What is Graduate Underemployment?

A systematic review of the Literature

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Abstract

The diversity of graduate careers is widely recognised, and the present paper seeks to draw attention to an increasingly important phenomenon – the careers of graduates in non-graduate occupations (GRINGOs). The phenomenon of individuals being employed in roles for which their education would appear to make them overqualified has been studied by researchers from an exceptionally wide range of disciplines, including economists, educationalists, sociologists, psychologists, and management scholars. The phenomenon is variously referred to as underutilisation, over-education, or underemployment, but we use the latter term within the present paper as it is the term most commonly used within the management field (e.g. Feldman, 1996). Though there has been some interdisciplinary research examining underemployment, it remains the case that much of our knowledge remains locked within the boundaries of individual disciplines. In this paper we therefore offer a systematic literature review of research on underemployment drawing upon all of the fields in which this phenomenon has been investigated. The review examines the diversity of disciplinary perspectives, whilst highlighting the significant issues of measurement, many arising from the objective versus subjective distinction. We suggest that the most appropriate basis for developing our theoretical understanding of graduate underemployment is draw upon relevant theoretical frameworks from career studies – specifically those on the objective-subjective duality of career, career indecision, and career success.

Keywords: graduate underemployment, careers, graduate labour market
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Introduction

In recent years the significant growth in the number of graduates emerging from ‘mass’ higher education systems has resulted in increased attention to the potential disparity between the supply of, and demand for, graduates within the labour market. Commentators have questioned the need for such increased numbers and the capability of the labour market to absorb these levels (Brint, 2001; Brown and Hesketh, 2004; Keep and Mayhew, 1999; Livingstone, 1998; Sutherland, 2008; Wolf, 2004). As a consequence there is mounting concern regarding the nature of employment which graduates enter and the increasing potential for them to find themselves in situations of underemployment (McGuiness, 2006; Walker and Zhu, 2005). These concerns are not new (see for example Political and Economic Planning, 1954; DE 1974; O’Toole 1975; Butler, 1978; Sullivan, 1978) and a large body of academic work refers to the phenomenon of graduate underemployment. A plethora of definitions and conceptualisations exist, with a lack of consistency even in the terminology drawn upon. As a result terms such as overeducation, overqualification, underutilisation and underemployment are used variably and interchangeably within the literature. Further complexity and contradiction arises from the concept being applied, often in different ways, throughout various disciplines such as sociology, economics and social psychology (Feldman, 1996; Johnson et al, 2002). This array of contrasting conceptualisations and measures creates difficulties in attempting to establish any sense of prevalence of this phenomenon; however, the existence of studies from a range of national contexts including the United States, the United Kingdom, China and Australia (Battenberg and De Witte, 2001; Fleming and Kerr, 2008; Jensen and Slack, 2003; Li, Morgan and Ding, 2008) suggests that graduate underemployment is common in many countries.

Whilst a significant body of research explores the phenomenon of graduate in non-graduate occupations (GRINGOs) (Blenkinsopp and Scurry, 2007), to date researchers have concentrated on measuring the extent of the phenomenon within, for example, specific cohorts or demographic groupings, and the evaluation of the consequences for the individuals, organisations and society. Much of this research, however, tends to remain within the boundaries of individual disciplines and although there are debates regarding ‘measurement’ of underemployment there have been relatively few attempts to synthesise the multitude of perspectives and conceptualisations from across and within the range of disciplines in which this phenomenon has been studied. This fragmentation is reflected in the inconsistencies
within existing research with regards to the definition, measurement, prevalence and significance of graduate underemployment.

As our starting point, and to orient the reader to the concept, we employ a working definition of graduate underemployment at its most basic as being employment which is deemed to be inferior to that one would expect for a graduate. This combines what Feldman (1996) identifies as the two key elements shared by the array of existing definitions and measurements. Firstly that the graduates employment is compared to a referent ‘standard’ for graduates and secondly that the employment is deficient in that it is beneath the referent ‘standard’ in some way (Feldman, 1996:387). This is intentionally ambiguous, for as our discussions will go on to highlight, graduate underemployment is a multifaceted phenomenon, filled with nuances and complexities, which need to be explored and discussed before a more developed conceptualisation can be offered.

