Rules of Engagement Beyond the Gates: Negotiating and Capitalising on Student 'Experience'^[1]_[SEP]

Victoria G. Mountford

Introduction

Buzzwords such as 'inclusion', 'diversity', 'participation' and 'engagement' reverberate in the academy in a period of widespread instability and of massive funding cuts, both within higher education (HE) and the broader UK public sector. Such terms at once suggest pathways to social, cultural and economic prosperity and seek to redefine (or remarket) the purpose, premise and remit of academic knowledge. This chapter involves an attempt to think through some of these buzzwords and their implications within and beyond the proverbial gates of the university by investigating how they resonate within everyday experiences of HE. I draw on empirical data from ESRC-funded, qualitative research into the (classed) experiences of undergraduate students in two closely situated higher education institutions (HEIs) in the north of England (represented henceforth as 'Old University' and 'New University'). The data collected suggests that students are involved in complex sociocultural dialogues of value, and they struggle to deploy and accumulate capitals in their everyday HE experiences.

The research data were gathered using in-depth, semi-structured interviews (n = 23) and focus groups (n = 2: 1 in each institution) with British students (all of whom identified as 'White British/-Scottish/-Irish' except one British-Chinese participant). The sample was mixed gender and ranged in ages from 18 to 25 years, except for one participant aged 49 years old; four students in the sample were 'mature students' upon entry. The sample was mixed on the basis of class (self-) identification; I do not advocate for two distinct homogeneous groups, nor for a simple existence of working-class disadvantage and middle-class privilege within HE. But there is evidence of class fractions and multiple examples in the complex negotiation of class identities within the data. Student accounts showed different relationships to what was constructed as a 'normal' or 'typical' student and/or a valued 'student experience'. This data indicates there are complex, classed, socio-cultural coding systems involved in (re)constructions of 'participation' and 'inclusion' in the student experience. Ultimately, I question the class neutrality of educational discourses and the logic of meritocracy underpinning the field. I interrogate the changing nature of value with regard to HE participation and the different types of investments negotiated and expectant gains.

My research was situated in an era of widening participation (WP) and of great expansion, in which discourses of institutional and student diversity were elided with 'choice' and equality/social inclusion (Archer, 2007: 236). Such values, however, are inherently conflictual with the explicit stratification of HEIs that are sustained via funding mechanisms and tripartite status (Archer, 2007: 239–240; also see: Ainley, 2003) and (mis)represented in university league tables. The status of the university attended is one such mechanism of classed value that endures,

affecting experiences and exchange-value within and beyond HE (Power et al., 2003). However, there are other investments and choices that are available to particular classed actors that factor in their university experiences.

Studying for a degree is just one element of university life, and the way students experience their time in HE differs profoundly, depending upon a range of personal circumstances and dispositions that relate to motivations and investments (see: Reay et al., 2010; Ball et al., 2000; Archer et al., 2003; Crozier et al., 2008). Bourdieu (1986) offers the term *hysteresis* to refer to the processes of adaptation that classed actors undergo to maintain privilege in the face of significant structural changes in the field of education (such as massification and marketisation). This involves struggles to maintain legitimacy and be persons of value (Skeggs, 2004) through everyday negotiations of identity. Utilising Bourdieu's concept of *hysteresis*, I argue that class operates in such a way as to alter the symbolic value of university participation as 'the [student] experience', rather than solely as qualifications gained, which were once considered symbolic capital alone (Bourdieu 1986; also see: Heath, 2007; King, 2011; Brown et al., 2002; Taylor and Scurry, 2011). The rules of engagement (as 'participation') effectively change to secure privilege and thus the education system continues to perpetuate inequality through reactivated forms of distinction. Students have differing abilities to access and capitalise on particular valued elements of student experience. Ultimately, this also impacts on opportunities to build and exchange further valuable resources within and beyond university gates.

Instead of *widening* participation, the UK Coalition government's plans are now 'narrowing the academic track' (Hodgson and Spours, 2013: 14). Broadly speaking, political rhetoric has shifted from 'aspiration' and 'diversity' to focus only on academic elites (traditionalism) and increased competition. According to Hodgson and Spours, the Coalition government has its 'sights set firmly on the top 30% of the children from deprived backgrounds can become potential candidates for research intensive universities (DfE, 2010)', which represents the top 10 per cent post-16 (Hodgson and Spours, 2013: 14). This move will exclude more young people from education (Hodgson and Spours, 2012) but is precariously otherwise portrayed as 'emblematic of the government's commitment to social mobility' (2013: 13; reference to HMG, 2011).

Further reduction in state support in HE is part of the intensified marketisation of HEIs and of 'academic capitalism' (Addison, 2012), and the current educational landscape centralises the necessity of students (as well as institutions – see Addison, 2012; Kitagawa and Lightowler, 2013) being/becoming more entrepreneurial, reflecting a broader process of choice, value and use as exchange. My research analyses and my own personal experience as a (classed) student-turned-early career researcher (ECR) provide much for reflection in terms of how (classed) students transition and negotiate their capital, their experiences and, ultimately, their worth in and beyond academia. The rules of engagement continue to change, and it is only those who play the game the 'right' way, making the 'right'

choices with necessary capital to 'participate', who will prosper. I, therefore, advocate space to consider alternative forms of 'engagement' and, to paraphrase Taylor and Addison (2011), to reflect on *what* or perhaps *who* is 'in the shadows'; that is, who or what does not quite 'fit', deemed without 'use' or value. Success stories of 'inclusion' and 'participation' occlude these stories of struggle and, ultimately, class and inequality.

