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Ready, set, work? Career preparations of final-year non-traditional university students

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ABSTRACT

In higher education, non-traditional students experience a range of challenges, from aspiration and access into university to academic progress and success in their degree. Most students either enter employment or further study after their degree. This paper focuses on the latter stages of the effort to widen student access and participation in higher education, with an exploratory study of the career preparation and readiness of 22 final-year undergraduates from non-traditional backgrounds in the UK. We explore how students prepare themselves and are prepared by their degree for life after university, with the focus on career preparations and employment. In particular, we discuss the challenges for these students to engage in opportunities such as work experiences and extracurricular activities, which have implications for their chances of success and social mobility. We conclude with recommendations for practice, especially for academic and professional staff.

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Introduction

Over the past 50 years the higher education sector in the United Kingdom (UK) has undergone significant change. In the 1960s, fewer than one in 10 adults gained a university degree. Since 2012, despite the rise in tuition fees, more than one in three adults hold a graduate qualification of some kind (Alexander & Arday, 2015). The need to expand higher education to non-traditional students has been driven by the needs of the expanding global economy. By non-traditional, we mean first-generation university students, those from low-income households, those from minority ethnic/racial backgrounds, mature students (age 21 or over on university entry), and/or students with a declared disability. The growth in the service sector and in new forms of digital employment and the associated credentialisation of these jobs has resulted in more people needing graduate level qualifications to gain work. These changes have led to an expansion of degree courses to meet the needs of the economy and universities have welcomed in large cohorts of non-traditional students.

Set against this context, this paper draws on interviews with 22 final year undergraduates all defined as non-traditional students to examine how they prepare for work or further study during the final year of their degree course. Of the 22 participants, 19 are

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studying for a degree in social science and three are studying for a natural science degree, as detailed later. We want to understand how non-traditional students navigate the university experience and how they perceive they have been prepared for their next steps into work or postgraduate study. To problematise the employability discourse evoked by universities in the past two decades, we also draw on the work of Boden and Nedeva (2010), Clarke (2018) and Morley (2007). More specifically, we focus on the career preparation and readiness of non-traditional students. For instance, we ask, does entry into higher education equate to success by the time they exit university? How do their universities, courses and tutors support their career preparation? What are the challenges experienced by these students? In discussing our findings, we make recommendations in terms of how universities can support the career readiness of non-traditional students.

UK higher education and the career preparations of students

The massification of higher education has created pressure on funding the provision. In 2012, England's Conservative and Liberal Democrat Coalition government implemented several radical changes to the funding arrangements for further and higher education, which included cutting 'most ongoing direct public funding for tuition' (Bolton, 2017, p. 2) and increasing undergraduate university tuition fees from a maximum of £3,290 per annum to a maximum of £9,000 per annum. The government's intention was that fees over £6,000 would be the exception rather than the norm. However, the majority of English universities ended up charging the maximum fees. Despite significant earning differences between forms of work, all undergraduate courses cost approximately the same. The Augar Review (2019) of English higher education, commissioned by then Prime Minister Theresa May, recommended a cut in tuition fees to £7500 to reduce the burden of subsidies picked up by taxpayers (Jarvis, 2019). The current Conservative government issued an interim response to the review almost two years later in January 2021, accepting many of the report's recommendations, but deferring policy decisions on the changes until late 2021/early 2022.

These funding pressures have created a need for all institutions to implement a range of support services to justify their fees and to ensure students gain graduate work upon completion of their studies. One of the major responses initiated by universities has been the considerable expansion and remit of career service provision to support student employability. The sector has altered the services provided to support non-traditional students through, for example, support with securing placement and volunteering opportunities, developing a curriculum vitae (CV) and completing job applications.

However, the employability discourse that underpins these efforts by universities is not unproblematic. As Clarke, 2018, p. 1923) notes, 'rather than seeking to debate the role of universities in society, higher education institutions have accepted, by and large, that graduate employability is, and should be, a key driver and measure of university outcomes'. Such a view has been critiqued (Morley, 2007). The tension relates to the purpose of university education (Brown & Scase, 2005) and the neoliberal drivers that determine the worker and associated skills required at any moment in time to service the economy. According to Boden and Nedeva (2010, p. 38), 'in many contemporary neoliberal states the long-standing contributions of universities to the development of citizens'

knowledges and skills have been re-badged as 'employability". Yet as Purcell and Tzanakou (2016, p. 356) note, there is no one graduate employment market 'and all degrees do not lead to the same career opportunities'. Non-traditional students are more likely to find themselves in less secure graduate employment due to their choice of course and institution (Hoskins, 2017). They are less likely to have access to and possession of reified social capital that has the potential to yield valuable connections to ease their entry into the graduate labour market (Tomlinson & Jackson, 2021).

