How institutional context shapes transitions to work between occupations

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Introduction

- The United Kingdom is regarded as a *liberal market economy* in which the transition from school to work is weakly institutionalized and relatively unstructured
- Diprete et al 2017 found, examining France, United Stated and Germany that there is considerable heterogeneity in school-to-work linkages within countries across educational field and occupation
  - Perhaps predictable, Germany overall had stronger overall linkage strength than France or the United States
  - **However,** the extent to which the three countries differ varies substantially across educational levels and fields of study
  - Generally stronger at higher educational levels than at lower levels
  - the existing comparative literature (e.g. VoC) literature is too macro-oriented to appreciate the granularity of the linkage process and its consequences.
- So, occupational or field specific context matter in terms of understanding the transition between Higher Education and the labour market
- This paper examines some key factors that structure these transitions within the wider British socio-political context
- Focus on what role Higher Education plays within the labour market

Transitions

Standard theoretical frameworks for understanding the relationship between education and labour market outcomes (such as wages and positions) are:

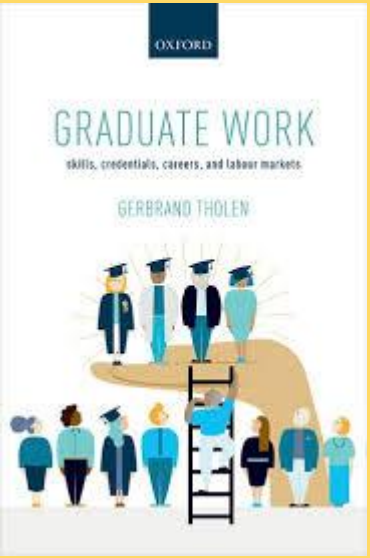
a)human capital theories: educational experiences and qualifications warrant productivity-enhancing skills

b) positional competition theories (which include signalling/screening and queuing theories), educational experiences and qualifications form signals of particular useful characteristics

c) Credentialist theories- educational experiences and qualifications represent opportunity for closure

The occupation-specific role of Higher Education takes within occupations could shape how transitions take place irrespective or in combination with a larger macro institutional context

The study



- Skills, Credentials and Jobs in the Graduate Labour Market: a Renewed Sociological Analysis (2012-2015)
- Funded by the British Academy
- Create a better understanding of the post-recession British graduate labour market
- Based on four occupational case studies:

1. software engineers
2. press officers
3. financial analysts
4. laboratory-based scientists/technicians in biotech/pharmaceutical companies

- Why these four?

The study

- Semi structured interviews with workers (graduates and non-graduates), employers, HR managers/recruiters and Higher Education lecturers.
- Wide range of sectors, companies, locations
- Variety of ages, career stages
- 25-28 interviews for each occupation
- Exploring (among other issues):

-How and where graduates obtain their skills;

-How the competition to enter the occupation is organised;

-What the role is of degrees and other credentials within the competition;

-The employability strategies of those who enter the occupation;

-The skills demanded by employers to access the occupation;

-The effects of the influx of graduates into the labour market;

-The skills and abilities that are utilized in the work process;

-How careers are developed and maintained within the occupation.

- Education takes on different roles and different meanings within the four graduate occupations
- Whereas HE deeply shapes the access to the occupation (as well as career progression and the status of the occupation), this is far less the case for other graduate occupations such as press officers
- There also exist differences in the functions HE qualifications have within these occupations

Higher Education as skills developer (1)

- The role of HE within occupation is not fixed and depends on the nature of the work (also linked to sector and job design) and how well HE institutions can keep up with the demands labour process.
- In some cases, HE courses are seen as ineffective. For instance, many of the laboratory-based scientists observe that universities do not offer enough practical lab experience

> "*If they come straight from university these days they rarely have done much in their lab. So there is one set of students which stand out and they are the ones that have done sandwich years, where they have done a year in industry." [Sam, head of Pharmacology, pharmaceutical company]*

- Or they are seen as not teaching the right technologies or not using the right pieces of laboratory apparatus.

> *You can have a general understanding of how a lab works, but yeah you'd learn on the job and as new techniques come in you get taught those or, you know, somebody else learns them and passes them on to you. So yeah it is … it's very fast moving, so you have to learn on the job really. [*Ella, an ex-scientist in biotechnology]

Higher Education as the developer of skills (2)

- In other cases, HE is seen as fundamentally incapable to deliver the skills needed
- Many software engineers commented that formal education is an inefficient way of learning to code and to work on the job. The best education for software engineers is seen as working-on-the-job

> *I think anything I learnt at university for that could have been done in perhaps three months. So you look at the three years' work and you think well, I could have learnt all that in, you know, a three month course and gone straight in two years earlier kind of thing. [Winston, software engineer, IT company]*

> *You have people who have a natural ability in your so-called bedroom coders and people who've done it from a young age. Then you have the people who have tried to learn it through university, and it's hit and miss, you have some good and some bad. [Nick, senior software engineer, Tech company]*

Qualifications as signals

The study showed great variation between different occupational fields in relation to the extent in which qualifications were able signal labour market value.

