

***'You need post graduate level education to work in  
Aldi these days': Class, credentials and  
occupational aspirations in contemporary Higher  
Education***

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# Research teams



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- University of Seville, Spain
- Stockholm University, Sweden
- University of Warwick, UK

# The project and the context

## Aims and Objectives

- Understand employability from the student and graduate perspective
- To look critically at employability
- Identify the strategies graduates are utilising to enter the labour market and what promotes or limits
- Explore the impact of age, gender, class, ethnicity and disability on students' employment prospects
- Explore employer and university staff perspectives
- Implications for policy and practice
- Comparative European perspective
- Class from a Bourdieusian, feminist, critical realist perspective (Bourdieu, 1984; Reay et al 2005; Sayer, 2005)

# The project and the context

## Research in the UK

- Neo-liberal and marketised HE system
- Lack of research on non-traditional students in HE and employability (Tomlinson, 2008)
- Most research takes a human capital theory and individualistic approach
- Critics of above have developed a 'social positioning' perspective (Holmes, 2013, Tomlinson, 2008, Kalfe & Taska, 2015;)
- Inequalities by class and HE institutions

# Access, employability and the 'black box' of education

- Ireland- open, liberal economy that has experienced very rapid 'late industrialisation'. Upgrading and polarisation in labour market in past two decades (Breathnach, 2007)
- Social and educational policy very strongly wedded to human capital. Remarkable expansion of HE and radically changed educational profile. HE is now tasked with startling range of objectives.
- Twenty years of access- uneven impact (Finnegan et al, 2017). Very little known about non-traditional graduates (Finnegan & O'Neill, 2015a).
- In crisis employability became new keyword (Finnegan & O'Neill, 2015b).
- Precarity chosen as one of our sensitising concepts

# Biographical research

- Humanistic and subjective approach to research
- 'offer rich insights into the dynamic interplay of individuals and history, inner and outer worlds, self and other' (Merrill & West, 2009: 1)
- Although individual they are also telling collective stories of lives which are classed, raced and gendered, for example. – structure and agency
- Aims to break down the power relationship between the researcher and the researched (Oakley, 1981)
- Gives voice and subjectivity to participants (and researchers) and places them centrally in the research process

# Key findings

- UK- inequalities in the HE system as top firms only recruit from top universities but also inequalities within elite universities where issues of mainly class but also gender, race and age impact on future employment. Don't fit in with culture of top companies (culture, dress, language). Discriminated by ties to locality. Lack of social networks and finance for unpaid internships. Careers services do not address the needs of adult students
- Ireland – detraditionalisation and individualisation of lifecourse (cf Alheit and Dausien, 2002) but continuing impact of class inequalities. Search for occupational security and 'good work'. Strong, if slowly diminishing, faith in HE to support this transition.

# UK STUDENT(S)

- **Paul** – non-instrumental attitude – motivated to study to gain knowledge – strong working class identity – 1<sup>st</sup> class honours degree - back into a precarious job of roofing – caught between 2 cultures – accepted for Masters' –lack of finance
- Compared to FE – felt more isolated and self – conscious – age but also a class issue
- I don't know if I would have chosen social studies...but because it was Warwick and I knew that Warwick was a good institution that was what kind of what swayed me

# Paul

- ...but in the finance industry, as much as they say they can't discriminate for age and all these things, like I know for a fact that they wouldn't be looking for me. Like my accent as well, I put my sentences together, they don't really like. They're not going to have me sitting in a boardroom in Singapore. Do you know what I mean? I wouldn't want to do that anyway...So when it comes to what employers are looking for, I don't think I'm it for a lot of them.
- Doing politics has helped him to understand his position in the labour market from a Marxist approach

# Sharon

Studies law – choice of degree shaped by life experiences – problems with finance and studying – aware of the need for social networks to get into the law profession

- I chose Warwick because it's in the top 5 and it's very close to my house. I looked at the newspapers and Warwick is the best especially for law. I know that solicitors can be quite picky about what university you've been to, to whether they employ you or not.

- Last year I went to a Law Society dinner. It wasn't part of the application process – it was kind of discovering more about us but then from that they did invite me to apply to them. I think because it's informal but formal but there are employees who have been with the company quite a while or sometimes graduates so you can talk to them. And because it's dinner, it's not an interview setting you can ask them any questions you want to, you can get tips. It does actually help.

- Some of the students I've spoken to, their parents are partners in solicitors so obviously they're going to walk into a job. Definitely down the barrister's route it's about what private school you've been to. I think money definitely because if you haven't got the money you're just not going to the bar. It costs too much money - £18, 000 and £12, 000 for solicitors and then books. I think it's more who you know as well as what university you're from.