Within this context, it is not surprising that students from non-traditional backgrounds tend to benefit from advice and support about how to plan for their next steps out of university and into work or graduate study (Rossiter, 2009). At the degree programme level, study skill support has increased along with an expansion of work placement opportunities. Most undergraduate degrees, especially in the social sciences, now offer at least a final year placement of some description with many offering yearly 'industrial' placement options. Placements have been noted as invaluable in supporting students' understanding and experience of the world of graduate work (Gbadamosi, Evans, Jones, Hickman, & Rudley, 2019). When enacted well and structured into the degree programme, rather than viewed as an add-on in the final year, placements work well to support students' and build their aspirations (Daniels & Brooker, 2014). These different forms of career service support and placement are aimed at improving graduate employment rates for all students, especially non-traditional students who have typically experience more challenges and thus lagged behind their peers in securing graduate jobs (Furlong & Cartmel, 2005; Hecht, McArthur, Savage, & Friedman, 2020; Tomlinson, 2012). However, placements have been critiqued for their emphasis on an 'instrumental approach to graduate employability that does not, however, take into account other critical factors' (Clarke, 2007, p.1923) such as social capital or class background (Gorman, 2015).

Enhancement activities during the summer months can be an element of undergraduate degree programmes. In the natural sciences, for example, the Salter Institute's provision of 185 summer schools at 18 institutions to encourage student participation in Chemistry as part of the government and industry's wider emphasis on promoting the take up of STEM subjects in higher education (Morton & Collins, 2010). The role of social activities and the summer break as a way of providing opportunities that enhance the student experience and provide concrete future career opportunities. In the social sciences, students can undertake a sandwich placement year that has been shown to provide 'a positive and significant impact on final year academic performance' (Jones, Green, & Higson, 2017, p. 988). These initiatives enable students to gain first-hand experience of the employment market to better inform their choices and planning. Yet, summer enhancement activities and sandwich year placements are more likely to be taken up by middle-class students with greater financial resources to support these endeavours (Hoskins & Barker, 2020). Here, it becomes clearer to see how 'employability has equity implications' (Morley, 2007, p. 191). Securing graduate employment is comparatively easier with a full curriculum vitae of placement and summer enhancement activities. Those students with financial support to take advantage of these opportunities are well placed when they enter the labour market (Purcell & Tzanakou, 2016).

Much of the existing research on the lifecycle of non-traditional students focuses on entry to higher education (Burke, Hayton, & Stevenson, 2018). Government policy tends to construct entry to a degree as social mobility and less focus is given to completion and gaining graduate employment (DfE, 2010). We know less about student experiences of transitioning out of university and into the workplace and how they prepare for this phase of their journey (Cabinet Office, 2012). Therefore, a key aim of our research is to build on existing research and explore how non-traditional students construct their futures and develop a sense of professional identity and career pathway during the final year of their undergraduate programme. In particular, we want to understand the forms of support that have worked for non-traditional students and how they prepare, or not, for work after university.

The theories of Bourdieu (1977, 1984), especially the concepts of *habitus* and *capital*, have been used to make sense of student experiences, including in higher education in the context of post-degree choices and trajectories (Burke, 2016; Tomlinson & Jackson, 2021). Bourdieu's work is concerned with the reproduction of social inequalities, especially through the education system. (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). According to Bourdieu (1977, p. 86), habitus constitutes 'a subjective but not individual system of internalised structures, schemes of perception, conception, and action common to all members of the same group or class'. In other words, individuals develop their understanding of the world, including their dispositions and perceptions of normality, that broadly reflects their socioeconomic position in society. These understandings, dispositions, and preferences constitute our habitus, which is developed over time, constituting our past and present. Although Bourdieu (1977) considered the habitus to function subconsciously and 'second to nature', these dispositions are not static or fixed as individuals can still learn and adapt new practices (Reay, 2004), especially through education and the acquisition of capital or different forms of resources.