A consolidation and synthesis of existing research is required to develop an integrated and comprehensive appreciation of how to measure, define and further understand this phenomenon. This paper therefore systematically reviews the literature on graduate underemployment in an attempt to evaluate and explore the range of definitions and conceptualisations within the literature and relate it to discussions of graduate underemployment particularly. Systematic reviews are an effective method for the coalescence and integration of knowledge on a subject which has been researched from a range of disciplines and perspectives as they can enable researchers to “identify whether differences across research domains are substantive or semantic, indicative of different starting points, disciplinary divergence, or authentic differences in the phenomena studied” (Rousseau et al 2008:25). Denyer and Tranfield (2008) stress that a systematic literature review should aim to answer a clearly specified question, rather than simply present an overview of work on a particular topic. We therefore argue that answering the question ‘what is graduate underemployment?’ is more complicated than would seem likely at first glance.

**Results**

Taking the multidimensional concept of underemployment as proposed by Feldman (1996) as our starting point (see Figure 1 below), we derived the following keywords; underemployment, underutilisation, over-education, overqualification, unemployment, employability. Following this we added the term graduate to each of the keyword searches. Details of the databases used and the results wielded can be found in Appendix 1.
The review of the literature wielded a vast amount of research from a range of disciplines and perspectives. We included papers on the basis of them being relevant to answering our question. We therefore do not present here details of the number of papers we drew upon or the percentage of papers that adopted a specific definition. We do however ask readers to note that the reference list of this paper is not exhaustive, and in some instances where there are multiple papers from the same authors or perspectives we have sometimes made reference to a sole exemplar.

### What is graduate underemployment?

Following Feldman (1996), our working definition of graduate underemployment is a situation in which a graduate is in employment that is seen to be beneath the referent standard for a graduate. However, as noted, this fails to capture the acknowledged complexity and ‘conceptual elusiveness’ (Burris, 1983a; Glyde, 1977) of underemployment and, as our discussions will highlight, both the referent and the ‘standard’ are defined and measured in a plethora of ways across and within disciplines. Traditionally there are two main perspectives of underemployment, the objective and the subjective (Khan and Morrow, 1991). The objective perspective of underemployment places emphasis on the notion of inadequate employment through the level of utilisation, or not, of the individuals ‘human capital’. This is evaluated in

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1 We excluded papers which focused on graduate underemployment alone, as we argue that this is distinct to graduate underemployment, although the potential effects are perhaps similar.
terms of individuals being in a lower level of occupation, measured for example by level of income, educational requirements or hours worked, in comparison to an accepted standard for their referent group, for example other graduates (Feldman, 1996). Such measures traditionally draw upon ‘accepted standards’ to establish the level to which an individual is underemployed. In contrast, the subjective perspective of underemployment acknowledges and explores individuals’ interpretations of their employment situation, focusing on individuals perceptions of the use of their skills and abilities (Khan and Morrow, 1991:211; Jones Johnson and Johnson, 1995). The subjective perspective acknowledges that groups of individuals, for example graduates, are not homogenous and that the extent to which an individual experiences underemployment can vary from person to person even if objectively their situation of underemployment is the same (Khan and Morrow, 1991). Therefore, within this perspective underemployment does not necessarily arise from failure to attain employment deemed ‘objectively’ suitable for the level of education that an individual possesses.

This distinction between the two perspectives of underemployment is useful, particularly with regards to further understanding this phenomenon. Nevertheless there is a need to evaluate systematically what has been measured in the first place and what or who has been used as the comparative referent, irrespective of stance (objective or subjective). If an individual is said to be underemployed, in what sense are they seen to be ‘under’? What feature of their employment is seen to be deficient? In the following section we therefore explore the different definitions of underemployment, from both objective and subjective points of view. For the purpose of analysis we have deliberately presented each approach to underemployment as a bold statement answering the question ‘what is graduate underemployment?’ This device serves both to clarify the claims of the existing literature, and draw attention to the limitations of such uni-dimensional approaches.