The rules and tools of engagement

Education systems are the products of wider social, economic and cultural changes in society and have the mutual relationship of shaping and being shaped by society (Hayton and Paczuska, 2002: 255). HE in the UK has evolved beyond all recognition over the past century (Featherstone, 2011), from 'elite higher education' into 'mass higher education' (Smith and Bocock, 1999; Williams and Abson, 2002), and such expansion and rapid growth have unsettled definitions of the student and the university and created much uncertainty (Ozga and Sukhnandan, 1998: 319). The neoliberal political culture driving expansion and massification has created a 'paradigm shift' (Newman and Jahdi, 2009), whereby HE is repositioned from being a social institution to a sub-system of the economy, an industry (Gumport, 2000; Morley, 2001). The marketisation and commodification of education have repositioned class (Ball, 2004, 2005; Morley, 2001). Yet, as Morley (1997: 234) argues: 'Under the guise of political neutrality the market economy poses as a technology, but represents a range of values which confirm and reinforce the established social order of wealth and privileges.' This is exemplified when considering how institutional diversity works according to two systems, 'horizontal diversity' and 'vertical diversity' (Archer, 2007). Although institutional diversity is positioned as suggesting 'parity of esteem' (Brown, 2003: 242), disproportionate funding further creates hierarchy rather than investing a strategy of funding equally across difference (Archer, 2007: 639). Greater amounts of funding are awarded for research rather than teaching (Williams and Abson, 2002); therefore specialist research universities receive greater funding than those which are not part of elite groups (e.g., the Russell Group) which, in their acquisition of additional research funding, place other institutions at a disadvantage in terms of funding and, arguably, prestige. Archer (2007: 239) recognises this element of diversity rhetoric as 'vertical diversity' wherein 'diversity is invoked as a means for driving up standards and "quality" – rewarding the "best" (and by implication punishing the "worst")'.

The differential prestige accorded to various institutions, broadly speaking, includes: history; timing and 'arrival' of university status; research; funding and finance; academic success rates; links to commerce and much more. The existence and prominence of league tables represents an example of the way in which 'vertical diversity' is met with 'horizontal diversity'. Horizontal diversity refers to 'a plurality of institutional forms' for different needs (Archer, 2007: 639) and it is within this discursive framework that criticisms of mass equals lower standards and dumbing down are located (Leathwood and O'Connell, 2003: 599). In the competitive education market place, institutions must vie for resources, which are specifically

and unequally targeted. A plurality of university 'types' emerge through the process of differentiation and are constructed using 'the evocative terminology of "gold", "silver" and "bronze" universities', forming a tripartite construction of value between research, teaching and more localised regional training institutions, which is an 'explicit form of stratification' (Archer, 2007: 638; Ainley, 2003). Similar stratifications occur with students: classed notions of value operate to position some as better equipped for success than others, despite the logic of individualisation, competitiveness and meritocracy that underpins the field.

Bourdieu (1986) proposes that degree qualifications act as symbolic capital – legitimate forms of capital that are exchangeable in the economic field and routinely acknowledged as valuable, without considering the play of power that establishes them as such. The mass expansion of HE is perceived as affecting the value of degree qualifications, and students are routinely encouraged to add to their degree in order to secure better futures (Brown et al., 2002; Heath, 2007). In a period of mass HE expansion – wherein the guarantee of success in the labour market from university participation is at best tenuous – much research suggests that middle-class students must employ strategies to maintain their positions via the acquisition and development of different capitals, qualities and dispositions (Brown, 1995; Brown et al., 2002; Power et al., 2003; Devine, 2004). Heath's (2007) study uses the idea of an 'economy of experience'; the 'gap year', in particular, 'raises important questions concerning the processes by which certain groups of young people are able to gain advantage over others during a period of educational expansion' (2007: 89). The rise in popularity of the gap year, Heath argues, is in parallel with HE expansion and thus places it as part of middle-classes strategies to gain the edge over other students. The conscious use of 'experience' in development, accumulation and promotion generates distinctions in the management and performance of identities. Students have to 'find new ways of gaining distinction in a world in which educational qualifications no longer guarantee success' (Heath, 2007: 92); they are expected to complement their qualifications with other desirable skills, qualities and experience.

When discussing the value of HE, many of my participants described it in terms of 'the experience', which was largely based around independent living, making new friends and socialising with the student community. The majority of working-class participants placed a lot of value on their part-time work experience (in terms of their increased skills and *work* experience) and their notions of value more broadly tended to be framed around the exchange value of a high-level qualification on the job market and a sense of academic success. Other (mainly middle-class) participants emphasised softer skills, be gained through participating socially and living independently. The 'student experience' was championed by mainly middle-class students and by most of the students who went away from home to study. This take-up of the 'student experience' was used as a means of differentiating between students and of creating bonds, with 'everyone in the same boat'. Different (classed) backgrounds and dispositions structured decisions and, equally, the judgement of

others. I offer only a few of these to exemplify the distinctions that operate around notions of the student experience.

When research participants reflected on how university may be different now from ten years ago, most responses involved discussing the expansion of HE and its change from an elite system to a mass one. The emphasis on the social side of university, as another response to the massification of HE, was highlighted by many of the participants. For example, Lyndsey was just one of many who recognised the importance of the 'social side of uni' and the 'package' that one has access to:

I think that it's probably become more about the extra things, like you know, like the societies have developed and the nights out have developed and the unions have developed to become more about the whole package of university – not just about studying. (Lyndsey, 18, middle class, Old University)

HE is of course recognised as a place for study but that it is not *just* about studying was repeatedly invoked; as Lyndsey notes, it is about 'the package'. However, the 'extra things' and the social life are part of the struggles to gain legitimacy in 'mass' HE.

Looking beyond HE to the graduate labour market, Brown et al. (2002: 6) maintain that large employers are redefining 'the skills and the personal characteristics of the knowledge workers of the future', which stand aside qualifications as ranking mechanisms. They argue that the rise of mass HE creates a market of 'potential knowledge workers', and that the recruitment processes employers adopt will (re)produce social and occupational elites (Brown et al., 2002: 6). 'Productive potential' indicators are used by employers, and therefore successful graduates need 'the personality package' to succeed in obtaining these positions (Brown et al., 2002: 28). Brown's earlier work (1995: 42) discusses the idea that the middle classes are invested in the development of 'charismatic qualities of their children', including social confidence, and that interests and hobbies outside of academic study are now 'a matter of investment'. Such investments are part of the 'economy of experience' and 'the personality package' which, according to Brown et al. (2002: 27), is valued more than the 'denomination of academic currency'. On this logic, the student experience is increasingly valuable in addition to (or perhaps more than) academic qualifications. The students in my research placed much emphasis on the value of the student experience as a 'package', which suggests that they make valuable investments in their future potential beyond university. Students are consciously engaged in securing experience that they can capitalise on in the future; by contrast, those who do not engage in this experience would be thus at a disadvantage.

