research (Tomlinson, 2007). However, this is the first empirical research on students I am aware of where flexibility was articulated as a preference on its own.

Third, this research adds to research on graduate job search and employability. First, it provides a detailed account of the process of the student job search and how employability is managed during it. It adds to the previous seminal study by Brown and Hesketh (2004) on this theme. At the same time, analysing employability as a socially constructed concept has provided nuance to interpretations of students' engagement with employability rhetoric, tracing their engagement with the 'common sense' within the process of the job search, rather than just their experience of it. Second, this study adds to critical employability literature by giving voices to agency. It is not that agency was not paid attention to in previous research, but was more often analysed in interaction, e.g. during career consultations or recruitment interviews. Interviewing students and letting them reflect on the 'common sense' of employability, and doing this over a period of time, brings up subjects' complex engagement with the 'common sense' of employability. In particular, the analysis of 'dialogical selves' engaging with different aspects of employability rhetoric has shown hints of resistance in a situation where it was not spotted before (e.g. Fogde, 2011; Sharone, 2007). This was passive resistance coming from the mismatch between embracing the 'common sense' of skill 'possession' and understanding one's employability through it, and being uncomfortable about or unwilling to conform to the kind of subject that employers wanted students to 'demonstrate'. However, this resistance did not challenge other aspects of 'initiative employability', and in all but one case did not make students rethink their job choices. Such an account on resistance also helps to avoid the somewhat simplistic dichotomy spotted when analysing recruiter-candidate interaction during recruitment interviews, where subjectification to recruiters' presentation of the organisation during the interview was key to individuals' employability (Bergström and Knights, 2006). From students' accounts analysed in this study conforming or following the recruiters' line of thought during the selection process was something that students needed to understand and figure out through trial and error (including rejections) during the process of job search.

10.4 Directions for future research

In this section I discuss some of the directions for future research, which have been informed by the outcomes and limitations of this thesis. I have divided these into three broad and overlapping themes. The first theme is university as an ideological space, with particular attention to non-educational activities there. The second theme is 'consumption of work' and the third is employability.

First, there is further scope for the analysis of both educational and non-educational activities at the university, as well as the ideologies surrounding them. This thesis has explored careers fairs and employer events as shaping students' work orientations. A detailed analysis of information available at the careers centre would be another place to explore. Although universities' careers centres are key to informing students about work, there are other non-educational activities on campus that might encourage certain work orientations in students. For example, employability rhetoric is not only about being able to get paid work, but potentially being an entrepreneur as well. A lot of universities in the UK have so-called enterprise centres on their campuses, which encourage students to start their own businesses. These may also be constructing students' work orientations, as well as their understanding of employability. Another aspect of non-educational activities at the university to look at are business games that are often organised on university campuses and are sponsored by corporations. These may have an important role in integrating students into the world of business and the rhetoric associated with it. Employer and corporate branding on campus can also go beyond careers-related activities that I focused on in this thesis. It can also be branding through sponsorship of various initiatives at the university (e.g. sports teams). This might also be in using brands to name university spaces (for example, an Ernst & Young Suite within a university building). Although this tendency has not been noticed at Aimfield yet, I am aware of it taking place at other universities. It is important to look at how these construct the image of work and of the ideal employers to work for, as well as how students engage with this presence while at university. Such analysis does not have to be limited to work orientations and students, and can look at other ideological underpinnings of corporate presence on campus, as well as at other participants of university life (e.g. academics, administrative staff) engaging with these.

