A narrative inquiry into the formation and deployment of graduate capitals by first-generation graduates over time

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June 2023

This thesis is submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

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Abstract

There has been a clear shift in the literature from employability as the acquisition of skills to employability as an active and socially constructed process that unfolds over time and across contexts. Yet there has been limited research on graduates' career journeys and the development of employability capitals over time using Tomlinson's (2017) graduate capital model. This study aims to add to this small body of literature by examining the development and usage of employability capitals over time among first-generation graduates, who have received little attention in the literature. Tomlinson's graduate capital model, which is positioned as a more nuanced conceptualisation of employability, was chosen as the study's main theoretical framework and the model's usefulness in the study of employability was examined. A narrative inquiry research design was employed to elicit the career stories of five first-generation graduates who graduated from UK universities approximately ten years ago. Schlossberg's transition theory was used to organise the central themes because career transitions were a significant feature in the participants' narratives. A main finding of the study was that, while capital accumulation and deployment can assist career transitions, it was unclear from the career stories how developing capitals can support successful and sustainable employment when professional development is not always supported in the workplace. This study offers a critique of the graduate capital model by highlighting its short-term, static nature, which prioritises the exchange value of graduate labour over long-term employment fulfilment. The career stories indicated that employability is a fluid and organic process, in contrast to the graduate capital model's strategic approach to capital formation and utilisation. This study demonstrates the need to move away from a static, individual-centred view of employability and towards one that considers long-term working conditions and practices, rather than just a graduate's immediate entry into the workforce.

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Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I want to thank Dr. Janja Komljenovic for her insightful feedback, unwavering support, and ongoing encouragement at every stage of this research project. I am especially grateful for all the positive reinforcement she has given me to keep me motivated, as well as her willingness to schedule our supervisor meetings outside of office hours to accommodate my childcare commitments. It has been an absolute pleasure to have her as my supervisor.

I would also like to express thanks to my partner and parents for their constant support during the most difficult (but most rewarding) two years of my life: having a baby and writing a thesis. Although my son, Louis, has provided a nice distraction from my studies, the ongoing juggling has been a challenge, and I am extremely grateful to everyone who has helped me during this busy time.

Finally, I would like to thank the five individuals who agreed to participate in this study. This research would not have been possible without their willingness to share their career stories.

Author's declaration: this thesis is my own work and has not been submitted in substantially the same form for the award of a higher degree elsewhere

Introduction and Background

Globalisation, technological advancements, economic insecurity, and the rise in flexible working arrangements have all contributed to significant changes in the labour market (Jackson & Tomlinson, 2020). Globalisation has influenced the labour market through migration, trade, foreign investment, and the spread of technology (Dadush & Shaw, 2012). Machines are increasingly replacing human labour in a variety of industrial processes as artificial intelligence advances and significant cost savings can be made (Acemoglu & Restrepo, 2018). This replacement, however, does not necessarily reduce the demand for labour because technological advancements create new jobs and industries, and labour is still required for non-automated work (Berger & Frey, 2016). Nevertheless, there is the potential of a mismatch between the requirements of new technologies and the skills of the workforce, resulting in employers being unable to find suitable people with the necessary skills to execute new jobs and activities (Acemoglu & Restrepo, 2018). These changes have resulted in policymakers and educational institutions paying more attention to preparing students for the modern workplace, where artificial intelligence will continue to play a significant role (Lechner et al., 2016). With greater levels of uncertainty in the labour market, there has been a shift away from permanent jobs to more precarious employment situations such as portfolio careers whereby individuals hold multiple roles across various sectors (Barley et al., 2017). Graduates who work in temporary positions have more choice and flexibility, but they also need to be more adaptable to cope with future uncertainty.

A significant change in the 21st century labour market is the shift from an industrial to a knowledge-based economy, with greater emphasis on the service industry (Nghia et al., 2020). In developed countries, knowledge is a key driver of productivity and competitiveness and a strategic resource for ensuring economic growth (Conceição & Heitor, 1999). Universities are knowledge-intensive organisations that can produce and disseminate knowledge for the benefit of industry and society, playing a significant role in the knowledge economy (Bejinaru, 2017). The expansion of the knowledge economy and the massification of higher education has transformed small elite universities into

larger, more complex organisations, necessitating the development of new governance structures to manage a variety of activities (Geuna & Muscio, 2009). Nowadays, universities interact with a variety of stakeholder groups and they must provide a visible contribution to areas such as industry, innovation, and societal issues, to the degree expected by their stakeholders (Broström et al., 2021). Universities face a variety of challenges in the knowledge economy, such as increased market competition and building strong partnerships with industry to ensure that research activity is relevant and students are equipped with the skills they need to be prepared for the workforce (Broström et al., 2021). The speed of technological advancements and the emergence of the knowledge economy has necessitated workers to be adaptable and have an evolving set of transferable skills that allow them to handle the high level of uncertainty in the contemporary workplace. The development of employability skills is now receiving increased attention from higher education institutions.

The higher education system has undergone major changes as a result of the movement toward neoliberalism and marketisation (Pal, 2022). The significant increase in university tuition fees in 2012 profoundly altered the relationship between universities and students, with students acting as customers paying for a service and universities competing for their business (Kornelakis & Petrakaki, 2020). Students are increasingly regarding their education as an investment and are more careful when selecting an institution and course to improve their prospects of finding employment once they graduate. Over the last decade, universities have placed a greater emphasis on employability by fostering the skills, attributes, and behaviours required in the workplace in order to satisfy the student-as-consumer (Kornelakis & Petrakaki, 2020). Students are becoming increasingly aware that a degree is no longer sufficient to gain graduate employment, and they often expect to see a return on their investment in the form of preparation for employment (Nghia et al., 2020). However, the commercialisation of education has created tension, with institutions being criticised for grade inflation, dumbing down degrees, and shifting away from their primary role of teaching and learning (Kornelakis & Petrakaki, 2020). Some academics believe that commercial and market needs are given greater

importance over academic values and creativity (Kalfa & Taksa, 2015). Universities face the challenging task of meeting the needs of employers, upholding high educational standards, and attempting to satisfy their students as customers.

Since the late 1990's, the employability agenda has been driven by government policy in England, and it remains a top priority for universities (The Dearing Report, 1997). There have been an increasing number of employability initiatives to help produce work-ready graduates since The Dearing Report (1997), which specifically urged universities to develop students' transferrable skills. Policymakers are paying particular attention to the supply-side of the labour market and the initiatives taken by higher education institutions to increase graduate employability because they recognise that investing in human capital will promote economic growth in the knowledge economy (Tomlinson & Holmes, 2016). With more than two million students enrolled in higher education in the UK, universities can make a significant contribution to the national economy by ensuring graduates are equipped to contribute positively and productively to the labour market (Minocha et al., 2017). The way that modern higher education systems operate has changed as a result of three important policy shifts related to graduate employability: 1) the massification of higher education to promote equal opportunities and develop a more diverse and highly skilled workforce; 2) the focus on a skills-based and vocationally relevant curriculum to improve access to employment, particularly for disadvantaged groups; and 3) the rise in tuition fees with students acting as customers seeking a return on their investment in the form of graduate employment (Tomlinson & Holmes, 2016). Universities are subject to greater forms of performance management in a marketised higher education system to ensure that their operations best serve the markets in which they operate (Tomlinson & Holmes, 2016). Graduate employability has become a performance indicator for institutions, and universities are evaluated on how well their students can obtain graduate-level employment upon leaving university (Turnbull et al., 2020). However, the supply-side orthodoxy that underpins current employability policies has been contested because there are

other factors besides a graduate's skills and characteristics that prevent them from obtaining employment, such as the state of the economy (McQuaid & Lindsay, 2005). According to Kalfa and Taksa (2015), graduate employability should be viewed in the broader social and economic context rather than using higher education as a panacea.

Employability is regarded as a complex and ambiguous concept, and there is a lack of clarity among key stakeholders, including universities, employers, and students (Römgens et al., 2020). Employability is commonly defined as a set of skills, attributes and characteristics that make individuals more likely to gain employment and succeed in their chosen field (Holmes, 2013). The concept of employability has gained prominence over the past few decades as a result of the need for graduates to possess the skills and characteristics necessary to succeed in a competitive and turbulent employment market and contribute to the global knowledge economy (Nghia et al., 2020). The accelerating pace of technological advancement is changing the skills that employers need and shortening the lifespan of employees existing skills, requiring them to continually adapt and upskill (World Economic Forum, 2016). The development of transferable skills like complex problem solving is becoming increasingly important to employers, and higher education institutions have demonstrated a commitment to helping students develop these skills, which are commonly referred to as graduate attributes (Nghia et al., 2020). The skills agenda has since become a dominant discourse in higher education.

Many initiatives have been put in place in a university context to promote the development of employable skills, including work-integrated learning, mentoring programmes, career management strategies, and curriculum integration of employability (Jackson, 2017; Bridgstock, 2009; Pegg et al., 2012). However, several studies have critiqued the skills agenda arguing that employability is more than the acquisition of static skills and attributes that can be enumerated to satisfy employer demands (Holmes, 2001; Hinchliffe & Jolly, 2011). Other criticisms of the skills agenda have included the skills gap between employer expectations and graduate job readiness as well as the argument that universities are diverted away from their primary activities of learning and

teaching as a result of this dominant employability discourse (Cranmer, 2006; Boden & Nedeva, 2010; Succi & Canovi, 2020). Given the opposition to the skills agenda, it is not unexpected that the literature has recently shifted to emphasise employability as a process rather than a box ticking exercise of skill acquisition.

In the literature, there has been a shift from skills acquisition to person-centered employability and graduate capital accumulation (Holmes, 2015; Tomlinson & Jackson, 2021). Employability is now considered more of a lifelong developmental process with a focus on adaptability and managing career transitions rather than the possession of skills (Nghia et al., 2020). Investigating employability development outside of higher education seems necessary given that employability requires lifelong and life-wide learning and does not end after graduation. The concept of life-wide learning acknowledges the different spaces (at university, outside of university, within employment) where employability can be developed (Speight et al., 2013). It is important to explore employability beyond a university setting because there are many contextual factors that determine employability including labour market opportunities and life circumstances. Even if a graduate is sufficiently employable, various barriers may hinder them from gaining employment, such as a lack of available positions, geographic immobility, ties to family, health constraints, and childcare obligations, to name a few (Nghia et al., 2020). While previous studies have applied capitals to examine graduate career trajectories (Burke et al., 2020; Bathmaker, 2021; Lau, 2022), there has been little research on graduate career paths using Tomlinson's (2017) graduate capital model. Despite the literature's shifting emphasis toward employability as an active and socially constructed process that unfolds over time and across contexts, only a few studies have investigated the role of capitals—human, social, cultural, psychological, and identity—in a graduate's career path using Tomlinson's (2017) model (Pham et al., 2019; Nghia et al., 2020). These studies investigated the development and utilisation of employability capitals by graduates worldwide and across a variety of careers over time.

In response to a call by Tomlinson and Jackson (2021), this study aims to add to the emerging body of literature by charting over time the accumulation and deployment of employability capitals. The research employs narrative inquiry to elicit the career stories of five first-generation graduates who graduated from UK universities approximately ten years ago. First-generation graduates were chosen for the research sample because their transition from education to employment is arguably more challenging without the predetermined capitals to support them (Thondhlana, 2020; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). First-generation graduates are those who have obtained a bachelor's degree or higher even though neither of their parents attended university (Gofen, 2009). They may find it difficult to transition from university to the workforce, but little is known about how they do so, and they are essentially the forgotten group in research on employment outcomes (Hirudayaraj & McLean, 2018; Groves et al., 2022). First-generation students, as opposed to first-generation graduates, have received most of the attention in the literature, which has largely examined issues related to their academic achievement, access to higher education, and transition from school to university (Hirudayaraj & McLean, 2018). Limited research on first-generation graduates has shown that they enter the graduate job market in uncharted waters and find it difficult to communicate these ambiguities to family and friends who cannot relate to their situation (Olson, 2016). However, studies have indicated that first-generation graduates should not be viewed from a deficit orientation because they often exhibit traits such as persistence, motivation, self-reliance, and adaptability due to their non-entitled family backgrounds. (Tate et al., 2015; Brown, 2020).

As the coordinator of a university professional skills programme, the researcher is particularly interested in how to effectively prepare students for the workplace, especially given the ongoing criticism of current approaches to employability development. The researcher oversees a professional skills programme that supplements the undergraduate academic curriculum by fostering skills such as communication, teamwork, and problem solving. It is primarily delivered by industry practitioners to help bridge the gap between university and the workplace. The researcher regularly interacts with students,

academics, and employers, and therefore was keen to investigate employability from a fresh perspective: that of graduates. The graduate capital model was chosen as the study's main theoretical framework for two reasons. First, the researcher had previously used the model in their work to help students understand the concept of employability and wanted to test its usefulness from a graduate perspective. Second, the researcher felt that a contribution could be made to the small but growing field of research on employability as forms of capitals because, to date, little is known about the efficacy of the graduate capital model in investigating employability. Compared to the skills-based approach, Tomlinson (2017) argued that the graduate capital model provides a more nuanced framework for enhancing graduate employability, however, there remains a paucity of evidence to support this claim. The purpose of this study is to analyse graduates' lived experiences when developing and deploying graduate capitals over time. This study intends to contribute to knowledge by analysing the graduate capital model's usefulness to the study of employability. It does this by using it as the main theoretical framework.

The research questions (RQs) for this study are as follows:

RQ1: What are the lived experiences of first-generation graduates' when accumulating and deploying different forms of graduate capital over time?

RQ2: Is the graduate capital model a useful framework to study employability?

The thesis has been structured into eight chapters. Chapter two will examine the literature pertinent to this study. The importance of graduate employability will be discussed from the perspectives of various stakeholders, including the government, employers, higher education institutions, and students. The literature review will then cover graduate employability in the 21st century, the Bourdieusian approach to understanding graduate employability, and the development of graduate capitals over time.

The two theoretical frameworks used in this research—Tomlinson's graduate capital model and Schlossberg's transition theory—will be described in detail in Chapter 3. The graduate capital model is a conceptualisation of employability

that looks at employability as a set of resources that graduates have at their disposal and can be utilised in the graduate labour market (Tomlinson, 2017). This is based on five capitals: human, social, cultural, identity and psychological. The graduate capital model was chosen as the theoretical framework for this study because Tomlinson has undertaken substantial research into graduate employability and has established a theory that builds on previous work (Becker, 1964; Bourdieu, 1977; Giddens, 1991; Fugate et al., 2004). The transition theory involves understanding transitions, coping with transitions, and applying transition theory to work-life transitions (Schlossberg, 2011). Exploring a second theory on transitions seemed fitting because graduate capitals are a set of resources that graduates can develop and utilise to help transition into the workplace. The transition theory created by Schlossberg was chosen because it offers a practical framework that can be applied to a wide range of situations, including career transitions.

In Chapter 4, the narrative inquiry research design will be examined to better understand how graduates experience capital formation through the retelling of their own stories. Since people naturally share stories in conversation, narrative interviews will be used to gather data (Murray, 2018). The three stages of the data analysis will be: restorying the stories; identifying the major themes inside each story; and identifying similar themes among the five stories. The retold career narratives will be presented in Chapter 5, and the key themes and research findings will be discussed in the subsequent two chapters.

Chapter 6 will use Schlossberg's transition theory to address the overarching theme of career transitions. Because career changes played a significant role in the professional stories, Schlossberg's transition theory was a good fit for organising the central themes. The 4Ss of Schlossberg's transition theory—situation, self, support, and strategies—will assist in understanding the participants' experiences with the transition from university to the workplace as well as the development and use of graduate capitals. Chapter 7 will provide a critique of Tomlinson's graduate capital model by highlighting its short-term and strategic nature and challenging its advancement from the skills agenda.

Chapter 8 will outline the study's contribution, limitations, and recommendations for future research. This study offers a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of graduates and challenges the usefulness of the graduate capital model in the study of employability. This research suggests a move away from the graduate capital model's static, short-term perspective of employability and towards a long-term approach that considers demand-side factors that can aid graduates in achieving fulfilling and sustainable employment.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The chapter begins by outlining the context of graduate employability and how it became a central concept in higher education policy in England. It then discusses how employability has been shaped by several stakeholder groups including the government, employers, higher education institutions, and students. Next, the importance of graduate employability in the 21st century labour market will be explored and then Bourdieu's work will be considered to better understand individuals and their employability. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the small but growing body of research around employability as forms of capitals which are developed and utilised over time to assist graduates in entering and succeeding in the labour market.

2.1 Why focus on graduate employability?

As globalisation progresses and knowledge is seen as a source of competitive advantage, higher education is crucial to the growth of developed economies (Brown et al., 2003). With more than two million students enrolled in UK higher education institutions, the HE sector contributes significantly to the growth of the national economy by producing graduates with the knowledge and skills needed in labour market (Minocha et al., 2017). Universities have long contributed to local economies and societies through knowledge creation and dissemination, but there has recently been a stronger link between education and economic needs, with a focus on human capital as a key driver of economic growth (Bridgstock & Jackson, 2019). Higher education in the UK underwent a significant transformation after New Labour was elected in 1997 with its main objectives being increasing participation to advance equality of opportunity and raising educational standards in order to produce a skilled labour force that could compete in the global knowledge economy (Robertson, 2010). The government's objective to widen participation in higher education led to the once elite system becoming massified as more students from all backgrounds could now obtain a university degree. Policy discourse has consistently advocated for increasing access and participation in higher education in order to support the achievement and success of those from

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underrepresented groups (Deer, 2004). However, there are concerns that increasing participation exacerbates the problem of social reproduction because it increases labour market competitiveness and blames individuals if they are unable to find employment (Wilton, 2011). By focusing on individual employability, policymakers are arguably reducing their responsibility for creating good quality jobs and ensuring social equality.

An expansion in student numbers, as well as the diversification of the institutions and the student population, altered the structure, size, and scale of universities (Evans et al., 2021). The massification of higher education was accompanied by a shift in government policy that emphasised the role of universities in the economic success of the nation. The Dearing Report (1997) made several references to the role of higher education in meeting labour market demands and encouraging the development of the skills highly valued in the workplace. The labour market has undergone significant change in recent decades due to increasing uncertainty and a rise in flexible contractual arrangements, requiring graduates to be resilient and adaptable (Harvey, 2000). Graduate skills like communication, teamwork, and problem solving have become more important in this context as graduates must demonstrate more than just their university degree to obtain jobs in a competitive and dynamic labour market (Oraison et al., 2019). Following The Dearing Report, there has been a push for employer-led skills acquisition within the university curriculum, with higher education playing a crucial role in the development of a dynamic workforce that can contribute positively to the global knowledge economy (Higdon, 2016). The skills agenda has been criticised for viewing higher education as the magic bullet for graduate employability when, in fact, graduate employability is a developmental process that graduates engage in way beyond the confines of a university setting (Harvey, 2001).

2.2 What is graduate employability?

Employability is a complex and multifaceted construct, with no uniform definition (Römgens et al., 2020). The concept of employability has been interpreted in many ways. At its most basic level it is the ability to become employed

(Vanhercke et al., 2014). However, there is broad agreement that employability is a lifelong process that involves more than just finding employment (Artess et al., 2017). Advancing this definition, it is an individual's ability to acquire and utilise the knowledge, skills and attributes needed to succeed in the world of work (Holmes, 2013). More broadly, employability also incorporates self-employment and entrepreneurship (Moreland, 2006). Career self-management is increasingly becoming an important aspect of employability as dynamic careers, such as boundaryless and protean, gain greater prominence in the labour market (DeFillippi & Arthur, 1994; Hall, 2004). Employability is shaped by several stakeholder groups, which adds to its complexity, including the government, employers, higher education institutions and students (Tymon, 2013).

2.2.1 The government perspective

The Robbins Report (1963) made the case for the expansion of higher education in England by expanding the number of institutions and students. Since then, the government has shown a commitment to increasing the supply of graduates entering the workforce in order to create a more flexible and highly skilled workforce in the global knowledge economy (Tomlinson, 2012). The massification of higher education in England helped diversify the student population as more students, from all backgrounds, were given the opportunity to access and progress from higher education (Morgan 2013). The transformation of higher education from an elite to a mass-educational system has had an impact on the diversity of institutions and the student body in addition to its core purpose. At the centre of policy making in England is now a preoccupation with the role of higher education in the economic success of the nation (Evans et al., 2021). The government has pushed for an employer-led skills-based approach to employability development within higher education, driven by a belief that developing the knowledge and skills of the future workforce will promote economic growth in the global knowledge economy (Higdon, 2016). Since The Dearing Report (1997), graduate employability has been a top priority for higher education. The government has progressively influenced employability practise through recommendations, funding, and policy

(Department for Business Innovation and Skills, 2011, 2016; Department for Education, 2021).

Over the last decade, there have been key turning points in higher education policy and regulation relating to graduate employability in England including access to information about employment prospects, regulating graduate outcomes, and meeting future skills needs (Woodfield & McIntosh, 2022). The 2011 White Paper 'Students at the heart of the system' shaped graduate employability by attempting to radically improve and expand the information available to prospective students about graduate employment prospects (Department for Business Innovation and Skills, 2011). Soon after in 2012, the Coalition Government increased tuition fees to £9000 (Kornelakis & Petrakaki, 2020). The considerable increase in tuition fees signalled a move toward a marketised higher education system, with policymakers constructing students as consumers making informed decisions about universities as service providers (Brooks, 2018). In a marketised higher education system, students have greater choice and bargaining power which places greater importance on student satisfaction. This creates a tension within the university system as it is difficult to create a challenging learning experience, while also attempting to satisfy the student as a consumer (Kornelakis & Petrakaki, 2020). At a time when government policy is driving marketisation, competition and efficiency in higher education, universities must strike a balance between providing students with what they want to keep them satisfied and what they need to receive a well-rounded education.

In 2016, the details of England's new regulator, the Office for Students (OfS), were published in the White Paper 'Higher education: success as a knowledge economy' (Department for Business Innovation and Skills, 2016). The OfS puts the interests of students at the centre of the regulatory landscape and one of its objectives is related to graduate outcomes as students from all backgrounds should be able to progress into employment or further study (OfS, 2022). Graduate outcomes are the status and career progression of graduates after completing a higher education course and universities are under pressure to provide hard data in relation to graduate outcomes (Turnbull et al., 2020). The

OfS uses the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) as a key mechanism for regulating graduate outcomes. The TEF assesses the quality of university initiatives aimed at improving graduate employability by collecting data on graduate outcomes via the Graduate Outcomes survey and the Longitudinal Education Outcomes (LEO) (Behle, 2020). The Graduate Outcomes survey, which measures the number of graduates in employment or further study within fifteen months of graduation, replaced the DLHE (Destination of Leavers from Higher Education) which surveyed graduates after six months of graduation (Greaves, 2018). The focus on measuring graduation outcomes and making the data available to prospective students and their parents is a clear indication of the government's push for a market-based higher education system.