Economic capital is about wealth and finance. Social capital refers to social contacts and networks. Cultural capital is about cultural competencies, which can be embodied, objectified and institutionalised, including cultural knowledge, tastes and qualifications (Bourdieu, 1986). The concepts of capital and habitus operate within and across *fields*, such as the field of higher education. For Bourdieu, access to these capital (and therefore positions of advantage) is socially structured and patterned. In the UK, middle-class students, especially from White British backgrounds (Reay, Crozier, & James, 2011), are typically advantaged, with more opportunities to participate in value-added extracurricular activities and more successful in securing internships than their working class and thus non-traditional counterparts (Bathmaker, Ingram, & Waller, 2013). The challenges for non-traditional students to 'fit in' at university is extensively researched (e.g. Cotton, Joyner, George, & Cotton, 2016; Holmegaard, Madsen, & Ulriksen, 2017; Leathwood & Read, 2009; Lowe & Cook, 2003; Marshall, Nolan, & Newton, 2016; Reay, Crozier, & Clayton, 2010; Willcoxson, Cotter, & Joy, 2011; Wong, 2018; Wong & Chiu, 2019). Some of these studies also adopted the lenses of habitus and capital to make sense of student experiences, especially around feelings of being 'out of place' (akin to 'fish out of water', see Reay, 2004) and their relative lack of academic resources, knowledge or dispositions to be academically successful, during and after university (Burke, 2016; Merrill, Finnegan, O'Neill, & Revers, 2020). In this paper we consider how students build cultural

capital through engagement with the career services and placement opportunities available to them. As detailed below, this paper focuses on non-traditional students and their readiness for employment after graduation.

The study

This paper draws on data from an exploratory study that investigated the career readiness of 22 university students from non-traditional backgrounds. Students were final-year undergraduates at one pre-1992 and one post-1992 English university,[1] mostly from the disciplines of the social sciences (see Appendix 1). Both universities appear to have a strong commitment to widening participation and a diverse student body comparable to their local population, as well as award-winning career services that the careers and professional development of students and alumni. Our students were diverse in terms of ethnicity and age, although we recruited only three male students. Our call for participants focused on final-year students who self-identify as from a non-traditional background.

To recruit participants, we emailed undergraduate programme leads, teaching and professional staff to ask for their support to share details of the study with their students. The email explained the purpose of the research and the criteria for participation, namely self-identification as a non-traditional student from a defined list (e.g. with mature, minority ethnic, first-generation or disability backgrounds). Semi-structured interviews were conducted in Spring/Summer 2018 and lasted 45 minutes on average. Participants were asked to talk and reflect on their degree education, with a focus on their career aspirations and preparations for the future. Key points were noted during the interview and revisited at the end, where students were asked to summarise again on their university experiences, especially around career preparation and readiness. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim, with sensitive details anonymised.

The research complies with the ethical protocols set out by the British Education Research Association revised ethical guidelines in 2018. We obtained institutional ethical approval prior to commencing data collection. In the process of our fieldwork, participants were assured of their confidentiality and anonymity through removing any identifying features from the data. We protected the rights of participants; they were advised they could withdraw at any time and/or not answer questions throughout the research process.

Data analysis is informed by a social constructionist perspective which understands social phenomena as socially constructed and discursively produced (Burr, 2015). To organise the data we used the qualitative software *NVivo*. A provisional coding framework was established after the authors independently coded the interview transcripts by relevant themes, which was then discussed and compared, with any differences on the application of codes debated until a consensus was reached. While some original language from the transcripts was maintained, data in the coding framework were then summarised by key points in a process comparable to a 'funnel', where concepts became more abstract. Here, we moved 'back and forth' between the data and analyses in an iterative process through which the dimensions of concepts and themes were refined or expanded through the comparison of data (Corbin & Strauss, 2014). These themes (see Appendix 2) were also conceptually analysed through Bourdieu's (1977) concepts of habitus and capital, with the focus on the dispositions and resources (e.g. economic,

cultural, and social) that students were able to access or develop in their skills repertoire and portfolio for employment. Below, we discuss how students felt they were prepared by their degree and university, as well as outside of study time and over the summer holidays.

Getting career ready: the role of the university

Some degree programmes, such as in education (teachers) or biomedical science (research scientists and public health professionals), have strong vocational links and tend to lead to direct employment (HEFCE, 2018). A few of our students had chosen their degree course with a specific career pathway in mind. As Noor (British Asian female, Education) appreciates:

> A lot of the things we learned on the course will really help me later on in the future. Some of the things that we learned, for example how children learn, understanding the role of schools, and understanding the roles of different socialising factors that will contribute to a child's development. So understanding all of that, the theory of it, will help me bring it into the practice next year.