Tim talks directly of the value of experience or the 'economy of experience' in the way that Brown et al. (2002) emphasise it:

Well, I try to get a balance of activities – well, I'm not really into anything like organised sport or anything like that but I like to try and do voluntary work when I can – and not just for the record reason – but to try and do it to better myself anyway, but I've got various voluntary work that I've done and I did some travelling during the summer. I did some 'inter-railing' round Europe with some friends...The important thing is, is to show you're a balanced individual so you've kind of got, well, you work hard but you've kind of got a good social life and you know, you're prepared to help others so, yeah, hopefully those things will stand me in good stead, and I've got a really good part-time job at home, which is always good to have to show you're a bit of a team player. (Tim, 20, middle class, Old University)

Whilst not *all* participants talked so explicitly about adding value, many students routinely indicated a conscious effort to demonstrate to future employers that they have the 'personality package': they can capitalise on social confidence and experience of travelling, of voluntary work, of university social life and living away. What is interesting are the ways that Tim alludes to his self-development *not* being solely for further exchange; it is not just to 'show' his qualities – it is 'not *just* for the record reason – but to try and better myself'. Such reflexive work on the self is explicit here, but the need to *show* he is a balanced individual (between work and social life), is extremely pertinent to the investment strategies in university itself (Addison, 2012). The value of a part-time job is recognised by many like Tim, but there are stark differences between students in this respect. Whereas Tim (as with many students who live away from home during university) has a part-time job 'at home' (i.e., during vacation time), others depend for their survival on working during term time. For working-class students, this is one of the main structural constraints that affect the ability to capitalise on other elements of the student experience.

Living with other students is typically interwoven with the social side of university and, indeed, the idea that socialising goes 'hand-in-hand' with studying, was communicated by the vast majority of students who have moved away to study. The decision to work part-time was factored as a 'choice' that students make, which overlooks the fact that for some, such work *is* a necessity. Many of the middle class participants, who moved away to study, talked about part-time work, but this work was usually sessional, occasional and often restricted to university holidays. Moreover, the wages gained from this work were not an income on which they depended for survival. The ways in which socialising is presented as one of the key elements of the 'student experience' denies any sense of being privileged by being able to access this. The way in which (middle-class) students (particularly those who moved away to study) frame investing in the student experience is as a matter of sorting out priorities and recognising that university is a time to engage in experiences other than work, which is reserved for 'the rest of your life'. The priorities of managing a home and living independently, relaxing and socialising as well as keeping on top of study, contrasted starkly to the reports of 'priorities' and regular tasks that most working-class students spoke of. Managing priorities involves the quality and quantity of particular resources that students have access

to, and these different stocks of capital are implicated in the types of engagements students (are able to) make.

The 'tools' needed to successfully engage and participate in university social life were rarely highlighted as financial by middle-class students; to them, there are key dispositions required. Lyndsey discusses such capitals and dispositions that were routinely highlighted by all middle-class students, most of those who had left home to study:

I think the best thing is just to be really confident....I think you just need to have the attitude where you're willing to get involved in things, and you will go to university and participate in wider things as well and be willing to make new friends...I think everybody can fit in as long as they've got the mental attitude – it's not about how you look or where you come from, it's like the mental side of things. (Lyndsey, 19, middle class, New University)

What it means to be a student is coded via dispositional qualities such as 'social confidence' that is seen as necessary to extract the optimal value from the university experience. That participation is about having the 'right mental attitude' situates successful access to the student experience at the individual level; implicitly, those who do not have the right attitude will struggle and will not fit in. Above all, participation in the student experience involves what Bourdieu terms as 'illusio', that is, the notion that the game is worth playing (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 98). Distinctions on the basis of confidence take a naturalised form, becoming a matter of individual personalities. Those who are lacking in confidence are coded as shy, uninterested, and as not making the most out of university by taking advantage of opportunities to socialise and be included in the student community. The naturalisation of such beneficial dispositions, however, detracts from the social contexts in which such qualities are developed and in which they are expected to be deployed. The confidence, the sociability, the desire to get involved is a form of cultural capital that is symbolically legitimated and which is seen as key to future success beyond HE.

The availability of opportunities to exchange and accrue cultural and social capital depend very much on stocks of economic capital. In order to prioritise socialising and studying to fit in and get ahead, students have to be equipped with the necessary financial resources, but not all students have access to these. The following example, with Siobhan, suggests that the degree to which students get involved socially depends on their financial resources. If, like Siobhan, students are lacking in financial resources and struggling to pay for necessities, then their spending power for leisure pursuits dwindles, limiting the ability to accrue the social and cultural capital favoured in academic culture:

I think that's the big difference in uni that really separates people – like, the money that you've got – 'cause I can't afford to go out – if I wanted to go out I couldn't afford it. The people who live around me – they can afford it – and they can afford it, like, five

times a week but, like, I can only afford to go out, like, once every two weeks and even then I begrudge paying it 'cause I was, like, you know – I could actually buy stuff that I actually need! (laughs) (Siobhan, 18, working class, Old University)

Siobhan was one of the working-class students in the sample to move away to study, and her experiences of staying in a hall of residence served to embed separatism on the basis of financial differences. An individual's intention to access the 'student experience' may be there (this may even be considered a priority) but the lack of financial capital necessary to go out with student peers restricts this and creates feelings of isolation from other students. However, it is not simply a case of financial restriction; the reality is much more complex and involves the investment of capital other than money, such as social confidence as highlighted above. Students are converting their economic capital into cultural capital, to access student lifestyles or the student experience that also has cultural value in the field.

Both Heath (2007) and Brown et al. (2002) employ in their work the term 'economy of experience' in terms of exchange value in contexts of entry into elite institutions and into graduate careers in their respective works; however, the particular student experience that is constructed by the research participants in my research was as exchange value *within* student interactions and everyday distinctions between students. King (2011) departs slightly from Heath's (2007) emphasis in documenting how 'experience' is used in identity work, as part of the ways in which students interact with each other and make social distinctions. In King's research the students (2011) who had taken gap years not only characterised these experiences as beneficial for the personal development of dispositions and characteristics such as confidence, maturity and independence, but they also used these experiences to draw distinctions on the bases of these newly developed dispositions and characteristics. Their 'others' were by contrast, immature and lacking in life experience, which also positioned them as more highly developed selves (King, 2011; also see: Skeggs, 2004; Evans, 2010). Similarly, the student experience creates space for establishing sameness and difference, drawing boundaries of 'us' and 'them' between students who are able to capitalise on social experiences of university, against those who are not.