The Graduate Outcomes survey data is used in university league tables and is considered a proxy measure of institutional success based on graduate destinations (Bridgstock & Jackson, 2019). The data is used by prospective students and their parents to inform study choices, particularly in a time of high university tuition fees when people are seeking a return on their investment. Focusing on metrics and outcomes to gauge a university's success fits within the context of massification and marketisation because benchmarking encourages competitiveness, accountability, and efficiency. However, using graduate outcomes as a measure of employability has been met with some criticism (Behle, 2020; Wilton, 2011; McQuaid & Lindsay, 2005). Even though the timescale has been increased, fifteen months post-graduation is still a measure of short-term employment rather than longer-term employability. This is problematic because many people view employability as a process that develops over time and across different contexts rather than an employment outcome (Tymon, 2013; Behle, 2020; Hewitt, 2020). It is possible to be employable but in a position of unemployment or underemployment, because using graduate outcomes data to gauge employability only gives a restricted view of employment at a given time (Wilton, 2011). Graduate outcomes are a crude measure of universities' efforts to produce employable graduates because there are many factors that contribute to employment that extend beyond the boundaries of a university, such as the economic climate (McQuaid

& Lindsay, 2005). It is interesting that the Graduate Outcomes survey—which assesses employment, not employability—is used as a benchmark for how well institutions prepare their students for the workforce. However, with an increased emphasis on graduate employment in higher education, there is a need for greater visibility, accountability, and reporting on success, which is typically metrics-driven.

Unlike Graduate Outcomes, which is reliant on survey responses from graduates, the LEO database is based on administrative data and includes information on all graduates from English providers who are in paid employment in the UK (HESA, 2022). The LEO database has been valuable for policymakers in determining which graduates, on which courses, repay their loans and how quickly, which has sparked discussions over whether low-value courses should be kept in the higher education system (Morris, 2017). Given that the government views higher education as a key contributor to economic growth, it is not unexpected that policymakers are eager to prioritise the courses that will have the greatest economic impact and to reduce those that will have the least. However, the LEO dataset has received criticism for failing to account for regional pay disparities and limiting the measurement of graduate success by focusing only on salaries. The problem with a data-driven strategy for boosting graduate employability in the context of higher education is that it places the burden on universities while exempting the government and employers of such responsibility (Cheng et al., 2021). Although developing employability is a lifelong process across time and contexts, the policy emphasis remains on universities to produce employable graduates and ensure a sound return on investment in higher education.

The 2021 White Paper 'Skills for jobs: lifelong learning for opportunity and growth' emphasises the need for universities to produce employable graduates with the right combination of technical, academic, and soft skills to meet the demands of future jobs (Department for Education, 2021). Government policy makes it clear that higher education institutions are increasingly being held accountable for their graduates' employment prospects and must take proactive steps to ensure that students leave fully prepared for the workplace. The

government has led a dominant skills-based approach to employability development by promoting transferable skills including teamwork, communication, and problem solving as "what employers want" when recruiting graduates (Higdon, 2016; Oraison et al., 2019). Policy-makers want graduates to leave university work-ready and equipped to make an immediate contribution to the labour force and economic outcomes (Clarke, 2017). The government's employer-led skills acquisition approach to employability development is strongly informed by human capital theory (Becker, 1964). Government policy encourages higher education institutions to make their graduates more employable on the basis that productivity will rise with higher levels of education and skill, enabling graduates to command higher salaries and fostering expansion of the global knowledge economy (Yorke, 2006). Much attention has been focused on the role that universities play in supplying the labour market with suitably skilled graduates who can adapt and bring productive value to the modern workplace, particularly in a climate of massification, marketisation, and uncertainty in the labour market.

2.2.2 The employer perspective

The issue of forming government policy based on human capital theory is that it provides a simplistic view of the university-employer relationship in which a university education is seen to add value to the economy and therefore is sought after by employers (Tomlinson, 2021). Human capital theory is significantly optimistic about the social power of higher education because it is based on the simple premise that higher education determines graduate outcomes, ignoring all other influences on employment such as the demand for labour or social background (Marginson, 2015). It is built on a single lens, and other types of capital, such as social and cultural capital, are ignored despite their significant impact on how people navigate and succeed in the labour market (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). Human capital theory assumes that education, work, and earnings are connected in a linear continuum, however, with a graduate unemployment rate of around 5% in the UK, not all graduates with human capital obtain graduate employment (Office for National Statistics, 2021; Marginson, 2015). Despite this there continues to be a clear

policy push to strengthen the relationship between higher education and industry to ensure graduates possess the necessary skills to succeed in the workplace, also known as the possessional approach to employability (Holmes, 2013; Department for Business Innovation and Skills, 2016). Policymakers are focused on how universities may contribute to economic growth through human capital formation.

Universities have made considerable attempts to integrate education and employment, however, numerous studies on employers' perceptions of graduate employability suggest a discrepancy between the employability skills that employers demand and the skills graduates possess (Cranmer, 2006; Jackson, 2014; Mullen et al., 2019). These are not limited to hard, technical skills as deficiencies in soft skills such as problem solving, resilience and communication are frequently noted (QS, 2019). The issue is that there is not agreement between employers as to what the gap is and how big it is. There is conflicting evidence regarding the size of the skills gap and the kinds of skills that are lacking according to data from numerous surveys on the topic. The Employer Skills Survey found that only 13% of employers reported that they had a skills gap among their workforce, whereas other skill surveys have identified significantly higher levels of employer dissatisfaction with employees' level of job-readiness (CBI/Pearson, 2019; Winterbotham, et al., 2020). The numerous surveys that have been conducted with employers have highlighted a skills gap, but these surveys are based on a sample of organisations and only provide basic data, usually simple percentages, on which to base decisions (Moore & Morton, 2017). There is a skills gap, but the nature of the issues and potential solutions are not well understood from mass survey data.

Employers assume graduates will bring higher level skills into their organisations which in turn will enhance productivity (Tomlinson, 2021). There is a tendency for employers to seek the 'ideal' graduate and place high expectations on their performance (Clarke, 2017). It is possible that the skills gap is attributable to employers if they have unrealistic expectations of new graduates, inadequate recruitment and selection procedures, and unfavourable working conditions, which leads to job dissatisfaction and soft skill withdrawal

(Hurrell, 2016). Employers frequently blame the educational system for failing to produce work-ready graduates without taking any responsibility for how they enhance and utilise the skills of their workforce. The development of generic skills such as teamwork and problem solving in a university setting does not guarantee that graduates will be able to apply these skills in the workplace because on-the-job skills will be context-specific. Much of the emphasis has been on the role of universities in preparing graduates for the world of work, rather than what employers can do to equip graduates with employability skills over time (Tomlinson, 2021). This is because the blame for skills deficits is often directed at the supply-side i.e., the education system, rather than the demand side i.e., the employers (Hurrell, 2016). In response to this criticism, universities have made several attempts to close the skills gap by introducing employability initiatives, but the gap has persisted (Succi & Canovi, 2020). Several studies have recommended a more employer-driven approach to addressing the skills gap as organisations are arguably better equipped to prepare graduates for the dynamic workplace (Succi & Canovi, 2020; Clarke, 2017; Sin & Neave, 2016). Furthermore, building skills on-the-job is more consistent with the idea of lifelong and life-wide employability development.

2.2.3 The HEI perspective

Universities have a clear economic purpose in modern society, and policy has stated that improving graduate employability is a fundamental role of higher education (McCowan, 2015). The government exerts control over universities by using graduate employability as a criterion of institutional success (Cheng et al., 2021). Performance management in a marketised higher education system provides universities with an incentive to deliver on the employability agenda in order to enhance their metrics, appear favourably in league tables, and secure student numbers. The status of universities may influence engagement with the employability agenda, as modern universities established post-1992 with roots in vocational education may be more susceptible to competition for student numbers and hence require a strong employability strategy (Cheng et al., 2021). While elite universities might be able to place graduates in high-level positions based solely on their reputation, allowing them to focus on broad-

based knowledge rather than the development of employability skills (Boden & Nedeva, 2010). However, the employability agenda has had an impact on the way most universities operate, with elements of the curriculum being redesigned to accommodate employability, full-time positions being created specifically to aid in employability development, and stronger partnerships with industry being built (Bridgstock & Jackson, 2019). The problem is that universities are restructuring and rethinking their operations based on a complex and difficult-to-define concept of employability, which may explain the proliferation of university initiatives aimed at preparing graduates for the workplace.

Driven by government policy and employer demands, HEIs have invested time and resources into the development of graduate employability (Nghia et al., 2020). Employability initiatives adopted by universities are wide-ranging including work-integrated learning, mentoring programmes, career management strategies, and professional skills modules (Jackson, 2017; Okolie et al., 2020; Bridgstock, 2009; Pegg et al., 2012). These initiatives can broadly be categorised as follows: embedded employability within the curriculum, bolt-on employability within designated modules or parallel approaches delivered by the careers service (Cranmer, 2006). Universities frequently adopt parallel approaches to employability development to reach all students through a centralised service, however, student engagement with the careers service is often low (Bradley et al., 2022). Since the skills are context-specific and more implicitly formed, the embedded approach is thought to be the more effective way to increase employability in higher education (Cranmer, 2006). However, some academics oppose the human-capital framing of the graduate employability agenda and make clear that it is not their job to teach employability skills (Cook, 2022). While an embedded approach to employability development may be preferred there remains too much resistance from academic colleagues for it to be truly integrated as they fear potential damage to curriculum integrity and rigour (Daubney, 2022). As a result, the careers service often assumes most of the responsibility for employability efforts. The challenge with bolt-on or parallel employability initiatives, delivered

by employability practitioners, is that they are strategically designed and developed, frequently promoting competition and the market-driven agenda, and going against the fluid nature of employability, which is developed over time across contexts. Furthermore, while employability initiatives are largely managed by the careers service, academics may struggle to integrate employability into their teaching because there is little incentive to do so and current approaches rely on limited resources (Cook, 2022).

While some authors have maintained that graduate employability can be developed in an academic setting, even developing frameworks to aid in its development, others have questioned the effectiveness of university-based attempts to prepare graduates for the workplace (Cranmer, 2006; Dacre Pool & Sewell, 2007; Mason et al., 2009). Work-integrated learning, which infuses industry into the curriculum, has been shown to be an effective method for enhancing student employability because it bridges the gap between education and work (Jackson & Rowe, 2022). It is particularly fitting to vocational courses where there is a clearer career trajectory and students can engage in meaningful real-world learning through placements, projects, and simulations (Lloyd et al., 2022). Some academics may resist the inclusion of employability in non-vocational courses because it goes against conventional academic values and prioritises job preparation over studying for its own purpose (Daubney, 2022). Furthermore, reorganising the academic curriculum along more vocational lines, with specific job-related skills, may not adequately prepare graduates for the dynamic knowledge economy, which necessitates versatility and a diverse set of abilities (Boden & Nedeva, 2010). However, with economically-driven discourses taking centre stage in higher education, universities must work to develop graduate employability in a way that does not compromise academic rigour but also goes beyond being an add-on (Harvey, 2000). The problem with employability initiatives being supplementary to the academic curriculum is that it goes against the idea of employability as a continuous process that spans time and context.

University efforts to make graduates career-ready has been met by criticism from students, employers, and academics (Tymon, 2013; Succi & Canovi,

2020; Speight et al., 2013). Universities are continuingly reshaping their employability strategies to suit the ever-changing needs of their stakeholders; however, it is debatable as to the success of such initiatives. The skills-based approach, commonly adopted by universities, has been subject to criticism as the skills required in the modern workplace are ever-changing and they cannot simply be transferred across varied contexts (Mason et al., 2009; Cranmer, 2006). Moreover, some scholars argue that dominant employability discourses are steering universities away from their main activity of teaching and learning (Boden & Nedeva, 2010; Morley, 2001). Academic perceptions of employability vary in the literature; some studies show that employability can be developed in the classroom (Sin et al., 2019), whereas others acknowledge the disconnect between academic learning and learning for employability (Speight et al., 2013). The level of influence HEIs can have on employability is also questionable, since it depends on many other factors – micro, meso and macro – which are beyond a university's control (Holmes, 2013). HEIs are positioned at the mid-range level, so university-led employability initiatives will always be constrained by other spheres of influence at the micro and macro levels. Although universities can help with the development of employability skills such as communication, teamwork, critical thinking, and so on, none of these skills are developed exclusively in a university setting.

2.2.4 The student perspective

Student perceptions of employability remain under-researched in the literature (Donald, 2018; Tymon, 2013). The movement towards neoliberal ideology and the free-market economy has shifted the cost of higher education away from the government and onto the individual, placing increased emphasis on value for money. Tuition fees were introduced in the UK in 1998 as a clear symbol of the marketisation of higher education, in response to the recommendations set out in The Dearing Report (1997). This has given rise to the widespread view of students as consumers who invest in higher education as a commodity and seek a reasonable return on their investment in the form of graduate employment (Brooks, 2018). Higher education is increasingly being framed as a private good that is privately funded, consumed, and used for future economic

gain (Buckner, 2017). However, perceiving students as consumers has negative implications because the assumption is that they must be given what they want, which may conflict with what a quality education should provide (Clayson & Haley, 2005). Furthermore, while there is a strong student-as-consumer narrative in higher education, there is evidence to suggest that students do not perceive themselves as consumers (Saunders, 2015; Guilbault, 2016). This implies that the strong consumerist discourse is being driven by policymakers rather than students with a strong consumer focus.

Due to the competitive graduate labour market, students are placing an increasing emphasis on developing their soft skills while they are in university to strengthen their employability currency (Jackson, 2013). Students recognise that a degree alone is not enough and need to differentiate themselves from the competition at a time when the supply of graduates exceeds the demand for graduate talent (Tomlinson, 2008). Inflationary pressure from mass higher education has devalued formal credentials in the labour market, forcing students to focus on soft skill development and the value of their experiences outside of formal learning (Tomlinson, 2007). These experiences can range from work-related to involvement in sports and societies. Developing employability skills is becoming increasingly important since non-linear careers demand graduates to self-manage their professional pathways (Jackson & Tomlinson, 2020). Graduates need to be resilient and adaptable to successfully manage the dynamic and turbulent labour market.

While some claim that students actively upskill in order to gain a positional advantage, others argue that there is apathy and passivism among students when it comes to participating in employability initiatives (Tomlinson, 2008; Wharton & Horrocks, 2015; Jackson & Tomlinson, 2020). Despite students recognising the importance of employability in a context of intense competition and self-managed careers, many choose not to engage with activities which support their professional development (Fowlie & Forder, 2020; Jackson & Tomlinson, 2021). It has been reported that students are uninterested in employability provision, with low attendance at optional events and ambivalence towards compulsory sessions (Frankham, 2017). This is a

problem as time and resources are being invested in employability initiatives to prepare students for the workplace, yet many students are sceptical of their worth and choose to ignore institutional efforts (Nghia, 2017). This could be because they do not see the value in participating in employability-enhancing activities at this point in their studies, are already upskilling themselves in paid employment, or want to prioritise their academic work, which they believe is more important.

2.3 Graduate employability in the 21st century labour market

The 21st century labour market is characterised by uncertainty and intensity due to the impact of globalisation, technological advancements, the rise in flexible working arrangements and economic instability (Jackson & Tomlinson, 2020). These changes have made the university-to-work transition more difficult, and policy discourses have put pressure on universities to prepare graduates for these precarious employment conditions (Lechner et al., 2016). Universities have been under pressure to update their curriculum and launch new programmes to help students develop the necessary skills for the 21st century (Habets et al., 2020). Within the literature, these skills are also described as generic skills, soft skills, transferable skills, or key competencies and among them include: collaboration, communication, problem solving and critical thinking (Oraison et al., 2019; Larson & Miller, 2011). In the UK, following the marketisation of higher education, the skills agenda has gained traction, and policy has encouraged universities to demonstrate their commitment to the development of 21st century skills, often in their Graduate Attributes (Oraison et al., 2019). Graduate attributes are the qualities, skills, and understandings that a university community determines its students should acquire throughout their time at the institution in order to make a meaningful contribution to their profession and wider society (Bowden et al., 2000). The problem is that none of these skills are exclusively developed in the university domain, so the responsibility of preparing students for an uncertain future should not fall solely on universities (McCowan, 2015). Policymakers believe that higher education can make a significant contribution to the global knowledge economy by creating skilled graduates who are ready for work; yet,

universities have faced significant challenges in responding quickly to the expanding needs of the knowledge-based society (Prokou, 2008). Universities can assist students in developing their skills, but much more can be done in the workplace, where a more practical and dynamic approach can be taken.

Rapid advances in technology, otherwise known as the fourth industrial revolution, are generating a demand for new skills while making others outdated (Kornelakis & Petrakaki, 2020). Technology is affecting some professions, mostly low-skilled ones, but it is also opening completely new opportunities, particularly in the digital economy (Berger & Frey, 2016). Around 60% of all jobs could be partially automated, which means that the workforce will need to improve their technical abilities to become accustomed to using technology (Manyika, 2017). Many organisations are implementing new technologies to improve working practices which is requiring employees to update their skillset to suit new ways of working (Berger & Frey, 2016). Due to the fear of being left behind, digital transformation is a top priority for many organisations, and as a result, the need for digital skills is expected to rise significantly (Seet et al., 2018). The labour market will need to upskill as technology evolves, which emphasises the significance of lifelong and life-wide learning to remain employable (Kornelakis & Petrakaki, 2020). The development of soft skills is just as important as the development of technical skills because workers will need to be flexible and adaptable in order to cope with the accelerated change brought on by disruptive technology.

Traditionally, organisations would provide a stable career pathway for their employees, whereas nowadays it is more common for the individual to be the primary driver of their career, making the 'job for life' a thing of the past (Donald et al., 2017). However, some argue that we are not witnessing the demise of the linear career, but rather a redefinition of the new career, which is more complex and subjective (Rodrigues & Guest, 2010). Furthermore, despite the popularity of non-linear careers, it is important to recognise that some people continue to pursue traditional and stable career trajectories (Sullivan & Baruch, 2009). Various factors have accounted for these emerging non-linear careers including: greater casual and fixed-term employment opportunities, changes in

the demand for skills due to disruptive technologies, economic uncertainty, and increased labour mobility (Jackson & Tomlinson, 2020). Employees' behaviours and attitudes towards work are also changing in response to numerous factors including an increase in dual-career couples, which necessitates increased flexibility and a desire for rewarding work that aligns with interests and values (Sullivan & Baruch, 2009).

Given these economic and social shifts, graduates are more likely to hold multiple roles in their professional lives, emphasising the need for career management skills and the ability to transfer skills across diverse contexts. On the one hand, graduates may have more freedom and autonomy to self-manage their own professional pathways in a way that better suits their lifestyle, but on the other hand, they will need to be more proactive and adaptable in order to survive and succeed in a challenging job market. Research on contemporary careers has tended to favour the positive characteristics of non-linear careers over the negative aspects such as unpredictability and job insecurity (Sullivan & Baruch, 2009). Several authors have alluded to the importance of career proactivity as self-driven graduates are more likely to embrace professional opportunities and manage complex employment conditions (Kinash et al., 2016; Fugate et al., 2004). The development of employability is a socially constructed and active process which requires effort on behalf of the graduate to forge a meaningful relationship with the labour market and its key social actors (Jackson & Tomlinson, 2019). Graduates who are proactive, open to new experiences, and take greater ownership of their career path are more likely to be able to overcome career challenges in the modern workplace.

Given the uncertainty and supercomplexity of life and work, some authors have begun to question the individualistic approach to developing employability, favouring a more holistic approach that considers the broader and non-individualistic aspects of employability, such as sustainability, diversity, inclusion, and equality (Cook, 2022; Lacković, 2019). The issue with placing a strong emphasis on individual employability in a university context is that it downplays employability's role as a relational and social process, instead

emphasising the narrative of employability as personal career success and fulfilment (Cook, 2022). Research has shown that feeling fulfilled with graduate employment is not just about finding a 'good' job but also feelings of wellbeing, stability and connection which are relational and emotional processes and extend beyond the individual (Finn, 2017). This goes against the current neoliberal employability strategy adopted by universities, which promotes the performative, future-focused self over meaningful interactions to make a difference in the world.

2.4 A Bourdieusian approach to understanding graduate employability

It is clear from the literature that university employability initiatives are shifting away from the generic skills-based approach to a more person-centred one (Holmes, 2015; Jackson, 2016; Tomlinson & Jackson, 2019). A large body of literature has considered the Bourdieusian perspective when attempting to understand individuals and their employability (Clark & Zukas, 2013; Herbert et al., 2020; Thondhlana, 2020). Bourdieu (1977) argued that educational settings reproduce inequalities by rewarding cultural capital of the dominant social class. Based on their backgrounds, individuals join the educational system with various forms of capital, and those with stronger capitals frequently have increased currency and validation (Groves et al., 2022). Because social class positioning can affect people's expectations or chances of success, known as habitus, these systematic inequities can affect how people negotiate the employment landscape (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). For example, high-status professions are often disproportionately composed of those from socially privileged backgrounds. According to Bourdieu, economic capital refers to financial resources, social capital is related to connections and cultural capital is the accumulated knowledge and sensibilities that people possess (Tran et al., 2021). Parental education provides access to financial, cultural, and social capital and these capitals are transmitted through the family (Bourdieu,1983). First-generation graduates are therefore at a disadvantage since they have less access to professional networks and industry knowledge, as well as having to overcome financial obstacles that come with the lack of parental education. The education-to-work transition is therefore more challenging for first-generation

graduates without the resources or capitals to support them, as they are starting from a position of disadvantage. Additionally, because the professional environments they are entering may be fundamentally different from those of their parents, first-generation graduates may experience a stronger culture shock (Gofen, 2009). However, the dispositions that make up a person's habitus can and do change over time as they are shaped by new environments and experiences (Hodkinson et al., 2007; Lee & Kramer, 2013).

According to Thondhlana (2020), exercising individual agency, being resourceful and learning the rules of a different field, can lead to a new habitus and enhanced employment prospects. The literature has referred to this as "agentic capital", which is the strategic application of various forms of capital to advance one's professional development (Pham, 2020). This is supported by Granovetter's research on the strength of weak ties, which shows that people who network outside of their immediate social structure have greater access to information and opportunities because these connections are likely to be active in a variety of other social circles, providing new insight that strong ties cannot (Granovetter, 1983). Some believe that more opportunities should be provided by businesses and educators for students to gain work experience in order to increase their cultural capital (Herbert, 2020). This is particularly important for those students starting from a position of disadvantage as they need to learn the rules of the field, in this instance the labour market (Thondhlana, 2020). Bourdieu (1990) talked about having a feel for the game, which is harder for first-generation graduates because they might not have grown up with constant capital cultivation. Pham et al. (2019) recognised the role of policymakers in developing and endorsing more nuanced measures of graduate outcomes, to successfully capture graduate's education-to-work transitions over time (Pham et al., 2019). This is particularly important for students who come from disadvantaged backgrounds, including first-generation students, because it could take them longer to acquire the necessary capital and internalise a new habitus that will help them succeed in the graduate labour market.

2.5 Developing graduate capitals over time

Following on from the work of Bourdieu, some authors have reframed employability around forms of capitals, or resources, which are acquired and deployed over time to help graduates achieve successful and sustainable employment (Peeters et al., 2019; Clarke, 2017; Tomlinson, 2017). The research on capitals, sometimes referred to as graduate capitals (Tomlinson, 2017), employability capitals (Peeters et al., 2019) or career capitals (Tomlinson & Jackson, 2019), is a small but growing field. This study sets out to contribute to the literature by charting over time the building up of employability capitals, as employability is a socially constructed and active process occurring across time and contexts (Tomlinson & Jackson, 2019). Only a few studies have explored the role of capitals–human, social, cultural, psychological and identity–in a graduate's employability trajectory (Pham et al., 2019; Nghia et al., 2020). These studies have investigated the development and utilisation of employability capitals over time by graduates internationally and across a range of careers. According to Peeters et al. (2019, p. 2), employability capitals are "the various personal resources which promote an individual's employability". A limited but expanding body of literature argues that employability outcomes are influenced by factors other than generic skills, including the development of human, social, cultural, psychological, and identity capital (Tomlinson, 2017; Clarke, 2017; Pham et al., 2019). These resources, which can be obtained through formal and informal learning experiences, cover a variety of educational, social, cultural, and psycho-social characteristics and support smooth transitions into and throughout the labour market (Bathmaker, 2021).

