

## Book Review

### Degree Generation - The Making of Unequal Graduate Lives

Rita Hordósy

School of Education, University of Nottingham

[Rita.Hordosy@nottingham.ac.uk](mailto:Rita.Hordosy@nottingham.ac.uk)

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1888-8269>

The book entitled *Degree Generation - The Making of Unequal Graduate Lives* by Nicola Ingram and the research team behind the *Paired Peers* project reminds us of our role as higher education professionals: to support our students to become happy, successful students and then graduates wherever they go. It also, however, provides a reminder of the limit to our “powers” through pointing to persistent structural inequalities and ongoing policy failure to tackle these. As the authors “highlight how employability support for disadvantaged students needs to take account of the structural conditions that affect the hopes, aspirations and opportunities of individual students in different way”, whilst also demonstrating “the importance of looking at the detail of the [post-graduation] transition process, rather than simply considering destination points” (Ingram et al., 2023: 11 & 171).

Through a rich and detailed discussion Ingram and colleagues explore factors such as geography of home and workplace (see also the Office for Students’ data, OfS, 2021); access to broader networks, opportunities and resources; as well as the classed, gendered and racialised nature of university and post-graduation transitions result in different graduate *lives* (rather than just *outcomes*).

The book provides a compelling critique of the “value for money discourse” that invariably regards some degrees as “Mickey Mouse” or “low-value” (Morrison, 2023; Jones et al., 2020). It does so through several detailed stories of how graduates from middle-class backgrounds end up mobilising a diverse array of capitals by “knowing and playing the game” (Bathmaker et al., 2013). The book also draws the threads of graduate stories together with the wider context and overall outcomes at the University of Bristol and University of the West of England, the two institutions the *Paired Peers* project sought to compare and contrast. It shows how privileged graduates are more geographically mobile and are afforded more time to work out what they might do next through what Vigurs et al. (2019) termed “graduate gap years”. Further, middle-class graduates are more likely to be working in high salaried jobs considered to be graduate roles, tend to see themselves “fitting in” with the workplace culture, but also sometimes “bypass the need for ‘experience’ and competence, exchanging and putting ‘entitlement’ in its place” (Ingram et al., 2023: 58; Abrahams, 2016; Ingram & Allen, 2019). On the other hand, several accounts

show the real struggle of working-class graduates to find “financial stability and avoiding risk and precarity” (Ingram et al., 2023: 124).

Through a careful and detailed analysis of this rich dataset, Ingram and colleagues also contribute to the further conceptualisation of “graduateness”, that is “not located in knowledge gained, but in labour market conditions, which are a resource that is hoarded and maintained by a select grouping” (ibid: 178). Similarly, their Bourdieusian analysis to explore “individual practice as emanating from the internalization of structure” (ibid: 20) provides new conceptual tools such as “engineering capital” (the symbolically recognised capital in the engineering field), or “London habitus” that is “generated out of economic, cultural and geographical capital, alongside an associated cosmopolitanism and global acumen” (ibid: 62).

There are a number of issues with the book given the finite stories that can be told in this format. First, as already outlined in their earlier volume (Bathmaker et al., 2016), the *Paired Peers* research cohort is overwhelmingly white; as such, this dataset does not allow for a detailed exploration of lived experiences of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic student and graduate lives. Second, I am left to wonder about the stories that the book does not have the space for, both over time and beyond the group of graduates we have a chance to get to know. A more detailed account of the overall patterns of graduate outcomes in the sample, but also more detail about the personal projects beyond the monetary and prestige aspects would be very interesting to see. Third, especially Chapter 8 left me wonder about the limits of a Bourdieusian framing – the contrasts drawn here feel somewhat forced, with the interpretation becoming deterministic based on the binary class definitions used.

The book certainly shows why such longitudinal accounts of student and graduate lives can be an incredible source to explore these complex, diverse and multiple transitions. As the authors remark, their lives over time became intertwined with their research participants, feeling invested in the hopes and dreams of these young adults. The value of showing change and complexity at the individual level over time through longitudinal accounts goes counter to the data used to justify scrapping “low-value” degrees based on snapshots at 15 months upon graduation using a narrow set of criteria. Just as the *FutureTrack* study provided a robust account of graduate transitions following the 2006 cohort of undergraduates (Purcell et al., 2013; Elias et al., 2021), the *Paired Peers* project will remain a crucial reference point in exploring inequalities in the English higher education sector and broader labour market.

