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Graduate employability, employment prospects and work-readiness in the changing field of professional work

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Abstract

In the light of emerging challenges to traditional employment patterns, not least, global competition for 'location free' professional work, the Higher Education sector is facing increasing demands for graduates to transition more effectively from education to work. Accordingly, the paper draws on Bourdieu's account of practice and the process of 'culturing' to explore the application of those personal behaviours and dispositions that go beyond the observable knowledge and employability credentials that, typically, are conferred by a university degree. Of particular concern is the role of the shared service centre model in the elimination, automation and offshoring of those entry-level tasks that, traditionally, have provided routes into professional careers. Empirical findings suggest that the *process* of culturing could provide a game playing advantage in securing graduate employment through the projection of work-readiness. A call is made for management educators, employers, government and professional bodies to think more creatively in fostering student behaviours and dispositions in work-based learning alongside, rather than at the expense of, developing intellectual skills and subject knowledge.

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1. Introduction

We cannot always build the future for our youth, but we can build our youth for the future.
(Franklin D. Roosevelt, 1940)

The massification of higher education (HE) over the past three decades is a success story across the world (Schofer, & Meyer, 2005). In the United Kingdom (UK), the National Audit Office (NAO) reported that participation rates have risen to 49% of school leavers (NAO, 2017). In England and Wales (E&W), the level of applications to study is proving resilient (UCAS, 2018) despite graduates now incurring significant study debt of around £50,000 (Kirby, 2016). Despite reported mismatches in skills between HE and employers' needs in some fields (Prospects, 2018), the overall demand for graduates appears buoyant (Highfliers, 2019), due in no small part to a significant effort by universities in furthering employability credentials in the past 20 years (Rothwell & Rothwell, 2016). Yet, employers still bemoan graduates' lack of preparation for work (Jackson, Sibson, & Riebe, 2013). In this paper, we provide evidence-based arguments that suggest the present buoyancy may not be a sustainable position, especially, in some of the core 'management' professional disciplines that are presently being transformed through work re-engineering, automation and offshoring. In particular, we address challenges expressed by Anderson, Hibbert, Mason, & Rivers (2018), that management education in business schools should be more than a 'cash cow' (p.3), moreover, that educators need to rethink what the future of management education might look like. In doing so, we respond to Anderson et al.'s call for '*developing new curricula, ...and educational processes to fit the changing times.*' (p.7).

The particular concern for this enquiry is the transformation of professional business support functions, such as finance, IT, HR and procurement, through the Shared Service Centre (SSC) model which invokes new working methods and the redistribution of work on a global basis (Rothwell, Herbert, & Seal, 2011). Whilst, work redesign is not a new phenomenon, nowadays, with reliable internet connections and Cloud-based storage/processing, white-collar work can be digitised and reconfigured over time and distance (Howcroft & Richardson, 2012). These changes present new opportunities for labour arbitrage (Wise & Martin, 2017) in a similar fashion to the changes that affected manufacturing in the 1980s and 1990s. The consequence is a reduction in the overall labour force and, in particular, fewer lower-level tasks that have traditionally provided entry-level work for graduates embarking on professional careers (Rothwell et al., 2011).

The structure of the paper is as follows. The next section reviews the nature of employability as a relative credential in a globalised field of work. This is followed by a discussion of the changing nature of professional support services in the context of Pierre Bourdieu's writings on education and work. The fourth section explains the methods used to gather empirical evidence from SSCs, a stakeholder working group and an exploratory study based on a sample of graduates in work. The fifth section presents the findings, followed by a discussion about the nature of work-readiness and learning processes. The final section makes some concluding comments, along with a call for action and further research.