Yet, an undergraduate degree is often seen as a symbol for a range of graduate-level skills that students will typically develop. These graduate attributes are generally considered to be a broad portfolio of skills that can be applied and adapted in a range of professions (Jackson, 2015; Oliver & Jorre de St Jorre, 2018; Scott, Connell, Thomson, & Willison, 2019). Few professions require specialised undergraduate degrees as the entry requirement, which are often also accredited or overseen by an external professional body or association. At most, employers may specify the minimum degree outcome that are expected from applicants, but rarely is the degree discipline a prerequisite in graduate jobs. Most of our students either had a broad and flexible idea about their future or few thoughts and therefore 'buying time' from their degree study, which seemed to have worked for three of our students (Andrea, David and Josh) who have just secured graduate training job offers from multinational companies.

When we asked students to evaluate how their programme of study has prepared them for the future, our students generally believed that their degree is likely to have a positive influence on their employment potential, citing a range of general and specific skills developed over the course of their study. Claire (White British female, Geography), for example, reflected on her improved analytical and reporting skills from 'working out people's opinions [to] being able to write reports and things like that'. Similarly, Andrea (British Indian female, Geography), who secured a graduate job, appreciated that her degree has 'given me phenomenal tools to be able to excel in the career that I'm going towards'. Whilst she recognised that 'as a geographer, we don't specialise in anything specifically', Andrea believed that her geography degree programme has equipped her with skills in communication, data analysis and the ability to have a 'birds eye point of view . . . 100% set me up for this job role'. In short, students appear to recognise and appreciate the transferable skills provided by their degrees, although it is understandable that the generic nature of broad employable and transferable skills also means that students can feel unsure and apprehensive about their post-degree career pathways (especially amongst those who are uncertain about their own aspirations).

From the interviews, we note that several degrees seem to have work experience or internship embedded into the curriculum, from short placements of a few weeks or months to an extended placement year within the degree. Unsurprisingly, these are highly appreciated as our students recognise the importance of practical experiences, especially as a taster in careers that are relevant to their own aspirations (Guile & Griffiths, 2001). Mariyah and Regina (both British Asian females, Education), for example, praised the structure of their degree which includes several work placements in schools, and allowed them to develop a stronger sense of professional identity as future teachers. Similarly, Belle (White British female, Psychology) also spoke of her work experience in the classroom even though she realised afterward that 'I'd rather be working one-on-one with a child', which helped to reaffirm her aspirations to be an educational psychologist.

For other students, especially those in programmes where work placement is optional, their feelings of being *career ready* were mixed. Whilst there are encouragements from tutors and the university, typically through student support centres or career services, to maximise their time and experience during their degree, especially in the summer, the onus is very much on the individual. Mandy (White British female, English), for example, shared that students in her department can complete an optional module that focuses on their professional development. As she explains:

> You have to do a series of training courses in academic or work placement and write a report afterwards. And there's a few other things, but the training courses are mainly catered towards your professional life after uni . . . You get it on your transcript, but you don't get any credit.

This module appears to be internally developed and not widely accessible by students outside of the department, which raises the issue of who actually makes use of the available support. Relatedly, these optional resources, including those relevant to professional development, are not always useful, especially for mature students with prior work experience. On the provision of career workshops in her degree programme, Bryony (White British female, Biological science) said:

> Yeah. They definitely were going on about it a lot in year two, and about getting experience and stuff. But then again, I could tell throughout the whole course that this is geared towards young adults that haven't worked for a long time, or don't have much work experience, and it did feel very geared towards them, which was a tiny bit of a shame, but then there really was only just a small group of us [mature students].

As such, there appears to be room for improvement as workshops on career development could further consider the different needs and starting points of students, especially those from non-traditional backgrounds.

Even when students have time, the role of a volunteer, which means unpaid, can be unattractive and unsustainable from a financial and pragmatic viewpoint. As Summer (Mixed female, Psychology) frankly confessed, 'I decided not to go on the placement because I didn't want to be working for a year and not get paid'. Here, students such as Summer are likely to lose out on such learning and development opportunities to more privileged peers who can, to put it bluntly, financially afford to develop their professional profiles without a salary, which further highlights the inequalities of higher education (Bathmaker et al., 2013).