The *Paired Peers* project followed the students who started their degrees in Bristol in 2010 under a different tuition fee regime to the current one in England, upon which fees trebled and loan conditions worsened over time (Callender, 2012 & 2023). Further, the initially relatively generous non-repayable financial support from 2012 (Kaye, 2021; Clark & Hordósy, 2019) gave way in England to means-tested maintenance loans, meaning that “increasing proportions of students from middle-to-lower income backgrounds receive smaller maintenance loans, while the poorest graduate with the largest student loan debt” (Callender, 2023: 76; Callender & Davis, 2023). The insufficiency of maintenance support is exemplified by more and more students resorting to foodbanks for essentials and the growing ratio of students

working part-time (Freeman, 2023). Compounding these issues, student loans have been shown to have long-standing impact on other aspects of graduate lives, such as owning property (De Gayardon et al., 2022). I do hope that the authors will mobilise these rich accounts of graduate lives in further critique of education and labour market policies and institutional practice too.

## References

- Abrahams J (2016) Honourable mobility or shameless entitlement? Habitus and graduate employment. *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 38(5): 625–640.
- Bathmaker A-M, Ingram N and Waller R (2013) Higher education, social class and the mobilisation of capitals: Recognising and playing the game. *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 34(5–6): 723–743.
- Bathmaker A-M, Ingram N, Abrahams J, Hoare A, Waller R and Bradley H (2016) *Higher Education, Social Class and Social Mobility: The Degree Generation*, London: Palgrave Macmillan
- Callender C (2012) The 2012/13 reforms of higher education in England: changing student finances and funding. In: Kilkey M, Ramia G, and Farnsworth K (eds). *Social Policy Review 24: Analysis and Debate in Social Policy*. Bristol: Policy Press, pp. 77–96.
- Callender, C (2023) Policy divergence: Changes in student funding systems across the UK since 2002/03. In Carasso, H (ed) *UK higher education – policy, practice and debate during HEPI's first 20 years*. Oxford: Higher Education Policy Institute. Available at: <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/UK-higher-education-Policy-practice-and-debate-during-HEPIs-first-20-years.pdf>
- Callender C and Davis S (2023) Graduates' responses to student loan debt in England: "sort of like an acceptance, but with anxiety attached". *Higher Education*. DOI: [10.1007/s10734-023-01045-5](https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-023-01045-5).
- Clark T and Hordósy R (2019) Social Identification, Widening Participation and Higher Education: Experiencing Similarity and Difference in an English Red Brick University. *Sociological Research Online* 24(3): 353–369.
- De Gayardon A, Callender C and Desjardins SL (2022) Does Student Loan Debt Structure Young People's Housing Tenure? Evidence from England. *Journal of Social Policy* 51(2): 221–241.
- Elias P, Purcell K, Atfield G, et al. (2021) *Ten years on – The Futuretrack Graduates*. Warwick: Warwick Institute for Employment Research. Available: [https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/ier/futuretrack/findings/ten\\_years\\_on\\_-\\_life\\_after\\_graduation\\_full\\_report\\_july\\_2021.pdf](https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/ier/futuretrack/findings/ten_years_on_-_life_after_graduation_full_report_july_2021.pdf)
- Freeman J (2023) *How to beat a cost-of-learning crisis: Universities' support for students*. Oxford: Higher Education Policy Institute. Available at:

<https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2023/09/14/how-to-beat-a-cost-of-learning-crisis-universities-support-for-students/>

Kaye, N (2021) Evaluating the role of bursaries in widening participation in higher education: a review of the literature and evidence, *Educational Review*, 73:6, 775-797, DOI: [10.1080/00131911.2020.1787954](https://doi.org/10.1080/00131911.2020.1787954)

Ingram, N and Allen, K (2019) 'Talent-spotting' or 'social magic'? Inequality, cultural sorting and constructions of the ideal graduate in elite professions, *The Sociological Review*, 67(3): 723–40.

Morrison, N (2023) *Crackdown On 'Mickey Mouse Degrees' Will Hit Poorest Students Hardest*. Forbes. Available at: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/nickmorrison/2023/07/17/crackdown-on-mickey-mouse-degrees-will-hit-poorest-students-hardest/>

Office for Students (2021) Official statistics with experimental statistics - A geography of employment. Bristol: OfS. Available at: <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/a-geography-of-employment/>

Purcell K, Elias P, Atfield G, et al. (2013) *Transitions into employment, further study and other outcomes: The Futuretrack Stage 4 Report*. Warwick: Warwick Institute for Employment Research.

Steven J, Vigurs, K & Harris, D (2020) Discursive framings of market-based education policy and their negotiation by students: the case of 'value for money' in English universities, *Oxford Review of Education*, 46:3, 375-392, DOI: [10.1080/03054985.2019.1708711](https://doi.org/10.1080/03054985.2019.1708711)

Vigurs K Jones S, Diane Harris D and Everitt J (2018) Graduate gap years Narratives of postponement in graduate employment transitions in England. In *Graduate Careers in Context—Research, Policy and Practice*. In: Burke C and Christie F (eds). Abingdon: Routledge Research in Higher Education, pp. 71-84