# David: risky transitions with an uncertain destination

- School *“was pretty dire looking back [..] Going there, there was certain discrimination because of where you were from. I was from a poorer area. We didn’t have an influence in the community. Moved into a “mickey mouse” vocational stream.*
- Felt *“like a square peg in a round hole”* in his early jobs. Became a taxi driver but became very dissatisfied.
- Personal learning projects and move into college: *“I am the new me. I am somebody else now. I don’t associate myself with Jobstown, that background [..] I would call that a deprived background, deprived of education and knowledge, deprived of capability and opportunities”.*
- The long ordeal after college: four years of precarity as a teacher: *“ I have done everything I can “ to “Be, try and make myself invaluable” “trying to fecking please everybody”* but in extremely difficult circumstances .

# Chloe: making her own way

- Flourishing at college but aspects of herself remain hidden amongst peers. Feels some anger, resentment and jealousy
- Occupational aspirations important to her. How is good work described? As: non-routine and secure and offers communicative richness, enough money, autonomy and status. Makes link between paid work and broader concerns and projects. *“Helping other people understand”*
- Notion of good work and attitude to education partially elaborated out of negative work experience (mainly familial rather than personal).

# Chloe on her choices and her family experience of work

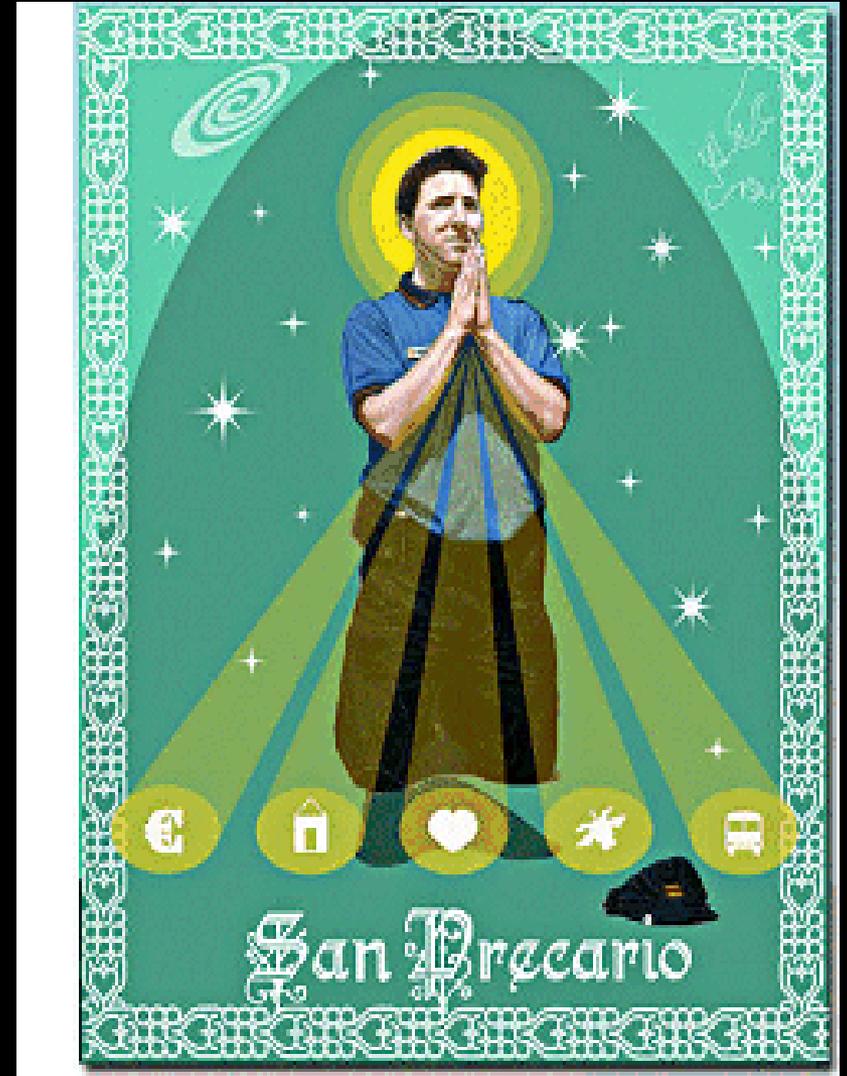
- *Yeah, my dad knows he was never pushed for higher education. He – his dad was a fisherman so he worked on boats a lot when he was younger, and his older brother went to school and you know did everything by the book. And he was you know, the loser and the you know - oh look that's my loser brother, the learning one with the books. But looking back now he always looks at me and he like – whatever you do, don't ever leave college – you know, work as hard as you can, do as much as you can. 'cause he's like – look at my brother, he's sitting there, you know, a house in Mayo, a house here, a house up the road you know. He's three or four houses, a nice fancy car, nice comfortable life, you know. He doesn't stress, you know, his hands are always nice and soft, he's not big - like everything, my dad's a farmer now, the fishing's obviously the salmon thing, that's gone, so dad lost out on all that...The farmers are being cut now as well, 'cause he doesn't have a big farm, it's just a little one to keep him kind of going. That's being cut*