Second, this thesis calls for further critical research on ‘consumption of work’. This would include positioning the concept within research on consumption and work, as well as work ethics. This would also include more critical research on the theme of employer branding, which is crucial to creating the ‘consumption of work’ orientation. More specifically, the phenomenon of ‘consumption of work’ can be explored at the workplace, as well as in different professional areas and national contexts. Within different professional areas it would be especially interesting to look at the non-corporate sphere. This is where a different image of a certain profession might be expected. At the same time, with the ‘war for talent’ rhetoric going beyond the corporate sphere (e.g. Ewing and Karuana, 1999; Peck, 2007; Brown and Tannock, 2009), more professions may have become constructed around the ‘consumption of work’ orientation. Such research would look at images of a certain profession and potentially how these have been changing over time. It can also analyse the rationales of people for being within the profession, as well as the rationales of people willing to enter the profession. The work with the subject here does not have to be built around the Cartesian subject, but can also work with theories of the body, and analyse how a profession is embodied and performed. The phenomenon of ‘consumption of work’ may also be explored in different national contexts. It would be especially interesting to look at the contexts where mass consumption started later than in the UK and other western countries. These could be, for example, Eastern European countries, including former Soviet republics, as well as countries such as India, China, Brazil, etc. It can be analysed whether corporations brand themselves as employers in the same way in these countries, or whether they choose different paths. It can be analysed whether universities in these countries accept employers’ presence on campus, or whether a different dynamic of the corporate-university relationship can be found there. The reaction of those targeted by employer branding practices would also be important to look at within these national contexts.

Third, this thesis has implications for future research on employability. I would be most interested in future studies on the agency’s engagement with employability rhetoric, which would include studies on students, as well as employees, those seeking work, or not doing it. The theme of mobilising the private in the name of employability seems to be particularly important in this regard. With people being encouraged to use experiences from their private lives to appear as more employable, the boundaries between work and life become even more blurred. In this research students were actively mobilising their private lives in the name of employability. However, I did not ask students what they thought about doing this, while they did not bring up this issue themselves, so this aspect of the theme was not covered in this thesis. This is exactly what I think could be done in future research. Furthermore, the issue of private life being constructed with employability in mind needs to be explored. Employability was one of the criteria through which extracurricular activities were presented to students on campus and was sometimes even central to the description of these activities. There were a number of instances in this thesis where students talked about constructing the private with employability in mind, but there was not enough data to comment on this theme in any depth. A study that would explore this issue would have a very different design. For example, it might look at how different social activities and voluntary roles are presented at a university in more depth. The agency that constructs the private with employability in mind might be especially hard to capture and needs to be carefully thought through when being designed. Engagement with employability rhetoric at the university level needs to be further analysed. This study has looked at the image of employability on campus, but not on the local agency 'enabling' students to be employable. Here it is especially important to look at academics dealing with employability rhetoric, which is what has been done by Kalfa and Taksa (2012) in an Australian context. There are two aspects within this theme that I think are particularly important. First, conceptually, individuals' engagement with employability rhetoric needs to include their relation to the notion of skill, which is so central to graduate employability. In general, individuals' relation to different aspects of the 'common sense' could be looked at, without assuming that a unity and consistency exists between them. Second, when constructing the data, it is important to look not only at employability entering academic modules, but also academics engaging with it at the administrative level. I am stressing this due to the potential for academics to have different approaches to activities that are educational and non-educational in nature.

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Appendices

Appendix 1. Informed consent form

Students' work orientations and the process of contemporary job search

INFORMED CONSENT FORM
(to be completed after Participant Information Sheet has been read)

The purpose and details of this study have been explained to me. I understand that this study is designed to further scientific knowledge and that all procedures have been approved by the [Aimfield] University Ethical Advisory Committee.

I have read and understood the information sheet and this consent form.

I have had an opportunity to ask questions about my participation.

I understand that I am under no obligation to take part in the study.

I understand that I have the right to withdraw from this study at any stage for any reason, and that I will not be required to explain my reasons for withdrawing.

I understand that all the information I provide will be treated in strict confidence and will be kept anonymous and confidential to the researchers unless (under the statutory obligations of the agencies which the researchers are working with), it is judged that confidentiality will have to be breached for the safety of the participant or others.

I agree to participate in this study.