Tomlinson (2017) defines each of the five capitals within his work. Human capital refers to the knowledge and skills needed to access and succeed in the labour market. This capital is most popular amongst policymakers as human capital theory assumes investment in education and training will improve employment prospects. With rising student numbers and credential inflation, human capital alone is insufficient to guarantee employment (Blackmore et al., 2017). Other forms of capital are becoming increasingly valued by employers as they help to differentiate candidates in the recruitment process. Social capital can be understood as the networks and relationships that connect

graduates to the labour market and enable them to exploit employment opportunities. Blackmore et al. (2017) concluded that social capital is in high demand by employers as they value social interaction, agency, and a sense of community. Identity capital requires the development of a professional profile and personal investment in the job market. The findings by Tomlinson and Jackson (2021) revealed that identity capital played a significant role in bridging the gap between higher education and the graduate labour market as students conceptualise their future selves. Cultural capital involves developing knowledge, dispositions and behaviours that are aligned to the working world. It is strongly aligned to social and identity capital which highlights the interconnectedness between the different forms of capital (Tomlinson, 2017). Psychological capital is about building resilience and adaptability to respond proactively to career challenges and withstand the pressures of a complex labour market. Given the competitiveness and unpredictability of the labour market, Caballero et al. (2020) found that psychological capital is a fundamental component of graduate employability. Most importantly, the various capitals complement and enrich one another, as would be expected given the multifaceted nature of employability.

This chapter has examined the significance of employability in the global knowledge economy, as well as the policy push in England to make graduates work-ready. It went on to explain employability as a complex concept shaped by numerous stakeholders, and it explored their differing perspectives. The chapter concluded with a shift in employability discourse away from the acquisition of generic skills towards a more person-centred approach based on capitals as resources that can be cultivated and deployed in the labour market.

Chapter 3: Theoretical Frameworks

This chapter introduces the two theoretical frameworks employed in this research: the Graduate Capital Model and the Transition Theory. It will explain why the theoretical frameworks were chosen, the features of the frameworks, and the connection between them.

3.1 The Graduate Capital Model

Tomlinson's (2017) graduate capital model, alongside others (Clarke, 2017; Fugate et al., 2004), view employability as a process, rather than the acquisition of static skills. The graduate capital model advances the notion of graduate employability by conceptualising five capitals as key resources, which can be developed throughout one's life to enhance employment prospects (Tomlinson, 2017). These five capitals, including human, social, cultural, identity and psychological, can be utilised in the graduate labour market to help achieve successful and sustainable employment. Tomlinson's work on graduate capitals has been informed by other theories, including human capital theory (Becker, 1964), Bourdieu's (1986) notion of economic, cultural, and social capital, Giddens (1991) work on self-identity, and Fugate et al.'s (2004) psycho-social construct of employability. Like previous research (Parutis & Howson, 2020; Pham et al., 2019), this study will employ and test the graduate capital model as a theoretical framework to help interpret the results and extend the limited body of knowledge on graduates' utilisation of employability capitals over time.

3.1.1 Marxist notion of capital

Before exploring Tomlinson's (2017) five graduate capitals, it is important to consider the term capital. Karl Marx defined capital as a surplus value of labour in which labour was merely a commodity and workers were exploited to maximise profit (Marx, 1976). Marx (1976) argued that labour is commodified so that it exists solely in terms of its market value. The Marxist notion of capital is aligned with the neoliberalisation of higher education, in which universities function as capitalist institutions, perceiving skilled labour as a commodity

capable of producing surplus value in the global knowledge economy (Maisuria & Cole, 2017). The commodification of labour in a commercialised higher education system might be understood as students being equipped with knowledge and skills and being valued in terms of their exchange value in the world of work (McArthur, 2011). However, the literature is shifting away from the prevalent skills-based approach towards a broader, more individualised conceptualisation of employability that is centred on the development of capitals through formal and informal experiences.

3.1.2 Human capital

The concept of human capital is that the acquisition of formal education and training increases an individual's skills, knowledge, and productive capacity, which consequently enhances their employment prospects (Tomlinson, 2021). This enhanced productivity enables individuals to command higher-level jobs and increased earning potential as employers are more inclined to recruit highly qualified applicants on the basis that they will satisfy workplace demands. The term human capital dates back to the 18th century, with distinguished authors including Smith (1776), Fisher (1896), Becker (1964) and Schultz (1961). Smith (1776) defined individual ability as a type of capital which can be acquired and maintained through education and training, and in turn positively contribute to a nation's wealth. Fisher (1879) agreed that a skilled individual should be placed in the category of capital and Becker (1964) argued that human capital is the most important asset as economic success is dependent on the effective investment in labour. Schultz (1961) focused on investment in human capital as a source of improved quality and productivity levels. Human capital is accumulated over time by families, schools and organisations who facilitate skill formation (Carneiro & Heckman, 2003).

Human capital theory has been heavily criticised in the literature for its lack of realism (Baptiste, 2001; Tan, 2014; Marginson, 2019). The theory implies a strong alignment between higher education and the workplace but the connection is partial and unclear (Marginson, 2019). This misalignment is even greater for non-vocational courses because there is no clear pathway from

education to profession. Human capital theory has been criticised for regarding education as a commodity to satisfy business needs and stimulate economic growth; this neoliberal approach prioritises productivity over social welfare (Tan, 2014). The theory emphasises human agency over social structures, viewing social inequalities as inevitable outcomes of a competitive free market rather than as injustices (Baptiste, 2001). It implies that people with more education are always more productive than people with less education, ignoring social, cultural, and environmental aspects that may influence behaviour. The theory aims to make sense of a social and economic phenomenon through the perspective of a rational decision-maker who maximises utility, even though this does not correspond to people in real-life (Tan, 2014). It seems inappropriate to apply such logic to the intricate pathway between education and work.

Human capital theory provides a rationale for the expansion of higher education as obtaining a degree is perceived as an investment, with the return being improved employment prospects (Marginson, 2019). In the purest form of human capital, the acquisition of a higher education qualification automatically leads to career success and economic growth. However, in a context of increased student numbers, economic uncertainty and technological advancements, a university degree is no longer enough to guarantee professional employment, resulting in unemployment and underemployment in the graduate labour market. Some university degrees will provide a direct route into employment e.g., medicine, but more commonly higher education provides a more general education rather than specific knowledge and skills aligned to a particular industry or job (Tomlinson, 2017). These generic skills are often articulated as 'graduate attributes' and include the likes of problem solving, critical thinking and teamwork. This makes the articulation of human capital important when seeking employment as the links between education and the labour market are not clearly defined (Tomlinson, 2017). Graduates must sell themselves to prospective employers in order to stand out from the crowd. Furthermore, with graduates now embarking on a life of jobs rather than a job for life, they must keep up to date with the ever-changing needs of employers and be able to mobilise their knowledge and skills across different contexts

(Nghia et al., 2020). This emphasises the importance of other capitals, beyond human capital, as knowledge and skills obtained solely through education will soon become outdated in the workplace.

3.1.3 Social capital

Social capital can be understood as the networks and relationships that connect graduates to the labour market and enable them to exploit employment opportunities (Tomlinson, 2017). These connections can include family, peers, employers, supervisors, and mentors who help to mobilise an individual's existing human capital and act as the gatekeepers to labour market opportunities (Popadiuk & Arthur, 2014). Social capital has been discussed by numerous scholars over time and the definition of the term remains consistent: investment in social relations as an asset (Lin, 1982; Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988; Burt 1992). Bourdieu (1986) refers to social capital as an asset, shared by members of a group, which value depends on the size of the network and the volume of capital possessed by its members. Coleman (1988) has also discussed how certain groups develop and maintain social capital as a collective asset which leads to greater opportunities in life. Lin (1982) believes the higher the social status of group members the stronger the asset from social relations. Those with strong networks will be rich in structural holes which means members can exchange information and resources to exercise greater control and opportunity (Burt, 1992). This results in unequal opportunities in the labour market for those with fewer connections.

There are different variations of social capital. Bonding social capital refers to horizontal ties between individuals or groups, with similar demographics. Bridging social capital involving ties between different individuals or communities and linking social capital refers to vertical connections with a power differential between the two parties (Baum & Ziersch, 2003). The strength of social capital is determined not only by the structure of social ties, such as the type and size of the network, but also by the quality of social relations in terms of trust and reciprocity (Stone, 2001). As a result, someone with a small number of high-quality connections may have more social capital

than someone with a vast network. Social capital is a difficult concept to measure due to its multidimensional nature (Stone, 2001). It has been criticised for being an umbrella and elastic term that implies different things to different people (Adler & Kwon, 2002). Furthermore, having a large network is not always advantageous. The negative effects of social networks include obligation, uncertainty, dominance, and social exclusion (Haynes, 2009). All of which can have an adverse effect on job prospects.

The amount of social capital varies between graduates, often with those from a lower socio-economic background being disadvantaged (Nghia et al., 2020). Without any insider knowledge, graduates from a working-class background will struggle to access the same opportunities as their middle- and upper-class counterparts. Some argue that universities can attempt to enhance the social capital of their students through initiatives such as internships, mentoring schemes and careers fairs (Benati & Fischer, 2020). By having membership or connections to specific employer groups, students can receive access to resources, knowledge, and insight. However, it is important that these connections extend beyond the boundaries of a university, and students are encouraged to form bridging or linking ties, with a focus on meaningful interactions with prospective employers (Tomlinson, 2017). The issue is that those from privileged backgrounds continue to be fast tracked for graduate employment since employability initiatives supporting the development of social capital cannot replicate the advantages experienced by those from a position of advantage (Holmes, 2013). Social reproduction enables those who possess the necessary social capital to monpolise on that capital (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). Graduates from privileged backgrounds are familiar with the understandings, practices, and behaviours of the social group to which they belong, all of which give them a stronger position in the graduate labour market because employers favour them.

3.1.4 Cultural capital

Graduate cultural capital involves developing knowledge, dispositions and behaviours that are aligned to the working world (Tomlinson, 2017). The

concept of cultural capital was first developed by Bourdieu (1986) to analyse how culture and education contribute to social reproduction. Since then, it is a concept that has been frequently used to account for educational inequality, and the influence of family background on educational attainment (Lamont & Lareau, 1988). One main criticism of cultural capital is that it has many different meanings in the literature which creates confusion and a lack of theoretical consistency (Lamont & Lareau, 1988). However, as cultural capital encompasses the different attributes and behaviours of individuals it is very difficult to fix it to specific features (Prieur & Savage, 2013). According to Bourdieu (1986), cultural capital comes in three forms - embodied (long-lasting dispositions), objectified (cultural goods) and institutionalised (educational qualifications). For Bourdieu, the embodied state is the most significant and its possession varies with social class (Sullivan, 2001). Those from a higher-class background will gain more exposure to cultural resources to help strengthen their competitive position in the labour market.

Cultural capital can have a significant impact on employability as knowing the right people, speaking the same language and understanding the cultural norms of organisations can bolster career prospects. Cultural capital can be presented as a 'personality package' that includes accent, body language, and behaviour, and employers tend to reward the cultural capital of the upper socioeconomic class (Nghia et al., 2020). First-generation graduates from a working-class background may be at a disadvantage because they lack the embodied capital that employers actively seek and lack access to or insight into the professional world to enable the development of cultural capital. This poses a challenge when employers demand a certain degree of cultural capital, which only a minority of students may possess. Nevertheless, the cultural reproduction theory has been disputed by the cultural resistance theory and the cultural mobility theory (Zhu, 2020). The cultural resistance theory advocates for the agency and cultural creativity of individuals, meaning they can overcome the barriers of social structure (Giroux, 1983). The cultural mobility theory argues that cultural capital is developed throughout one's life and therefore family background only has a small bearing on it initially (DiMaggio, 1982).

According to these alternate views, an individual from a disadvantaged background may be able to accumulate more cultural capital over time than their more privileged counterpart.

With the massification of higher education, institutionalised cultural capital is becoming less potent in enabling access to employment (Tomlinson, 2017). As qualifications alone cannot guarantee success in the labour market, graduates must possess added-value knowledge to differentiate themselves from the crowd. Strong cultural capital can also be demonstrated by job-specific experience, industry knowledge, relevant achievements and an overall personality package which is well suited to the organisation of interest (Tomlinson, 2017; Nghia et al., 2020). Students who have experience or competencies which meet the demands of organisations will be viewed more favourably in the labour market. For this reason, universities should provide regular exposure to different organisational cultures to challenge student perceptions and expand their horizons. In addition, embodied dispositions can be harnessed through interview practice as students are encouraged to align their competences to employer demands.

3.1.5 Identity capital

Côté's (1996) culture-identity link framework highlights the way in which culture and identity are interrelated. The framework outlines three identity concepts: social, personal and ego. *Social identity* is an individual's position in a social system, *personal identity* is the tangible components of individual experience rooted in interactions and institutions, and *ego identity* refers to personal attributes. Côté (1996) recognised that identity formation has evolved over time, with social identity being more managed in modern society as people try to make the right impressions, personal identity becoming more image-oriented as individuals seek approval, and ego identity becoming more about identity discovery. Côté (2002) suggests that individuals need to invest in who they are in order to establish a sense of self in contemporary society. This is consistent with the notion of individualisation, which refers to the path people take in life and the decisions they make when they are less constrained by traditional

norms and values (Beck, 2002). It is based on the belief that global economic and political changes, such as neoliberalism, have disrupted conventional norms and community structures in Western cultures, leading to a general decline in agreed-upon social standards and, as a result, people becoming more individualised (Côté, 2016). This is in line with the emergence of self-directed careers, in which individuals are more responsible for charting their own professional paths in the modern workplace. Individualisation can be strategically formed using tangible resources such as education credentials and family social status, as well as intangible resources such as self-esteem and an agentic personality (Côté & Schwartz, 2002). While the individualisation process has many advantages, such as the freedom to shape one's identity and career path, it also places additional pressure on the individual who must plan ahead, make life-altering decisions, and accept responsibility for personal setbacks, all of which they may not be adequately prepared to handle (Côté & Schwartz, 2002). Furthermore, although individualisation can provide freedom from constraining cultural norms, it does not prevent individuals from facing systemic barriers such as social class positioning (Côté, 2016).

Graduate identity capital requires the development of a professional profile or personal narrative, aligned to employment domains, which enables the accomplishment of career goals (Tomlinson, 2017). A considerable amount of literature has been published on person-centred employability using terms such as: 'graduate identity' (Holmes, 2013), 'professional identity' (Tomlinson & Jackson, 2019) and 'pre-professional identity' (Jackson, 2016). Identity development is a fluid process requiring experimentation as a university student (Bennett, 2012), moving between different modalities of identity as a graduate (Tomlinson & Jackson, 2019) and identity negotiation as an established professional (Jackson, 2016). The process of forming a professional identity requires construction and adaptation through personal exploration (Brooman & Stirk, 2020), self-determination (Reid et al., 2019), lifelong learning (Bridgstock, 2009) and interaction with others (Holmes, 2013). The interactional nature of the identification process is key; as an individual may claim a particular identity but it must then be affirmed by significant others or gatekeepers i.e.,

prospective employers (Holmes, 2013). The more aligned identities are to employer demands, the more likely graduates will secure employment. The rapidly changing world of work, characterised by disruptions and non-linearity, has amplified the importance of career self-management as graduates must be equipped to identify and navigate career pathways suited to their interests (Lochab & Nath, 2020; Jackson & Tomlinson, 2020). The responsibility is on the individual to acquire and maintain the knowledge, skills and attributes valued by prospective employers. In a neoliberal society, individuals have a greater level of choice and autonomy over their education and work. However, increased self-authorship ignores the fact that unequal opportunities exist in the labour market which can lead to greater inequality and uneven outcomes (De Lissovoy, 2018). This is particularly the case for first-generation graduates who may not have the connections and networks to support them in the professional world.

3.1.6 Psychological capital

Psychological capital stems from positive psychology which aims to shift the emphasis away from what is wrong with people towards what is right with them (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Positive psychologists were keen to shed light on constructive behaviours and the overall wellbeing of employees at work and beyond, rather than focus on the negatives such as work stress, burnout, and counterproductive behaviours (Youssef-Morgan & Luthans, 2015). Psychological capital is a positive organisational behaviour which focuses on four psychological capacities, including self-efficacy, optimism, hope and resiliency, which can be developed, managed and measured (Luthans et al., 2006). These four psychological resources encourage an effort to succeed, a positive attitude, perseverance towards goals and an ability to bounce back from difficulty (Luthans, 2002). Individuals who possess these characteristics are more inclined to withstand the pressures of modern-day life, in terms of managing adversity, being open to new experiences and demonstrating a flexible approach to change (Bonanno et al., 2001).

Psychological capital moves beyond human and social capital as it is concerned with 'who you are' and 'what you can become' rather than what or who you know (Luthans et al, 2006). It is like identity capital in that it considers attitudes, behaviour, and performance at the individual level. However, research has also been undertaken on the impact of psychological capital at the team and organisational levels (Walumbwa et al., 2011; McKenny et al., 2013). This capital requires significant time and investment to develop and nurture in life and in the workplace. Criticisms of psychological capital include the difficulty of distinguishing between positive and negative human characteristics, as individuals will deal with stress differently yet still take value from the experience regardless of their response (Lazarus, 2003). Furthermore, criticisms have been raised in regards to the focus on the individual level, with little attention paid to the contextual factors that shape people's lives (Hackman, 2009). External factors can have a large bearing on an individual's psychology so should be taken into consideration.

Graduate psychological capital is about building resilience and adaptability to respond proactively to career challenges and withstand the pressures of a complex job market (Tomlinson, 2017). Increased importance is being placed on psychological capital given higher levels of competition and uncertainty in the labour market (Nghia et al., 2020). Graduates need to demonstrate resilience and persistence given the challenge of securing employment and the emotional demands once employed. Psychological resources are a key component of graduate employability as they provide preparation for the challenges of everyday life and have a positive impact on job satisfaction, career success and overall wellbeing (da Costa et al., 2021). It has been argued that psychological capital can be developed within a university setting by helping students become accustomed to workload pressure, tight deadlines, and difficult situations (Benati & Fischer, 2020). Tomlinson (2017) suggests that contingency planning and expectation management is needed in university career guidance so that students know how to deal with adversity and setbacks. Arguably, if students are more cognizant of the working world, it may soften the friction between higher education and the labour market and they may not get a

reality shock when they first enter. This is particularly important for students who have a relatively smooth experience through formal education, as the workplace, often characterised by complexity and unpredictability, will be a very different experience.

However, other studies have questioned the effectiveness of higher education institutions in helping students develop their psychological capital because it is difficult to transfer skills in adaptability and resilience to contexts that are vastly different and there is little to be gained from developing skills that are best acquired after starting employment rather than beforehand (Cranmer, 2006; Mason et al, 2009). Psychological capital is hard to build in educational settings because it is counterintuitive to create stressful and uncertain situations in a setting that is intended to be safe, nurturing, and supportive. Furthermore, the curriculum and assessment structure, which often consists of a series of short and unrelated topics, makes it difficult for students to bounce back from adversity (Walker et al., 2006).

The five graduate capitals are relational and cumulative, each enriching another. Employability capitals can be acquired and deployed over time across a range of contexts (Tomlinson, 2017). It is not just about the possession of graduate capitals which is important, but also understanding their value in the labour market to help maximise career opportunity. As developing graduate capitals is intended to facilitate transitions into the labour market it seemed appropriate to explore a transition theory alongside the graduate capital model. Both theories refer to 'resources' that people draw upon in order to cope with the transition. However, while the graduate capital model is focused on preparation for the university-to-work transition, the transition theory considers the resources required to move in, through and out of the transition, making it a useful framework for studying career stories.

3.2 The Transition Theory

A second theoretical framework on career transitions was investigated, as graduate capitals are resources that assist graduates in transitioning into the labour market. Nancy Schlossberg's transition theory was chosen because it is

a practical framework that is highly understandable and translatable to a wide variety of settings. It identifies the common characteristics associated with transitions and therefore could aid in better understanding the career journeys of graduates.

In order to effectively manage a transition process, it is necessary to understand transitions and take stock of the situation (Schlossberg, 2011). The first step involves understanding different types of transition. Transitions can be anticipated, such as starting a graduate job, unanticipated, like a redundancy, or non-events, for example not receiving an anticipated promotion (Anderson et al., 2012). A transition is "any event, or non-event, that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions and roles" (Schlossberg et al., 1995, p.27). Even a planned transition can be unsettling because it involves leaving one set of roles, relationships, routines, and assumptions behind and establishing new ones, which will take time and effort. The greater the degree of difference between the pre-transition and post-transition environments, the bigger the impact may be (Goodman et al., 2006). This is especially true for graduates who are transitioning from an educational setting to a vastly different working environment. A transition is a gradual process in which feelings change as people move into, through, and out of it. Those in transition may experience dissonance at first as they regain clarity in their new situation and determine where they belong (Barclay, 2017). Regardless of the reasons for the transition, an individual must still deal with the life-altering experience. Perception is important because different people perceive transitions differently, and how an individual evaluates the transition influences their ability to cope with it (Anderson et al., 2012). The coping mechanisms needed to deal with the change may vary greatly depending on how significant the transition is perceived by the individual and the resources available to them.

Schlossberg's model includes the 4Ss system for transition coping or taking stock - situation, self, support, and strategies (Anderson et al., 2012). These are coping resources that a person may or may not have when experiencing a transition, which can be both positive or negative. The 4Ss are the variables that make a difference in how an individual negotiates the transition over time.

The 4Ss and graduate capitals clearly overlap since the 4Ss, like capitals, are resources that may help graduates transition from university to the workplace. However, while the graduate capital model focuses on the development and deployment of these resources, the transition theory examines these resources from an evaluative standpoint. When evaluating the university-to-work transition, a graduate might consider how they perceive the transition, who they are and how they react to change, where their support network is, and what they can do to adjust to the change. Both frameworks approach career transitions from a person-centered approach, requiring individuals to accept responsibility for navigating and directing their own professional journey.

3.2.1 Situation

Each transition is distinct depending on the circumstances surrounding it, and an individual can evaluate their situation through the lens of these factors:

- the trigger (what initiated the transition?)
- the timing (is it perceived as a good or bad time?)
- degree of control (the amount of influence an individual feels they have)
- role change (does the transition involve a change in responsibilities?)
- duration of the transition (is the transition seen as temporary or permanent?)
- previous experience with similar transitions (how has the individual coped with comparable transitions?)
- concurrent stresses (what other sources of stress is the individual facing, if any?)
- and an individual's perception of the change (is the situation perceived positively, negatively, or benign?)

(Anderson et al., 2012).

The timing of the transition is important because if it is off time, it can lead to greater discomfort. For example, a graduate who does not find employment immediately after graduation may find a delayed transition even more distressing because they may consider themselves to be starting at a

disadvantage in comparison to their counterparts who began working immediately. The expected duration of the transition will also affect the ease or difficulty of assimilating it. An unpleasant work transition may be easier to deal with if the graduate knows it is only temporary, and they can search for an alternative position in the meantime. If a person is under stress at the time of the transition, it may impair their ability to deal with the change effectively. This could be the case for a graduate who has experienced several rejections from employers prior to the transition and has lost confidence in their abilities. Past experience of transitions can shape an individual's attitude toward them in the future. A person's outlook will be more positive if a previous similar transition was successful for example, a graduate with previous work experience may find it easier to transition into the graduate labour market because of their existing knowledge. By assessing the situation around a transition, an individual can take stock and reflect on how they view the transition, including whether any action is required to improve the current situation.