One of the most significant distinctions drawn between the students involved living arrangements and how they were commonly associated with the decision to attend a local university or to move away from the area. Students who have moved out of the area voiced a sense of 'us', of 'being in the same boat' with others; the 'them' in Faye's discussion below are those who stay at home and do not get the 'proper experience':

[A] lot of them as well, they're still living at home...so it's not really like...well, yeah, I don't think they're really gonna get the proper university experience. (Faye, 18, middle class, Old University)

'Just living at home' was regularly devalued in favour of living independently, which involves taking on new responsibilities that students studying locally are presumed not to undertake. Many 'local' students live independently but remain outside the sense of belonging to the student community.

Jayne, like other local students spent time during her studies living with friends/partner and also with her family at different points, and she highlights a number of issues that were commonly voiced by local students, wherein living locally and not with other students, retaining existing friendship groups and maintaining a part-time job affected participation in the student experience. The distinction here is largely drawn between the 'us' and 'them' of local students and people moving away:

I think you're more part of the student life when you live in town and with other students – that's what it feels like...I would just sort of go to uni and then go straight home or then go straight to work, so I didn't really take part in uni life...and, again, because a lot of my friends were older...they were more like acquaintances on my course, I think that would definitely be the difference of people moving away or staying here....From what I've seen, it seems like you do just keep your friendship group that you've always had if you stay around here and whereas, obviously, if you're at a different uni and you don't know anyone and make loads of friends – like, new friends – then maybe you'd make like closer friendship groups then...I sort of grouped together with sort of the local students quite a bit...I just thought, well I'm not coming just to make friends or anything...I still find it a little bit daunting being there. (Jayne, 25, working class, New University)

That Jayne's friendship groups result in alliances with other local students is interesting; she draws attention to a sense of withdrawal from the university life that is commonly discussed by other local, working-class students. As such, Jayne and others like her demonstrate 'socio-spatial compartmentalisation and resistance to integration' (Clayton et al., 2009: 170; also see, Baxter and Britton, 2001), whereby boundaries are constructed between established social lives 'and the often more limited social relationships enacted within the spaces of university' (Clayton et al., 2009: 168). Taylor and Scurry's (2011: 584) examination of the 'intersection between marginalised "home" students and "international students" highlights the issue that local students may be "awkwardly placed as already being in place ... yet, still outside of this". Their finding that 'some students have *always* been in the locale, while *never* feeling at home in the university (Taylor and Scurry, 2011: 600) has a distinct resonance with the students of this research. As with one of Taylor and Scurry's participants (2011: 600; also see Archer et al., 2003), Jayne and other local, working-class students like them, do not integrate into the student community; they do not access the 'student experience' of occupying student spaces (e.g., halls, pubs).

That Jayne also mentions the element of university as 'daunting' is also significant and ties in to the discussion on social confidence as a valuable capital in the student

experience highlighted earlier. Bourdieu and Passeron (1977, 1979), in their work on HE argue that middle-class individuals are socialised in such a way that they enter HE equipped with resources and practices similar to that of the field and thereby encounter university as a 'fish in water' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 127). They are more likely to have family who have been to university and they have an affinity or a 'feel for the game', that their working-class counterparts lack. This is the result of different socialisation and having opportunities to accrue particular resources, with working-class individuals (or 'non-traditional' students), according to Bourdieu, withdrawing from the university system with the notion that it is 'not for the likes of me'. However, working-class and 'non-traditional' participants in this research *are* in the system. They are the 'lucky survivors', 'the least disadvantaged of the most disadvantaged' who nonetheless differ profoundly from their middle-class ('traditional') student counterparts (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1979: 26). The social confidence that middle-class students possess and see as crucial to getting involved in the student experience, signifies their ease with the field, or their 'feel for the game'. Possession of the social confidence to make many new friends and to socialise with other students and having the 'right mental attitude', that Lyndsey mentioned earlier, involves drawing on what are considered to be particularly classed capitals.

The decision to move away to study is not a matter of straightforward choice either; it is not a case of working-class students making poor judgments but one of geographical and material constraints (Reay et al., 2001). Colin here exemplifies a common concern amongst working-class students of the (financial) affordability of moving away to study:

I didn't go to Nottingham, Trent or Wales for the simple fact of money erm I just – my parents can't financially support us and I didn't [think] that the student loan would be enough for, like – obviously for survival; but travelling back and forth 'cause once you get to Wales or Nottingham you're far away, so I applied for these two [Old and New] as well'. (Colin, 25, working class, New University)

Colin conducted thorough searches that dialogues with other working-class students in the sample revealed were uncommon. However, as shown above, despite finding suitable courses elsewhere, it was ultimately lack of financial support that prevented him taking up an offer of a place outside of the region. From the outset, class backgrounds and dispositions structured decisions to participate in quite different ways. Working-class students had been recognised as being academically bright and encouraged to maximise their educational potential in order to achieve social mobility, but they were acutely aware of their 'non-traditional' status, already marked as outsiders from the very point of entry into university – their choice to participate already framed by the knowledge that it was *not* the norm 'for people like us' (Bourdieu, 1990: 64–65). Such powerful expressions of otherness to the 'norm', contrast markedly with the accounts of middle-class participants.

Their reasons for going to university were structured by a sense of HE being the natural and next step – the norm between their family and peers – an ‘educational inheritance’ (Power et al., 1999). Here, the ‘transgenerational family scripts...exert a prospective and regulative influence on actual life chances and choices’ (Cohen and Hey, 2000: 5).