**It’s a mismatch between education and employment**

The majority of studies focus on the extent to which there is a discrepancy between an individual’s education and their employment (Brynin and Longhi, 2009; Feldman and Turnley, 1995; Kalleberg, 2008; Livingstone, 1998; Sloane, 2002). An individual is seen to be underemployed if they have a higher level of education than the job requires in terms of entrance to the job and/or the performance of it (Fleming and Kler, 2008; Hartog, 2000) with a mismatch rendering the individual as overeducated and underutilised (Battu et al, 1997; Belfield et al, 1997; Brynin, 2002; Dolton and Vignoles, 2000; Green et al, 2002; Mason, 2002; McGuinesses, 2006). It has also been argued that individuals who are in employment unrelated to their area of formal education and qualification can be seen to be underemployed as they are not fully utilising their acquired human capital; the knowledge and skills related to their subject of study (Feldman and Turnley, 1995; Feldman, 1996; Maynard et al, 2006).
Although ostensibly a straightforward gauge of underemployment, there are a multitude of definitions and measures adopted to establish the level of disparity. If we first focus on an individual’s level of education, what appears to be a simple objective measure actually incorporates a number of tacit assumptions. As Table 1 illustrates, variable methods have been employed in the existing research to ascertain the level of education an individual possesses. These can be categorised into three broad categories employing years, level and field of education.

Table 1 - Measures of Educational Attainment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measure of Education</th>
<th>Examples</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Years of Education²</td>
<td>Robst (2008), Verhaest and Omney (2009)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In spite of the different methods used to establish an individual’s educational attainment it is relatively straightforward, in the sense that objective data can be readily obtained. What is significantly more complex, and of great consequence to the judgement that an individual is underemployed, is the way in which the extent of any disparity between education and employment is measured. Measuring disparity requires us to establish the educational requirements for an occupation – this is often far from clear cut and a number of approaches are employed. These can be categorised into three broad groups (Hartog, 2000; Sloane, 2002) as illustrated in Table 2 – a) systematic job analysis/evaluation, b) realised matches (whereby mismatch is seen to occur if the level of education is one standard deviation above or below a mean or modal measure), and c) worker self assessment.

²Some studies use multiple measures of education for example Brynin and Longhi (2009) use both years in education and level of education as indicated by certification.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measure of Mismatch</th>
<th>Measurement</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Hartog and Oosterbeek (1988)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Realised Matches (Objective/Subjective)</td>
<td>Mean/modal educational attainment(^3) of workers in that job or occupation.</td>
<td>Alpin et al., (1998)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Labour force data which indicates the distribution of graduates in occupations</td>
<td>Khan and Morrow (1991)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Battu et al., (2000)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Mason, (2002)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Worker Self Assessment (Subjective)</td>
<td>Self report of educational level required for entry and/or performance Satisfaction levels Perceived overeducation Perceived overqualification Perceived utilisation Perceived no growth</td>
<td>Battu et al., (1999)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Burris (1983b)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Dolton and Silles (2008)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Fine and Nevo (2008)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Maynard et al., (2006)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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<td>Nabi (2003)</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Johnson et al., (2002)</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

There are fundamental debates within the existing literature, pertaining to the establishment of a match between education and employment. With regards to graduate underemployment, in particular, these appear to stem from an increasing diversity in the career outcomes of graduates and a subsequent blurring of the boundaries between ‘graduate’ and ‘non-graduate’ employment. Traditionally, views of graduate level occupations have been associated with the entering of a ‘profession’: doctors, lawyers, teachers or high level management are typical examples of such (Elias et al., 1999). It has however been argued that the nature of some forms of employment, previously considered as being ‘non-graduate’, have changed in terms of their skill requirements and as such should be regarded as new forms of graduate employment (Elias and Purcell, 2004; Elias et al., 1999; Harvey et al., 1997; Mason, 1996; Purcell et al., 1999). This leads us to question how effective

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\(^3\) Educational attainment is used here to refer to the various measures as discussed in table 1.
existing measures are for ascertaining the required level of education for a 'graduate job'.

Numerous studies explore the discrepancy between an individual’s level of education and that required for entry into a job, often as stipulated by the employer in the recruitment process. Those with a higher level of education than that required for entry are deemed to be overeducated or overqualified for their employment (Green and Zhu, 2007). However in relation to graduate underemployment, there are issues with regard to this measurement as it has been argued that employers are stipulating a degree as an entry requirement simply because there is a ready supply of graduates in the labour market who are available and preferred by employers, rather than graduates being necessary to perform the job (Brynin, 2002; Nove et al., 1997).