Your name

Your signature

Signature of investigator

Date

Appendix 2. Research information sheet for longitudinal interviews with students

Research information sheet

A bit about the research
This project seeks to discover how students see themselves and the world of work during the very important and often challenging process of job search. Together with students in their final year of study, I want to explore their experiences of this process and see how they make sense of them.

Job search during the final year of one's studies is an important step towards the future career, so for many students it's very important to succeed in it and find a suitable job. At the same time during this period a lot of people ask themselves very important questions like who they want to become, what they want to achieve, whether they are doing the right thing etc. This process is likely to be associated with a variety of feelings and emotions.

In research, attention is usually drawn to the technical part of the process, i.e. applying for jobs, passing interviews and assessment centres. The same holds for advice that graduates get when searching for a job. This is, of course, important. However, I think that graduates' personal experiences, emotions and concerns during this process are even more important, and definitely in need of research.

Why should you take part?

- to discover yourself
- to have an opportunity to reflect on your job search experiences
- to think about some issues you would have not thought of otherwise
- to be able to share your views whenever you want to
- to be able to articulate your views more clearly to employers
- to figure out your preferences/priorities more clearly
- contributing to research on graduate job search
- contributing to the understanding of graduate job search in general

What you'll need to do
- Take part in 3 interviews approximately at the beginning, in the middle & at the end of your job search (e.g. December, March and June)
- Provide me with your CV, cover letters and applications to employers

Ethical issues
- Confidentiality and anonymity are guaranteed
- You can ask further questions about the research and your participation in it
- I will be happy to share the results of the research with you as well as keep you updated on how it goes in case you are interested
- It is entirely up to you whether you would like to be recorded during our interviews
- You can withdraw from the study at any stage for any reasons

Appendix 3. Research information sheet for interviews with students at GRPF

Research information sheet

Interview after the Careers Fair
This interview is an important part of the PhD research I am conducting. What I would like to explore is your impressions from/reflections on the Careers Fair and how it is organised. This will be a semi-structured interview taking around 10-20 minutes. The motivation for this is that the Careers Fair is one of the major events happening within the university that presents what employment opportunities are available for students, almost like a model of graduate labour market.

A bit about the research
This project seeks to discover how students see themselves and the world of work during the very important and often challenging process of job search. The main empirical part of my work has been exploring experiences of final year students' job search and see how they make sense of them.

Job search during the final year of one's studies is an important step towards the future career, so for many students it's very important to succeed in it and find a suitable job. At the same time during this period a lot of people ask themselves very important questions like who they want to become, what they want to achieve, whether they are doing the right thing etc. This process is likely to be associated with a variety of feelings and emotions.

In research, attention is usually drawn to the technical part of the process, i.e. applying for jobs, passing interviews and assessment centres. The same holds for advice that graduates get when searching for a job. This is, of course, important. However, I think that graduates' personal experiences, emotions and concerns during this process are even more important, and definitely in need of research.

Ethical issues
- Confidentiality and anonymity are guaranteed
- You can ask further questions about the research and your participation in it
- I will be happy to share the results of the research with you as well as keep you updated on how it goes in case you are interested
- It is entirely up to you whether you would like to be recorded during our interviews
- You can withdraw from the study at any stage for any reasons

Appendix 4. Research information sheet for interviews with CEC's employees

Research information sheet

A bit about the research
This project seeks to discover how students see themselves and the world of work during the very important and often challenging process of job search. The main empirical part of my work has been exploring experiences of final year students' job search, how they make sense of them and what changes throughout the process.

Job search during the final year of one's studies is an important step towards the future career, so for many students it's very important to succeed in it and find a suitable job at this stage. At the same time during this period a lot of people ask themselves very important questions like who they want to become, what they want to achieve, whether they are making the right choice. This process is likely to be associated with a variety of feelings and emotions.

In research, attention is usually drawn to the technical part of the process, i.e. applying for jobs, passing interviews and assessment centres. The same holds for advice that graduates get when searching for a job. This is, of course, important. However, I think that graduates' personal experiences, reflections and concerns during this process are even more important, and definitely in need of research.