Graeme exemplifies here how notions of financial/cultural risk and difference are bound up in the distinctions between those considered atypical students which manifests in the type of investment they make:

I think that [if] a lower economic background [student] really want[ed] to go to university, then they will do really well at it and I think they'll be more erm ... what's the word, more erm ... respectful, I suppose, respectful of what they've got 'cause you know they've done so much to get to where they are...They've had to get their fees paid for or whatever and they've had to kind of go against the trend in their background and actually sit there in the lecture and be able to, I suppose, you know, be part of the university. Then, I think that they'd probably do better than people from an upper-class or a middle-class background 'cause they know where they've come from and they know what they need to do whilst they're here...Yeah,'cause you know it's – they probably know what it's going to do for them in the long run rather than somebody else who might think, 'Oh well, I can go to university and therefore I'll do it'. (Graeme, 18, middle class, Old University)

Working-class students are very much ‘other’ to Graeme, but he frames their ‘respectfulness’ for the value of the degree for purposes of social mobility, supposing that their ‘struggle’ to achieve HE status will propel their efforts to succeed academically. The assumption is that by way of being previously excluded, working-class students will show more enthusiasm for their studies (see Harrop et al., 2007). An assumption exists within Graeme’s statement that accessing HE and performing well academically will result in equality, or at least social mobility. The rhetoric of social mobility, however, glosses over much of the reality of going ‘against the trend in their background’ – and the fractured identities that may result in a sense of belonging nowhere (Ingram, 2011; Reay et al., 2009; Taylor and Scurry, 2011). It is also noteworthy that Graeme emphasises the importance of the degree and the study element of HE to working-class students, contrasting this with ‘people from an upper-class or middle-class background’ who presumably are able to put in less effort.

There were similarities, yet also important departures, from how local working-class students positioned themselves against more privileged students, departures which indicate perceived differences in the value of university and in accessing the student experience. In these students’ accounts, the more privileged students are positioned as caring little about the grade they receive and the university is their playground: a temporary measure before progressing onto already sought-after positions that they obtain through contacts (social capital):

[M]aybe it's just a one-off thing, but there's a lot of people who I met on my course who were lovely but who didn't care about what they were doing – they were there primarily because they wanted to say that they'd been to university – they didn't want the degree – they weren't even bothered about their degree – they were there because they wanted the experience – they didn't need it because at the end of the day they were going to get a job at their dad's company or their mam's company, so it didn't really matter what they did. (Vanessa, 25, working class, New University)

As seen here (and in other accounts), what are perceived by local working-class students as 'typical students' are identified as going to university for the social experience, destined for unearned positions in the job market without the worry of debt or funding their lifestyles, which is everything that the working-class student's experience is not. This contrasts with working-class students having made risky investments in HE to secure better job prospects and having prioritised studies over anything else HE may have to offer. Whilst they recognise that those other students come to university for 'the experience', this is not recognised as a strategy but more as an extension of their privileged selves. As such, working-class students challenge meritocratic discourse surrounding HE that implies it will afford them the same opportunities as the privileged others. This is most explicitly stated by Colin:

[T]here's this façade that university is of equal chance but like everywhere there's division and it's, it's the division is always financial – not academic – 'cause I'm top of my class and I'm one of the poorest students at university like it's – all the division's financial. (Colin, 22, working class, New University)

Colin (like others above) addresses the inconsistency in meritocratic rhetoric of university value, as endorsed by the government. The notion of 'divisions' that Colin repeatedly invokes is significant; he speaks of internal divisions within university without the emphasis Vanessa (amongst others) placed on unequal outcomes. As top of his class, Colin recognises his achievements academically, but sees money as key in the lifestyles other students can afford and crucially it is on this basis that Colin, and others from similar socio-economic backgrounds in the study, make distinctions. The 'student experience' of university, the different elements of gains to be had from embarking on a degree – the very reasons for making the decision to participate in HE – are aspects of how the value of HE is constructed for differently classed students. The choices students make are complexly affected by numerous social factors such as class as well as gender, age and prior education. Financial position and material constraints are perceived to structure the kind of investment possible; however, social and cultural elements also factor in. Social, cultural and economic resources are needed to accrue and develop subsequent valuable capitals from the HE experience, despite not being routinely recognised in this way; and access to such precious resources for investment differ between students as there are persistent and uneven rules and requirements which frame (dis)engagement.

Capitalising on 'student experience' beyond the gates

Broadly speaking, my respondents depict HE as a social arena of distinctions and divisions relevant in the ways in which friendships are formed and maintained; in the spaces traversed and inhabited in and around the university and the city; and, further, in the relations between students from neighbouring institutions. These distinctions rely on complex, culturally specific classed codes that are enduring, yet dynamic, and involve the exchange of intersecting dimensions of social, cultural and economic capital. What my own work draws attention to – as does that of the likes of Brown et al. (2002), Heath (2007) and King (2011) – are ideas around the impact of 'experience' within and beyond the proverbial gates of the university, and I reflect here on how these ideas regarding exchange value and everyday distinctions continue to resonate further down the line of academic 'success'. I wish to draw attention to the 'profitability' of 'student experience' and the specific 'knowledge products' produced from sociological research of this nature; and in doing so how exchange value is precariously negotiated during transitions from PhD student to labour-market-entrant or, indeed, to an early career researcher (ECR) if equipped with the 'right' capitals.

Some forms of engagement pay off more than others. Knowing the rules of the game and being able to successfully negotiate and capitalise on 'student experience' is something that is not widely available to all, despite the way in which participation is constructed universally through policy. Classed systems of value operate within and beyond HE in the graduate job market and those who have the resources to capitalise on valued experiences and investments are more likely to find success beyond the gates. The 'impact' on students as a result of their (non)participation and (dis)engagement is continued in the struggle to obtain positions within the job market on which their investment into university was predicated. As Taylor (2011: 777) maintains, in addition to massively increased numbers of undergraduate entrants, 'universities now support large numbers of post-graduate students and post-doctoral research staff, seeking – and being compelled – to make a public "impact"'. This signals important considerations regarding the transference and exchange value of capital further down the line of 'educational success'.