2. The changing field of higher education and graduate employability

2.1 Responsibility for work-readiness

The tension between employers and HE about who should be responsible for providing work-ready graduates is longstanding (e.g. Helyer, 2011; Jackson & Wilton, 2016; Starkey & Tempest, 2008). In the UK, concerted attention across the HE sector to raise the level of employability by developing more vocationally relevant skill-sets in graduates was galvanised to a significant extent by the recommendations of the Dearing Report (1997). Skills such as: good time-keeping and *personal* organisation; *interpersonal* negotiation and communication; *number* and *technology* skills (see PINT framework of Herbert & Rothwell, 2004), are essentially transferable between different organisational contexts and vocational sectors and prepare students for the demands of employment after graduation. Yet, whatever the ideal scope and mix, the transferable skills identified for development tended to comprise those that are relatively discrete and which are generally relatively straightforward to identify and evidence for the purpose of curriculum vitae and job specifications.

A further term in the work-readiness debate is 'competence'; commonly associated with those vocational schemes that seek to calibrate a worker's ability to perform a given task to a certain level in an independent manner. However, the notion of competence tends to sidestep those personal behaviours and dispositions that, whilst more difficult to identify and articulate, might signal a person's social background and thus, influence, either consciously or subconsciously, judgements about their potential for employment and advancement on the part of employers. Consequently, a delineation between transferable skills, competence and behavioural dispositions encourages a sharper focus on how possession of the latter can provide a game playing advantage for some candidates that might have a similar employability level (based on a suite of transferable skills) and task competence credentials to their peers.

More generally, the notion of employability, as projecting a wider and longer-term sense of 'graduateness' (Hillage & Pollard, 1998) has become 1) embedded in curricular learning outcomes; 2) institutionalised through quality monitoring regimes; and, 3) promoted in university advertising campaigns. A graduate is considered employable if he/she has a certain set of credentials which match the employer's role and person specification and has the potential to develop a sustainable career along with the ability to manage life in general (Dacre-Pool, Qualter, & Sewell, 2014: Jackson & Chapman, 2012; Rothwell & Rothwell, 2016). Yet, graduate employability is a multi-faceted concept (Rothwell & Rothwell, 2016). It appeals both to employers demanding so-called 'plug and play' workers and to HE institutions that compete to attract students on the promise of employment success on graduation (Arora, 2015; Hill, Walkington, & France, 2016; Kalfa & Taksa, 2015; Pavlin & Svetlik, 2014).

In E&W[1], the promise of enhanced employability has been used to justify students contributing to the full cost of their study and living costs; thereby, 1) moving debt from the public to the private purse; 2) recasting HE as a market with 'customer voice'; and, 3) bringing into sharper focus those output credentials that can be benchmarked between competing institutions (Blackmore, Bulaitis, Jackman, & Tan, 2016; Pemberton, Jewell, Faggian, & King, 2013; Wilton, 2012). Put simply, students are paying in effect for a 'game-playing' advantage to enable them to move from the field of education to the field of work (Jackson, 2014; Jameson, Strudwick, Bond-Taylor, & Jones 2012). Yet, in a competitive global labour market, employability at an individual level can soon become a ubiquitous rather than a differentiating credential (Britton, Dearden, Shephard, & Vignoles, 2016; Tomlinson, 2008). As Hirsch (1997: p.5) noted succinctly, 'if everyone stands on tiptoe, no-one sees further'.

Some critical perspectives on employability go further, suggesting that a focus on employability has drawn attention from more fundamental concerns such as the lack of availability of jobs (Chertkovskaya, 2013; Rothwell & Rothwell, 2016). Indeed, despite the current buoyancy of the UK graduate market (High Fliers, 2019), there is evidence that some sectors of the labour market may not be keeping up with the massification of HE (Brown,

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[1] Whilst the economy of the United Kingdom is the focus of the paper in terms of student employment prospects, within that domain it is only the jurisdictions of England and Wales that students incur substantive study debt. Separate local arrangements apply in Scotland (no study fees) and Northern Ireland (very low fees) although, the proportion of the overall UK student population represented by those two countries is small - see Kirby (2016).