Yet, for students such as Liz (White British female, Geography), who did spend a year in the industry (and salaried) as part of her degree, the opportunity to be away from the university has provided with her new insights and ideas about her future. Liz worked for a property consultant company, which 'I actually knew nothing about at all'. Although Liz said 'my role was actually quite specific', she was pleased that 'what I learned was very varied'. While she is still open and unsure about her future, the placement year has allowed Liz to get a taste of what life could be like after university as she returns to complete her final year of undergraduate study (Wilton, 2012). Similarly, Sarah (White British female, Zoology) admitted that her placement year 'kind of opened me up to see what it was like' to work in different fields and environments, which has enlightened her to continue and volunteer for a non-profit conservation charity. However, she struggled with finance as the placement salary was insufficient and Sarah was therefore forced to scale back her involvement when she opted to do another part-time job to improve her finances.

These students' experiences evidence a form of cultural capital building. Through acquiring first-hand practical opportunities to apply their theoretical knowledge and develop confidence in doing so. If we accept that cultural capital reflects 'the exchange-value that accumulated forms of culture have within the social world' (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 187), placements provide a space for accumulation of practical knowledge informed by enactment of theory learned in the higher education classroom. Whilst all students, regardless of class background, will benefit from this accumulation of cultural capital, for non-traditional students it arguably has a higher value as their relative starting points are at variance to their middle-class peers. Thus, placements are important as they facilitate, to varying degrees, cultural capital building for non-traditional students.

In terms of wider university support, our students generally praised the accessibility of their career services, who offer a range of support from one-to-one meetings/mock interviews to employability workshops to career fairs/talks. For instance, Andrea (British Indian female, Geography) appreciates that 'there's so much available. I think it's been so helpful' as she spoke of the 'help with my CV and with applying for jobs'. More specifically, Andrea, as well as Josh and David (all with graduate job offers), also praised a new pilot workshop that simulates the processes of a graduate scheme interview, which included an individual interview, group analysis and a joint presentation. Andrea said:

> I had direct feedback from actual employers, it was massive in helping me to realise where I have a downfall in interviewing processes … but it definitely helped me to stay a little bit cooler in unfamiliar situations … and it helped me to be confident in addressing those issues that I had.

Similarly, Belle and Annabelle (both White British female, Psychology) were grateful to their university's careers consultants who helped them to search and secure work placements. Whilst students acknowledge the availability of these support, their own engagement can depend on their current aspirations and priorities. Mandy (White British female, English), for example, admitted that 'I haven't really had much input with the career service just because I've kind of already established what I want to do and where I want to go'. For Mandy and others like her, there is recognition that career support is available as and when needed, although we need to be mindful that students do not feel *unable* to access these services, a concern which to our relief did not occur in the data.

Getting involved in social and summer activities

Outside of the degree curriculum and the support of the university, preparation for employment can also be seen through the ways in which students build and develop their professional profiles, notably their participation in extracurricular activities during term time but also over the extended summer holidays. For our non-traditional students, the breadth and depth of these engagements were mixed.

On term time extracurricular activities, just under half of our students said they have joined a university society, from subject-based social groups to sports and special interest clubs. Most took part in the early stages of their degree to broaden their interests and social networks, but very few maintained such commitment beyond the first semester or year due to other demands and priorities, such as study, part-time work and family responsibility. For example, Angie (East Asian female, Biomedical science) said she 'tried to join societies and clubs. I was in a jiu jitsu club first year, and then second year, didn't have the time'. Similarly, Noor (British Asian female, Education) was a member of her student union, but 'I don't really go to any events'. She casts her vote during student elections but confessed 'other than that, I'm not really interested in it'. Here, Noor does not appear to see the potential added value from her participation in these student-led activities or events. David (White British male, English), on the other hand, whilst also admitting not taking his role as social secretary 'as seriously as some of the other things that I've been involved in', said that his involvement in a university society was also motivated by the potential value it can add to his professional profile. Only a handful of students elicited this approach in their extracurricular participation.