My own position as an educationally successful 'non-traditional' student (in Bourdieusian terms, a 'lucky survivor') exemplifies the ambivalence and precariousness of educational privilege and the slipperiness of 'use' as it is being reconfigured in the educational setting. Enormous competition for funding and academic positions coupled with the necessity of financing survival, getting 'experience', developing writing, broadening networks and so on, certainly require entrepreneurial skills (and much in terms of risks and costs). The PhD graduate job market is similarly affected by increased competition for academic positions, and the influence of the REF agenda – which demands publications, 'engagement' and 'impact', affects the value of the credentials and importantly, the experience PhD graduates bring with them. The PhD qualification is one thing, 'the package' of having experience in successfully acquiring and managing funding, publishing in highly regarded academic refereed journals and, often, engaging within and beyond

academia, sits alongside (of course) the right mental attitude, the (social) confidence (demonstrated through networking and networks) and, necessarily, the right fit into the institution/department: thus echoing much discussed above. What is also at stake here is the use(fulness) as 'exchange' of the PhD knowledge-product, which reflects a broader pattern of 'choice' and 'value' – as does the data presented regarding undergraduate 'engagement' and 'participation'. The use/exchange value of the nuanced, theoretically informed sociological 'knowledge product', and the 'impact' and 'engagement' these 'knowledge products' can make with different audiences relies on particular criteria and involves issues of transference and translation. The 'knowledge product' is also indelibly connected to the 'knowledge producer', a person(s) who is subjected to, and by, the same enduring, complex and culturally specific classed codes and exchange of (differently) valued capital.

Impact, outputs and sustainability are key mechanisms of success in academia; we must 'engage' with publics (who are assumed to be an interested audience) including governments and markets in order to secure funding and, ultimately, our jobs. The substance (topic/politics/findings) of the PhD research 'knowledge product' no doubt impacts greatly on the ability to capitalise in the sense of performing 'impact' and 'engagement' in/ beyond academia; or even to acquire future research funding that is often shaped by key 'priority' themes. Knowledge transfers and engaging publics involves what is communicated (interestedness), how it is communicated (translation) and to whom it is communicated or transferred (audiences), all of which are inflected by classed systems of (exchange) value and what is considered 'useful'.

There most certainly exists difficulty in communicating the nuanced (social/cultural/economic) everyday operations of class different audiences, including broader publics as well as policy and academic contexts. Taylor and Addison (2011) document the experience of engaging a project user-group, including various 'North East actors', and they document difficulties in transferring knowledge when the user-group's own agendas of 'use' contrast with that of researchers. The analyses of the complexity of 'fitting into place' (Taylor, 2012) can be 'cast into the shadows', and elite user groups can be detached from the struggles of the participants in favour of what is considered more useful or representative of the place brand, as in the example of Taylor and Addison's (2011) research engagement experience. Furthermore, their comments that "'city publics" might be positioned as democratising and open or, conversely, as curtailed and shaped through specific and pre-determined economies of value and use' (Taylor and Addison, 2011: 5.1) provide useful commentary on the relative value of sociological knowledge in different settings; within as well as beyond the academy, I maintain.

Certainly, my research (my 'knowledge product' of classed 'student experience') is not particularly conducive to a notion of 'outputs' as tangible products; rather, the research analyses concern 'relational, always ongoing, incomplete (even "failed") learning processes' (Taylor and Addison, 2011: 1.8). Within the academy and in public policy contexts, the 'value' of my 'knowledge product' is subjected to the

same classed logic of marketisation that positions quantifiable learning outcomes as more 'useful'. In social policy contexts (as well as some academic contexts – see Bourdieu and Waquant, 1992) critical, theoretically and empirically informed qualitative research 'knowledge products' are unlikely to be 'useful'.

Furthermore, Murji (2007: 851) makes a point of the persisting 'ivory tower' image of academics (as 'knowledge producers') and their 'knowledge products' being (mis)understood/interpreted by 'public' audiences, which is particularly worthy of consideration for ECRs 'stepping out' as sociologists (see: Back, 2007). I remain wary of 'translating' my theses to 'publics', being profoundly aware that even to those who experience class inequalities, they are perhaps not popularly recognised in the form of the 'c-word' (Sviensson, 2009) in a supposedly 'classless society' (Adonis and Pollard, 1997) wherein people often dismiss, trivialise and decentre class (Skeggs, 2004: 41). A 'new nomenclature of class' signifies preference for an alternative language of sociocultural differentiations (see: Pini, McDonald and Mayes, 2012; Taylor, 2012); wherein people are considered as different degrees of 'ordinary' (Savage et al., 2001) so the 'translatability', 'transference' and 'interestedness' in my PhD 'knowledge product' is subjected to similar difficulties outside the academy with broader publics.

Finally, within and beyond the academy the value or usefulness of my 'knowledge product' concerning 'student experience' cannot be divorced from myself as a 'knowledge producer' (and classed researcher); equally involved in negotiations of exchange and inflected with the dynamic economies of value circulating within (and beyond) HE. The knowledge product is certainly part of me and what I have to offer in everyday negotiations of value and in exchange for labour-market positions; particularly a foot on the academic (research) ladder. Yet, whilst I have focused on the value of the knowledge product itself, I must also consider the broader parallels of the insights from the research data and my own (reflexive) practices. The value of my own student experience and the (dis)engagements that my sociocultural class performances enact and interweave in everyday distinctions, circulating within and beyond the 'gates' of the academy.

Financial support/structural issues continue to influence the struggles and/ or (in)ability to meet writing and publishing objectives, preparing research and funding proposals and other valuable experience in a (academic) job market that requires 'bankable' and translatable skills, outputs, expert experience, and status to invest in you as part of an 'institutional brand' (Addison, 2012). Yet, as I have also argued, they interweave with social and cultural capitals of valued networks and associates, having the 'personality package' and the (social) confidence to 'fit in' with the institutional brand. In making transitions beyond the PhD student, struggles to fit into place occur in all aspects of one's personal and professional lives; be this in the academic job market or otherwise. To embody the personality package and to 'exchange' experience depends on classed circuits of value and how one is perceived to fit with such sociocultural classed codes. Although it is assumed that educational success enables social mobility, this inheres a sense of 'moving

AQ12 away' from working-classness, which may involve psycho-social disjuncture and a feeling of not 'fitting in' anywhere. I ask at what stage, if any really, does the 'fish out of water' (Bourdieu, 1999: 495) see the academic community (or other segments of the labour market) as 'people like me' (Bourdieu, 1990)? When does the field become familiar and the 'disquiet, ambivalence, insecurity and uncertainty' dissipate (Reay, 2009: 1105; also see: Reay, 2005)? Negotiations of class identities in the experiences of working-class academics (Hey, 2006; Mohoney and Zmroczek, 1997; Nainby and Pea, 2003; inter alia) highlight issues of ongoing tensions and struggles; educational success does not necessarily premise 'arrival' (Taylor, 2012).