Lauder, & Ashton, 2011; Bathmaker, Ingram, & Waller, 2013). This is already causing some graduates to be under-employed or, even unemployed (Forsyth 2017; Mavromaras, McGuinness, O'Leary, Sloane, & Wei, 2013; Mok & Qian, 2018; Mosca & Wright, 2011; Steffy, 2017; Vargas, Sánchez-Queija, Rothwell, & Parra, 2018; Verhaest & Van der Velden, 2013).

Notwithstanding the global nature of work redesign and relocation, in order to provide sufficient contextual depth, this enquiry will focus on HE in the UK, and particularly E&W where very high levels of undergraduate study-debt, averaging around £50,000 (including maintenance costs) for a three-year undergraduate degree at a public university (Binham, 2019; Kirby, 2016) bring a particular focus on the cost versus benefit calculus of a degree. In addition to study fees, the opportunity cost of not working for three years, together with compound interest on loans (currently 6.2% per annum from the point of graduation), penalises graduates from disadvantaged backgrounds. This is because they will likely earn lower salaries at the start of their careers and thus, take longer to repay their debt than more privileged graduates who might enjoy better access to top employers and hence, faster career progression (Kirby, 2016).

2.2 The changing field of professional work and the availability of entry-level jobs

Consistent with the upskilling thesis (DTI, 1998; Heisig, 2009), professional groups have expanded significantly in the past 50 years. In the context of the 4th industrial revolution (Schwab, 2016) and the global knowledge-based economy (Brown & Hesketh, 2004), one might expect professional employment to continue expanding. However, for graduates in high-income economies, the future may now be more challenging than it was for their parents. As professional work is digitalised and broken down into more specialised sub-tasks, it becomes 'location–free' and can move across international boundaries (Howcroft & Richardson, 2012). Individual workers cannot, generally, relocate due to country-level migration restrictions and thus, competition for graduate jobs is played out at a country level, with employers choosing office locations based on graduate work-readiness and employment costs, along with general infrastructure costs (Rothwell, Herbert & Seal, 2011).

The forces of globalisation and work deskilling are reflected in the way that many business support functions are being transformed in a manner that goes largely unnoticed when internal SSCs are used to orchestrate organisational change (Herbert & Seal, 2012). Whilst, the actual process of service transformation can be highly contextual and idiosyncratic; nonetheless, a typified SSC scheme might be as follows. First, activities formerly fragmented

across multiple business units are aggregated into a central process centre where top experts, new information technology and business process re-engineering (BPR) techniques are applied to simplify procedures, standardise systems/protocols and eliminate task duplication (Ulbrich, 2006). Through the division of labour, sub-tasks can then be assigned to individual workers by workflow software within end-to-end business process streams, e.g. 'order-to-cash'. Transactional work, which has traditionally provided entry-level work at the start of a professional career, is digitalised so that it can be subjected to robotic process automation (e.g. Nedelkoska & Quintini, 2018) or moved offshore, where further optimisation occurs before the remaining work is outsourced to a third-party (Willcocks and Lacity, 2016). The final stage of transformation is to change the business operating model, for example, by moving to online customer and employee self-service; thereby, removing all human interventions (Hammer, 1990). Nowadays, for example, millions of customers find and buy products such as holidays and insurance on-line, with almost zero human intervention on the part of the vendors. In practice, the sequencing of change may be enacted in various ways. For example, activities may be moved offshore at the start to allow process redesign work to be undertaken at a lower cost. Alternatively, a whole functional group (e.g. finance transactions) may be outsourced to a specialist, third-party, vendor in one 'big bang' change, which provides access to top systems expertise, thereby facilitating more radical and faster change (Gospel, & Sako, 2010). Yet, whatever the order of change, the overall effect is declining entry-level work for young people as Nedelkoska and Quintini (2018) make clear, *'...the risk of automation is the highest among teenage jobs.'* (p.8).