An additional concern within the literature is the possibility that some jobs classified as non-graduate – according to content or occupational level determined by job analysis, or the absence of a requirement of a degree for entry – can be considered as ‘graduate level’ occupations in that they require the skills, knowledge and abilities of a graduate to perform the role. It is argued that these jobs have been upgraded in some way and are ‘new graduate occupations’ (Elias and Purcell, 2004). Upgrading is seen to occur in two ways, either through the employer permanently and formally ‘upgrading’ the requirements of the job in terms of the job description or through individuals own initiative and ‘growing of the job’, perhaps with a view to career development and progression (Mason, 1995; Mason, 2002; Harvey et al., 1997). The latter is seen to be a more temporary, informal upgrading that can lapse when an individual leaves a post (Mason, 2002). Some question however the extent to which a formal substantial upgrading of ‘non-graduate’ jobs has occurred (Battu et al., 2000; Teichler, 2007) and how this can be captured in a meaningful way.

The focus on formal educational attainment is also seen as failing to adequately recognise or measure an individual’s skills levels which may have been accumulated and developed beyond their formal education (McGuinness and Wooden, 2009). As a consequence it is argued that there is a need for multiple measures, objective and subjective, which capture the education required to get a job and the education required to do a job (Green and Zhu, 2007; Chevalier, 2003; Chevalier and Lindley, 2007; Dolton and Silles, 2008). Chevalier and Lindley (2007) define over-education as not being in a graduate job but this can be seen as apparent and genuine overeducation. Grouping their respondents according to their occupational level, using Standard Occupational Coding (SOC2000) and defining graduate occupations in accordance with the Dictionary of Titles, they compared graduates’ self-reports of the education level required for the job and their skill utilisation. They build on the previous work of Chevalier (2003) who argued that genuine mismatch occurs when an individual is both overeducated and unsatisfied. If an individuals is overeducated yet satisfied with their job this is viewed as being an apparent mismatch. This has been developed by Green and Zhu (2007), who distinguish between formal and real
overqualification based on individuals’ self assessment of skill utilisation and the qualifications required for their job. Those who report having a higher level of qualification than required to get the job but a high level of skill utilisation are seen as being in a position of ‘formal’ overeducation, whereas those who have a higher qualification but experience low skill utilisation are classified as being in a situation of ‘real’ underemployment.

This brings us to a consideration of the difficulties that have been identified when drawing on individuals perceptions of the match between their education and their employment. In the majority of studies so-called objective measures of the match between the level of education and employment are acquired through self reports. As a result it is unclear in what terms individuals are perceiving themselves to be overeducated or overqualified (Khan and Morrow, 1991). In spite of these concerns, such conceptualisations do at least move beyond the existing prevalent assumptions of homogeneity within cohorts or groupings of individuals with the same level of educational attainment, though it is argued that as a result of this increased heterogeneity the interpretation of questions is likely to become increasingly varied (Johnston, 2003). We therefore need to address the neglect of personal and job characteristics as a means to explore this further (McGuinness, 2006; Robst, 2008).

Finally, tensions exist regarding the measurement of mismatch between the field of study and employment. This measure however, makes assumptions regarding the potential transferability of the knowledge and skills individuals acquire whilst in education and the extent to which they are transferable to different types of employment. There is also an implication that there is an intention by individuals to enter into employment related to their degree choice. However individuals do not necessarily select a degree with a view to following a career in that specific subject area or discipline. For example, an individual may take a degree in Chemistry but this does not necessarily mean that they desire or expect a career as a chemist or employment in a related field. Researchers have acknowledged that individuals, in particular recent graduates, are likely to enter employment unrelated to their field of study as they change paths over the course of their careers (Feldman and Turnley, 1995; Feldman, 1996; Robst, 2008).