3.2.2 *Self*

Individuals will react differently to transitions depending on who they are, their values, and their attitude toward the situation. An individual's personal and demographic characteristics will have an impact on how they deal with transitions when they arise (Anderson et al., 2012). Socioeconomic status, gender, ethnicity, age, and health will influence how people adjust to change. Psychological resources also have an influence on the transition process as people approach the same transition from different frames of reference (Goodman et al., 2006). An optimistic person will be more inclined to view the change with a positive outlook, and optimists tend to deal with setbacks better.

With the rise of non-linear careers and the emphasis on person-centered employability, graduates need to assess who they are and how they react to transitional periods. Career transitions are becoming more common in today's dynamic workplace, making graduates responsible for self-managing their own non-linear career paths (Jackson & Tomlinson, 2020). This self-management and non-linearity require graduates to be more professionally adaptable, but it

also enables them to pursue a career suited to their interests and values. Studies have shown that younger generations place a greater focus on doing meaningful work and maintaining a work-life balance (Ng et al., 2010; Maxwell and Broadbridge, 2017).

3.2.3 Support

The types of support people receive during the transition process will influence their ability to handle it. People may receive support from their partners, family, friends, institutions, or the community. Support systems can provide affection, affirmation, aid, and feedback to help an individual navigate through the transition process (Anderson et al., 2012). Social support can be measured by identifying the types of support present in an individual's life during a transition period, also known as their convoy of support (Kahn & Antonucci, 1980). A support network can be classified as stable support, support that is role dependent, and support that is likely to change over time. It is important to note that a person's support system can be both an asset or a liability, as some types of support are unwarranted and unhelpful.

Support from others is becoming essential in an increasingly competitive and unpredictable graduate labour market. For graduates, this assistance can take numerous forms, including encouragement, knowledge, and opening doors to opportunities (Anderson et al., 2012). Many initiatives have been tried in a university context to support students with their transition into the labour market, but the success of such efforts is unclear given the significant cultural difference between university and the workplace (Mason et al., 2009; Pegg et al., 2012).

3.2.4 Strategies

People navigate transitions in different ways depending on the strategies they have at their disposal. Coping strategies can help to modify the situation, change the meaning of the situation, or manage the stress (Pearlin & Schooler, 1978). The strategies deployed will depend on the situation and whether it can be changed. If the situation cannot be changed, more emotion-focused coping

strategies will be deployed such as changing the way a person perceives the situation or engaging in activities which reduce the stress associated with it (Anderson et al., 2012). During a transitional period, people should flexibly employ a variety of coping strategies to be able to manage the situation effectively.

The transition from education to work can be a culture shock for graduates who have had little exposure to or experience in the workplace, particularly first-generation graduates who may be joining an environment that is significantly different from the one in which their parents worked (Gofen, 2009). Although universities seek to reduce this shock with employability activities that bridge the gap between education and the workplace, it is unclear whether these efforts can successfully support a graduate when moving into, through, and out of a career transition. Some argue that companies are better positioned to provide the required tools for a smooth transition into the workplace (Clarke, 2017; Succi & Canovi, 2020).

This chapter has provided an overview of the two theoretical frameworks used in this study: 1) Tomlinson's graduate capital model and 2) Schlossberg's transition theory. Both theories are similar in that they investigate the resources people employ to successfully navigate a career transition. They differ in that the graduate capital model focuses on a graduate's preparation for the university-to-work transition through the development and deployment of capitals, whereas the transition theory emphasises the coping resources required to move into, through, and out of a transition. Since the transition theory aims to evaluate the entire career transition, it seemed appropriate to use it as a supplemental theoretical framework when examining the career pathways of five first-generation graduates.

Chapter 4: Methodology

The purpose of this chapter is to outline the methodological approach for studying the lived experiences of first-generation graduates when accumulating and deploying different forms of graduate capital over time. It begins with the researcher's ontological and epistemological position and then goes on to describe the narrative inquiry research design. The process of acquiring data is then discussed, including the selection of research participants, the structure of the narrative interviews, and ethical considerations. The researcher's positionality will also be included in this chapter, and the approach to data analysis to discover meaning within the narratives.

4.1 Ontology and epistemology

A Deweyan theory of experience (1938) is central to the epistemology and ontology of narrative inquiry. Three features of a Deweyan ontology of experience are well suited for framing narrative research (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007):

1) Emphasis on the temporality of knowledge generation as experience is never fully represented.
2) Emphasis on continuity as experiences build on one another and give rise to new ones.
3) Emphasis on the social dimension of inquiry as individual experiences are shaped by the institutional, social, and cultural contexts in which those experiences are formed.

Beginning with a view of reality as temporal, continuous, and relational, narrative researchers arrive at a conception of how reality can be known. Narrative inquiry proceeds from a subjectivist ontology; an interest in people's lives and the components of their experiences (Caine et al., 2013). Despite being subjective, stories can help researchers understand lived experiences through narrative construction because there is a mutual relationship between life and narrative (Nghia et al., 2020). An interpretivist epistemology views all

knowledge as socially constructed, fluid and multifaceted which is fitting to narrative research (Lieblich et al., 1998). The narrative researcher adopts a relativist stance by bringing together different perspectives in search of a better understanding rather than finding the truth (Farrow et al., 2020). The researcher must be comfortable with some degree of ambiguity because data collection may be messy and unstructured. Interpretivism acknowledges that it is impossible to remove cultural and individual influence from research (Farrow et al., 2020). Therefore, the researcher's positionality will be explored within this chapter.

4.2 Research Design

This study employed a narrative inquiry research design to help understand human experience through the re-telling of their stories (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Narrative inquiry enables researchers to explore and understand the inner world of individuals through their stories and experienced reality (Lieblich et al., 1998). Personal narratives capture people's identities, which is particularly appropriate given the nature of this study and the emphasis on professional identity formation over time. Numerous authors have used a narrative inquiry approach to understand professional development, particularly in teaching (Kartal & Demir, 2021; Tran & Huynh, 2017). Narrative inquiry is a useful tool for capturing the overall experience of individuals, which aligns nicely to employability development as it is influenced by a wide range of factors, including social, cultural, and institutional.

Since the 1990s, narrative research has been gaining popularity as a research method amongst social scientists, particularly in health and education (Ziebland et al., 2013). It can be defined as any study that uses or analyses narratives (Lieblich et al., 1998). Authors use words such as 'time', 'events', 'sequencing' and 'story' to define narrative within the literature (Abbott, 2002; Polkinghorne, 1995). Brought together, a narrative is an account of connected events throughout a period of time, otherwise known as a story, which can be presented through a sequence of written or spoken words. Narratives are important because they are an inherent part of everyday experience and a

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fundamental tool through which individuals make sense of the world; people lead storied lives (Riessman, 1993). Narrative inquiry enables experience to be understood over time, in a series of places, involving different social encounters; making it the perfect tool to use for exploring the gradual building up of employability capitals (Lindsay & Schwind, 2016). The research participants were encouraged to tell their story before, during and after university as employability is a life-long and life-wide process (Nghia et al., 2020). Bruner (1990) acknowledges that people are urged to tell stories when there has been a change in their lives, a transformative experience. This is particularly fitting when considering a career journey as people demonstrate agency over their career trajectories.

Under the umbrella of narrative inquiry, researchers can use different types of data collection such as journal records, interview transcripts, observations and letter writing to name a few (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). This study used narrative interviews as a tool for data collection, because interviews are the most common source of narrative data and people naturally share stories in everyday conversation (Murray, 2018). Similar studies, exploring graduate employability and career development over time, have used interviews as a main source of collecting narratives (Nghia et al., 2020; Pham et al., 2019). While narrative interviews were the primary source of data collection, the researcher also provided a space for participants to share their thoughts and reflections between the first and second interview, in a secure online location. However, none of the participants did this. There is large variation in how researchers understand, investigate, and analyse narrative (Andrews et al., 2008). Some researchers may explore a life story through the spoken word and concentrate on the individual's experience, whereas others may interrogate narratives in writing or objects, focusing on a significant event and considering how the story is shaped by society; or a combination of the two. This study obtained narratives through the spoken word and prioritised the employability development of five individuals. The use of spoken accounts of past experiences enabled the researcher to capture the complete career stories and

pay attention to the nuances within the data including the sequencing of events, the time spent narrating situations and the transitions between themes.

There are many benefits of using narrative inquiry in qualitative studies. Firstly, it enables an in-depth exploration of experiences as humans are natural storytellers who provide rich descriptions and reveal themselves in their stories (Butina, 2015). This allowed the researcher to construct meaning from the personal experiences being told. Secondly, it offers insights into people's lived experiences across time, rather than a static snapshot (Carless & Douglas, 2017). This gave the appropriate time and space for a full story to be captured. Thirdly, it takes into consideration the sociocultural context as an individual's experience is shaped by their surroundings (McLeod, 1997). This was particularly important for the career journeys as different factors were at play during the construction of the professional pathways. To reap the benefits of narrative research, there must be an open and trusting relationship between the researcher and the participant to capture meaningful stories.

However, there are also several limitations to narrative inquiry. It is not suitable for large-scale research, and therefore only captures the stories of a relatively small number of people. The findings may not be representative of a larger population and therefore cannot be empirically generalised. However, theoretical inferences can be made from the narrative data within the scope of the theory being tested (Hammersley, 2012). The researcher will be clear that the conclusions drawn from the study are only relevant to the experiences of the research participants and that the value of the research lies in the in-depth, detailed, and rich understandings of each participant's unique career story rather than the breadth of the data. The researcher will make recommendations for further research work to progress the study and gain greater insight into the topic of investigation.

Due to the small sample size, the researcher collected extensive information about the participants to gain meaningful data. This can make data collection and analysis slow and meticulous (Butina, 2015). For novice narrative researchers, the prospect of analysing lengthy interview transcripts can be

overwhelming and daunting, particularly when the literature is rather sparse on how to undertake this process (McCormack, 2004). The researcher limited the number of interviews to two per participant to help alleviate this issue. Furthermore, the first and second interviews were two months apart to enable the researcher to spread out the analysis over time. Stories can be embellished, understated, or fabricated depending on the context and the audience (Cousin, 2009). The researcher encouraged the unearthing of the true narrative by building trust and rapport with the participants to ensure they felt comfortable to disclose their lived experiences. Moreover, the researcher used clarification questioning and a follow-up interview to help surface the full story. Finally, the research participants had the opportunity to review their interview transcripts to verify the data and judge the credibility of the accounts.

4.3 Data Collection

4.3.1 Research Participants

Five first-generation university graduates who work in a range of professions and graduated from university approximately ten years ago were chosen for this study by the researcher. Key demographic data for the research sample is presented in the table below.

Participant	Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Ethnicity	Professional Sector
1	Emily	Female	31	White	Technology
2	Harriet	Female	33	White	Public Sector
3	Catherine	Female	33	White	Accountancy
4	Joseph	Male	31	White	Higher Education
5	Charlie	Male	37	White	Construction

Table 1: Key demographic data for the research sample.

First-generation graduates were chosen for the research sample because, according to the literature, they have a harder time making the transition from university to the workforce because they lack the predetermined capitals to support them (Thondhlana, 2020; Bourdieu & Passeron 1990). The researcher, who received their university degree ten years ago, reached out to potential participants in their network to determine whether they would be interested in taking part. The participants all belonged to the researcher's network of university friends so this was a convenience and purposive sample as they were easily accessible, willing to participate and could provide information that would help answer the research questions (Etikan, 2016).

Research has shown that friendships in research often produce the richest but most sensitive data (Brewis, 2014). Since no time needs to be wasted on building a rapport, rich information is frequently obtained from participants and researchers who already have a pre-existing relationship. Friendships in research do, however, raise a variety of ethical issues, such as over sharing, blurred boundaries, and the impact of prior knowledge on data collection (McConnell-Henry et al., 2010). There are sound ethical reasons for keeping some distance between the researcher and the participant since balancing the simultaneous roles of friend and researcher can be challenging for researchers. Using friends as participants in research may be seen to produce richer data since it is easier to establish a genuine connection based on rapport and trust, but it can also pose difficult interactional issues because there is a higher level of emotion and vulnerability involved (Owton & Allen-Collinson, 2014). It may be difficult for a friend-researcher to make private exchanges public since it is hard to predict how narrative research will turn out and how participants will feel having their personal stories retold in an academic publication (Brewis, 2014). In narrative research, characterisation is unavoidable, therefore it is critical that the participants—especially if they are friends—are comfortable with how they are represented. The researcher's familiarity with the participants has a significant impact on how they are perceived by, connected to, and inevitably represented by the researcher (Taylor, 2011). In order to protect the trust

between the friend-researcher and provide the participant a greater sense of control over their own representation, it is useful for the researcher to seek validation of their interpretations from those being interviewed (Taylor, 2011). Giving the participants a chance to review their interview transcripts before analysis allows them to make any necessary adjustments, including omitting any information they wish to from their narrative.

According to Brewis (2014), conducting research with friends should not be avoided, but preparation is vital as the researcher must carefully consider how to explain, carry out, and use the research when a friendship is involved. Despite its drawbacks, the friendship approach can be effective in some situations, especially where a closer bond between the participant and the researcher can encourage greater expressiveness, emotion, and interaction that is appropriate for narrative research (Owton & Allen-Collinson, 2014). Data from narrative inquiry is detailed and rich, meaning that it is inevitable that sample sizes are small (Emmel, 2013). However, at least five narratives were required to create plausible and compelling findings (Cousin, 2009). Studies are typically carried out with a limited sample size to ensure that the research procedure is manageable due to the vast amount of data collected via narrative interviews.

4.3.2 Narrative interviews

Narrative interviews were used to solicit participant stories. These interviews are unstructured and participant-led, as the researcher was looking for the storyteller's perspective rather than their responses to predetermined questions (Kartch, 2017). The purpose of the narrative interview is to elicit as much information from the interviewee as the interviewer possibly can, by encouraging them to tell a story (Jovchelovich & Bauer, 2000). People are natural storytellers, so usually substantially more information is obtained from a narrative interview, and each story is unique, resulting in a rich dataset (Lieblich et al, 1998). Storytelling tends to follow general rules that guide the narration: 1) the narrator will give detailed information to make the story plausible for the audience; 2) the storytellers recollection will be selective based on their

interpretation of the world; and 3) the overall story, and core events within, will usually be structured with a beginning, middle and end (Jovchelovich & Bauer, 2000). To render a more valid narrative, the interviewee's perspective must not be constrained by the researcher's agenda. The interviewer must provide a brief context of what they want the interviewee to talk about but then allow uninterrupted time for them to tell their personal story. This goes against the traditional question-and-answer type of interview, where the interviewer sets the agenda and remains in control. The more structured interview, in fact, discourages storytelling as the interviewer is so preoccupied with gaining answers to specific questions that stories are perceived as a distraction or deviation away from this intended outcome (Murray, 2018).

Despite narrative interviews being unstructured, the interviewer must invite the interviewee to tell his or her story and therefore preparation is still key for effective data collection. Open-ended questions are essential within a narrative interview to encourage in-depth stories to be revealed (Kartch, 2017). Commonly, narrative interviews are divided into four main sections: the introduction, the narrative, the questioning phase, and the conclusion (Anderson & Kirkpatrick, 2016).

4.3.2.1 The Introduction

Firstly, the interviewer reminded the participants of the process including uninterrupted storytelling followed by the questioning phase. The introduction of the central topic should then trigger the process of narration (Jovchelovitch & Bauer, 2000). This was in the form of a statement which spurred the participant to share their story. Jovchelovitch & Bauer (2000) have provided some guidelines for formulating the initial topic area including the need for it to be broad, experiential, of personal significance and the interviewer's interest in the topic must remain unstated. The researcher tested three potential introductions with colleagues, with varying degrees of information, to assess which one would prompt them to tell their story most effectively. Based on the feedback, the introduction was brief because it was recognised that the participant information sheet had already clearly defined the research purpose and

process so that those who participated knew what was expected of them. However, an opportunity to ask questions was provided. It was also felt that a succinct introduction would be easily understood by the participants and prevent misinterpretation. Furthermore, the feedback indicated that the introduction should be presented informally, avoiding the use of jargon. Considering this feedback, the central topic was introduced as follows:

You have received the participant information sheet, so should understand the research purpose and process. But, do you have any questions at this stage? Please tell me everything that has had an impact on your professional life so far. I'm interested to hear the meaningful moments for you and how they have influenced your career development. You can refer to impactful events at any stage in your life, including those before, during and after university. There is no right or wrong way of delivering this information, so please tell your story as you understand it and take as much time as you need. You now have uninterrupted time to tell your story, which will be followed by a questioning phase to clarify any unclear or incomplete information within your narrative.

4.3.2.2 The Narrative

Secondly, the interviewee was given the space and time to tell their story without interruption. The interviewer gave non-verbal encouragement to signal their attention and engagement via nodding and maintaining eye contact, but avoided speaking until there were clear signs the interviewee had concluded their story. The interviewer then probed for further information by asking 'is there anything else you would like to add?' (Jovchelovitch & Bauer, 2000). During the main narration phase, the interviewer listened carefully and made notes to assist the questioning phase.

4.3.2.3 The Questioning Phase

Thirdly, once the narration ended the questioning phase began. This is where active listening from the interviewer was important as they used the interviewee's own language to help fill in any gaps or ask for further clarification. For example, 'can you say a bit more about…?', 'let's return to…'

rather than asking why questions (Anderson & Kirkpatrick, 2016). These questions cannot guide the interviewee towards themes or refer to an event that has not been mentioned in the previous narrative. Clarification questions are intended to return the interviewee to moments in their story which remain unclear or incomplete. Questions were orientated in the following ways (Rosenthal, 2004):

- Addressing a phase in the interviewee's story e.g., "could you tell me more about the time you were working as an….?"
- Addressing a theme that has emerged in the story e.g., "I understand X has been an ongoing challenge for you. Could you elaborate more on that?"
- Addressing a specific situation which has already been referred to e.g., "You mentioned situation X earlier, could you tell me more about what actually happened?"
- Eliciting an account to clarify an argument already made before e.g., "can you recall a situation when this happened before?"
- Addressing transmitted knowledge e.g., "you mentioned situation X earlier, how did people respond to this scenario?"

By using active listening techniques, the researcher paid close attention to the interviewee's language, observed when their account coincided with pertinent theory, and then clarified these instances as necessary during the questioning stage. As the interviewee was telling the story, the interviewer identified major themes and compared them to those discussed in the body of existing literature. These topics completely, partially, or did not at all crossover. The questioning phase then addressed any queries that the researcher wanted to have answered considering their study interests. By using the interviewee's own language, the researcher converted exmanent questions based on their own interests into immanent ones based on problems raised by the narration (Jovchelovitch & Bauer, 2000). The follow-up interview gave the researcher another chance to fill in any study gaps.

4.3.2.4 The Conclusion

Finally, the interviewer drew the interview to a close by stopping the recording and explaining the next steps including the follow-up interview, the receipt of the transcript etc. Increasingly, narrative researchers are favouring extended interviews over several different occasions (Murray, 2018). Second interviews are valuable in narrative research as they enable the interviewee to look back at the experience, return to events in their story and continue the conversation (Andrews et al., 2013). It is difficult to capture a full story in a single interview so this period of reflection enabled gaps to be filled in the narrative. It is also less exhausting for the interviewer and interviewee if they don't feel pressured to capture everything in a single attempt as narrative interviews tend to be extensive.

4.3.2.5 Interview Logistics

It is difficult to predict the length of a narrative interview as the interviewer tends to allow the interviewee to control the direction, content, and pace of the interview (Anderson & Kirkpatrick, 2016). However, in the participant information sheet 2 hours and 15 minutes was specified as an indicative time commitment. Participants were interviewed separately on two occasions, the first for approximately 90 minutes to discover their story and the second for around 45 minutes to provide an opportunity for reflection and to build on the initial narrative. The interviews were conducted online via Zoom and were held around two months apart to enable sufficient time for initial analysis by the researcher and space for reflection for both interviewer and interviewee. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed shortly afterwards. Interview transcripts were sent to all participants for member checking prior to analysis, if they wished. This involved returning interview transcripts to all participants to give them the opportunity to verify the results and reduce the potential for researcher bias (Birt et al., 2016).

A short interview and absent narrative may indicate the research method has been unsuccessful (Jovchelovitch & Bauer, 2000). This may be because the central topic wasn't conducive to storytelling, or the participant has limited experience to share about the selected topic. Narrative interviews may also fail

because the participants are unwilling to tell an in-depth personal account of their experience, despite encouragement from the researcher, but more commonly they fail because of a novice interviewer (Scârneci-Domnișoru, 2013). Without a pre-prepared interview schedule, the interviewer has less control over how the interview will go, which can lead to panic when unforeseen circumstances arise. To be better prepared, the researcher undertook a pilot interview to test the narrative interview design and review the process in response to lessons learned. A pilot interview also enabled the researcher to assess their ability to conduct a narrative interview and come to terms with the practicalities of an unfamiliar research design. The pilot interview was mostly effective, but one lesson was to give the narrative section more time and refrain from jumping straight into the questioning phase. This was achieved by asking the interviewees whether they had anything further to share in order to elicit more information. Another lesson was to write down questions during the narrative stage in an organised manner of clarification, elaboration, and theme since the researcher felt that their questions during the pilot interview should have been more structured.

Since the main aim of narrative inquiry is to elicit stories, it is important to create an environment which facilitates storytelling (Cousin, 2009). Since the interviews were conducted remotely it was important for the researcher to ensure that distractions were avoided, sufficient time was assigned, and the participants felt comfortable and welcome. A good narrative interviewer will establish trust and rapport early in the interview to make the interviewee more open to sharing their experiences (Kartch, 2017). The benefit of the participants being known to the researcher was that a connection was formed more quickly, which was especially helpful in an online situation. The researcher should also demonstrate effective listening skills, as a facilitator, with the focus always being on the interviewee's personal account (Anderson & Kirkpatrick, 2016). For participants to feel comfortable to share their stories there must be an ethical and trust relationship between the researcher and the participant. It is important for the researcher to be transparent about the purpose of the research, and respect the welfare of the participants, especially when they are

sharing personal information about themselves (Kim, 2016). The researcher made a conscious effort to ensure the participants felt safe, connected, and passionate about what they were doing.

4.4 Ethical considerations

Encouraging participants to disclose personal stories emphasises the need for greater sensitivity to the ethical issues (Elliott, 2005). The researcher ensured that participant confidentiality and privacy was respected, which was particularly challenging when they were referring to specific case histories. Discussing confidentiality was necessary from the outset to gain informed consent and build trust between the researcher and participants. To ensure confidentiality was protected, the researcher removed all identifying characteristics during data cleansing. The names of respondents were replaced with pseudonyms and the names of specific places were changed. However, even with personal identifiers removed, the contextual identifiers in the participant's career story remained. This is particularly true for those participants who have experienced unusual career events in their employment history. In this instance, the researcher did not use a specific quote if they believed the dissemination of the research could lead to the participant being identified. Furthermore, the reporting on sampling in the thesis or other publications was carefully considered to avoid participant identification.