My research provides much for reflection in current political times, particularly with regards to the future of HE. What will become of the 'lucky survivors' who do make it into the top 10 per cent of young people who will go to university (Hodgson and Spours, 2013: 14)? My own experience as a 'lucky survivor' (who accessed HE through WP policies), certainly does not guarantee (academic) success and social mobility, nor provide the means to avoid or overcome the persisting sociocultural classed codes that entrench society. The sentiments of 'democratising and open' spaces of inclusion and class-neutral participation in HE (constructed through policy) reverberate within and beyond the gates of academia. And yet, powerful 'specific and pre-determined economies of value and use' (Taylor and Addison, 2011: 5.1) contribute to the persistence of class inequalities and, ultimately, the ability to negotiate and capitalise on student experience within and beyond the gates of the entrepreneurial university. I advocate that now, more than ever, there is a necessity to 'pay attention to the fragments, the voices and stories that are otherwise passed over or ignored[;]...to admit these voices and pay the courtesy of serious attention' (Back, 2007: 1). Yet, this task is situated amidst mounting pressure to be publicly accessible and transferable in specific ways, and as a useful marketable knowledge product. Such discernment of 'use' places the sociologist and the 'art of listening' (Back, 2007) at risk of selectivity, disjuncture and misinterpretation, and, more-over, (re)inscribes and (re)constructs sociocultural classed codes of value and worth.

Knowing the 'rules of engagement' and having the resources with which to capitalise properly on university and all that the experience may have to offer, are inherently classed, signalling different limits on access. As the landscape of HE changes, so do the rules and strategies for getting ahead. The rules of engagement (as 'participation') effectively change to secure privilege and, thus, the education system continues to perpetuate inequality through reactivated forms of distinction. Being 'other' to what is considered typical or 'normal' within the gates of the university subsequently affects experiences and the ability to accrue valuable capital for exchange. My research exemplifies some of the enduring, yet dynamically reconstructed, elements of class distinctions that challenge the universalising, class-neutral elements of educational policy. What is produced, and the ability of the producers to translate and transfer resources accrued from HE, are at stake, and such translations/transfers are affected by economies shaped by predetermined

forms of 'use' and 'value'. These predetermined forms of use and value shape the rules of engagement, and this highlights the precariousness of 'educational privilege'.

References

Addison, M. (2012) Knowing your way within and across classed spaces: the (re) making and (un)doing of identities of value within higher education in the UK. In Taylor, Y. (ed.), *Educational Diversity: The Subject of Difference and the Difference of Subjects*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 236–256.

Adonis, A. and Pollard, S. (1997) *A Class Act: The Myth of Britain's Classless Society*. London: Hamish Hamilton.

Ainley, P. (2003) Towards a seamless web or a new tertiary tripartism? the emerging shape of post-14 education and training in England. *Higher Education Quarterly*, 51(4), 390–407.

Archer, L. (2007) Diversity, equality and higher education: a critical reflection on the ab/uses of equity discourse within widening participation. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 12 (5), 635–653.

Archer, L., Hutchings, M., Ross, A., Leathwood, C. and Gilchrist, R. (2003) *Higher Education and Social Class: Issues of Exclusion and Inclusion*. London and New York: Routledge/Falmer.

Back, L. (2007) *The Art of Listening*. Oxford: Berg Publishers.^{[1][SEP]} Ball, S. J. (2004) Education for Sale! The commodification of everything? *The Annual Education Lecture 2004*. London: Kings College London.^{[1][SEP]}

Ball, S. J. (2005) Education, markets, choice and social class: the market as a class strategy in UK and USA. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 14 (1), 3–19.^{[1][SEP]} Ball, S. J., Maguire, M. and Macrae, S. (2000) *Choice, Pathways and Transitions Post-16*. London: Routledge/Falmer.^{[1][SEP]}

Baxter, A. and Britton, C. (2001) Risk, identity and change: becoming a mature student. *International Studies in Sociology of Education*, 11, 87–104.^{[1][SEP]}

Bourdieu, P. (1984) *Distinction: A Social Critique on the Judgement of Taste*. London: Routledge.^{[1][SEP]}

Bourdieu, P. (1986) The forms of capital. In Richardson, J. (ed.), *Handbook of Theory and Research for Sociology of Education*. New York: Greenwood.^{[1][SEP]}

Bourdieu, P. (1988) *Homo Academicus*. Collier, P. (trans). Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.^{[1][SEP]}

Bourdieu, P. (1990) [1980] *The Logic of Practice*. Nice, R. (trans). Cambridge: Polity.

Bourdieu, P. and Passeron, J. C. (1977) *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture*.

Nice, R. (trans). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Bourdieu, P. and Passeron, J. C. (1979) *The Inheritors, French Students and their Relation to Culture*. Nice, R. (trans). Chicago: University of Chicago.

Bourdieu, P. and Wacquant, L. (1992) *Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*. Wacquant, L. (trans). Cambridge: Polity Press.

Brown, P. (1995) Cultural capital and social exclusion: some observations on recent trends in education, employment and the labour market. *Work, Employment and Society*, 9, 29–51.

Brown, R. (2003) New labour and higher education: dilemmas and paradoxes. *Higher Education Quarterly*, 57(3), 239–248.

Brown, P., Hesketh, P. and Williams, S. (2002) Employability in a knowledge driven economy. *Journal of Education and Work*, 16 (2), 107–126.

Burawoy, M. (2005) For public sociology. *British Journal of Sociology*, 56, 365–372.

Clayton, J., Crozier, G. and Reay, D. (2009) Home and away: risk, familiarity and the multiple geographies of the higher education experience. *International Studies in Sociology of Education*, 19(3), 157–174.

Cohen, P. and Hey, V. (2000) *Studies in Learning Regeneration: Consultation Document*. London: University of East London and Brunel University.

Crozier, G., Reay, D. and Clayton, J. (2008) Different strokes for different folks: diverse students in diverse institutions – experiences of higher education'. *Research Papers in Education*, 23(2), 167–177.

