

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

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EMPLOY – about the project

Objectives:

- Understand employability from the student and graduate perspective.
- Explore the impact of age, gender, class, ethnicity and disability on students' employment prospects.
- Explore the approaches, attitudes and needs of employers (different sectors) and other stakeholders
- Map the different HE contexts in relation to the employability of NTS in the partner countries and identify the differences and similarities across Europe

Employability: what is in focus?

In plain sight

- Responsible and reflexive individual agents supported by labour activation measures.
- A fluid world of change and innovation in which there are emerging opportunities in labour market but also threat of exclusion to 'knowledge poor'.
- Education as panacea, But HE needs reform -measurable outcomes and listening more carefully to employers.
- In crisis need to respond to needs of Knowledge based Economy

Hidden in the shadows

- ❖ Uncertain and weak growth and rise in unemployment in leading industrialised countries. Debtfare states (Soederbergh, 20150).
- ❖ Neoliberal globalisation: mobility of capital and massive growth in global workforce.
- ❖ Rising inequalities, increased precarity and individualisation.
- ❖ Credentialisation and underemployment. Intense competition
- ❖ Causes of crisis (Lapavitsas, 2013; Standing, 2009; Streeck, 2016).

National context Ireland: class, the KBE and educational aspirations

- Ireland is a highly globalised open economy which has experienced rapid 'late industrialisation' large scale social transformation and, more recently, deep crisis.
- Riven by class inequality- continuities but changing morphology.
- Enormous faith in education as 'fix' to wide range of social problems and believed by policymakers that will guarantee of future cohesion and competitiveness.
- Rapid expansion and development of access. New dilemmas and contradictions in a Knowledge Based Economy imaginary (Sum & Jessop, 2013). Education is tasked with meeting a startling range of objectives.
- Students views are rarely foregrounded in Irish HE research and policy (Fleming, Loxley & Finnegan, 2017). Emphasis on entry point to HE rather than on student experience and long term destinations.
- Understanding educational change in relation to social inequalities

National context: UK – hierarchies and inequalities in the HE system and the labour market

- UK highly stratified HE system which is also neo-liberal and marketised
- But also a more diverse student population as a result of widening participation policies
- Employability an increasing concern in HEIs – *'It now appears no longer enough just to be a graduate, but instead an employable graduate'* (Tomlinson, 2012: 25) and an individualistic approach
- Transition into the labour market often takes longer for working class graduates and in precarious times may have to take non-graduate jobs
- Top companies recruit from the top universities – looking for a particular type of graduate (class, race, age and gender issues)
- Recruitment to top jobs is now favouring 'poshness' – Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission study– June 2015. Working class adult graduates experience barriers in the labour market

Uncertain pathways and risky transitions



Uncertain pathways and risky transitions

- Students and graduates are told stories of managing dilemmas and contradictions thrown up by the macro socio-economic trends outlined earlier.
- Evidence of 'biographicity' (Alheit & Dausien, 2002). Responded to in various ways but also evidence of structural limits to such biographical action which are important to understanding employability in a 'world on the move'.
- Varied strategies and trajectories— Chloe (21) David (48) Maria (28) and Grace (30).

Sharon's story : past influences, aspirations for social mobility and lack of social capital

- A troubled childhood (mother murdered by father, foster home at 12) affected her later schooling *'I went to school for my free school meals. I didn't really participate'*. No school qualifications. Single parent at 17 living in homeless accommodation
- Various jobs – then became a Prison Officer *'dad went to prison...I was intrigued about what is behind those gates'*
- Studies Law as a result of life experiences at university – *'I chose Warwick because it's in the top 5 and it's very close to my house. I know that solicitors can be quite picky about what university you've been to, to whether they employ you or not'*.
- Aware of the need for social networks to get into the law profession. *'Last year I went to a Law Society dinner. It's informal but formal but there are employees who have been with companies for quite a while so you can talk to them. And because it's dinner, not an interview, you can ask them any questions you want to, you can get tips. It actually does help'*.
- Class, social capital and finance issues – *'Some of the students I've spoken to, their parents are solicitors, so obviously they're going to walk into a job. Definitely the barrister's route is about which private school you went to. If you haven't got the money you're 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 as well what university you're from'*

Class, capitals and futures

- Shifting class boundaries and experiences (Savage, 2014; Wright, 2016) especially in relation to education. Individualisation of class.
- Intense competition and 'The broken promise of education' (Brown, Ashton & Lauder, 2011).
- Changing composition of capitals required for that 'bit extra'. Credentials < embodied cultural capital and social capital (see Burke, 2015 Bourdieu, 1986; Fuller et al, 2016).



Class, capitals and futures

- Individualisation of class \leftrightarrow discourse of employability.
- Narrowing resources for 'biographicity' in a era of deepening inequality.
- How to respond? Cultivate the 'sociological imagination' to:
 - Identify existence and causes of class inequality.
 - Support collective agency.
 - Reimagine public institutions including HE.