At the same time, as entry-level jobs reduce in mature economies such as the UK, the value of degree credentials as 'differentiators' diminishes in an expanding global graduate labour pool. As work moves across international boundaries, workers tend not to be able to relocate. Students in mature economies who are competing for those jobs remaining will need to mobilise additional forms of social and cultural capital during job hunting to convince employers that they can move between education and work without the traditional graduate training programmes that are expensive to deliver in higher-income countries, and especially in comparison to the new offshore locations (Tomlinson, 2008). A particular concern for management education is that in the SSC model, the process of change tends to happen in a gradual, piecemeal, manner (Herbert & Seal, 2012). Moreover, awareness of its human effects (redundancies, retirements and redeployments) tends to be confined within organisational boundaries and thus, hidden from those responsible for HE and wider economic policy.

2.3 Adapting to the field of work and creating a professional identity

The Wilson Review (Wilson, 2012) recommended that there should be a stronger partnership between business and universities to *"ensure a smooth and effective transition between university and business environments"* (p. 1) through Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) programmes. The review also advocated that "*Government has a role to play in both these fields through funding support and regulatory changes*" (p. 2). WIL usually consists of a structured period of relevant work experience, e.g. sandwich degrees, internships, placements, co-operative learning, voluntary work, etc. in conjunction with HE, in contrast to non-relevant experience, e.g. restaurant/bar/charity work, etc., (BIS, 2013; CBI, 2009; Campbell Clark, 2003; Helyer & Lee, 2014; Jackson et al., 2013; Shadbolt, 2016; Wakeham, 2016). Interestingly, Rodgers, Simon, and Gabrielson (2016) argued that intellectual development (alternatively labelled conceptual and cognitive) receives considerably less attention by research scholars compared with experiential learning and campus-led transferable skills. Indeed, within the HE sector, inter-institutional competition based on the relative merits of graduate credentials might cause more identifiable and tangible transferable skills to dominate both the research and marketing agendas.

Studies have highlighted how the transition from education into work, and, in particular, the process of adaption to the world of work can be a challenging, even destabilising, experience (Bowman, Colley, & Hodkinson 2005; Holden, & Hamblett, 2007; Rocheleau, 2014; Tomlinson, 2008). In entering the workplace, graduates need to learn the craft of their chosen professional vocation and to form their own professional identity on which to build a sustainable career (Reid, Dahlgren, Petocz, & Abrandt Dahlgren, 2008). Indeed, Scanlon (2011) described this as a process of *becoming* within *"the evolutionary, processural nature of developing a professional self"* (p.14). Jackson (2016) explained how university studies could contribute to the formation of a pre-professional identity (PPI) through engagement with 'a landscape of practice' (p.1), rather than merely the achievement of an arbitrary set of credentials at the point of graduation. The development of a PPI, in which a graduate develops and internalises their own set of employability attributes and behavioural dispositions, helps them to secure a post-graduate job in their chosen career pathway (Caballero & Walker, 2010). The next section reviews these challenges to graduate employment in the context of Bourdieu's writings on education, work and globalisation.

2.4 Moving from education to work – the Bourdieusian perspective

Given the twin contexts of transformation and globalisation in the field of managerial and professional work, together with the need for graduates to transition more effectively from education to work, we have chosen to draw on Bourdieu's account of practice (Bourdieu, 1990, 1991). Especially, pertinent is his focus on social class and cultural issues (Bourdieu, 1984), along with his more politically focused contributions to debates about globalisation (Bourdieu, 1996). Securing a graduate job and learning the 'craft' of a professional career is a competitive process and success in moving between education and work offers scope for a 'game-playing' advantage (Bourdieu, 1984). A tight market for entry-level jobs likely favours those graduates from professional/middle-class backgrounds who enjoy higher levels of social and cultural capital to access employment opportunities and assimilate themselves faster into the behavioural expectations of the workplace: what Bourdieu calls the 'habitus'. Whilst there is criticism of Bourdieu's looseness in defining habitus (e.g. Sullivan, 2002), professional work reflects and perpetuates certain behavioural predispositions. In moving from education to work, students who are first-generation professionals in their family will likely be at a disadvantage in securing those entry-level positions where the enactment of such behaviours is expected at interview.

