

Paper

Title: 'When it comes to what employers are looking for, I don't think I'm it for a lot of them': Experiencing class inequalities in higher education and beyond into the labour market.

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Much research on adults in higher education has focused on issues of access and participation.. As a result little is known about what happens to non-traditional students after leaving university even though employability has now become the new buzzword in HE research on this topic is sparse. There is even less research which focuses on the voices of non-traditional students and their aspirations and discourses in relation to employability. This paper draws on the findings of two countries, England and Ireland, from a six country European project on employability of non-traditional students using biographical research methods. Each country has undertaken 40 interviews with both undergraduates and graduates as well as interviews with university staff and employers. The focus of this paper will be on working class students and issues of class inequalities in HE in relation to employability. But we also recognise that class intersects with other forms of inequality such as gender, ethnicity and age. Once in the system there is an assumption by higher education institutions that non-traditional adult education students experience a level playing field alongside their younger middle class counterparts but research indicates that this is not the case, particularly in relation to future employment (Tomlinson, 2012). We begin by locating the research in a socio-economic, political and policy context and move to a critical discussion of employability in HE and beyond into the workplace. A brief overview of key literature in the field will be undertaken. However, the core of the paper will centre on the narratives of students: two English and two Irish. Their stories reveal awareness of class inequalities they face in the labour market in relation to cultural, economic and social capital as well as issues of locality, gender and age. The stories also indicate a sense of precarity in their lifecourse in a society which has become highly reflexive and fluid (Alheit, 1999, Alheit & Dausien, 2002, West, 2016). Despite significant continuities in class experience and structures there is in the narratives a strong sense of the unforeseen and the new. This paradox of continuity and change will be explored. We will outline the broader theoretical implications of the findings in relation to two contending discourses of precarity and class. On one hand we are offered (Savage et al, 2015) a notion of precarity which identifies this with the poorest section of the working class. On the other hand for Standing (2009) precarity is understood as a generalised condition created by changes in economic's, welfare regimes and politics. The paper will conclude with some remarks on theorising about precarity in relation to higher education and argue that employability functions to perpetuate class inequalities both within HE and society as

a whole.

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Diversity with equality