Another ethical consideration for a narrative inquiry research design was to gain informed consent from the participants, including permission to record the interview and the right to withdraw. Participants were welcome to withdraw from the study at any time before or during the interview and up to 2 weeks following their first interview. This was because data analysis would have commenced after this time. A potential ethical risk is that participants may find the telling of their stories an emotional experience (Wang & Geale, 2015). To appropriately manage this situation, the researcher planned to stop the recording and provide the opportunity for a break. The recording only would only resume once the participant was happy to continue with the interview. The researcher identified appropriate sources of support outside of the interview, however this was not

required. Narrative research demands a close relationship to be established between interviewer and interviewee (Wang & Geale, 2015). This presented a further ethical challenge as the researcher already knew the participants and had an established relationship with them. It was important that boundaries were put in place and the participants understood the parameters of the research. This entailed clearly explaining the purpose of the research and ensuring the research was contained to a specific time period. Privileged information, disclosed outside of the allocated research time, was omitted.

Role clarification is important as the participant must view the interviewer as a researcher, rather than in a personal capacity (McConnell-Henry et al., 2010). This prevented the participants from leaving out information they believed the researcher already knew, as they were not viewing them as a friend but as an interviewer. On the other hand, as the participants were known to the researcher there was the threat of over disclosure which could have led to a vulnerable situation for both parties. Owing to the level of familiarity, the participant may have perceived the interaction as therapeutic or a friendly chat rather than for the primary purpose of gathering data (McConnell-Henry et al., 2010). Participants were reminded that the main aim of the interview was data generation. Finally, participants may have volunteered because of the pre-existing relationship and out of obligation rather than interest. The researcher made clear to the participants that they were under no obligation to partake in the research and their involvement should be driven primarily by interest in the project.

4.5 Researcher's positionality

The researcher recognised their influence on the research process as they were a part of the social world they were researching (Holmes, 2020). Rather than attempting to eliminate their effect on the research process, they acknowledged their positionality within the work. The researcher is closely connected to the topic of graduate employability as they are employed to support this agenda within a higher education institution. Despite being employed to develop students' employability in a university setting, the

researcher has questioned the effectiveness of current approaches to employability development, such as the one-size-fits-all professional skills programme they oversee. The researcher works with academics, students, and employers and, as a result, is familiar with the concept of employability from a variety of perspectives and its complexity. Perhaps this is why the researcher has questioned the value of employability initiatives within a university context as graduate employability is a complex concept that is difficult to define, let alone develop. Even though they work in the field of graduate employability, the researcher may have been more inclined to explore the subject through a critical lens having experienced their own reservations.

The researcher selected the research participants from their network of university friends, giving them an insider perspective because they knew the participants better than an outsider would. The researcher might have been characterised as a "total insider" because they shared an identity with the participants (first-generation graduates) and an experience (friends at university) (Chavez, 2008). This level of familiarity was both a strength and a weakness, as it might have provided a more nuanced and unique perspective into the participants' stories or it might have brought the researcher too close to the participants, making it difficult for them to maintain the objectivity required to observe the entire process. The participants would have been more able to overlook the amount of familiarity if they perceived the researcher as an interviewer rather than a friend, which is why role clarification was so crucial in this study.

4.6 Data Analysis

Narrative analysis has been influenced by various scholars over time (Riessman, 1993; Polkinghorne, 1995; Lieblich et al., 1998). Yet, it remains a complex process and there is no prescribed procedure for researchers to follow (Smith, 2016). Narrative researchers must therefore forge their own construction of the inquiry process, and choose the most appropriate methods for interpreting the data. Despite several variations of narrative inquiry, narrative

studies do tend to possess these common characteristics (Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2002):

- Learning can be gained through stories;
- These stories form the data, typically gathered through interviews;
- This data is analysed descriptively and/or theoretically by the researcher and meaning is created to help understand human experience.

The essence of narrative analysis and interpretation is to discover the meaning in narratives to better understand human existence (Kim, 2016). The researcher combined different methods of analysis to interpret the data and find narrative meaning (Polkinghorne, 1995; Lieblich et al., 1998; Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2002). This combination of methods involved three stages of data analysis:

4.6.1 Restorying the Story

Polkinghorne's (1995) distinction between narrative analysis and analysis of narratives was a useful starting point for the data analysis. Narrative analysis involves renarrating the individual stories to ensure they are coherently presented whereas analysis of narratives involves identifying themes and patterns that are common across the different stories. The researcher first conducted a narrative analysis of the five stories, by restorying them. Narrative analysis is not merely a transcription of the interview, but a coherent presentation of the main events and actions within the story to clearly depict the participant's lived experience. Narrative smoothing involves organising and connecting the raw data to create a coherent story, by reporting on some of the data while ignoring other parts of the account which do not align to the thematic thread (Kim, 2016). The renarration should sustain the richness of the story, while sequencing the events and bringing in new meaning.

The researcher considered two models to restory the narrative data: 1) The three-dimensional space approach, and 2) The problem-solution approach (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2002). The three-dimensional space approach describes individual experiences in a more unstructured manner with a focus on three aspects: interaction, continuity, and

situation. Interaction includes both individual experiences and interpersonal interactions, continuity considers the past, present, and future, and situation considers the context of the story (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). The problem-solution approach focuses on efforts to discover a solution to a problem and adheres to the standard plot structure, which includes characters, setting, the problem, actions, and finally a resolution (Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2002). The three-dimensional space approach was chosen by the researcher to restory the stories because it concentrates the narrative on the interactions and experiences of the individuals rather than on the explanation of experiences, leading to a more thorough account.

4.6.2 Holistic-content analysis

Once the five narratives were restoryed, the researcher identified key themes within the individual stories. The holistic-content approach, one of four modes of analysing narrative data by Lieblich et al. (1998), was used as a method of analysis. The researcher followed this process:

- The entire story was read several times until patterns emerged. The researcher became immersed in the data and familiar with it.
- Using the comments feature in Microsoft Word, initial thoughts regarding the account's major themes were recorded.
- A thematic content analysis was conducted by identifying the narrative themes. A narrative theme is a recurring pattern found throughout a story (Smith, 2016). Using the highlighting feature in Microsoft Word, the various themes were marked with different colours. It was crucial to avoid over-coding the data because doing so may have broken the text down too much and undermined its narrative (Smith, 2016).
- Conclusions were noted, including where a theme appeared, the transitions between themes, the context for each one and any contradictions. Preliminary connections were made to employability capital theory.

4.6.3 Categorical-content analysis

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The final stage involves the analysis of narratives. In contrast to the holistic-content approach, which discovers key themes inside each story, the categorical-content approach identifies common themes across the five narratives (Liebliech et al., 1998):

- Selected sections were withdrawn from the complete texts and treated independently, based on the researcher's own interests and the themes arising from the holistic-content analysis.
- The researcher read the subtext carefully and looked for patterns which arose across the collected stories.
- The patterns from the different narratives were grouped to create mother codes and sub-themes. For each sub-theme, a description, the number of times it was mentioned, and the number of participants who said it were noted.
- Schlossberg's (2011) transition theory was used to interpret the results because career transition was a significant mother code and the themes readily fit the framework.

To summarise, this chapter described the methodological approach used to address the study's research questions. The narrative inquiry research design was explored in-depth, including the use of narrative interviews as a tool for data collection and the approach to narrative analysis. Narrative research was an appropriate fit for this study given the focus on the lived experiences of first-generation graduates and their development and deployment of graduate capitals over time.

Chapter 5: Restorying the Career Stories

The first stage of the narrative analysis is represented in this chapter by the retold career stories. The researcher will renarrate each of the five career stories in order to illustrate the graduates' lived experiences and logically present the stories' key elements.

5.1 Emily's Career Story

"I never wanted to be in a position where I couldn't pay my bills at the end of the month."

5.1.1 Career building blocks

While I was growing up, I had part-time jobs that increased my level of confidence and helped me communicate with a wide variety of different people. These jobs ranged from a nursery nurse to a confectionary shop assistant. At the time, I did not see these experiences as stepping stones to my future career, however, in hindsight, they improved my employability. I consider my career journey to start after graduating, however, there were moments during my university experience that enhanced my employability.

When I was at university, they strongly urged me to do a placement year or study abroad in Year 3. I remember being told it would improve my employment prospects, and I felt pressured to participate in this initiative since everyone around me was doing so. As my undergraduate degree was Business and Spanish, I chose to study abroad in Spain. It was a fantastic experience, though I didn't do as much work as I should have. I was 20 and living in Spain! As well as my study abroad experience, I also participated in a Youth Evaluator role during my time at university, which involved conducting a mini-research project for a local arts and cultural festival. As I was aware that my degree wasn't enough, I made sure to engage beyond it to become a more well-rounded candidate. Having additional experience on my CV helped me answer competency-based interview questions because I could provide examples that were based on my experience.

5.1.2 The graduate landscape

My last year at university was filled with peer pressure to apply for graduate jobs. I was terrified to go down this route because I was convinced I would fail the tests. As it happened, I considered becoming a teacher because there was a grant available to teach Spanish, I believe it was £25,000 at the time, which was very appealing. I applied and got a place on a PGCE, but it wasn't what I wanted to do. Because both of my sisters were teachers, I thought I would just be following in their footsteps. I arranged a one-on-one meeting with a university career advisor and discussed my apprehension towards graduate schemes. As my degree was general and did not have a clear vocation at the end, she persuaded me that a graduate scheme would be my best option. With strong ties to my hometown, I began looking for graduate schemes in my area. What I soon found out, however, was that there were very few graduate schemes around here, apart from those at Aldi and Lidl with the free Audi!

During my search, my professor recommended a university graduate scheme, since one of his other students had done it and loved it! Despite all of the tests I initially feared, I decided to apply. To prepare, I practiced diligently. Following a series of rounds that included team activities, a presentation, and a panel interview, I was offered the job. My options were the PGCE, the university graduate scheme, and a role as a travel policy consultant, which was also a possibility. Teaching wasn't my passion, so that was out. The policy role sounded incredibly dry, and it was based in London, so I decided to go with the university graduate scheme.

It was a mixed experience. I learned the basics of a professional environment including attending meetings and professional communication; however, I knew from very early on that the role wasn't going anywhere. One of the benefits of working there was that I was exposed to women in senior positions who acted as role models for my professional development. They inspired me to work up the career ladder. One of the major problems I had with the programme was that it was structured so that you would rotate across different departments

every six months. There was therefore little continuity and opportunities to specialise.

5.1.3 A fresh start

I confided in a friend about my dissatisfaction at work and was recommended to apply to her company which offered a graduate scheme in technology in Northern Ireland. I was nervous about going there because I had no experience in technology, it involved relocating and it was for less money. However, what convinced me was that the company invested in you. I was enrolled in a training course to learn the fundamentals of technology and secured a permanent position at the end having met all the assessment criteria. I really enjoyed the learning aspect of the programme; I learned how to do Excel properly, understand structured query language, and use data visualisation. My co-workers were largely wealthy, private-educated people who attended the country's best universities. Then there was me with my regional accent.

In retrospect, it was the best career move I ever made because I learned so much, and it catapulted my career in technology. Having a career in technology immediately appealed to me; it is ever-evolving and expanding daily, so it is a very secure line of work. The first few months, I shadowed a lot and was not trusted to do much. But I was exposed to a lot of high-performing individuals, which was incredibly motivating. Furthermore, there was a highly structured performance review process that pushed me to work hard and become more commercially aware. In addition, I have had the opportunity to work abroad; this was highly rewarding and gave me an advantage in the job market. Looking back, I've come a long way. I went from not wanting to leave my hometown to working overseas for a top corporate firm.

However, the experience wasn't entirely positive. The environment was very male-dominated, which was demotivating to me because I couldn't picture myself in a senior position. In addition, because of the structured performance process, you had to wait patiently for an opportunity to progress. Even though I

worked hard for several years, I had to form an orderly queue for my promotion. In order to move up in my career, I decided I needed to leave the company.

5.1.4 An opportunity not to be missed

I started searching for jobs and came across my current role as a digital consultant. It involved no travel, was for more money and better working hours. So too great an opportunity to miss out on. When I was travelling in my previous role, sometimes 5 days a week, it made me contemplate how I could do it long-term if I chose to have a family. As far as I was concerned, it was unsustainable. My skillset has enhanced within this role. I have gained exposure to senior members of staff and have improved my knowledge of global operations. The organisation is highly supportive of learning and development and you get incredible rewards. Employee retention is extremely high, which is a testament to how they reward their staff. It can, however, be a double-edged sword since no new ideas are generated.

Working for an unpleasant supervisor during my first year of employment was a huge test. He took a very traditional approach, and his actions were undeniably troubling. It was unmistakably a generational divide. In retrospect, it was a beneficial experience because it taught me to be more accepting of others, encouraged me to think on my work approach, and increased my resilience, although I was miserable at the time.

Looking ahead, as a dedicated individual, I intend to advance more in my job. My self-drive is fuelled by my personality, my parents, my peers, and my desire to never have money worries. I recall working in the nursery with a woman on minimum wage who was worried about how she would pay her energy bill. I remember thinking to myself that I never wanted to be in a position where I couldn't pay my bills at the end of the month.

5.2 Harriet's Career Story

"I felt like a swan frantically paddling beneath the surface of the water"

5.2.1 No clear trajectory

I never knew what I wanted to do when I was younger. I still don't. From the age of 14, my brother knew he wanted to be a physiotherapist, but not me. I was a fairly bright student who was good at maths. The fact that numbers provide an accurate answer appealed to me. This could have come from my grandfather, who used to be an engineer. That's why I went to college and university to study maths. It was more for fun than for future professional prospects.

In my second year of university, I spent one day a week volunteering at a school to get a taste of what it's like to be a maths teacher. It turned out that I hated it. I don't believe it helped that I was just a year and a half older than some of the students, and I didn't want to be in a situation where I had to discipline individuals for not listening. As a result, teaching was ruled out.

I obtained a 2:2 on my degree, leaving me with few possibilities. A 2:1 in any discipline is required for most graduate schemes. I had assumed that having a maths degree would place me in a better position, but this was not the case. I applied for several jobs but received very few responses. Furthermore, the university careers advice was ineffective, as the advisor I dealt with had no idea what you could do with a maths degree other than teaching and finance.

5.2.2 It pays to work part-time

I always worked part-time in fashion retail during my college and university years to help pay for my studies. I wanted to delve deeper into this field and discovered merchandising. The initial instinct of most people when they think of merchandising is to make the store look nice, but numbers and forecasting are in the background. I worked as an entry-level allocator for a small retailer for just over a year after graduating from university. It was fast-paced and learning about consumer behaviour, such as the psychology behind different price points, was fascinating. I think having past retail experience helped because I understood the language of the sector. On the job, I picked up a lot of technical skills, including Excel proficiency. My direct line manager was fantastic, which made it easier for me to transfer into the professional world. I wanted to work

hard under his line management since he was approachable and down-to-earth.

One of the most difficult aspects of this job was that it required a big relocation. I'd moved away from home for university, but this was different. At university, everyone is in the same boat and actively looking for friends. In this situation, I discovered that people from the area who were busy with their lives were less inclined to form new friendships.

5.2.3 If you can't move up, move out

I then made a lateral career move to a well-known high-street retailer. I felt ready for a promotion, but there were no vacancies in the more senior role. I had to wait a year and a half before becoming a senior allocator. The work was interesting and it was a good company to work for. With it being a large organisation, I was allowed to attend training courses on management, HR, etc. But after a further two years, I was ready for the next step up. I applied twice for promotion and missed out both times. Unfortunately, my manager at the time was quite rude and sarcastic and didn't push for my promotion, as other managers did. My art teacher in college was a rude person, so I'd had the experience of people behaving this way previously and learned how to brush it off. But the issue is that in a large organisation, there are plenty of candidates who are capable of doing the next level up so you need your manager to fight for you to stand a chance. I decided if I'm not going to get it here, I'm going to have to go somewhere else; despite loving the work and the organisation. Some people are lucky and move through the ranks within the same company but, for me, it wasn't meant to be. It's quite common practice within retail for people to seek promotional opportunities elsewhere.

5.2.4 Performing under pressure

I moved to a high-end retailer as an assistant merchandiser. Going to the next level on the professional ladder in a much smaller company was quite a shock to the system. I felt I was prepared, but the job was drastically different, and it didn't help that my manager was off for the first month, leaving me with no one

to turn to. In retrospect, it was a valuable experience because I met a lot of senior individuals and learned a lot. I had a one-on-one meeting with the Director of Merchandising in my first week, which would have never happened at my prior employment. However, I felt like a swan frantically paddling beneath the surface of the water. The work involved forecasting sales for a wide range of products, which I found fascinating. I also appreciated how the organisation was incredibly integrated, as opposed to my previous workplace, where different departments worked in silos.

Even though I enjoyed working in the fashion industry, the working hours were exhausting. I knew going into retail would be difficult because it was such a popular field, but I was working 13-hour days every day. The trouble is that once you get into that habit, it becomes the norm. I realised I didn't care enough about fashion to live and breathe it every day. Furthermore, the money was not worth the stress it caused.

5.2.5 Same skills, different contexts

My friend, who worked in the public sector at the time, advised me to apply for a statistical officer position at her company. It started out as a temporary position, but after a year, I was promoted to a permanent position. Years ago, I'd applied for the same job with the same company, and the interview process was gruelling. The interview panel asked me one question about why I wanted to work for the company, then bombarded me with statistical questions. I didn't receive the job at the time, which was understandable given my lack of preparation. But I wouldn't have applied again if it hadn't been for my friend's advice and guidance through the process. I didn't think I'd be capable of doing the work after experiencing this setback. But I didn't have to be concerned; I quickly settled in.

I expected it to be a significant change from my former position, yet the great majority of my working day is not that different. I'm still working on projections, talking with different stakeholders, and providing facts to help people make better decisions. Working in a fast-paced sector, such as retail, has provided

me with a diverse set of transferable skills. I've learnt how to prioritise my workload, deal with stressful situations, and successfully communicate with a varied audience. These abilities were quickly transferred to this new context. However, I have a lot better work-life balance now, and I would never return to retail. You don't get a thank you for all your hard work, and there's more to life than that.

My professional path remains tremendously open in the future. I still don't have any specific career goals in mind. I'd like to advance my career inside my current company, and there is a well-structured promotion process in place that is both fair and official. I look at some of my co-workers and think to myself, "If you can work your way up in such a short amount of time, I can too," which is incredibly inspiring. But I'm not in a hurry.

5.3 Catherine's Career Story

"I enjoyed figuring out how all of the pieces fit together to get the final product."

5.3.1 Nothing worth having comes easy

I've always worked since a young age, and it was instilled in me that if I wanted something, I had to earn it. Working took up the most of my school holidays. Because my parents had to work all the time to pay the bills, I was mostly raised by my grandfather. My first employment was at a local newsagent. It was a difficult job and the customer is always right. However, it allowed me to pay for my driving lessons as well as half of the cost of my first car. That, in my opinion, was a true victory.

The best advice I ever received in school was to go to university and study a subject you enjoy. My chemistry teacher used to tell me that my degree would be tattooed on my forehead, and he was right; companies simply look at your degree classification. Between maths and chemistry, it was a toss-up. Maths was the subject I chose. Who knows where I would be now if I had pursued chemistry? But I enjoyed maths and excelled at it. It undoubtedly helped that

my maths teacher was one of my favourites; she was constantly supportive and encouraging. After school, I also enjoyed solving problems at my grandfather's house.

5.3.2 Expectation vs reality

I had no intention of becoming an accountant. I wanted to be a teacher when I was 18 years old. I'd already completed two weeks of work experience in a primary school, which I thoroughly loved. One of the best aspects of primary school is how nice and forgiving the students are. The issue was that I didn't want to study for a degree and then return to primary school teaching; I wanted to put my knowledge to use. Two years into my degree, I worked in a secondary school for a week as part of a volunteer programme on my course. It was like hell on earth. Every day, I couldn't wait to be done; I despised every second of it. The kids were so ungrateful. I was taught in school that you should respect your teachers. I realised that wasn't the life for me since there was no respect. Teaching is a true vocation, and you must enjoy it.

Then I thought to myself, "What do I do now?" I was intent on finishing my maths degree, getting a PGCE, and starting teaching right away. I visited a university career counsellor, who printed off a list of possible careers for people with a maths degree. It was simply overwhelming because I had no idea which one was best for me. However, that same summer, a friend of my father's indicated that he was seeking someone to assist him in his finance department. That was something I did for a couple of months and really enjoyed it. I only handled basic administration, but it was wonderful to be in an office environment, work in a professional team and experience adult conversation.

5.3.3 If you can do it, why can't I?

I had no clear career plans at the end of my degree, so I opted to travel. In my third year, I applied for a couple graduate schemes but was unsuccessful. In November, I went travelling and worked in the hospitality industry in the interim. I missed education while I was away. Traveling is wonderful, and I would suggest it to everyone, but it lacks structure, and I believe that I thrive on

routine. I had reached the age of 21 and wanted to return to education. Traveling sparked my curiosity in other cultures and economies, so I applied for a Master's degree in international finance and economics. I loved economics so much that I applied for the Bank of England scheme. I made it to the third round but did not progress any further, which was upsetting. I found graduate schemes to be quite competitive, and I had no luck applying. Some of my classmates got graduate jobs, and I recall thinking to myself, "If you can do it, why can't I?"

My mother's friend notified me that a nearby accounting firm was hiring during my dissertation. I applied and was hired. I believe the main reason I got the position was because I answered a current affairs question exceptionally well and displayed good business knowledge. Being a competitive rower at the time also piqued the interest of the interview panel. It's still on my CV, and employers inquire about it: what drew you to it? How did you strike a balance between your training and your studies? It's a topic of discussion. One of my favourite aspects of this profession was that you started from the ground up; you moved from a shoebox full of accounts to large audits. So, it's been a true professional journey. Accounting is like putting together a jigsaw puzzle, and I enjoyed figuring out how all of the pieces fit together to get the final product. At this firm, I passed all of my accounting exams and became a full-fledged accountant.

5.3.4 Bigger and better things

Even though I enjoyed my first accounting job, I knew that if I continued there for another two years, I would be in the same position and would have learned nothing new. Because it was so small, it was clear that I wouldn't be able to advance unless someone more senior left. It was a huge step up for me to join a larger accountancy firm. In this capacity, I received a lot more exposure. I thrive on being challenged, therefore I'm glad I ventured outside of my comfort zone.

Working in a large accountancy practice with a well-structured review process motivated me to put in long hours. I learned a lot. It was fast-paced, and I was continually chasing month-end and year-end deadlines. However, after a few years, I realised I wanted to use my knowledge in the industry. I would have relocated sooner if life hadn't gotten in the way. I bought a house, then the pandemic struck, and time flew by. Working in industry is so different to practice and I wanted to experience this different context. I used to look at senior people in the workplace and thought to myself, "I don't want to be that person." I didn't want to be the one who was responding to emails at 5 a.m. In an accountancy practice, I just felt like a number, and I respond well to being appreciated. Knowing that someone values my work.

With years of accounting expertise, I was highly employable at this point, and by the end of the week, I had three interviews and a job offer. With the new industry role, I'm having some growing pains. I don't think they know what they want from me because the job didn't exist when I started, and my line manager is terrible at delegation. They could definitely let things go; they just don't want to. However, I see the importance of being cautious about how you approach feedback in a professional situation, particularly when on probation for six months. People have a terrible attitude toward feedback in previous places I've worked, and they often don't take constructive criticism well. In comparison, I've always had a positive attitude toward feedback since I understand how vital it is for me to improve.