For financial analysts, university degrees were able to position candidates ahead of the queue in relation to non-graduates

“My degree was to give me the bare basics of what I need to learn, to be able to walk into someone’s office, shake their hand, have a light conversation about it, and hopefully get a job and learn on the job.“[Esther, senior financial analyst, law firm]

Professional qualifications were further signals of relative advantage and seen as a sign of dedication to the occupation. Professional qualifications sideline HE in both the provision and qualification within the occupation.

“They don't look for anything else. You have to be ACC or similar, that's all. And then you have to pass the tests and even for the job that I've just started. “[Andrea, finance business analyst, finance company]

Degrees as means of closure

- For scientists, an important strategy to advance within the occupational structure is through advanced qualifications in the form of doctoral degrees.
- Scientists with PhDs occupy an increasing share of these sectors' workforce. This leaves workers without advanced qualifications at a disadvantage, both in terms of the job tasks aligned with their role and career progression.
- Although some companies will let graduate scientists perform much of the traditional scientific work, in other companies they have limited autonomy and work in assistance to PhD- level scientists

  They'll just be doing the basic work, so quite a lot of, you know, the donkey work just setting up experiments and then the analysing of them would then be passed on to the people with the PhDs who've got the full expertise in actually, you know, how to read the results and everything like that. [James, a lab manager within a biotech company]

- The context in which PhD credentials provide advancement is one of increasing educational participation. Many believe that credential inflation has affected the industry, leading to a situation where, increasingly, previously non-graduate technician jobs are taken by graduates and scientific roles increasingly by postgraduate workers without a greater skill use or demand:

  I'm not sure if the roles are any more complex, I think the expectation … it's almost because … when I graduated perhaps there were 15% of graduates went on to PhDs, now 50% of graduates going to PhDs. [Dominic, scientist, pharmaceutical company]

Ambivalence in the value of a degree

For press officers, one increasingly needs to have a degree in order to access the occupation. Yet the degree is not more than a base

> *"On paper so many people now are absolutely on a par with each other, if everybody has those qualifications then you tend to look for something else and what else is in there. So yeah, I would absolutely look to work experience and personality and willingness to learn, I think that's the danger with anybody, and I was subject to actually the same at the time, is that you assume that you're at the end of your education, whereas you might forget, you absolutely mustn't forget you're absolutely at the beginning of your career and effectively now a new blank sheet of paper and everybody's in the same boat really to start with. It's the extra add-ons which are really important I think if everybody's got the same qualifications." [Janet, public relations manager, car manufacturer]*

PR degrees are nonetheless not highly regarded

> *"I would go for an English graduate over a media relations graduate, I think." [Lucy, head of media relations, manufacturing company]*

> *"I'm not a particularly big fan of the PR university degrees that people do; I think that I'd probably rather someone explored a passion, and then had done some interns or had some experience in PR." [Alastair, press manager, Internet company]*

There is a apprenticeship route but has a mixed reputation

What does HE represent?

	laboratory scientists	**software engineers**	**press officers**
credentials represent	initial work preparation	work experience	various
providers of skills, knowledge and other (technical) competencies	medium/high	medium/low	medium/low
signal of skills and characteristics	medium	medium	low
opportunity for closure	medium/high	medium	low
type of credentialism	*functional*	*ancillary*	*peripheral*

Conclusions

- The national political economy lens has offered a reasonably useful but broad analytical framework to understand the role of institutions in work-education transitions.
- Yet it needs to be supplemented by analyses that disaggregate the data to look for occupation or sector specific school to work linkages
- The findings of the study suggest that various factor influence the transitions from education to work within occupations such as:
  - Skills used at work (or allowed to be used at work)
  - the educational makeup of the field
  - Training systems and providers
- In occupations in which HE is a key skill provider, transitions tend to be more predicable and structured (e.g. medicine). Yet in other cases, in which qualifications work as signals or means of closure the transition may become less predictable.
- This presentation has mainly looked at how education serves different purposes but there many other occupational factors that could influence the transition such as historic relationship with HE, licencing, union power etc.