**It’s a mismatch between education attainment and earnings**

Within the literature, there is a significant consideration given to the wage levels of those who are seen to be underemployed in some way (Glyde, 1977; Battu *et al.*, 1999; Chevalier and Lindley, 2006; Hartog, 2000; Robst, 2007). The focus however is mainly on the potential penalty in, terms of income in the long term, for an individual who is underemployed. Relative lower wage levels are therefore viewed as a consequence or effect of underemployment (McGuinness and Sloane, 2009) as
the lower level of employment associated with underemployment results in a less efficient utilisation of individuals’ skills and that this is reflected in a lower level of remuneration than others with the same level of ability or education received. Glyde (1977) argued that in the absence of data about job content, underemployment could be measured in terms of wage dispersion “based on the assumption that, other factors the same, wages will be higher the more fully skills are utilized” (Glyde, 1977: 258). It has been suggested that wage levels are a dimension of underemployment (Feldman and Turnley, 1995; Feldman, 1996; Feldman et al., 2002) and not simply a consequence. If individuals are in a position whereby their earnings are 20% less than their previous employment this is seen to be a position of underemployment as they are not receiving the economic return for their knowledge, skills and abilities. For new graduates income that is 20% less than the same graduating cohort in similar areas of study is seen to be a feature of underemployment (Feldman, 1996).

Aside from attempting to distinguish between wage level as a measure or consequence of underemployment, when we get down to a more detailed level of analysis there are potential limitations to these classifications. As has been widely acknowledged the increased supply of graduates emerging from higher education systems is increasingly diverse and as such focus on income levels in comparison to the same graduating cohort may neglect factors which are potential restrictions on an individuals earning capacity. Although macro-level societal factors are seen to influence and determine wage levels there are a number of individual level variables including gender, age, social class and race which are seen to have an effect on the employment choices, options and earning potential of individuals (Büchel and Battu, 2003; Feldman, 1996; Haldeman, 1999; Leana and Feldman, 1995; McGuinness and Bennett, 2007; Newman, 1988; Purcell et al., 2007; Ruiz-Quintanilla and Claes, 1996). As Elias and Purcell (2004) note, the wage premium that arises as a result of being a graduate is not immediate and that factors, such as those outlined above, can be associated with a slower growth rate in earnings (Purcell et al., 2007).

It’s a mismatch between educational attainment and contract status

Throughout the literature references are made to ‘visible underemployment’ (Clogg, 1979) which occurs when an individual is employed in a part-time or temporary position but desires a full time or permanent post, this has also been referred to as “inadequate hours” (Sullivan, 1978:9). Various measures and definitions have been used, as illustrated in Table 3, however the central assumption of many studies which adopt this notion of ‘time-related underemployment’ (ILO, 1998) is the willingness and/or ability of individuals to work additional hours or obtain permanent continuous employment (Feldman et al., 1994; Kaufman, 1982; Watson, 2002; Wilkins, 2007). If there is a mismatch between the workers preference and their situation they are seen to be involuntarily underemployed. This originates from a
premise that an individual would want full time permanent jobs which would fully utilise their education and skills (Feldman, 1996).

Table 3 – Measures of Mismatch between educational attainment and contract status

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measure of Contract Status</th>
<th>Definitions</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Low hours</td>
<td>Works less than 35 hours</td>
<td>Clogg et al., (1986)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Jensen and Slack (2003)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Involuntary part time</td>
<td>Preference for full time position, Preference for more hours, Difference</td>
<td>Dooley et al., (2000)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>between actual hours and ideal hours, Availability to work more hours</td>
<td>Hauser (1974)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Prevented working full time due to demand</td>
<td>ILO (1998)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Prevented working more than 35 hours due to material shortages</td>
<td>Kalleberg (2008)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Unable to find full time employment</td>
<td>Maynard and Joseph (2008)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Wilkins (2007)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Wooden et al., (2009)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intermittent/sporadic</td>
<td>Insufficient regularity, Non-continuous, Not permanent</td>
<td>Feldman et al., (1995)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/Temporary</td>
<td></td>
<td>Feldman (1996)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Such conceptualisations are useful as they can be seen as a move beyond wage levels as indicators of underemployment however, the extent to which being in part-time or temporary employment is an indicator or characteristic of underemployment may be questioned (Glyde, 1977). Although a general expectation exists that graduates will be employed in full time and permanent positions, and as such any other employment is seen as underemployment (Feldman and Turnley, 1995; Kalleberg, 2008), recent studies have highlighted an increased desire from Generation Y or ‘millennials’ for work life balance and opportunity to pursue activities outside of the formal employment (Terjesen and Frey, 2008), therefore as Feldman (1996) suggests a need exists to establish the extent to which an individual has voluntarily accepted a temporary or part time position and the reasons for doing so.
It’s not a matter of choice