This isn't my forever job, and I need more challenge. But I'm not sure what that will look like just yet. The industry has peaks and troughs, and I get bored during the quieter periods. One option I've considered is becoming a contractor, which would entail working on projects for other organisations and invoicing the work. However, because I would be self-employed, this would entail a higher level of risk. I have options that I will investigate when the right time arises.

5.4 Joseph's Career Story

"So, I panicked. £60,000 in debt for what?"

5.4.1 Where's the record deal?

My mother was advised by my teacher to enrol me in drama classes in primary school. After that, I received private lessons in drama, singing, and piano. My parents must have spent a small fortune on me. At school, I was only interested in drama and music, and unsurprisingly, these were the subjects I excelled at. As a result, I began preparing for a career in performing arts.

At both college and university, I studied music technology. My expectation was that if I went to university to study music, I would become a singer and performer. But, by the third year of university, I had realised that the record deal was not going to happen. It didn't fall into my lap like I had hoped. I applied to all the big record companies for graduate positions and none of them worked out. In my second year of university, people who had done internships were in a stronger position than me. Unfortunately, I could not afford to intern for free. It is difficult to pursue an artistic career because there are few opportunities available. It's one of those careers that doesn't require a degree. All you need is talent, hard work, and a little luck. Many people asked me, "Why not become a teacher?" And I would always say no. So, I panicked. £60,000 in debt for what? Time to switch to Plan B - a Master's degree.

My undergraduate degree was primarily focused on performance; I like putting on a show and the performing aspects of it. I was interested in learning more about this aspect of the business. I decided to specialise in performance for my Masters in order to learn how to put on a bigger and better show. The employment of non-musical gestures and semiotics by performers to attract an audience piqued my curiosity. I continued to attend the same university. I was familiar with it; I was acquainted with the lecturers, and they were acquainted with me. At 23, I didn't want to start my life over in a new place. In addition, as an alumnus, I received a 25% discount.

5.4.2 A different path

During my Masters, I landed a job as a graduate assistant in learning technology. Despite the fact that music was still my love. The job was sent to

me after I sought help from the university's career department. Because I applied on the spur of the moment, I was surprised to secure the role. I hardly met any of the job requirements, and I'm not good in interview situations. The job involved assisting with the implementation of the new virtual learning environment and training both staff and students on how to use it. This project coordinator position was a lot of fun for me, and I saw a lot of parallels between it and my musical background. Project management, like performance, has a beginning, middle, and end with many variables in between. The only stumbling block was the jargon! I had to learn a slew of new vocabulary, including rubric and pedagogy. But it wasn't anything that a quick Google search couldn't solve.

Because this employment was only for a year, I applied for another position inside the university while finishing my Masters. My senior colleague forwarded the job opening to me and guided me through the application process. It was the most effort I have ever put into a job application. I emailed my CV and cover letter to friends in the recruitment industry, and they gave me some candid feedback. I'm glad I had this extra help because the advice I received from the careers service sounded a little generic. With a combination of projects, events, and collaboration with students, I thought it would be a career I would like. I'm doing the same thing I was previously, but on a far larger scale. It was a more senior post with a substantial pay raise. I was hesitant to go for it, but my manager at the time advised me to seize opportunities when they arise, and that's exactly what I did. I couldn't believe it when I got the call saying I got the job and yelled, "SHUT UP!" The adjustment to the new position was not as difficult as I had anticipated. Being familiar with the university, understanding the processes, and understanding how things were done helped.

I finished my master's degree, but the record contract had yet to materialise. I needed to keep paying the bills at this point, so I took on more projects at the university and gained project management expertise. With more responsibilities, I realised I couldn't pursue my aspirations of being a musician with the same zeal as previously. Although disappointing, my music ambitions had been dormant for a long time, so it didn't come as a major surprise.

5.4.3 Chase money and discover a passion

The issue is that I've landed up in a job that I don't enjoy because it pays well. A couple of things irritate me. To begin with, the work is cyclical. When it's busy, I enjoy the buzz, but when it's quiet, I procrastinate. Second, I had five different bosses during the course of 18 months. Being passed from pillar to post and having to adjust to new expectations and ways of functioning was really challenging. You get into a rhythm, and suddenly it shifts. I've worked under a variety of leadership styles, including the hands-off boss, the micromanager, and the nitpicker. This takes me to my final point of contention: when my work is criticised, I become stressed. If I'm asked to do something and it's been heavily modified to the point where it no longer looks like my work, I quit giving it my all. What's the point if it'll never be good enough? I am a flexible person who will work around other people to some extent, but only to that extent. Now I try to work smarter rather than harder. I do what needs to be done, but my creativity and self-motivation have been stifled.

I'm ready to move on, and I'm currently looking for a new job. I never intended to work in higher education; I just happened to end up here. However, it assisted me in discovering my passion in project management, which is a path I'd like to pursue further. I'm looking to land a training position in the technology sector. It will require a pay reduction, but I recognise that I must endure some short-term discomfort in order to reap long-term benefits. I'm getting guidance from a friend who works in the industry, so I know I'll need to do things like PRINCE2 Agile. I'm more likely to succeed if I show a desire to work toward industry standards. I've also modified my LinkedIn profile to make it more relevant to tech-related jobs, and I'm using networking to learn more about the field.

Even though I haven't achieved my original ambition of becoming a musician, the wealth of skills I have obtained through studying and performing music may be readily applied to project management. A 45-minute performance takes eight months to plan and is essentially a project that must be meticulously managed.

5.5 Charlie's Career Story

"After first-hand experience with the benefits of industry contacts, I will always advocate for people who are looking for a step up."

5.5.1 Find a trade

My cousin, who had recently completed her architectural degree, used to show me her portfolio of work when I was younger. I found the work fascinating, and looking back, it was undoubtedly a pivotal moment in my career. My parents had never attended university, so I had no idea what to expect or how to get there. At the time, I saw my cousin as a role model. However, I was not on that path. My mother steered me down the road of an apprenticeship because I had a negative attitude about school and didn't enjoy learning. I enrolled in an apprenticeship programme, provided them my grades, and took the required screening tests. I was given a list of apprenticeship programmes I could apply for. I applied to a variety of programmes, including engineering, architecture, and an electrician's course. The possibilities were limitless.

The week after I finished my last GCSE exam at school, I started my apprenticeship in a civil and structural engineering firm. I resented not having a summer holiday. They kept me on for almost eight months, but things didn't work out. Looking back, I believe I was too young for them since they lacked a good apprentice programme. I recall being disappointed that I wasn't kept on. Fortunately, I was offered a second shot at an architecture firm, which I eagerly accepted.

5.5.2 Real-world learning

I spent four days in the office and one day at college as part of my apprenticeship programme. I also got a mentor from the apprenticeship provider who would check in with me once a month to see how I was doing. They'd check to see if I was enjoying my job and if the company was pleased with my performance. I earned a BTEC in civil engineering after two years. This

certificate allowed me to pursue architectural technology as a foundation degree at university.

I worked while studying, and by the time I finished my degree, I had four years of experience under my belt and was a fully trained architectural technician, accountable for my projects, at the age of 21. For my university, I was the primary consultant on a project that involved converting squash courts into office space for the Deans. It was strange to be studying at the same institution where I was conducting work. My employer encouraged me to continue my education while working, so I pursued a second degree in project management. It's weird to believe that I now have two degrees after wasting my time in school. My teachers wouldn't believe me if I told them.

The advantage of studying part-time while working is that my industry expertise is far superior than that of a full-time student. I know a lot more about working on site, but I'm not as prepared for management. Managers are less concerned with the finer points of project work, which can be frustrating when you know more about construction than your boss. They can, however, deliver a fantastic presentation, something I am unable to do. Another advantage is that I've never had to pay any university tuition because my employer covered them and then I won a rowing scholarship. At the European Championships, I was a member of the university rowing team. That was incredible!

5.5.3 Young and free

I was ready to move on after 6 years at the same company. I applied for a job with another architect's firm and worked there for two years as an architectural technician, primarily sketching commercial units. My then-girlfriend, now wife, had recently finished her architectural degree and was struggling to find work in the aftermath of the recession. We opted to travel to Australia for a year on a working holiday visa since we were young and carefree, with the idea of continuing our careers in architecture. Fortunately, thanks to contacts in the field, I was able to find a 6-month position with a business that specialised in

surveying. After first-hand experience with the benefits of industry contacts, I will always advocate for people who are looking for a step up.

We were on a visa that only allowed us to work for six months at a time. As a result, I went to work for a drafting firm, where I drew retail fit-outs using the architectural software Revit. Most architecture firms in Australia utilised Revit at the time, although AutoCAD was the most used software package in the UK. In the job interview, I claimed to have a working knowledge of Revit when I actually did not. As a result, when I first received the position, I spent the entire weekend studying how to utilise the software. I took a chance and it paid off. I worked for another six months before taking a few months off to travel before returning to the UK.

To broaden our horizons and increase our work chances, we moved from our little hometown to a large UK city. It didn't take long to find work. Two weeks in fact. I was offered a technical position specialising on student housing developments. Construction work was more appealing to me than store fit-outs. I'm glad I ventured out since I couldn't picture spending the rest of my life sketching standardised shop units. I became comfortable at the firm and stayed for six years. During this time, I was in charge of ten large-scale student housing projects all around the country. I learnt a lot and had a great time doing it. I soon advanced through the ranks, from technician to senior technician to project lead, and then to architectural team leader. It was a significantly faster pace of work than I'd seen in either my hometown or Australia. It's fascinating to be exposed to different cultures, and I can attest that having international experience on your CV is highly valued by employers.

5.5.4 Let it find you

I had no intention of ever leaving the company, but when looking for a job for my wife, I discovered a position for myself as a technical manager in construction for a housing association. In my current role, I am the lead due diligence consultant, ensuring that all projects are completed on time, on budget, and in accordance with industry standards. I've been here for four

years and have worked on several large-scale affordable housing projects. Each year, we plan to build 450 new homes within the region.

I have a basic understanding of various sectors as a technical manager, but I specialise in architecture. Certain organisations will need a mechanical and electrical technical manager, and because I am unfamiliar with the subtleties of this position, I will need to hire a consultant to help. With fire safety, new technologies, and environmental policies, the construction industry is currently in a state of flux. I need to continue my professional development to keep up with these changes. I attend training courses on a regular basis as part of my professional growth and to ensure that I have a solid understanding of industry legislation, standards, and practices. To ensure that my work is compliant, I am also a member of CIAT, the Chartered Institute of Architectural Technologists.

5.5.5 The joys of juggling

My next steps would be to work as a senior technical manager and ultimately as the head of technical. In the future, I'd like to advance my career and gain more industry knowledge. I'm not one to go from job to job, so if there's a chance for advancement at my current company, I'd rather stay.

My manager recently advised me to apply for the role of senior technical manager. But just now, my priorities are elsewhere. I'm not in a position to take on extra responsibilities or travel because I have a 3-year-old son. The advancement would necessitate far too many sacrifices in my personal life. However, I made it obvious to my manager that I am career-oriented and eager to advance when the time comes.

The participants' professional stories have been retold in this chapter by highlighting the key components and arranging them in a logical order to create five coherent narratives that capture their real-life experiences. Now that the five stories have been retold, it is possible to discuss the key themes that connect all five of them.

Chapter 6: Career Transitions

Given the number of career transitions featured in the professional stories, Schlossberg's transition theory was an appropriate fit for organising the central themes. It is surprising that the participants changed jobs so frequently, given that career transitions disrupt relationships, routines, roles, and assumptions and can be unpleasant experiences. Their willingness to deal with the stress of changing jobs reflects their dissatisfaction with their employment situations, as they were searching for better opportunities elsewhere. Despite the disruption that transitions can cause, Schlossberg believed that by engaging in a process of taking stock, people could successfully manage the change. Taking stock involves examining the coping mechanisms—situation, self, support, and strategies—that are available to deal with the transition (Anderson et al., 2012). The 4Ss will be used to better understand the participants' lived experiences of career transitions and the development and utilisation of graduate capitals.

6.1 Situation

An individual's situation at the time of the career transition can impact their ability to cope with it effectively. Life after graduation can be a distressing experience as many graduates have to reset their expectations and cope with the uncertainties of looking for employment (McKeown & Lindorff, 2011). Most graduates experience rejection when applying for positions due to the competitive nature of the graduate labour market as one participant said: "I applied to all the big record companies for graduate positions. None of them worked out." Another participant revealed: "I had assumed that having a maths degree would place me in a better position, but this was not the case. I applied for several jobs but received very few responses." Tomlinson (2017) recognises that human capital alone is insufficient to secure graduate employment and needs to be complemented by other forms of capitals to mobilise skills and credentials. Some of the participants were aware of the need to engage beyond their degree in order to differentiate themselves in a crowded graduate labour market. One participant said: "As I was aware that my degree wasn't enough, I made sure to engage beyond it to become a more well-rounded candidate."

Another participant revealed: "The advantage of studying part-time while working is that my industry expertise is far superior than that of a full-time student." Some studies have revealed advantages to working while pursuing a degree, including better career prospects, increased confidence, and the development of work-ready skills (Coates, 2015; Jackson & Collings, 2018). While others have discovered that paid jobs can divert students' attention away from their studies and harm their academic achievement, especially in the early years of their degree (Bartolj & Polanec, 2016).

Extracurricular activities were mentioned by some participants as a way to signal distinctiveness and personal value to employers. As one participant said: "Being a competitive rower at the time also piqued the interest of the interview panel." Another participant revealed: "As well as my study abroad experience, I also participated in a Youth Evaluator role during my time at university." Extracurricular activities can be framed around the development of identity capital since they contribute to the formation of a personal narrative that can be aligned with employer expectations (Tomlinson, 2017). Extracurricular involvement has been recognised as a key differentiator in successful graduate outcomes for those from less advantaged backgrounds (Groves et al., 2022). Capitalising on informal experiences is important for first-generation graduates who may need to use additional capital obtained from extracurricular activities to strengthen their position in the competitive graduate labour market. The graduate capital model assumes that capital accumulation and deployment will increase graduates' employment prospects without fully taking into account social mobility and the possibility that some graduates may not be able to compete with their more privileged peers who are starting from a much stronger position.

For some graduates, this may be their first experience of dealing with rejection because universities foster an environment of certainty and support over learning through challenge (Nixon et al., 2018). Graduates are transitioning from a favourable situation where they are the consumers and universities satisfy their expectations to an unfavourable situation where employers have the power to select them from a large pool of applicants. Some graduates may

find it more difficult than they initially thought to secure graduate employment, as one participant said: "I applied for several jobs but received very few responses." Others may be forced to change direction entirely because of a lack of job opportunities available to them. One participant "opted to travel" and the other switched to "Plan B - a Master's degree." If graduates expect to find employment in their chosen pathway immediately, they may experience far greater discomfort when they enter the workplace later than anticipated and encounter experiences that are inconsistent with their expectations (Tomlinson, 2017). One participant commented: "My expectation was that if I went to university to study music, I would become a singer and performer. But, by the third year of university, I had realised that the record deal was not going to happen." The more a transition disrupts a person's life, the longer it takes to adapt to a new situation and the more coping mechanisms that are needed (Anderson et al., 2012). Transitioning from an environment of considerable nurture to one of significant uncertainty will come as a shock to many graduates and take them some time to adjust. This reality shock may be even greater for first-generation graduates who have fewer capitals to support them and less insight into the corporate world (Hirudayaraj & McLean, 2018). University careers services, which are meant to help bridge the gap between education and the workplace received criticism from some of the participants for being "ineffective" "overwhelming" and "generic."

Given the prevalence of part-time employment among university students, it is interesting that many of them encounter such a culture shock when starting their first graduate position (Gbadamosi et al., 2015). It is generally assumed that if an individual has experienced a certain type of transition in the past, they will be more likely to successfully deal with a transition of a similar nature in the future (Anderson et al., 2012). Several of the participants discussed work experience as a stepping stone to professional employment, enabling them to earn money, gain transferable skills, and obtain insight into their sector of interest, as one participant said: "I always worked part-time in fashion retail during my college and university years to help pay for my studies." Many first-generation students may need to work to support themselves while they attend

university which puts them at a disadvantage for accessing relevant unpaid work experience and other meaningful CV-building activities (Bathmaker et al., 2013; Groves et al., 2022). As one participant commented: "people who had done internships were in a stronger position than me. Unfortunately, I could not afford to intern for free." Securing relevant work experience is a vital asset for first-generation graduates transitioning into the workforce, as one participant noted: "having past retail experience helped because I understood the language of the sector." Work experience is a crucial component of capital formation since it enables graduates to create pre-professional identities, build networks, overcome problems, and bridge the gap between university and the workplace (Tomlinson, 2017). Work experience can offer stronger levels of cultural knowledge and social ties in targeted organisations, which is especially advantageous for people with lower levels of social and cultural capital inherited from families.

The importance of work experience in enhancing graduate employability and success has been extensively researched in the literature (Heyler & Lee; 2014; Jackson & Collings, 2018). However, the transition from university to the workplace, even for those with recent work experience, is still a new one that comes with its own roles, relationships, routines, and assumptions—and therefore, new challenges. Each organisation has its own set of field rules and graduates will need time to adjust to the new rules (Bourdieu, 1977). Unfavourable prior work experiences can have a harmful effect on future career transitions as a person's mindset is more negative than positive. For example, one participant said: "Every day, I couldn't wait to be done; I despised every second of it." The benefit of work experience is that students can try out different employment settings to determine whether it is the right fit for them, without the high stakes of a full-time permanent position. As one participant revealed: "I realised that wasn't the life for me." It is common for people to go through numerous transitions at once, as one participant put it: "One of the most difficult aspects of this job was that it required a big relocation." These concurrent stresses can make an employment transition even more uncomfortable. This highlights the value of psychological capital because it can

be difficult to manage a major career transition while also balancing the emotional demands of everyday life.

It was evident from the participants' career stories that they found the transition from university to the workplace to be the most challenging, and that the more job moves they experienced, the more favourably they perceived their situations. This might be as a result of their own initiative, which gave them a sense of control and helped them see the transition as a positive one that came at the right time. As one participant said: "I'm ready to move on, and I'm currently looking for a new job." Additionally, because the participants had prior experience with career transitions, they may have been better prepared for major life adjustments such as changing professions or working abroad. One participant remarked: "We opted to travel to Australia for a year on a working holiday visa since we were young and carefree, with the idea of continuing our careers in architecture." Some participant's circumstances, however, were more complicated when they changed careers because they had additional stresses to consider, such as family and financial obligations, as one participant put it: "I needed to keep paying the bills at this point." Moreover, when participants advanced in their careers, their roles evolved and their levels of responsibility increased. As one participant described: "Going to the next level on the professional ladder in a much smaller company was quite a shock to the system." Evidence has shown that adults have a different perception of career changes than younger individuals because they tend to have a more condensed and specialised sense of who they are, as well as greater responsibilities outside of the workplace (Plimmer & Schmidt, 2007).

6.2 Self

The way a person perceives the transition can affect how well they are able to handle it. Therefore, if graduates enter the workplace with inflated expectations, they will more likely be disappointed with the day-to-day realities of professional employment and adopt a negative mindset towards it (Parris and Saville, 2011). As one participant said: "It was a mixed experience. I learned the basics of a professional environment including attending meetings and professional

communication; however, I knew from very early on that the role wasn't going anywhere". Employment is the aim for many graduates, and because it is so highly anticipated and difficult to obtain, it can be disappointing if it falls short of their expectations.

According to research, younger generations have high expectations for their careers, placing an emphasis on enjoyment, career progression, and work-life balance. (Ng et al., 2010; Maxwell & Broadbridge, 2017). Over time, studies have revealed significant differences in the workplace between younger and older generations, particularly in terms of workplace needs and expectations (Treuen & Anderson, 2010; Arora & Kshatriya, 2017; Maloni et al., 2019). With the rise of self-directed careers, graduates are demonstrating a higher level of personal investment in their employability development, and with this investment comes higher expectations. In an increasingly individualised and fluid labour market, graduates must maintain a strong identity and personal narrative that is aligned with their values and the needs of the organisations for which they wish to work (Tomlinson, 2017). The problem is that, once employed, there appears to be a misalignment between younger workers' expectations and their actual workplace experiences (Perrone & Vickers, 2003; Jusoh et al., 2011). The participants expressed dissatisfaction with learning and development opportunities and a work-life balance in their career stories.

While universities cultivate lifelong learning, the workplace, in general, is less supportive of it due to workplace structures, power and culture (Sim et al., 2003; Hager, 2004). As one participant said: "Even though I enjoyed my first accounting job, I knew that if I continued there for another two years, I would be in the same position and would have learned nothing new." Younger generations have high expectations for workplace learning and development, which is unsurprising given that they are digital natives who recognise that success in their careers is dependent on constantly updating their skills and knowledge (Drewery et al., 2020). The demand for ongoing professional growth might result from the compelling case put forward by universities to upskill in order to remain employable in a competitive job market. This is connected to human capital theory, which assumes that increased education and training

make people more skilled, productive, and hence more employable (Tomlinson, 2017). Learning was a recurring theme in the career stories, and many participants found satisfaction in learning, as one participant stated, "I really enjoyed the learning aspect of the programme", and another stated, "I learnt a lot and had a great time doing it". The literature has emphasised the importance of continual learning and personal development for younger generations (Shaw et al., 2008). It was clear from the professional stories that the participants valued opportunities for self-development at work, as one participant said: "I thrive on being challenged, therefore I'm glad I ventured outside of my comfort zone". Another participant remarked: ""it was the best career move I ever made because I learned so much, and it catapulted my career in technology."

The problem with the graduate capital model is that it encourages students to develop their employability capitals while at university to strengthen their exchange value in the world of work. This results in the commodification of graduate labour as it is perceived solely in terms of its market value (Marx, 1976). Students are being prepared for a workforce in which the economic exchange value of labour takes priority over personal fulfilment (McArthur, 2011). The graduate capital model is pushing the narrative of conforming to employers needs through the development and deployment of employability capitals; however, this has the potential to harm graduates' wellbeing and professional development because they want to be seen as more than just a commodity at work. In a university and workplace setting, more emphasis should be placed on personal and professional growth for its own sake as opposed to always being connected to commercial value.

The participants were clearly eager to develop professionally, but opportunities for progression were not always available to them. As one participant stated: "Some people are lucky and move through the ranks within the same company but, for me, it wasn't meant to be." A lack of career advancement was a strong motivator in all the five career stories for seeking a new job with better prospects elsewhere as one participant said: "In order to move up in my career, I decided I needed to leave the company." A common stereotype of the younger generation is that they want it all now and are willing to change jobs in order to

progress quicker (Ng et al., 2010; Kamau et al., 2014; Maxwell and Broadbridge, 2017). Some claim that younger employees are very "me" focused and have a strong sense of entitlement, whereas others argue that they are ambitious, want to make a difference and contribute to something meaningful (Twenge, 2009; Kadakia, 2017). The participants' professional stories demonstrated their passion and drive for pursuing fulfilling careers rather than any sense of entitlement, as one participant said: "…as a dedicated individual, I intend to advance more in my job." Given that universities actively encourage students to sustain a narrative of self, particularly in increasingly individualised and uncertain economic conditions, it is not surprising that graduates take charge of their career path. Ambition should be praised rather than criticised because universities ought to be producing empowered graduates rather than subservient workers.