For most other students, there is general acknowledgement that it would be nice to participate in different social activities outside of their study but have conceded that there is simply insufficient time. These students, some of whom have family responsibility and/or a long commute to university, are particularly susceptible to be excluded from such profile building endeavours. Mariyah (British Asian female, Education), for example, explained that 'because I'm commuting . . . [and] the clubs always start quite late here, like five, six-ish, and then getting the bus back is quite difficult' as the frequency reduces in the evening. Mandy (White British female, English) added that if a social event is organised on a day that does not coincide with her existing schedule on campus, then she is unwilling to make the journey.

For mature students such as Bryony (White British female, Biological science), who said she would 'love to . . . join the choir, that was my goal', she realised quickly that it was not possible to 'fit that in' when she struggled to 'manage the workload and my home life as well'. Her experiences align with what Hordósy, Clark and Vickers (2018) call the *double deficit*, which refers to students who strive to balance between multiple priorities under limited time and resources. For Summer (Mixed female, Psychology) and others like her, the choice between academic and social engagement is not really an option because 'I will have to put my academics first'. In short, non-traditional students cannot broaden their profiles in the same way as traditional or more privileged students due to financial and time constraints. These act as barriers to non-traditional students' effort to acquire cultural capital through networking and socialising that provide important connections in efforts to secure graduate jobs. The lack of opportunity to access clubs

and societies puts non-traditional students at a disadvantaged compared to their middle-class peers. The tensions created by lack of time need to be considered by higher education institutions as more is needed to level the playing field.

We also specifically asked students to talk about their summer breaks during their degree, in recognition of the value that students could add to their professional profile. University students can make use of their long holidays to expand and enrich their experiences, typically in the form of international work and travel, additional work experiences and various roles as a volunteer (Helyer & Lee, 2014). From our interviews, only a handful of students have planned their summers in ways that could enhance their future prospects. Gill (White British female, Geography), for example, accredited her father who 'always pushed us to do work experience because a lot of people go to uni now but not as many have all the work experience under their belt'. Such insight and warning have meant that Gill has 'already done like six weeks at three different places' as she embraces the experiences of working in different environments.

For many others who also worked in the summer, their decisions and options were primarily driven by the need to increase their finance, and these work experiences are often unrelated to their future aspirations and typically an extension to their existing part-time work during term time (such as in catering, hospitality and retail jobs). As a typical response, Angie (East Asian female, Biomedical science) said 'during the summer I just literally worked. I would just work. I wouldn't do anything else, I worked'. A few students, especially those with children, admitted that their summers must be dedicated to their families, and considered it as a way to compensate for their own lack of available time for others during term-time. Bushra (British Asian female, Education), for instance, said 'I spend time with my kids because I feel guilty for them . . . I feel as a mother . . . I wasn't there when he really needed me for the last couple of years'. In other words, family responsibilities and financial constraints can limit the opportunities of students to further prepare themselves for employment, especially in building their professional profiles.

Discussion and conclusion

This paper has shed light on how non-traditional students prepare for life after university, especially on career readiness and employment. We focused on the career support and development afforded by their degree course and university, as well as students' engagement in valued-added extracurricular activities that can strengthen their professional profile. Although students generally felt prepared by their degree of study for the future, and mostly satisfied by the available career support from their universities, there are still key challenges and barriers that can limit the career preparations of non-traditional students. In this section we revisit these issues as we make recommendations for policy and practice.

A degree can be an entry ticket to a professional career, although most students and programmes of study are not tailored for specific occupations. Rather, the emphasis is typically on the development of transferable and higher order thinking skills, which are often marketed as the benefits and distinctions of higher education (Scott et al., 2019). In the UK, universities and their degrees have increasing responsibility to support and prepare students for their post-degree pathways, especially for employment, given the

growing scrutiny around 'value for money' and 'valuable degrees' (Neves & Hewitt, 2020; OfS, 2019), as well as the importance of 'graduate outcomes' (employability data of recent graduates) for university ranking and reputation (HESA, 2020).