The majority of existing literature adopts an ‘involuntary’ perspective on underemployment (Glyde, 1977). As discussed a range of demographic factors, personal characteristics and economic cycles are seen as possible antecedents to underemployment for individuals. All of these are examples of factors which are seen to be out of the individual’s control, and therefore the subsequent underemployment is deemed as an ‘involuntary’ situation. As a result the notion that an individual may choose to enter a position of underemployment is somewhat neglected (Glyde, 1977). However, as Brynin (2002) notes, there are a number of individuals who, for a variety of reasons, actually make a choice not to utilise fully their education in their employment and are therefore voluntarily entering a position of underemployment. There are two main reasons put forward within the existing literature. Firstly there is a notion of such employment being a temporary transitional period for acquiring additional skills and experience, almost a stepping stone or a bridge into more desirable situations or a ‘stop gap’ before career decisions are made (Alpin et al., 1998; Batenburg and DeWitte, 2001). It has been found however, that such situations are essentially underpinned by a sense of involuntariness if it is perceived that there is no alternative (Verhaest and Omney, 2009). The second main reason within the literature for graduates entering underemployment is as a means to avoid unemployment. Underemployment is seen as the ‘lesser of two evils’ (Borgen et al., 1988; Feldman, 1996; Leana and Feldman, 1992), however it has been suggested that after the initial novelty of actually being in employment begins to wear off individuals views regarding the situation can became more negative (Borgen et al., 1988). A third, less explored notion is that some graduates enter into non-graduate occupations as part of a lifestyle choice (Eliason and Purcell, 2004). This possibly highlights a gap within the literature, as there is little research that explores how the notion of an individual’s underemployment being voluntarily or involuntarily, and whether it influences the manner in which they experience underemployment.

It’s a temporary phenomenon …..isn’t it?

There appears to be a prevailing assumption underpinning the existing research that underemployment is a temporary and transitional phenomenon for graduates; a ‘stop gap job’, foot in the door or a means to avoid unemployment (Cassidy and Wright, 2008; Connor and Pollard, 1996; Chevalier and Lindley, 2007; Pitcher and Purcell, 1998). This is based on the implicit supposition that individuals would attempt to obtain more appropriate employment which matched their education and skills or that there would be the possibility for ‘growing’ the job, although this is less likely than finding alternative employment (Mason, 2002). However, this fails to consider that some individuals may enter positions of underemployment as a result of career indecision (Feldman and Turnley, 1995; Feldman, 2003) or a lack of engagement with job search (Saks and Ashforth, 1999). This is a key point for consideration as it
is argued that there could be potential consequences for an individual’s future career trajectory and success particularly as extended periods of underemployment may be viewed negatively by future employers (Feldman and Whitcomb, 2005; Scurry and Blenkinsopp, 2009). Studies have also suggested that although the period of underemployment itself may be temporary or transitional there are possible long term implications, particularly in terms of wage penalties (Dolton and Vignoles, 2000). There is little research which explores this aspect and it is argued that an overreliance on cross sectional data prevents the nature of underemployment as a temporary or permanent state, and the latent long term effects, being explored (McGuiness and Wooden, 2009).

It’s in the eye of the beholder

Throughout the literature there is the sense of an almost chimerical ‘ideal type’ of graduate occupation which pervades assumptions and expectations of the kind of employment that individuals should be entering upon graduation from Higher Education. Underlying these expectations is an unexamined assumption of objective levels that validate the ‘graduateness’ of an occupation. This assumption sees rewards, both tangible and intangible, as being a universally valid objective measure of what should be expected from graduate employment – for example the wage level, career structure, and stability and security of a job. Such expectations seem to reflect a “conventional wisdom among politicians, parents and students alike that” all education remains “a form of investment” and that it will in a sense “deliver the economic ‘goods’” (Brown and Scase, 1994: 16). There are, however, a number of problems encountered when attempting to establish the nature of a ‘graduate job’. These include difficulties distinguishing between the different types of graduate – vocational degrees as opposed to non-vocational; the differing expectations individuals derive from Higher Education; the socio-demographic background of the graduate and the position of the economy within the economic cycle.