Devine, F. (2004) *Class Practices – How Parents Help Children Get Good Jobs*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

DfE (2010) *The Importance of Teaching: The Schools White Paper 2010*. London: DfE.

DfES (2003a) *The Future of Higher Education*. London: HMSO. DfES (2003b) *Widening Participation in Higher Education*. London: HMSO.

Ericson, R. (2005) Publicizing sociology. *The British Journal of Sociology*, 56(3), 365–372.

Featherstone, L. (2011) Fair Admissions and the Elite University: an examination of the practice of 'contextualisation' in the undergraduate admissions process. *Reflecting Education*, 7(1), 5–22. [17]
[SEP]

Gumport, P. (2000) Academic restructuring: organizational change and institutional imperatives. *Higher Education*, 39, 67–91.

Harrop, A., Tattersall, A. and Goody, A. (2007) Gender matters in higher education. *Educational Studies*, 33(4), 385–306.

Hayton, A. and Paczuska, A. (eds) (2002) *Access, Participation and Higher Education*. London: Routledge/Falmer.

Heath, S. (2007) Widening the gap: pre-university gap years and the 'economy of experience'. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 28(1), 89–103.

Her Majesty's Government (HMG) (2011) *Building Engagement, Building Futures: Our Strategy to Maximize the Participation of 16–24 Year Olds in Education, Training and Employment*. London: HMG.

Hodgson, A. and Spours, K. (2012) Towards a universal upper secondary education system in England: a unified and ecosystem vision. An inaugural professorial lecture. London: IOE Publications.

Hodgson, A. and Spours, K. (2013) Middle attainers and 14–19 progression in England: half-served by new labour and now overlooked by the Coalition? *British Educational Research Journal*. (forthcoming).

Ingram, N. (2011) Within the school and beyond the gate: the complexities of being educationally successful and working-class. *Sociology*, 45(2), 287–302.

King, A. (2002) Thinking with bourdieu against bourdieu: a practical critique of the habitus. *Sociological Theory*, 18(3), 419–433.

King, A. (2011) Minding the gap? young people's accounts of taking a gap year as a form of identity work in higher education. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 14(3), 341–357.

Kitagawa, F. and Lightowler, C. (2013) Knowledge exchange: a comparison of policies, strategies and funding incentives in English and Scottish higher education. *Research Evaluation*, 22(1), 1–14.

Leathwood, C. and O'Connell, P. (2003) 'It's a struggle': The construction of the 'new student' in higher education. *Journal of Education Policy*, 18(6), 597–615.

MacPherson, W. (1999) *The Stephen Lawrence Enquiry*. London: TSO. [17]
[SEP]

Martin, B. R. (2011) The research excellence framework and the 'impact agenda': are we creating a Frankenstein monster? *Research Evaluation*, 20(3), 247–254.

Morley, L. (2001) Producing new workers: quality, equality and employability in higher education. *Quality in Higher Education*, 7(2), 131–138.

Murji, K. (2007) Sociological engagements: institutional racism and beyond. *Sociology*, 41(5), 843–855.

Newman, S. and Jahdi, K. (2009) Marketisation of education: marketing, rhetoric and reality. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 33(1), 1–11.

Ozga, J. and Sukhnandan, L. (1998) Undergraduate non-completion: developing an explanatory model. *Higher Education Quarterly*, 52(3), 316–333.

Painter, C. (2012) The UK coalition government: constructing public service reform narratives. *Public Policy and Administration*, 28(1), 3 –.

Pini, B., McDonald, P. and Mayes, R. (2012) Class contestations and Australia's mineral resource boom: the emergence of the 'Cashed-up' Bogan. *Sociology*, 46(1), 142 –158.

Power, S., Edwards, T., Whitty, G. and Wigfall, V. (1999) Destined for success? Educational biographies of academically able students. *Research Papers in Education*, 14(3), 321–339.

Power, S., Edwards, T., Whitty, G. and Wigfall, V. (2003) *Education and the Middle Class*. Buckingham and Philadelphia: Open University.

Reay, D. (1996) Contextualising choice: social power and parental involvement. *British Educational Research Journal*, 22(5), 581–595.

Reay, D., Crozier, G. and Clayton, J. (2009) Strangers in paradise: working-class students in Elite universities. *Sociology*, 43(6), 1103–1121.

Reay, D., Crozier, G. and Clayton, J. (2010) 'Fitting in' or 'standing out': working-class students in UK higher education. *British Educational Research Journal*, 36(1), 107–124.

Reay, D., David, M. E. and Ball, S. (2001) *Degrees of Choice: Social Class, Race and Gender in Higher Education*. Stoke on Trent: Trentham Books.

Skeggs, B. (2004) *Class, Self, Culture*. London: Routledge.

Smith, D. and Bocoock, J. (1999) Participation and progression in mass higher education: policy and the FHE interface. *Journal of Education Policy*, 14(3), 283–299.

Sviensson, K. P. (2009) Introduction: the white working class and multiculturalism: is there space for a progressive agenda? In K. P. Sviensson (ed.), *Who Cares About the White Working Class?* Chichester: Runnymede Trust.

Sutton Trust (2010) *The Educational Backgrounds of Government Ministers in 2010*. London: The Sutton Trust.

Taylor, Y. (2011) Accessions: researching, designing higher education. *Gender and Education*, 23(6), 777–782. Taylor, Y. (2012) Cultures of class: ‘Cashed Up’ and (dis)appearing in place. Available at http://www.genderandeducation.com/issues/cultures_of_class/ [accessed 26 August 2012].

Taylor, Y. (2012a) 2013? Taylor, Y. and Addison, M. (2011) Placing research: ‘city publics’ and the ‘public sociologist’. *Sociological Research Online*, 16(4), 6 [accessed 26 August 2012].

Taylor, Y. and Scurry, T. (2011) Intersections, division, and distinctions: exploring widening participation and international students’ experiences of Higher Education in the UK. *European Societies*, 13(4), 583–606.

Watson, C. (2010) Accountability, transparency, redundancy: academic identities in an era of ‘excellence’. *British Education Research Journal*, 37(6), 955–971.

Williams, J. and Abson, J. (2001) Mass higher education: the construction of difference. In P. Anderson and J. Williams (eds), *Identity and Difference in Higher Education: Outsiders Within*. Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate Publishing.