Experientially, our non-traditional students generally felt well prepared by their degree and wider university. Students recognise their development of transferable skills, on top of discipline knowledge, and appreciate the range of career support provided by career consultants. In particular, students highlight the value of gaining real-life work experience during their degree, which reflects the growing popularity of work placements/internships as an integrated part of the degree programme. These experiences have given our students a first-hand preview of what a future in these working environments might entail, which can reinforce or reinvigorate their current aspirations and commitment (Jones et al., 2017). Here, the structure of the degree has also enabled students to develop new dispositions and capital, from their newfound work experiences that may otherwise been unthinkable and unimaginable prior to higher education (Bathmaker et al., 2013; Burke, Scurry, & Blenkinsopp, 2019). For degrees without a requirement to do work placement, our non-traditional students appear less inclined to engage in these opportunities because of perceived lower extrinsic/exchange value (i.e. it is not accredited/counted as part of their degree/grade), and with low/no financial rewards for their time. In other words, the inclusion of work placement in the degree has at least ensured that *all* students (rather than just privileged students, see Cabinet Office, 2012) will have a valuable addition to their professional profile, as well as knowhow or understanding of how their skills may be used in future employments. Thus, the habitus of non-traditional students would be better equipped through the acquisition of new capital that would otherwise be difficult to obtain (Burke, 2016; Tomlinson & Jackson, 2021).

However, Tomlinson (2012) cautioned that 'while mass HE potentially opens up opportunities for nontraditional graduates, new forms of cultural reproduction and social closure continue to empower some graduates more readily than others'. There will still be, Tomlinson argued, inequalities in students' dispositions and capital even if work placements are normalised because, in line with Bourdieu's (1977) theory of social reproduction, the privileged will have greater access, resource and power to secure and maintain their advantaged positions. Yet, we believe that a standardise work placement for all undergraduates will be an important first step, and whilst inequalities may still persist in terms of the exchange value of different work experiences that can be afforded by more privileged students, the inclusion of real-life work in their study will no doubt be beneficial for students who have had limited exposures to these professions.

As part of their degree education, students can build their professional profiles outside of their study through participation in extracurricular activities, notably sports clubs, student union societies and summer work experiences. However, only a few students (e.g. David) appeared to be strategic and engaged for the purpose of strengthening their professional profile and cultural capital, whilst most other students either did not participate at all, or quickly disengaged due to other commitments. In short, our non-traditional students seem less engaged and interested in these extracurricular activities, especially when compared to academic outcomes (e.g. Summer). With limited capacity

and resources, academic progression and outcome ought to be the priority and the luxury of professional profile and capital building is often not available or possible for non-traditional students (Buckley & Lee, 2018).

Here, we also found family commitment and long commutes to be key barriers in their participation in extracurricular activities or summer work experiences (Maguire & Morris, 2018). Although concerns around the summer learning loss, or summer setback, are typically focused on school-aged pupils, especially during the developmental stages (Alexander, Pitcock, & Boulay, 2016; Shinwell & Defeyter, 2017), this evidence highlights the disproportional impact on those from less privileged backgrounds (Johnston, Riley, Ryan, & Kelly-Vance, 2015). For our non-traditional students, financial constraints and caring responsibilities have meant that whilst desirable, these activities and experiences are not feasible. Perhaps more concerning, existing evidence found large employers to value and reward graduates with extensive engagements with extracurricular activities, especially career-related summer work experiences (Ashley & Empson, 2017; Branine, 2008; Rivera, 2011; Stuart, Lido, Morgan, Solomon, & May, 2011). In other words, non-traditional students must contemplate another layer of inequalities in the job market, after overcoming the barrier of access into higher education.

So, how can we better support and equip non-traditional students to be prepared for employment? Our evidence is overwhelming on the value of real-life work experience, be it part of the degree or gained over the summer holidays. As such, we urge all undergraduate programme leaders to consider including work experience or placements as part of their degree curriculum. Whilst not all disciplines have a clear or obvious career pathway, we can take inspiration from the careers of previous graduates as a guide to the range of employment possible for graduates of that degree. This way, students are not only made aware of their options but also the opportunity and expectation to experience for themselves these potential careers. However, we recognise there are concerns that teaching staff themselves may have limited or lacked recent experiences in the professions of their teaching, especially in fast-moving industries (Pilcher, Forster, Tennant, Murray, & Craig, 2017). As Forster et al. (2017, p. 96) argued, 'challenges exist in the sense that such students with their industry backgrounds and experience may well be taught by "Career Academics" who may not be able to contextualise the knowledge they are attempting to teach'. As advocated by Tennant, Forster, Murray, and Pilcher (2015), we support calls for a closer collaboration between the discipline of study and professionals in the discipline, which might include regular speakers from the industry who may be also play the role of active and potentially relatable role models (especially if speakers also stemmed from a non-traditional background, see Lockwood, 2016). Relatedly, recent scholarship has also discussed the social backgrounds of academics and how discussions of their own trajectories can potentially inspire students, especially those who may share similar experiences or identities (e.g. Mishra, 2020; Redding, 2019).