Observations and interviews at the Careers Centre
Careers Centre plays an important role in students' job search. A lot of students in my interview have been referring to the Careers Centre as the place they have been going to for advice. So I would like to find out more about the help that careers centre provides to students, the job of career advisors, ways in which they work with students as well as challenges and pressures of it.

Ethical issues
- Confidentiality and anonymity are guaranteed
- You can ask further questions about the research and your participation in it
- I will be happy to share the results of the research with you as well as keep you updated on how it goes in case you are interested
- It is entirely up to you whether you would like to be recorded during our interviews
- You can withdraw from the study at any stage for any reasons

Appendix 5. Guide for longitudinal interviews

Interview 1

1. What thoughts do you have about the kind of work you'd like to have/organisation you'd like to work for and why?
2. Potential supportive questions:
3. What do you value most when thinking of your future job? Why?
4. Do you think your choices are different from your classmates from the same subject or department? Why or why not?
5. What would you consider to be a 'good' and a 'bad' job?
6. Try to think of your ideas about work since you were a child, before university and during university years. What thoughts did you have at each of these periods and how they were changing/developing?
7. If you didn't have to work at all, if money weren't an issue, what would you do in life?
8. If you didn't have to apply and any job were accepting you, where would you choose to go?
9. Do you have any particular ideas/strategy on how to approach job search and if yes, what are they? If no, why?
10. What are your impressions from applying so far?
11. Potential supportive question: how does it feel to face a rejection from employer?
12. In what way, if any, you think you have been affected so far by the process of job search?

[Guides for interviews 2 and 3 are sample guides tailored to specific students based on the discussion we had in previous interviews and the stage of job search they were at.]

Interview 2 (Melanie)

1. What's happened since we last met?
2. What is it that attracts you so much about being a sport agent?
3. What will this job involve? What will a typical working day be?
4. How would you describe yourself?
5. With most of your classmates willing to go into graduate schemes, have you ever been doubting your choice?

Interview 3 (Lyle)

1. Could you tell me how you got the job at [name of organisation]?

2. How has the job been going?
3. Could you describe what your working day is like?
4. What do you like most/least about the job?
5. What is the atmosphere like in the company?
6. What would your next step be (if this is something you are thinking of already)?

Appendix 6. Guide for interviews with students at GRPF

1. What was your main purpose for coming to this fair?
2. What do you think about the careers fair you've been to today?
3. Which stands did you like? What did you like about them?
4. Would you like to work for them?
5. What roles you were looking into? Why?
6. What do you want from a job?
7. What do you think this kind of job will give you?
8. What was the atmosphere at the fair like?
9. What did you like most about the fair and why? Least?
10. What do you think about the luxury cars you can see outside? Do you think they are relevant there?

Appendix 7. Guide for interviews with CEC's employees

1. Could you tell me a bit about your role at the careers centre?
2. How did you start working as a careers advisor?
3. What are the best/worst aspects of your jobs in terms of working with students? What is most challenging about being a careers consultant?
4. What do you think is the key to one's successful/smooth transition from university to work?
5. What do you think is the role of the careers centre in students' job search?
6. In what ways do you help students?
7. What do you think are the most common problems students have when applying for jobs?
8. Do you think that employability has become more important in recent years. In what specific ways have you noticed that? In what ways has it impacted on the concrete things that you do with students?

9. Employers pay a lot of attention to students' transferable skills during the application process. Why do you think this is the case? In what ways do you help them to work at their transferable skills?

10. How do you decide which organisations to invite? [Question primarily for employer liaison manager and the director of CEC]

11. Are there organisations that have not been our campus yet, but who you'd like to be coming in the future? Why has it not been possible to invite them so far? [Question primarily for employer liaison manager and the director of CEC]

12. If you were a student yourself now, what jobs/organisations you'd be most interested in and why?