However, problems might occur when professional goals and employment prospects are not aligned (Tomlinson, 2017). Identity formation extends beyond the individual and is heavily influenced by contextual factors which may constrain or enhance personal development (Schachter, 2005; Goller & Harteis, 2017). For example, one participant said: "there was a highly structured performance review process that pushed me to work hard and become more commercially aware." While another participant commented: "I applied twice for promotion and missed out both times. Unfortunately, my manager at the time was quite rude and sarcastic and didn't push for my promotion, as other managers did". This indicates that some organisations may be more supportive of professional development than others and the behaviours and actions of their employees will be influenced by what they allow or deny. Despite a person's commitment to professional growth, there will always be a significant gatekeeper in the environment in which they are working who has the power to support or contradict their opinions about career advancement. The problem with the graduate capital model is that it continues to emphasise employability from the supply-side, where graduates build a variety of capitals that can offer them a competitive edge in the job market. Not enough consideration is given to

demand-side factors, such as the working environment, which may have an impact on a graduate employability (Clarke, 2017).

The professional narratives showed that the participants occasionally felt the need to change careers in order to accomplish their own goals. As one participant said: "I'm glad I ventured out since I couldn't picture spending the rest of my life sketching standardised shop units." A study by Sturges and Guest (2001) found that graduates are afraid of becoming stuck in their careers and want to keep striving forward. Interestingly, there was a clear sense among the participants that they would stay with their current employer if opportunities for progression were available, as one participant said: "I'm not one to go from job to job, so if there's a chance for advancement at my current company, I'd rather stay." Graduates are more likely to stay with companies that make their jobs interesting, challenging, and enjoyable (Tay, 2011). However, as shown by the career stories, there is frequently a misalignment between the opportunities graduates desire and those that are offered within employment domains.

Although all the participants wanted to move forward and succeed, they were also aware of their responsibilities at home. This sense of responsibility manifested itself in the form of bills to pay and children to care for, resulting in a shift in attitudes toward work. As one participant said: "I'm not in a position to take on extra responsibilities or travel because I have a 3-year-old son". Even those who did not have dependents were considering how their current employment choices would affect their future if their circumstances changed. One participant remarked: "When I was travelling in my previous role, sometimes 5 days a week, it made me contemplate how I could do it long-term if I chose to have a family". In all five of the career stories, there was a clear sense of concern about their responsibilities, both now and in the future. This is consistent with the findings of Ng et al. (2010), who discovered that graduates have high expectations of their jobs while also demanding work-life balance in order to live a fulfilling life outside of work. Employees are becoming increasingly interested in flexibility and freedom in their workplaces. Sturges and Guest (2001) found that graduates are conscious of and concerned about their work-life balance and it would influence their decision to remain in or leave

an organisation in the future. This emphasises the flexibility of identity capital since a person's story is likely to evolve over time and may not stay consistent with their current place of employment.

The career stories had a significant element of comparison, with participants assessing themselves against their peers, colleagues, and superiors in order to gain knowledge about themselves. One participant said: "Some of my classmates got graduate jobs, and I recall thinking to myself, "If you can do it, why can't I?" University students are particularly susceptible to social comparison because modern technologies allow for a constant flow of information about other people's lives and they are encouraged to 'sell themselves', 'differentiate themselves', 'have an edge over the competition' and 'stand out from the crowd' in an educational context (Stapleton et al., 2017; Fotiadou, 2020). In response to policy on employability, the rise of neoliberalisation and frequent use of competitive language in a university setting is likely to increase the intensity of social comparison. As one participant commented: "My last year at university was filled with peer pressure to apply for graduate jobs". People often assess their own abilities by comparing themselves to others in similar circumstances (Dijkstra et al., 2008). Research has shown that social comparison can have a negative effect on personal well-being as people continually judge themselves against external standards (White et al., 2006). As one participant said: "My classmates were largely wealthy, private-educated people who attended the country's best universities. Then there was me with my regional accent". First-generation graduates may be more prone to imposter syndrome because they believe they lack the resources and advantages of their more privileged counterparts (Gardner & Holley, 2011). On the other hand, upward social comparison can increase motivation and self-assurance since it allows people to see others succeed and, as a result, set higher personal goals (Dijkstra et al., 2008). Some of the career experiences included upward comparison, as seen by the comment given by one participant: "I was exposed to women in senior positions who acted as role models for my professional development."

6.3 Support

The level of support a person has at the time of their transition will affect how well they are able to cope with the change. In several of the career stories, social contacts were an important source of support for the transition from university to work. Professors, family members, friends and co-workers were among the contacts that provided access to information, affirmation, and improved employment prospects. Numerous studies over time have demonstrated the importance of social ties in disseminating information about job opportunities (Villar et al., 2000; Alho, 2020). Grannovetter (1983) argued that weak ties are a good source of labour market information since the network is more dispersed and can offer greater insight. As one participant commented: "My mother's friend notified me that a nearby accounting firm was hiring during my dissertation. I applied and was hired." For first-generation graduates, weak ties are especially advantageous because they cannot rely on their close network of family and friends for exposure to job opportunities and insight into the labour market (Lehmann, 2019). The importance of weak ties in career stories emphasises how fluid employability is, which undermines the graduate capital model's structured and organised approach to capital formation and development.

Access to information through unofficial channels can be a valuable source of help, especially when the existing support systems are inadequate. Three of the participants voiced their dissatisfaction with the university career service, as one put it: "the…advice was ineffective, as the advisor I dealt with had no idea what you could do with a maths degree other than teaching and finance." Granovetter (1983) made the case that weak ties are most useful when they bridge substantial social distance. As a result, rather than relying solely on the careers service, which is more distant from the workplace, graduates should seek relevant information from connections who work in organisations of interest. Tomlinson (2017) reported that social capital is particularly strengthened through work experience as this provides a bridge between university and the workplace and facilitates meaningful interactions between graduates and employers. One participant specifically brought up the importance of work experience for developing social capital, commenting: "it

was wonderful to be in an office environment, work in a professional team and experience adult conversation."

It is also helpful to have social contacts for emotional support given how unstable and competitive the labour market is, as one participant said: "I wouldn't have applied again if it hadn't been for my friend's advice and guidance through the process." Research has demonstrated that social connections can offer emotional support since information from helpful contacts lead to an enhanced sense of control (Batistic & Tymon, 2017). Having a wider network of contacts can be beneficial since it may be easier to ask someone outside of one's immediate social circle for assistance. As one participant revealed: "I confided in a friend about my dissatisfaction at work and was recommended to apply to her company which offered a graduate scheme in technology". The benefit of weak ties is that they consist of a diverse range of social connections that can broker trust, share information, and offer insider knowledge, all of which can have a significant impact on graduates seeking employment (Tomlinson, 2017). This shows that students should expand their social networks beyond the confines of university in order to increase their chances of success in the graduate labour market. Cranmer (2006) argued that universities are not the best setting to enhance employability, as it may be done better and more naturally outside of formal education.

Graduates need emotional support both while looking for a job and once they are hired. Due to the rise of self-directed careers, psychological capital is becoming even more essential because graduates may not receive the same level of support and stability as they did in traditional employment settings (Savickas et al., 2009). Several participants mentioned feeling unappreciated at work, and the majority had problems with management. As one participant said: "You don't get a thank you for all your hard work, and there's more to life than that." It is unsurprising that graduates struggle with a lack of appreciation in the workplace after graduating from a supportive university environment where their needs are constantly met. One participant revealed: "I respond well to being appreciated. Knowing that someone values my work." Graduates may be so used to the academic methods of performance feedback that they find the

irregular and unstructured feedback they receive at work to be unsatisfactory (Jusoh et al., 2011) Some participants expected more from their managers in terms of support as one said: "I felt I was prepared, but the job was drastically different, and it didn't help that my manager was off for the first month, leaving me with no one to turn to".

Jusoh et al. (2011) recognised the disparity in expectations between graduates and employers, particularly in relation to leadership style. Although graduates may prefer a more directive approach to leadership, employers typically anticipate a more independent style from graduates given their expertise and aptitude for the position. There appears to be a situation in which graduates are expected to be autonomous, adaptable, and resilient employees ready to face the challenges of a complex and uncertain workplace, but they feel unprepared to do so. This raises the question of whether universities should be held accountable for preparing work-ready graduates, given the limited success of university initiatives aimed at increasing graduate employability and the fact that graduates require ongoing structure and support once employed (Cranmer, 2006; Mason et al., 2009). Employers, rather than universities, may be better positioned to foster an organisational culture that supports graduates in reaching their full potential once they enter employment.

6.4 Strategies

The coping mechanisms people use to deal with a transition will depend on the tools they have at their disposal. The participants expressed some dissatisfaction with the workplace, citing feelings of overburden, unappreciation and frustration. One participant said: "I realised I didn't care enough about fashion to live and breathe it every day." According to another participant, working for a difficult manager was a "huge test", and they were "miserable at the time". A further participant was displeased with their work situation: "I do what needs to be done, but my creativity and self-motivation have been stifled." Research has shown that graduates are unprepared to deal with workplace challenges due to the reported gap between graduate skills and employer expectations of the skills (Lowden et al., 2011). Universities invest a lot of time

and effort into preparing work-ready graduates, yet the success of this is debated (Stoten, 2018). Tomlinson (2017) asserts that universities can and should support the development of psychological capital by raising awareness of non-linear careers and regulating expectations connected to the university-to-work transition. While others have questioned whether universities can adequately prepare graduates for the workforce and think that employers are better positioned to provide the necessary training and experience (Cranmer, 2006; Mason et al., 2009). Several of the participants alluded to the skills they acquired in the fast-paced workplace as one put it: "Working in a fast-paced sector, such as retail, has provided me with a diverse set of transferable skills." Since universities are unable to emulate this high-pressured workplace environment, it is nearly impossible for them to produce graduates who are truly prepared for the workplace. Additionally, some participants had to deal with unforeseen circumstances in the workplace, as one participant stated: "It didn't help that my manager was off for the first month, leaving me with no one to turn to." Although universities may strive to produce adaptable and resilient graduates, these challenging circumstances are less likely to occur in an educational setting where there are significant support systems in place, making preparation for employment in this context exceedingly difficult.

It was clear from the career stories that the participants valued their employers' investment in their professional development, as one participant stated: "what convinced me was that the company invested in you." Opportunities for learning and development were clear reasons to remain within an organisation as one participant observed: "Employee retention is extremely high, which is a testament to how they reward their staff." Due to financial constraints and the perception that younger generations are less loyal than their predecessors, organisations are becoming reluctant to invest in training, which puts the onus on universities to produce graduates who are prepared for the workforce (Jackson, 2010). The problem is that no amount of employability development in an educational setting can adequately prepare students for the complexities of the working world because of the significant cultural differences between university and the workplace (Yorke, 2006). The fact that the workplace is

commonly referred to as the "real world" elevates it above the academic world in importance and relevance (Fotiado, 2020). Furthermore, academics are generally disconnected from the modern workplace, which may be exacerbating the skills gap (Jackson & Chapman, 2012). Universities can nurture the growth of employability skills, but they cannot be held fully responsible for it (Jackson, 2010). Employers must also promote a culture that supports professional development. The graduate capital model assumes that employability capitals are developed over time, deployed, and their effects are sustained across a variety of employment contexts. However, it does not account for the possibility that some employers may not foster environments that are conducive to the development of employability. Tomlinson (2017) suggests that universities create a vocabulary around graduate capitals, however, it is questionable whether a narrative should be built around it given that capital development is not always nurtured in the workplace.

The participants' career stories revealed that they often responded to a difficult transition by changing the situation rather than controlling the meaning of the problem or managing the stress (Anderson et al., 2012). As one participant remarked: "I decided if I'm not going to get it here, I'm going to have to go somewhere else." Another participant moved to a lower-paying position to improve their employment situation: "I was nervous about going there because I had no experience in technology, it involved relocating and it was for less money." These participants' openness to new experiences and adaptability to change serve as examples of psychological capital. Nowadays, the typical career spans multiple employers, and early-career professionals frequently switch organisations after a short period of time (Fan & DeVaro, 2020). Graduates are likely to move jobs to avoid dissatisfying workplace environments or to pursue better opportunities elsewhere (Zimmerman, 2016; Lake et al., 2018). As one participant said: "the money was not worth the stress it caused" and another participant remarked: "to move up in my career, I decided I needed to leave the company." The career stories brought to light discrepancies between graduate and employer expectations of workplace structure, support, and skills. Employers expect graduates to be independent,

resilient, and job-ready while graduates demand a defined progression route, a supportive workplace environment, and investment in their professional skills and development. Universities have little to gain by attempting to close this expectation gap since employers are better equipped to give graduates the structure, support, and skills they need to succeed. Graduates may be less inclined to change jobs as frequently if their needs are met by their employers.

The major themes emerging from the career stories have been outlined in this chapter using Schlossberg's transition theory. The 4Ss (situation, self, support, and strategies) were employed to better understand the participants' career-related experiences. The participant's lived experiences have highlighted some issues with the graduate capital model's application to the study of employability. The graduate capital model encourages the development of employability capitals to raise graduates' exchange value in the labour market, which supports the commodification of graduate labour. Tomlinson (2017, p.341) acknowledges that one function of universities is to "help graduates harness their knowledge in ways that frame its economic utility". In doing so, the graduate capital model prioritises satisfying employer demands ahead of the satisfaction and fulfilment of graduates. The graduate capital model strongly emphasises developing employability capitals in the setting of higher education, but it does not sufficiently address the ongoing support and developmental structures needed in the workplace. The next chapter will go into more detail on the critique of the graduate capital model.

Chapter 7: Critique of the Graduate Capital Model

This chapter provides a critique of the graduate capital model which is presented as a more sophisticated and comprehensive conceptualisation of employability (Tomlinson, 2017). The graduate capital model has been used as the main theoretical framework within this research to test its usefulness in studying the topic of employability.

The graduate capitals (human, social, cultural, psychological, and identity capital) were all present in the participants' career stories, and therefore in their lived experiences. None of the participants explicitly referred to capitals within their narratives, however the key resources and utility of graduate capital were mentioned, for example networks, experience and adaptability. Graduate capitals can undoubtedly help graduates with career transitions, but it is debatable whether it is a useful framework for studying employability given that capital development typically occurs organically over time and employers do not always support a structured approach to employability development. This brings to light three key issues with the graduate capital model:

1. A short-term, static process as opposed to a long-term, dynamic one

Tomlinson (2017) recognises graduate capital development as a dynamic process in which graduates' lived experiences serve as sources of capital; however, the model itself is based on a static and oversimplified notion of employability that places the burden of employment success or failure on the individual and their ability to develop capitals. The graduate capital model is aligned with neoliberal ideology which places a strong emphasis on individual responsibility by giving graduates the tools they need to create and effectively manage their own career paths (Tight, 2019). It is believed that this collection of capitals, will give graduates the advantages they need to stand out from the crowd and realise their full professional potential in an increasingly competitive job market. The model places employment success or failure ultimately on the graduate's ability to develop, articulate and mobilise their capitals over time. Since graduates are urged to upskill and develop in order to meet employer demands and provide economic advantages, the model has a strong supply-

side orientation. This is fitting with contemporary careers, which are distinguished by a high degree of individualisation as people take control of their own career paths (Hall, 2004). Career self-management has become increasingly important as employers prefer short-term employment exchanges over longer-term relationships with their employees, necessitating numerous career transitions over time (Greenhaus & Kossek, 2014). Career transitions were a prevalent theme in the professional stories, as many of the participants changed jobs multiple times in an attempt to achieve success and satisfaction in their careers.

While the graduate capital model is said to empower graduates by increasing their employability currency and leverage in the labour market, employers essentially control the university-to-work transition. Graduates may be led to believe that their commitment to capital accumulation will allow them to control their employment success, when in fact, employers make employment decisions, and there are numerous external factors that determine whether someone secures employment (Hooley & Sultana, 2016). Since many graduates' experience disappointment and unmet expectations when they enter the workforce, it may be detrimental for universities to support initiatives like graduate capital development for successful transitions. Graduates may be unable to act on their own behalf once they enter the workforce because their actions are governed by the rules, conventions, and practices of their employers. The ability to exercise individual agency is heavily dependent on the workplace context, and while some contexts may encourage their employees to exercise human agency, others might discourage a more self-directed approach (Goller & Harteis, 2017). According to Tomlinson (2017), the graduate capital model offers a broader, more complex conceptualisation of employability, but it still does not consider demand-side elements, most notably employment contexts and conditions. Rather than focusing on producing perfect work-ready graduates within a university setting, more emphasis should be placed on how graduates are supported once they are employed. Currently, students go through a supportive education system before being expected to navigate the challenges of the working world. It is not only about bridging the

educational-workplace gap, but also about improving working practices so that individuals are satisfied with their chosen career.

Within the career stories, there was a strong sense of disappointment among the participants because their professional expectations were unmet. The participants had a certain level of expectation in terms of learning and development, support, and appreciation but they were disappointed to discover that the workplace reality fell far short of their expectations. This disappointment may have been amplified by the fact that they had transitioned from a position of power in which they believed their capitals had some currency in the labour market to an unfavourable situation in which they felt stifled in their workplaces. Many graduates are understandably dissatisfied with the realities of the workplace after graduating from university, where they feel empowered and informed to exercise agency over their career planning, only to discover that employers are less supportive of their career development. The graduate capital model encourages graduates to have a lifelong learning and continuous development mindset, but learning and development do not always appear to be fostered within the workplace, leaving graduates feeling stuck and eager to move on. The participants were able to regain control by changing their employment situation, as evidenced in their career stories. The graduate capital model promotes career self-management by utilising resources to achieve employment success; however, it does not assist graduates in obtaining satisfying and sustainable employment.

Tomlinson (2017, p. 348) highlights that the formation and deployment of capitals "can inform a graduate's immediate relations to the job market", further supporting the short-term nature of this model. The model is also centred on the commodification of graduate labour by understanding it in terms of its exchange value, or, in other words, building up employability capitals to meet employers' demands. The graduate capital model values a graduate more in terms of their employability capitals and workplace contribution than in regards to who they are, which is incredibly dehumanising and may alienate graduates from their true selves (McArthur, 2011). By solely analysing graduate labour in terms of economic exchange value, the model ignores how graduates experience

personal fulfilment and job satisfaction. The graduate capital model is fundamentally aligned with the neoliberalisation of higher education, in which universities function as capitalist institutions and perceive skilled labour as a commodity capable of producing surplus value in the global knowledge economy (Maisuria & Cole, 2017). This is problematic seeing as employability should be a lifelong and life-wide process, not a short-term exchange.

The model clearly aligns with government policy on graduate employability because it promotes graduates' workforce readiness and provides strategies for capital building in a higher education setting. The issue is that policymakers are operating under the narrow assumption that an individual's employability is determined by their skills, resources, or capitals, all of which must be compatible with employer demands. Those advocating for a broader view of employability that considers not only individual factors (skills, attributes, capitals), but also external factors (labour market factors, economic climate) have criticised this narrow and individualised conceptualisation of employability (McQuaid & Lindsay, 2005). It seems policy requires a shift away from a static, individually-focused explanation of employability towards a longer-term view which includes working conditions and practices once employed and not just an individual's transition into employment. Currently, the UK government influences employability practice in higher education through recommendations, funding, and policy (The Dearing Report, 1997; Department for Business Innovation and Skills, 2016; Department for Education, 2021). This policy agenda, however, ignores what happens after graduates are employed and instead focuses solely on the university-to-work transition, resulting in a static, short-term view of employability rather than a long-term dynamic process.

Although the graduate capital model is positioned as a broad conceptualisation of employability, it primarily focuses on the short-term university-to-work transition and graduates exchange value in the labour market. The model has a strong supply-side orientation, driven by government policy, as graduates are expected to develop and deploy the necessary capitals to enhance their employment prospects. However, to have a truly long-term, broad conceptualisation of employability there must be a greater focus on the

demand-side elements, in particular the way in which personal and professional development is nurtured and coordinated by employers. Universities still have a role to play because employability development is a lifelong process that evolves across many contexts. However, rather than concentrating their efforts on working with industry to understand what employers want, universities can also encourage dialogues about what graduates need from their employers.

2. The translation of skills into capitals

Tomlinson (2017) encourages universities to establish a new vocabulary around graduate capitals, but given that capital development is not widely supported in the workplace, it is questionable whether a narrative should be built around it. It is ironic to support initiatives that encourage smooth transitions and lifelong learning when many graduates are likely to experience discomfort and dissatisfaction once employed. The graduate capital model enhances students' expectations because it convinces them that if they invest in their capitals, they can graduate from university with enhanced employment prospects. However, the environments of formal education and the workplace are vastly different, and workplaces do not always celebrate and reward individual initiative and development.

Despite pointing out the limitations of the skills-based approach, Tomlinson (2017) simply appears to have substituted the concept of "capitals" for "skills," as in graduates with the highest level of desirable skills - or indeed "capitals" - are more employable. Like the skills agenda, the graduate capital model has a strong supply-side orientation in which graduates are encouraged to embody certain capitals and convey them in a way that aligns to employers' practices. The graduate capital model presents a new vocabulary around graduate employability, adding to a wealth of existing terms such as skills, marketability, and adaptability, which promote the employable self and conforming to employers demands. By using such language, the graduate labour market is portrayed as a "rat race" or "war for talent," which inevitably produces winners and losers, because some people have a greater head start than others (Hooley, 2015). The graduate capital model encourages capital accumulation to prepare graduates for the labour market, but it ignores social mobility and the

possibility that graduates may not be able to compete with their more privileged peers because they are starting from a much stronger position. As a result, even the process of accumulating capital is highly stratified and diverse. This was evident in the career stories, where being a first-generation student sometimes put the participants at a disadvantage in comparison to their more privileged peers.

Hooley (2015) suggests that dialogues about social justice should replace the competitive vocabulary used to discuss employability in career guidance at universities. Given that Tomlinson (2017, p. 348) acknowledges that HE is "not in a position to compensate for...engrained social inequalities," it is surprising that he advocates for a vocabulary around capitals to be widely used within a university context when students are not on a level playing field in terms of capital formation. Individuals enter the educational system from a wide range of backgrounds and with varying forms of capital, and by developing a new vocabulary around capital development, universities risk reproducing greater inequalities by rewarding and validating those from the dominant social class (Bourdieu, 1977; Groves et al., 2022). A focus on person-centred employability and competing in the graduate labour market based on capital accumulation and deployment may exacerbate the problem of social reproduction by blaming those who are unable to secure graduate employment.

Tomlinson (2017) acknowledges that higher education may not be the most effective setting to develop employability skills as there are significant contextual barriers between formal university and the workplace. However, these contextual barriers persist for capital development. For example, Tomlinson (2017) recognises that developing a graduate's adaptability and resilience levels may not be a straightforward task for those working in HE, so it seems not productive to advocate for a new vocabulary around graduate capital development in a university context when it is more easily developed in the workplace. To date, university efforts to prepare graduates for employment have been met with significant criticism from students, employers, and academics, so it appears counterintuitive to continue to place the responsibility on higher education for preparing graduates for the workplace (Tymon, 2013;

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Succi & Canovi, 2020; Speight et al., 2013). Some of the career stories emphasised the ineffectiveness of the university careers service in assisting them with their prospects, and they felt they were better supported elsewhere. Several studies have argued for a more employer-driven approach to employability development as organisations are better positioned to prepare graduates for the dynamic world of work (Succi & Canovi, 2020; Clarke, 2017; Sin & Neave, 2016). It appears unhelpful for policymakers to continue putting the sole onus on higher education institutions to provide graduates with the tools they need to succeed in the workplace when previous attempts have proven unsuccessful. As a result, developing a new vocabulary for graduate capital development within the context of a university may not address the overarching issue of disparities in expectations between graduates and employers, as demonstrated in the career stories. Instead, an approach focused on social justice might be better suited in which universities foster conversations about it and assist graduates in understanding how they may contribute to it in their professional lives (McArthur, 2011).