On wider university support, especially for career preparation, students seem satisfied by the breadth and availability of support in their preparation for employment, which reinforces the importance of career and professional services in students' journey (Dey & Cruzvergara, 2014). We refer to the positive experiences of Andrea and concur with Bradley et al. (2020)'s call for more dedicated workshops that are tailored for graduate scheme applications, especially psychometric tests, which are typically deployed by these employers to narrow down applicants. Similarly, inspired by Bryony, we suggest that

career workshops should also give greater consideration of students' prior experiences and backgrounds in the design and delivery of these provisions, especially to appreciate the different starting points of non-traditional students (e.g. Bryony).

The bigger challenge is how we can make a difference to the ways that non-traditional students can build their professional profiles outside of their degree studies, when there are other priorities that restrict their participation. To promote extracurricular engagement, especially those affiliated with the university, a concerted effort is required to diversify the ways these activities and events are planned. For example, the times and locations could be more flexible to allow those with other commitments a better chance to participate, which can include the use of social media and digital platforms (Sutherland, Davis, Terton, & Visser, 2018). For value-added summer activities, we acknowledge there are practical constrains for non-traditional students, and whilst flexible or virtual alternatives may provide some career-related work experience, the extended holidays continue to be a disadvantage that need greater empathy from employers and additional creativity from students and universities. Perhaps financial support in the form of childcare or carer bursary can help some students to alleviate their other responsibilities in the summer to participate in enrichment activities.

Despite shared experiences as non-traditional students, there are also specific challenges within different subgroups of non-traditional students. Although further research is merited, our study suggests there are myriad differences in experience between non-traditional students themselves, especially those from mature or commuter backgrounds, which reminds us of the importance to consider intersectional identities and multiple inequalities (Collins & Bilge, 2016). While our evidence was conclusive on ethnic differences, existing literature has warned us that people from minority ethnic backgrounds in the UK are disproportionately affected by social inequalities, lack of opportunities and structural barriers (Bhopal, Myers, & Pitkins, 2020; Byrne, Alexander, Khan, Nazroo, & Shankley, 2020). There is more work to do to minimise the impact of these inequalities to provide a fairer higher education and graduate employment landscape.

Note

1. In the UK, universities can be broadly categorised as pre-1992 or post-1992, which refers to whether the status of being a university was granted before or after the year 1992. Pre-1992 universities are typically considered to be more research oriented, especially Russell Group universities. Post-1992 universities are mostly former polytechnics, with a history of being more teaching oriented.

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Appendix 1 – Participant details

Student	Gender	Ethnicity	Discipline
Andrea	Female	British Asian	Geography
Angie	Female	East Asian	Biomedical science
Annabelle	Female	White British	Psychology
Belle	Female	White British	Psychology
Bryony	Female	White British	Biological science
Bushra	Female	British Asian	Education
Casey	Female	British Asian	Education
Claire	Female	White British	Geography
David	Male	White British	English
Gill	Female	White British	Geography
Josh	Male	White British	Geography and Economics
Liz	Female	White British	Geography
Mandy	Female	White British	English
Mariyah	Female	British Asian	Education
Michelle	Female	White European	Education
Noor	Female	British Asian	Education
Orla	Female	Black British	Politics and Economics
Regina	Female	British Asian	Education
Sarah	Female	White British	Zoology
Summer	Female	Mixed	Psychology
Zack	Male	Mixed	Psychology
Zara	Female	British Asian	Education

Appendix 2 – Coding themes and subthemes

Background
- Choice of study and university
- Engagement in part-time work or volunteering
- Student background details

Career choice and aspirations
- Applying for job or graduate schemes
- Importance of current study
- Importance of other people
- Student own interest and aspirations

Extracurricular activities

Future aspirations

Personal development or reflections at university
- Development of aspirations
- Development of self and identity
- Importance of preparation
- Struggles or concerns

Placements (a whole year placement in particular)
- Career talks
- Transition back to university

Roles of ethnicity, gender, or social class (social identities)

Role of university in supporting student career development
- Career fairs or trips
- Comments on the careers support
- CV support
- Interview support
- One-to-one appointment
- Mentoring programmes

Other university support or initiatives
Volunteering programmes
Trainings wanted by students
Work placement programmes
Social networks (and capital)
Summer experience