While the basic benchmark drawn upon, whether a job requires a degree at entry level, is perhaps a useful starting point for understanding what a graduate job is, it should be remembered that there are other ‘objective’ criteria that are associated with appropriate graduate employment: wage level, career structure and job security, as noted above. While many occupations that graduates enter which do not require a degree may seem to have these features, it can be questioned how far graduates think that these ‘objective’ criteria are met and therefore add a sense of ‘graduateness’ to the job. Perhaps also, the feelings of ‘graduateness’ do not simply arise from a detached rational assessment of these ‘objective’ criteria and other elements come into the equation? As such, it is important to consider that the graduates ‘assessment’ of the ‘graduateness’ of their employment may arise from interaction with employers, peers and family and not within an objective vacuum. Choices and decisions by individuals are complicated and within the literature there
is a tendency to draw on assumptions of individuals as rational investors in education who expect an economic return on their investment (Tomlinson, 2007) and assess their employment in objective terms. However, career success is not derived from objective criteria alone and as Heslin (2003) argues individuals draw on self and other referent criteria in both the subjective and objective domains.

The issues brought to the fore by in attempting to answer the question “what is graduate underemployment”, are leading the discussion towards much more fruitful directions, in terms of developing a framework for further exploration of graduate underemployment. In particular we highlight a previously identified need to focus on the perspective of graduates and explore how they make sense of their situation (Feldman, 1996; Jones Johnson and Johnson, 1991). Although self-perception measures of graduate underemployment have gone some way to acknowledging the heterogeneity of individuals there is still an emphasis on causality and correlations which fail to provide insight into the contextual and interpretative frameworks individuals draw upon to make sense of their situation (Feldman, 1996; Johnston, 2003). The review of the literature suggests that, as a consequence of the preoccupation with measurement of underemployment, no previous theory or conceptualisation of underemployment offers an analytical framework for understanding the dynamics of the unfolding experience of graduate underemployment (Feldman, 1996) capturing the interplay between objective and subjective factors.

**Graduate underemployment - an agenda for future research**

It will be clear from our review that graduate underemployment is a dynamic and unfolding concept, in which the experience of the graduates is a significant mediating variable. There are few integrated conceptualisations of underemployment which captures the dynamic relationship between the objective and subjective elements, and what is absent in much of the existing research, with a few notable exceptions (Burris, 1983b), is an examination of the unfolding dynamics of the experience of underemployment for individuals. Although many studies draw on subjective measures of underemployment, these measures fail to capture the sensemaking of individuals and the meaning(s) they ascribe to their situation as a result.

There is therefore a need to develop a research agenda which acknowledges the inherent duality of underemployment (objective and subjective). Such research would examine issues such as the extent to which the graduates (and significant others) perceive they are meeting social expectations of what graduate employment should be, and establishes from whence these expectations are derived (e.g. family, peers, partners, popular culture and the media), whilst also exploring the graduates’ *experiences* of that employment and how they make sense of their situation. Calls for such an approach have been made previously by Burris (1983b) and Feldman
(1996), but as yet have not stimulated significant research. We suggest that one way to encourage greater work in this area is by stressing the value of applying a careers lens. The relative neglect of graduate underemployment by career studies was one of the surprising findings of our review. Although some of the key researchers on graduate underemployment are career scholars, the potential benefits of applying career theories and models have as yet not been fully realised. We have already highlighted upon the relevance of research on career indecision (Feldman, 2003), but we think the careers literature can contribute in two other important ways – through offering a richer conceptualisation of the objective-subjective distinction on underemployment, and through examination of underemployment using models of career success.