The graduate capital model is focused on how graduates manage and convey their employability in order to secure a favourable position in the labour market. However, it is unhelpful to inform graduates that by developing all necessary employability capitals, they will improve their chances of success in the graduate labour market. This is especially true given that organisational structures and workplace procedures are not always geared towards promoting fairness and rewarding effort. To create more equitable workplaces that encourage individual creativity and development, universities should pay more attention to social justice dialogues than to competitive discourses centred on graduates' marketability. Instead of viewing themselves as directly competing with their peers for jobs, this would encourage students to engage in discussions about how the labour market functions and their experiences within it. Universities should discuss the barriers that graduates could encounter rather than simply highlighting the opportunities in the graduate job market. If graduates are given a realistic perspective of the workplace, they might

experience less culture shock and feel more prepared to deal with unfair practices.

3. A strategic plan rather than a fluid and organic process

The graduate capital model is presented as a strategic plan that students must follow in order to succeed in the graduate labour market. However, based on the career stories, capital formation appears to be more natural and fortuitous. Every participant mentioned a chance opportunity that ended up shaping their career path, whether it was a family friend or colleague presenting a job opportunity or discovering the perfect job while searching for something unrelated. Tomlinson (2017) recommended that HE practitioners adopt a proactive approach to capital development with students, such as CV preparation, interview training, insight into and access to various organisations, and the promotion of career adaptability. However, this orchestrated approach to employability does not align with the participants' lived experiences. Instead of concerted efforts to increase employability, most of the career stories appeared to have been influenced by chance encounters and opportunities. Having highly structured employability initiatives at universities to build graduate capitals seems counterproductive when there is little to no structure in the workplace to keep building these capitals. Universities take an organised approach to employability, trying to prepare and skill graduates, but the professional narratives revealed that capital accumulation is more fluid and organic rather than purposefully developed or acquired.

According to Tomlinson (2017), capitals are acquired through graduates' lived experiences across multiple domains and are not confined by formal educational provision. Nonetheless, Tomlinson proposes that universities develop a new vocabulary for capital formation and provides practical dimensions for developing capital forms in higher education. This makes sense seeing as higher education institutions are influenced by policy to develop graduate employability and must tick boxes in terms of graduate outcomes (Nghia et al., 2020). Therefore, employability development needs to be more organised and tangible to demonstrate progress on this metric. However, adopting a structured approach to capital development within a university

context may not be the best strategy when employability is generic in nature and there are various forms of capital that graduates can develop and deploy across a wide range of contexts. While university is frequently preceded by full-time employment, it should not be assumed that it is the primary or even the only influence on graduate employability (McCowan, 2015). Furthermore, it should not be overlooked that a university may not be able to have a direct impact on capital formation because these capitals are formed from early childhood and are heavily influenced by family backgrounds. However, in the current context of individuals taking responsibility for their own employment, income, and survival, universities do have a part to play in preparing graduates for the future (McCowan, 2015). And yet, employability initiatives do not need to be as explicit and bold as creating a new vocabulary around graduate capitals, as this only encourages competition, supports capitalism, and exacerbates inequalities.

The graduate capital model, which sees capital development as fluid and acquired through graduates' formal and informal experiences, is presented as an integrated approach to improving employability. This dynamic and integrated conceptualisation of employability assumes that graduates gradually build their capital through their lived experiences, raising the question of whether it is necessary to explicitly address capital building in the context of higher education. Instead of organised activities that go against the organic and fluid nature of employability, perhaps universities should focus on teaching and learning, where students would naturally develop their employability.

This chapter has offered a critique of the graduate capital model, especially casting doubt on its status as a more in-depth conceptualisation of employability. The graduate capital model continues to view employability as a short-term static process in which graduates need to strategically develop their employability capitals to increase their exchange value in the world of work. In doing so, it disregards demand-side elements that may affect graduate employment such as unfair workplace practices, and the reality that employability is a dynamic process that evolves naturally through time and situations.

Chapter 8: Conclusion

This study set out to examine graduates' lived experiences when developing and deploying graduate capitals over time, as well as the usefulness of the graduate capital model to the study of employability. The effects of globalisation, technological advancement, economic uncertainty, and the rise of flexible working arrangements have had a considerable impact on the labour market (Jackson & Tomlinson, 2020). The shift from an industrial to a knowledge-based economy has been one of the most significant developments in the world of work (Nghia et al., 2020). The government is particularly interested in the supply-side of the labour market and the steps taken by higher education institutions to improve graduate employability since it views universities as a significant contribution to the global knowledge economy (Tomlinson & Holmes, 2016). As a result of government policy, the higher education system has undergone significant changes including marketisation and massification to fulfil its function in the national economy (Pal, 2022). The concept of employability has gained prominence as a result of the need for graduates to possess the skills and attributes required to succeed in a competitive and unstable labour market and contribute to economic growth (Nghia et al., 2020). Many initiatives have been implemented in a university setting to support the development of employability, however several studies have criticised these efforts (Cranmer, 2006; Mason et al., 2009; Succi & Canovi, 2020).

Although employability in higher education has been extensively researched, few studies have focused on graduates' career journeys and the development of capitals over time using Tomlinson's (2017) Graduate Capital Model (Pham et al., 2019; Nghia et al., 2020). Given that employability is increasingly being emphasised as an active and socially constructed process that develops over time and between contexts, this is an intriguing gap in the literature (Tomlinson and Jackson, 2021). This study set out to add to this emerging body of literature by charting over time the development and use of employability capitals. In this research, the graduate capital model served as the primary theoretical framework, and its application to the study of employability was evaluated. A

narrative inquiry research design was used in the study to elicit the career stories of five first-generation graduates. This research method was chosen because people naturally tell stories in their everyday lives and these stories can assist in unearthing and understanding human experience (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

The research questions were as follows:

RQ1: What are the lived experiences of first-generation graduates' when accumulating and deploying different forms of graduate capital over time?

RQ2: Is the graduate capital model a useful framework to study employability?

In answering RQ1, this study found that the five graduate capitals (human, social, cultural, identity and psychological) were present in the participants' careers stories albeit not explicitly referred to as capitals. Although all capitals were represented in the career stories, social, identity, and psychological capital stood out as being particularly strong. Several of the participants alluded to the fact human capital alone was insufficient to guarantee employment and they needed to engage beyond their degree to mobilise their credentials. They were aware that, as first-generation graduates, they needed to take advantage of their informal experiences to improve their position in the competitive graduate labour market. Work experience was a prominent theme in all the career stories which enabled participants to earn money, gain transferable skills and obtain insight into their sector of interest. Work experience can offer stronger levels of cultural knowledge in targeted organisations, which is especially advantageous for first-generation graduates with lower levels of cultural capital inherited from families.

Social capital played a significant role in all the career stories in the form of access to information, emotional support, and better employment prospects. It was evident from the professional narratives that informal networks were an important source of support for career transitions. Social capital is especially helpful for first-generation graduates as they cannot rely on their close network of family and friends for exposure to job prospects and understanding of the

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labour market. The career narratives revealed a strong sense of identity capital, with the participants expressing a desire to learn, develop, and engage in fulfilling work while also seeking a work-life balance. The fact that career transitions were such a major theme in the narrative data demonstrates that the participants were willing to self-manage their own career paths to pursue employment opportunities aligned to their interests and values. Overall, the participants experienced a strong sense of dissatisfaction at work and mentioned feelings of overburden, underappreciation, and frustration. The fact that the participants were first-generation graduates with limited inherited capitals to support them may have amplified these negative emotions for them. It was clear that working in fast-paced professional environments, being exposed to difficult management situations, and being open to new experiences in order to improve difficult circumstances all helped the participants develop their psychological capital.

One important finding from the career stories was that, in contrast to educational institutions, which actively try to develop graduate capitals, workplaces may provide less support for personal and professional growth. Upon entering the workplace, there was a noticeable sense of dissatisfaction and unmet expectations among the participants. This may have been because the participants had left a setting where they felt empowered to develop their capitals and were now constrained and underappreciated in their working environment. Career transitions were a key theme in the professional narratives since the participants were eager to change jobs if they felt unfulfilled and unsatisfied in their current positions. The fact that the participants frequently felt the need to make a career transition—which can be a difficult experience because it disrupts relationships, routines, roles, and assumptions—indicates how unhappy they were with their employment situations and how eager they were to move on to better opportunities. This demonstrates how, even if a graduate builds and uses their graduate capital, contextual factors such as the working environment may hinder or facilitate their long-term professional success and fulfilment.

Even though acquiring and using various graduate capitals can aid in career transitions, it was unclear from the professional experiences how such capitals assisted in gaining successful and long-term employment. In fact, the more empowered participants felt, with the resources necessary to secure employment, the more likely they were to move jobs in order to find employment conditions they were satisfied with. The graduate capital model raises students' expectations by convincing them that if they invest in their capitals, they can graduate from university with better career prospects. This is counterproductive because formal education and the workplace have such different contexts, and employers do not always appreciate or reward effort. Additionally, it is unhelpful to support initiatives that encourage seamless transitions and lifelong learning when many graduates may feel unsettled and unsatisfied in their employment positions.

In response to RQ2, the career stories brought to light some of the limitations of the graduate capital model, along with concerns about its suitability as a framework for studying employability. First, the graduate capital model has a strong supply-side focus since it emphasises graduates' ability to accumulate and deploy capitals and express them in a way that meets employers' demands. This is based on a static and simplistic idea of employability that attributes success or failure in the workplace to a graduate's ability to amass, use, and mobilise capitals across time. The graduate capital model places a short-term emphasis on graduates' exchange value in the labour market and as a result does not sufficiently address demand-side elements, such as working conditions that may or may not be conducive to personal and professional growth. Tomlinson (2017) advises higher education professionals to focus on developing graduate capitals, however this is counterintuitive if employers are not on board with this terminology because capital development extends far beyond the scope of education. Universities can support employability development, but they cannot be exclusively accountable for it because capital accumulation occurs over time and in many circumstances. For the graduate capital model to provide a more comprehensive understanding of employability,

it should carefully address the ways in which employers assist in capital development.

Second, the graduate capital model and the heavily criticised skills agenda are not all that dissimilar due to their strong supply-side orientation. The graduate capital model assumes that graduates will have a more advantageous position in the graduate labour market if they develop and apply their employability capitals. This promotes competition and comparison among graduates as they attempt to market themselves favourably to prospective employers, which unavoidably creates winners and losers. Yet, social inequalities and the reality that some graduates have a stronger starting position than others are not fully considered by the graduate capital model. This was made clear in the participants' career stories, where being a first-generation graduate occasionally put them at a disadvantage compared to their more privileged peers. This calls into question the model's applicability to the study of employability since there may need to be a shift in higher education away from competitive discourses and towards greater dialogue around social justice.

Third, by advocating a strategic and proactive approach to capital formation and deployment, the graduate capital model goes against the fluid nature of employability development. Although Tomlinson (2017) acknowledges that graduate capitals are gained through both formal and informal experiences, the model's approach to capital creation is much more deliberate. This systematic approach to employability development is inconsistent with the participants' lived experiences, where capital formation appeared to be more organic and fortuitous. Additionally, it seems futile to create a vocabulary around capital development and have highly structured employability initiatives within universities if not all employers are not creating comparable structures to foster personal and professional growth in the workplace. The professional narratives demonstrated that, despite universities' rigorous approach to employability development, capital accumulation is more fluid and organic than deliberately generated or acquired.

This study has provided deeper insight into graduates' lived experiences and has challenged the use of the graduate capital model to study employability. Overall, this research has strengthened the idea that it is time to move away from a supply-side focus on employability whereby universities produce work-ready graduates to a more demand-side focus wherein greater onus is put back onto employers. Government policy should evolve from one that sees employability as a static, individual-centred concept to one that has a longer-term perspective and considers working conditions and practices, not just a graduate's transition into the labour market. Because employability development is a lifelong and life-wide process, universities would still have a role to play in it. However, higher education should not be solely responsible for employability and initiatives should not be as strategic and deliberate because this goes against the organic and fluid nature of employability. Instead of using terminology around graduate capitals, which encourages greater competition and comparison among graduates, universities should focus their efforts on discourses about social justice to give students a more accurate representation of the modern workplace.

This study adds to the body of knowledge on employability by offering a critical lens on the strategic formation and deployment of graduate capitals in a higher education system. Even though capital development might help graduates in the short term with their transition into the workforce, it is primarily dependent on their exchange value in the labour market and does not take into consideration their ongoing professional development at work. The findings shed new light on the graduate capital model and question its usefulness in the study of employability as the model promotes the commodification of labour by prioritising the economic value of graduates over their happiness and fulfilment in the workplace. The results of this study should urge higher education professionals, especially those who oversee employability, to re-examine the employability initiatives they have in place to help students and the discourses they use to talk about developing employability. It is important to carefully consider whether models like the graduate capital model are increasing

graduates' employability or whether they are merely commodifying graduate labour to meet employer expectations.

There is a definite need for greater dialogue around graduate employability to challenge the current individualistic approach in favour of a more holistic and relational one. To increase awareness, dispel myths, and change perceptions regarding graduate employability, key stakeholders in higher education and beyond must engage in conversation. Currently, the careers service or employability specialists are responsible for most employability activities inside a university setting. Employability needs to be integrated into learning and teaching and a holistic university strategy, to make it more organic and less deliberate. Perhaps it would be more advantageous for employability practitioners to be part of the learning and teaching team, alongside academic developers, and to have "employability developers" or "experiential developers" with a focus on promoting discourse about employability and encouraging academics to incorporate employability into the curriculum. If academics are held more responsible for employability development, it is likely that the emphasis will shift from one that is individually and outcome centred to one that is driven by dialogue around social justice, inclusivity, and solving global problems. The reason for this is that academics will not want the employability agenda to dilute academic rigour and the opportunity for learning. However, the scope of this study was limited to a convenience sample of five participants and the results may not be representative of the graduate population as a whole and therefore cannot be generalised. A further limitation of this study is that the researcher was a "total insider" because they shared an identity with the participants (first-generation graduates) and an experience (friends at university) (Chavez, 2008). The research process may have been impacted by this degree of familiarity, including a lack of researcher objectivity, participant oversharing, and blurred boundaries. This limitation must be explicitly acknowledged considering the research findings despite the researcher giving careful consideration regarding how to describe, conduct, and use the research when a friendship was involved. Being limited to the use of interviews, this study relied heavily on the memory of the participants when recalling their

experiences. To obtain the full career stories of each of the five participants, the researcher conducted two separate interviews with each of them; however, other methods of narrative data collection, such as journal entries or observations, might have improved the validity and credibility of the results.

A natural progression of this research would be to investigate the career paths of more graduates to determine whether the findings are still applicable on a larger scale. This study only investigated the career journeys of first-generation graduates, so it would be useful to explore the lived experiences of a larger sample of the graduate population when accumulating and deploying graduate capitals over time. It would be possible to examine the level of support more thoroughly for personal and professional development in the workplace with further research into the experiences of recent graduates. Although the graduate capital model was heavily criticised in this study, it is positioned as a more nuanced conceptualisation of employability in the literature. As a result, further research may be conducted to determine the model's effectiveness in the study of employability. A question raised by this study is whether the government should reconsider their current supply-side focus to graduate employability and this would be a fruitful area for further research.

Appendix One: Data Themes

Mother codes	Sub-codes	Description
Previous experience	**Work**	Work experience was mentioned by all participants as a vital source of professional development. Some noted the skills acquired, such as communication and problem solving, while others alluded to the fact that it allowed them to experiment with their likes and dislikes in terms of a profession. For financial reasons, the majority of participants worked alongside their academic studies; yet, they all admitted that work experience was vital to compete in a crowded graduate landscape.
	Professional	Participants cited management issues, a lack of feeling valued, excessive work hours, a lack of challenge, insufficient learning opportunities, and poor progression as factors of professional unhappiness. In many cases, the participants' professional choices left them unsatisfied and disappointed.
	International	Three of the participants mentioned international experience. Two worked in professional roles overseas and one of them travelled internationally. Those who worked overseas felt that it assisted their employment prospects as it gave them a competitive advantage.

	Extra-curricular	All of the participants mentioned extracurricular activities as something that made them more well-rounded in the eyes of potential employers. Sport, music, volunteering, and studying abroad were among the activities.
	Academic	In addition to their academic degrees, the participants acknowledged obtaining qualifications through on-the-job training courses and professional certifications in accountancy, project management, and architecture.
Career transitions	Chance	Chance was highlighted by all participants as a factor in changing their career path. One participant was sent a job position that was completely unrelated to their interests, and they applied on the spur of the moment and were hired. Another participant came across a job while assisting someone with their job hunt, applied, and was hired.
	Progression	All of the participants expressed a desire to advance in their careers. Many people, however, have struggled to get that promotion in their current jobs. There were either too many employees waiting for the next step up, a lack of management support, or no open positions. The organisations with no opportunities tended to be those with low staff turnover, hence no senior positions became available.

	Interests and passions	The majority of the participants mentioned their interests and passions and how they influenced their professional choices. Maths, music, and architecture were among their interests. While most of them were able to continue pursuing their passions, one of the participants had to change direction due to the lack of prospects in the music industry.
	Relocation	The majority of participants stated relocating for work. Some relocations were intentional, while others were necessary. The majority of relocations were favourable since they provided better opportunities and the chance to experience diverse cultures, but others were challenging due to a lack of familiarity and friendship.
	Responsibility	All of the participants mentioned the word "responsibility" at some point during the conversation. This responsibility manifested itself in the form of bills to pay and children to care for, resulting in a shift in attitudes toward employment. Even those without dependents were thinking about how their present employment choices would affect their future if their existing circumstances changed.
	Learning	All of the individuals stated learning several times. In all of the career stories, there was a strong desire to advance both personally and professionally. No one liked being

		stagnant in a job and they were eager to move on once there were no more opportunities to learn and progress.
	Transferable skills	Three of the participants mentioned how simple it was to transition their existing skillset to a different field of work. One participant switched from music to project management. In another scenario, the individual moved from retail to the civil service, and in the third, the participant changed from education to technology.
Adversity	**Unappreciated**	Some of the participants mentioned how important it is to feel valued by your employer. Receiving recognition for a job well done or the company investing in your development are two examples. One participant claimed that not feeling acknowledged caused him to put in less effort at work because he realised that nothing was ever good enough.
	Rejection	The majority of the participants have been rejected at some point in their lives. Many people experienced rejection the moment they graduated from university and attempted to enter the competitive graduate labour market. Others have had similar experiences when applying for a promotion. Some participants mentioned how difficult it is to watch others succeed while you appear to be failing.

	Barriers	All of the participants have faced some form of barrier in their professional development. These obstacles ranged from geographical to financial. One participant felt their prospects were limited because they were not ready or able to relocate away from their small hometown for work.
	Pressure and pace	At some point in their stories, all of the participants alluded to the pace of work. However, there are different points of view. The speed was sometimes too fast, and the pressure was too intense, according to the participants. At other times, it was accepted that boredom and repetition may make calmer intervals at work just as difficult. Getting the right pace of work is definitely a problem for everyone.
	Management issues	The majority of participants expressed issues with management. These problems were wide-ranging from rudeness to absence. It was fascinating to hear about the various management styles, such as hands-on, hands-off, unapproachable, and the criticiser.
Comparison	**Competition**	The majority of the participants mentioned competitiveness, particularly in the graduate job market. It's challenging to get a desirable job because most graduates have similar academic credentials and experience. It's also tough not to compare

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		yourself to people who have succeeded, thinking that if they can do it, why can't I?
	Peer pressure	Some of the participants mentioned peer pressure. When applying for graduate jobs at university and competing against others in similar positions, this pressure was felt. It was also mentioned once in professional employment, as platforms like LinkedIn allow you to compare how your peers are doing in their jobs compared to your own.
	Exposure	A number of participants mentioned how important it is to be exposed to role models in a professional setting. These role models gave them hope that they, too, might achieve great things. These people were more senior and successful in every case.
Informal Networks	**Guidance**	Some participants received help from supportive friends and colleagues with job applications. A number of participants expressed dissatisfaction with the university careers advice and felt compelled to seek help elsewhere.
	Reassurance	Three of the five participants stated that they needed reinforcement from others in order to pursue a career opportunity. This arose from a feeling of not being good enough for the role and requiring encouragement to pursue it. Job descriptions were mentioned as a

		disincentive because meeting all of the essential criteria is challenging.
	Knowledge	All of the participants mentioned a positive encounter with a contact in their field of interest. Benefits include providing insight into the profession to determine whether it is a good fit, as well as understanding what qualifications and experience are required to work in that field.
	Opportunity	Throughout the five career stories, there were numerous examples of this. Professors, family members, friends, family friends, and colleagues presented many job opportunities to the participants.

Appendix Two: Codebook Sample

Mother codes	Sub-codes	Summary	Description	No. of times mentioned	By no. of participants	
Previous Experience	Work	Part-time employment is hugely beneficial to employability because it helps to fund academic studies, develop transferable skills, become a more well-rounded graduate, answer competency-based interview questions, learn how to manage conflict, and provides an insight into the professional world.	Work experience was mentioned by all participants as a vital source of professional development. Some noted the skills acquired, such as communication and problem solving, while others alluded to the fact that it allowed them to experiment with their likes and dislikes in terms of a profession. For financial reasons, the majority of participants worked alongside their academic studies; yet, they all admitted that work experience was vital to compete in a crowded graduate landscape.	11	5	While I was growing confidence and help people.
	Professional	Professional employment has been a mixed bag. Expectations are frequently not satisfied, resulting in unhappiness. This could be a problem with expectations, as there is an obvious disconnect between what the participants expect the workplace to be like and what it actually is.	Participants cited management issues, a lack of feeling valued, excessive work hours, a lack of challenge, insufficient learning opportunities, and poor progression as factors of professional unhappiness. In many cases, the participants' professional choices left them unsatisfied and disappointed.	20	5	It was a mixed expe environment includ ; however, I knew t
	International	Possibilities to work abroad/study and expand one's CV. Employers highly value international experience since it exposes employees to a variety of contexts and working habits. It demonstrates adaptability and is becoming increasingly relevant in a globalised environment.	Three of the participants mentioned international experience. Two worked in professional roles overseas and one of them travelled internationally. Those who worked overseas felt that it assisted their employment prospects as it gave them a competitive advantage.	4	3	I have had the oppo gave me an advant
	Extra-curricular	Hobbies, such as rowing, can enhance job chances and provide a talking point for employers. It's especially critical for early-stage professionals who don't have a lot of work experience and must rely on extra-curricular activities to answer competency-based interview questions.	All of the participants mentioned extracurricular activities as something that made them more well-rounded in the eyes of potential employers. Sport, music, volunteering, and studying abroad were among the activities.	8	5	Being a competitive interview panel. It's
	Academic	Attending training and undertaking courses in order to improve one's knowledge and skillset in the professional sector. Qualifications might be offered in-house or initiated on an individual basis. Companies that invest in training are highly appreciated.	In addition to their academic degrees, the participants acknowledged obtaining qualifications through on-the-job training courses and professional certifications in accountancy, project management, and architecture.	18	5	What convinced me in a training course permanent position
		Unexpected opportunities that alter the trajectory of one's career. Some people refer to it as luck, while others refer to it as being at the right place at the right time.	Chance was highlighted by two people as a factor in changing their career path. The first			When looking for a technical manager

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