Bourdieu (1996) explored levels of schooling (and higher education) within the context of access to broader fields of social power, in our case a graduate's ability to secure professional jobs, which typically will lead to elite positions within the field of work. His ideas have mainly been used by researchers (e.g. Robbins, 2004) to show the reproduction of inequality (Bourdieu, 1996) within different 'fields' (alongside the concepts of habitus and capitals), to understand social practice, and to highlight the workings of power and inequality (e.g. Tholen, 2012). Bourdieu's main theoretical contribution allows researchers to explore changing understandings of education and careers and the relative positions of power groups (Bathmaker, 2015; Burawoy, 2012; Tholen, 2012). More specifically, Bourdieu argues that there are wider sets of cultural relationships which shape an individual's social position and her relationship with her fields of engagement (Bourdieu, 1990, 1991). Through a process of 'culturing', individuals come to know what to wear, how to behave, and how to apply their academic skills and knowledge in the habitus of different social situations. For Bourdieu habitus is 'a system of enduring dispositions' (1990: 190), which are fundamentally social and are obtained through 'practice', or "knowing how" rather than "knowing that" (Lovell, 2000: 12). Such dispositions are intuitive and have a tendency to be grounded in one's cultural context. Ultimately, they shape an individual's propensity towards particular forms of actions and frame a sense of what is appropriate and meaningful.

Both Alvesson and Willmott (2002) and Hall (2013) explored the reproduction of work cultures, but with relatively less attention to how individuals are 'cultured' into a particular field. Obembe (2012) explored Bourdieu's notion of habitus with regard to relationships in the workplace and how individual predispositions to sharing, along with their feelings of trust in co-workers together with expectations of reciprocity, can influence the transfer of knowledge within the habitus of social groups. We extend this premise to suggest that a graduate must become experienced in the social practice of work and be 'cultured' into a field in order to be aware of the necessary cultural values and behaviours across different levels of management and towards clients. Important in the context of playing the game are those dispositions expected within the work habitus which might be gained from the family and which help to shape an individual's actions, along with an awareness of knowing what might be appropriate behaviour in any given situation. Thus, middle-class parents will more likely have greater social and cultural resources to draw upon in guiding their children's education and then 'culturing' them to gain an advantage over their peers when accessing the world of work (Jeffries, 2018). For example, parents who have professional careers in law, banking or accounting can steer their offspring into these careers through building experiences and opportunities in these fields; hence, reproducing family behaviours and dispositions.

In Bourdieu's conceptualisation of habitus, an individual's dispositions (including their views of the labour market) are generative and recursive: they both reflect and reproduce the structural arrangements that shape them. To this extent, subjective dispositions are the active embodiment of objective conditions from which they are derived. By using this approach, a graduate's behaviour might be constitutive of wider structural arrangements, for instance, their cultural location, cause those behaviours to be reproduced through the career choices and professional orientations that they make. For example, a graduate's location within a particular social structure (e.g. their class background, gender or ethnicity) may propel them towards a particular labour market that they perceive to be appropriate based on their derived dispositions.

In a globalised field of work, with less emphasis on recruiting employees for life-long careers (Peiperl & Baruch, 1997) employers will be concerned, typically, with getting the *present* job done at the lowest cost. Thus, graduates need to be work-ready, such that they can perform a specific role to the required level on a consistent basis with minimum supervision (Gardner & Lui, 1997). Yet, as Wilton (2012) notes, the complexity of what employers

actually want often leaves graduates unclear as to what they are expected to demonstrate: especially if they are from a family with a non-professional background.