Though an objective-subjective distinction on underemployment has already been introduced, this differs from its usage in the careers field in one important respect. Hughes (1937) describes the subjective career as a ‘moving perspective’ and in doing so stresses the temporal dimension to understanding career. We suggest that subjective underemployment too can best be understood by considering the graduate’s perspective on where their current employment fits into a wider career. In our work on GRINGOs (Scurry and Blenkinsopp, 2009) we found that for some their subjective underemployment actually decreased when they realised their work experience had grown to a point where they could envisaged parlaying it into a promotion. Previous research focusing on graduates’ experience of employment and their employability have highlighted career and identity as concepts which can be drawn upon to identify interactions, events and experiences which impact on the graduates experiences of employment (Adamson, 1997; Holmes, 2001; Nabi, 1999; Stewart and Knowles, 1999). Adopting this perspective enables the exploration of an individual’s emergent identity as a result of “the dynamic interaction of the expression of identity aspirations on the part of the individual, and the identity attributions by society” (Jameson and Holden, 2000:266). The traditional view of career refers to an individual’s work-related positions over a period of time (Arthur et al., 1989:8) it is argued however, that career is more than this and has as subjective element (Hall, 1976; Watts, 1981) which is not defined or measured by extrinsic elements such as salary and hierarchical position but instead looks “at the way an individual understands or makes sense of the way they have moved or are moving thorough various social positions or stages in the course of their life, or part of their life” (Watson, 2003:196). It is linked to the individual’s own perspective on career and what this means to them (Barley, 1996) within the context of their own social situation over time (Hughes, 1937) and how interaction with others can influence individual’s perceptions of their career. In this way career provides a means through which an individual can link themselves to societal structures (Barley, 1996). This approach moves away from career being seen as movement along ‘objective’ trajectories and acknowledges that individuals have their own views and interpretations of their situations linked to their self-identity (Goffman, 1969). As such, career is a construct that is drawn upon to give meaning to an individuals
experiences and it can “reflect individual’s sense of who they are, who they wish to be, and their hopes, dreams, fears and frustrations” (Young and Collin, 2000:5). Employment, within this perspective of career, is therefore not solely about the progression of an individual through work-related experiences. It can be seen as being connected to an individual’s live as a whole.

Finally, the careers literature offers an increasingly sophisticated examination of the idea of career success, which is clearly relevant to graduate underemployment. Two particular issues are highlighted. The first is the inescapable interplay of objective and subjective markers of career success. Nicholson and de Waal-Andrews (2005) note that despite a number of theoretical arguments for an emphasis on the greater importance of subjective over objective career success (e.g. Weick and Berlinger, 1989), it is impossible to discount objective career success. Indeed, they make a strong argument that it might be considered unethical to do so, since in many ways objective career success remains the better predictor of life outcomes such as health and well-being. The second important issue for graduate underemployment is the importance of other-referents for our perceptions of career success (Heslin, 2005). These other referents are both those who provide us with relevant comparisons of our own success (e.g. fellow graduates) and those whose evaluations (or imagined evaluations) influenced our self-perceptions (Blenkinsopp, Hay and Scurry, 2010).
## Appendix One

### Search terms and Results

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| Underemployment            | - Web of Knowlege – 463  
- Scopus – 1662  
- EBSCO – 547  
- Psychinfo – 190  
- Emerald – 151  
- Ingenta - 123     |
| Underutilisation           | - W of K – 79  
- Scopus – 106  
- EBSCO – 338  
- Psychinfo – 431  
- Emerald – 26  
- Ingenta - 33     |
| Over-education             | - W of K – 130  
- Scopus – 89  
- EBSCO - 71  
- Psychinfo – 14  
- Emerald – 16  
- Ingenta - 50     |
| Overqualification          | - W of K – 28  
- Scopus – 23  
- EBSCO – 33  
- Psychinfo – 13  
- Emerald – 8  
- Ingenta - 6      |
| Unemployment               | - W of K – 20,786  
- Scopus – 21,663  
- EBSCO – 40,872  
- Psychinfo – 5147  
- Emerald – 3546  
- Ingenta – 6,312 |
| Graduate underemployment   | - W of K – 4  
- EBSCO – 23  
- Scopus – 20  
- Psychinfo – 1  
- Emerald – 44  
- Ingenta – 1   |
| Graduate underutilisation  | - W of K – 1  
- EBSCO – 3  
- Scopus – 2  
- Psychinfo – 1  
- Emerald – 5  
- Ingenta – 1  |
| Graduate over-education     | - W of K – 23  
- EBSCO – 12  
- Scopus – 18  
- Psychinfo – 1  
- Emerald – 11  
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References