# Next steps

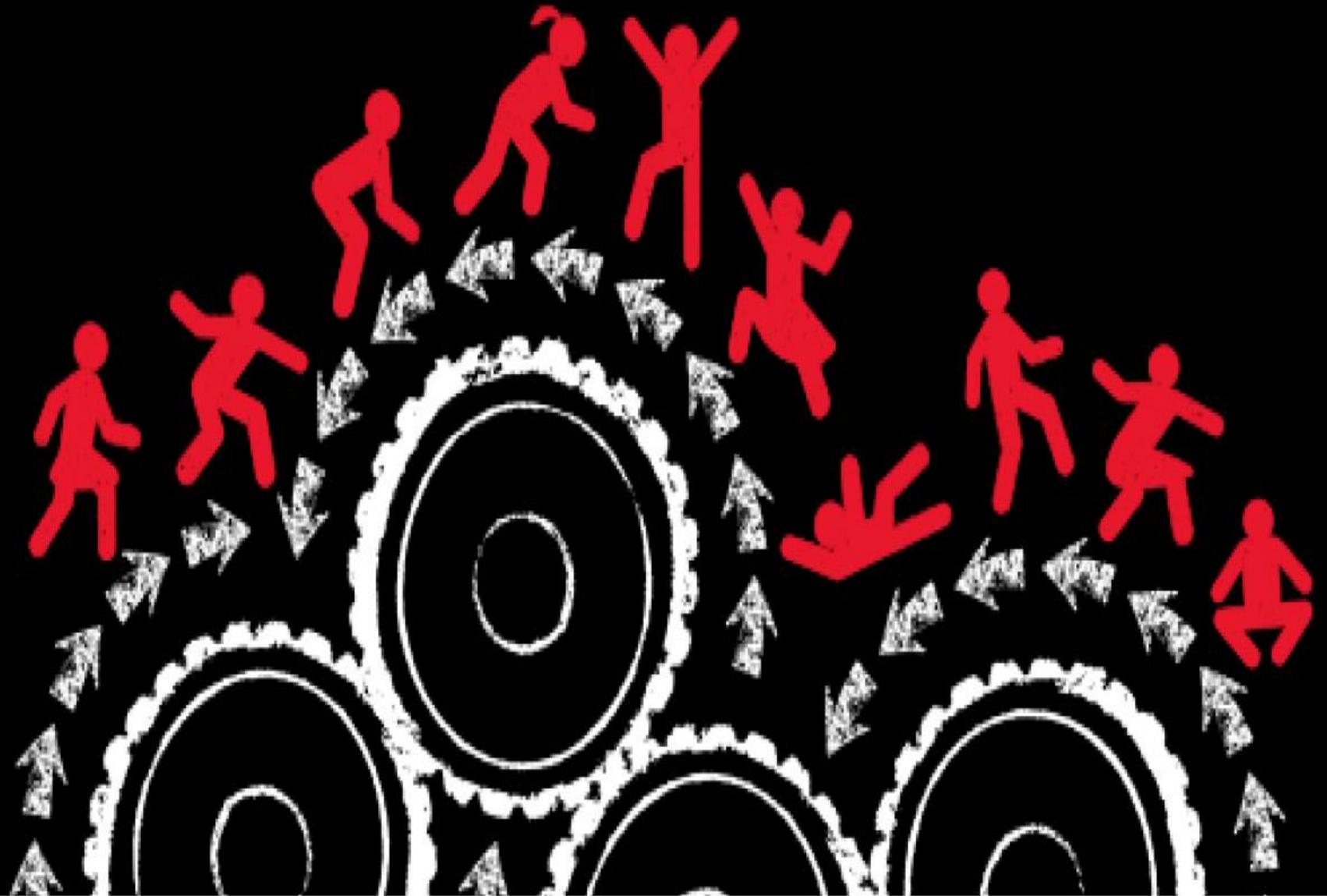
Chloe intends to do masters: *I'm not running Aldi down, I'm just saying you know, to get a job, in even a shop scanning groceries, you need to have so much qualification.* Anticipates challenges ahead not least in terms of social networks but hopeful.

# Precarious times

- Precarity a term produced between the academy and social movements (eg Bourdieu, 1999) and EuroMayday.
- **Precarity part of a broader process** linked to rise of financialised neoliberalism (Streeck, 2016).
- **Longterm effects:** employment and welfare insecurity, erosion of occupational identity (Standing, 2009) and loss of a sense of a future (Berardi, 2016).
- Changing class boundaries? (Savage, 2014; Standing, 2009; Wright, 2016)







# Conclusions

- The role employability as a discourse has in perpetuating class inequalities both within HE and society as a whole.
- Universities are not level playing fields – reproduces the class system
- Employers stratify universities – top firms recruit from top universities
- Having social capital and networks, cultural and economic capital influential in getting top graduate jobs
- Class also intersects with gender and race inequalities in the labour market so that:

- Recruitment to top jobs is now favouring 'poshness' – Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission study – June 2015
- Age also important – perception by adult students that employers don't want them
- Transition into the labour market often takes longer for working class graduates and in precarious times may have to take non-graduate jobs
- Need to take a critical stance on employability and challenge the individualistic, neo-liberal approach.

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