One might expect that more relevant curricula and pedagogy in universities would help to level the 'playing field' by bolstering the employability credentials of all students, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds. Whilst significant progress has been made in promoting and embedding the transferable skills agenda since the Dearing Report (1997), in the context of accounting education, at least, Howcroft (2017) confirmed the continued existence of an expectation-performance gap. He concluded that the lack of graduate preparedness is only likely to get worse due to deteriorating staff/student ratios and other academic pressures, despite the well-meaning intentions of individual tutors and teaching teams in developing innovative pedagogies. Interestingly, Hopper (2013) made a similar point about institutional pressures, but he did so from the alternative perspective that rising student debt would pressurise accounting degrees to imitate professional accounting courses by increasing technical content, in order to maximise exemptions from professional examinations; thus, saving training costs for employers. Put simply, restricting the proportion of intellectual learning in HE programmes will restrict a graduate's ability to progress into more senior roles over the long-term. In the light of our observations on the global reconfiguration of entry-level professional work, together with our concerns about the persistence of inequality implicit in a tightening graduate labour market with high student indebtedness, the following questions were developed to guide the empirical data collection.

> RQ1: How is the nature of professional work changing through the use of the SSC model and what are the implications for graduate employment?
> RQ2: What is involved in the process of becoming work-ready and the development of professional identity?

3. Data gathering

In the course of a longitudinal project into the transformation of business support functions by two of the authors (ongoing since 2003), two senior management consultants (2014) asked us to bring together a number of interested parties with concerns about disappearing entry-level jobs. As one of them put it *"We both have children in or approaching, university, and in our work, we see what is happening to graduate jobs".* The core of the stakeholder group comprised around 25 people over time, including management consultants, SSC managers, university tutors, two career advisors from HE, a representative from each of two

professional bodies and two officials from a UK Government department responsible for economic policy. The chief aim was to consider how graduates could be helped to access professional careers in the face of global competition for digitalised work.

Typically, around 15-20 people would attend any one meeting (in person or via Skype), although a position statement would be circulated to all members after each meeting. Seven formal group meetings (2015, 2016 and 2017) were held under 'Chatham House' rules with a pre-circulated agenda to structure discussions around evolving themes. Meetings lasted around 60-90 minutes, typically. In a final plenary-style meeting (2017) eight finalist (4th year) undergraduates were also invited to attend and contribute experiences from their academic studies and industrial placements. During the period 2014 to 2016, visits made by two of the researchers to six multi-national organisations with mature SSCs in the UK, Poland, Sri Lanka and Malaysia to see at first-hand how jobs are either being 'engineered out' or relocated from the UK to countries with lower costs. We also attended industry conferences aimed at finance directors and SSC managers to gauge how representative our sample of SSCs might be. Wherever practical, the discussions of the group meetings and site were recorded and transcribed by a professional typist. All the transcript data were accumulated in NVivo software, which enabled keyword searching and analysis of the data. Given the exploratory nature of the enquiry, the modest number of interviews conducted and the wide variety of skill descriptors used by the various actors, statistical analysis beyond the simple frequency of keyword usage was not possible. This limitation is noted in the concluding section.

From the analysis of the transcripts by two of the researchers, the themes emerging in each meeting were identified and fed back into future discussions. This process allowed us to sound out our interpretation of the data and develop an agenda for the subsequent meeting. A practitioner in the working group explained how his company (anonymised here as *ServiceCo*) employed a novel approach to hiring unemployed graduates and then helping them to achieve 'work-readiness' (i.e., being capable of doing productive work in an independent manner) as fast as possible. Often these graduates held non-relevant degrees and had struggled to get a first graduate job in office work as a prelude to management roles. *ServiceCo* provided a range of administrative services to the financial services sector, using both the BPO and SSC models. Company management invited us to explore how graduates acquired the necessary skills to be effective in the workplace. This particular part of *ServiceCo's* operations involved recruitment and initial screening processes for a range of clients in the financial services sector, mainly in London. These were entry-level positions

and were considered suitable for either internship or the first year of graduate employment. Initially, three meetings were held with senior managers and, given the accent that was placed on the development of generic interpersonal and personal skills by management, the interview structure was designed around the 'PINT' framework (Herbert & Rothwell, 2004). Ten 'at-desk' semi-structured interviews with workers between one and five years from graduation were undertaken on-site to explore skills development. Participants (labelled G1 to G10) were identified through a senior manager and invited to participate; no-one refused. Individuals were briefed about the nature of the interview and our institution's code of ethics before giving their written consent. Interviews lasted around 30-40 minutes. They were recorded transcribed verbatim; comprising, typically, around 5,500 to 6,000 words per interview.

The transcripts were coded by one researcher (with a sample being blind coded by a second researcher) and analysed using NVivo (qualitative analysis software) to enforce a systematic approach to managing, organising and understanding the data (Bazeley & Jackson, 2013). This enabled a thematic analysis of skills-based upon the original coding according to the PINT framework, although our analysis was also sensitive to emerging themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Indeed, there had been frequent references to conduct and behaviour. On further reading of the transcripts, these included; confidence, personal conduct and behaviour, and reliability as 'being trusted to do a job in a team environment' (Obembe, 2012). A second coding pass was made to include these additional items. A further researcher also reviewed the transcripts and noticed a number of resonances with the work of Pierre Bourdieu. The whole team then re-examined the data in this new light. The next section reports the findings from the working group meetings and the graduate interviews; organised broadly by the two research questions.

4. Findings

RQ1: How is the nature of professional work changing through the use of the SSC model and what are the implications for graduate employment?

The SSC managers in the group meetings and the site visits confirmed that in their own organisations, business support activities were being systematically challenged and then subjected to re-engineering and relocation. Consequently, entry-level graduate work was being either eliminated, automated and/or offshored. One manager made the following comment.

> *"I did try to make a business case for keeping my finance staff complement in the UK SSC but was told it was a mainboard mandate to offshore support work. Hence, the number of onshore workers is being reduced from around 150 to only four."*

There were also strong resonances with longstanding calls by employers for greater work-readiness in graduates. SSC managers explained how graduates needed to be prepared to work with relatively little training and supervision. For them, work-readiness was not just about developing a level of competence in specific tasks, but more about going beyond the minimum requirement and *"being able to work in an independent manner and contribute beyond the formal job specification"* (SSC Manager). Work-readiness was also about exposure to corporate administration and information systems, together with internalising and reproducing appropriate behaviours for office-life. These managers were mainly from large organisations, where knowledge of behavioural codes and increasingly complex corporate information systems and operating protocols was crucial to getting things done in practice. In other words, graduates needed to be cultured into the habitus of an organisation to be able to operate effectively.

> *"We're often faced with, literally, hundreds of applications from 'employable' graduates, but we only want to interview, say, the top ten who can demonstrate that they are more 'ready to work' [than the others]."* (P1)

Another key informant from a professional body of accountancy described how qualification was often misunderstood as being about technical competence, not least passing 'professional' examinations. In her experience, becoming a professional is also about developing appropriate behaviours and discontinuing (unlearning) inappropriate ones. She gave an example of a graduate who insisted on 'high-fiving' co-workers on his way into the office, *"He could not understand why this was unacceptable and was eventually asked to leave."*

Despite the longstanding tensions between industry and HE about graduate preparedness, these managers at least were largely sympathetic to the challenges facing universities in having the difficult conversations about performance that can often be a feature of the workplace, as one manager put it.

> *"Universities have to tell every student they are great, but in real life, this cannot be the case. Unfortunately, many graduates have difficulty coping with honest feedback and unlearning and then relearning ways of doing things."* (P14)

The practitioners were also at pains to point out that, whatever the relative merits of work experience compared with a university education, for today's graduates the peer group is now global: work can move to the new offshore graduate pools, in countries such as India and Malaysia. Thus, graduates need to convince an employer that they are ready to work and can operate in an independent manner with minimal further training.

RQ2: What is involved in the process of becoming work-ready and the development of professional identity?

Given that the interview structure had been designed based on skills in the PINT framework, graduates talked at length about developing common interpersonal and personal skills, especially communication and writing skills. However, several also mentioned other, more intangible/tacit aspects of conduct and behaviour that they felt were also essential to success, and which had largely to be learned in the workplace. Our interviewees often referred to work being a 'wake-up' call, for which they had not been sufficiently prepared for at university. They described work-readiness as more about a process of learning *how* to learn, which enabled them to become confident in a range of work situations, rather than merely the accumulation of a set of otherwise discrete skills and behaviours. The incidence of references to identifiable skills and behaviours is shown in table1.

Skills and behaviours	References
Development of Personal Skills	**Total 162**
Time Management	85
Meeting Skills	35
Decisions	21
Speed Accuracy	21
Conduct and Behaviour	**Total 103**
Confidence	81
Conduct Behaviour	18
Reliability	4
Development of Interpersonal Skills	**Total 342**
To Reflect and Learn from Experience	180
Responsibilities as Part of a Team	38
Development of Leadership Skills	31
Receiving Feedback	19
Self-Motivation	18
Influence and Negotiating	16
Problem Solving	16
Resilience	13

Creativity	8
Personal Development needs	3
Communication	**Total 300**
Verbal Speaking Skills *General*	140
Dealing with Customers and Clients	53
Questions	51
Presentation Skills	13
Listening	5
General Communication	37
Writing Skills – general	28
Reports	5
Letters	4
Memos	1
Knowledge	**Total 52**
Utilising Degree	52
Technology, Information Communication	**Total 18**
System Software (mastering different types of software)	18

Table 1. Frequency of skills from interviews. – about here.

Perhaps, not surprising, given the client-facing role of our interviewees at *ServiceCo* and the structure of the interviews based on the PINT framework, verbal and written communication skills featured prominently in the original and further coding exercises, see Table 1. Indeed, several graduates mentioned that good written communication skills are imperative in projecting professional competence to clients and confirming the graduate's position in the field. For example;

> *"Written skills are important, especially if you are e-mailing clients and [poor quality] is just about the quickest way to get yourself completely struck off the business [talent] pipeline." (G9)*

A further insight from the transcripts was the importance attached by graduates to the process of learning from others in the workplace and differences between university and workplace learning. Although our analysis had been applied *post hoc* to data that were not collected directly for the purposes of applying Bourdieu's theory of field and capitals, nonetheless, we found certain patterns of social dynamics in, and across, the individual narratives. The comments below have been extracted to highlight three themes: 1) the nature of 'culturing' into the habitus of work, 2) the process of becoming work-ready, and 3) the

process of transitioning and learning, along with examples of differences between the graduates' perceptions of learning at university and work.

4.1. Culturing into the habitus of work

Overall, interviewees felt that university-led attributes of employability provided a useful enough range of work-related skills (e.g. the PINT framework). Nevertheless, these graduates had still not been able to get a job in the area of their degree subject which, amongst others, included sports science and geography. Yet, having 'ended up' by chance in financial recruitment, these young workers felt that, nonetheless, it was proving a serendipitous experience. All ten participants reported that they were very satisfied with their work, the company and their work-life balance. They talked enthusiastically about the rapid development of deeper, more specialised skills and behaviours, not least the opportunities to learn independently and develop within a team. They explained how it was important to understand how to dress, speak, address work colleagues and clients in different ways, and to create their own identity as a worker. Put simply, to be cultured into the world of work, as one graduate with 5 years' service explained.

> *"... when you walk into this office, everyone's in a suit and tie, and you can tell that even though you can joke…there's a way [of doing it]. ... every single person that you hear on the phone is professional at all times, so there's a clear line between joking and being professional." (G3)*

> *"... so I mean it's a big difference between working in like a Pizza Hut (laughs) to a job like at [ServiceCo]! For example, telephony skills, the way you present yourself in an office. You have to be professional, well-spoken and generally quite pleasant to be with." (G3)*

4.2. Becoming work-ready

The process of becoming work-ready also appeared to be about learning how to navigate the transition between education and work and 'changing' as a person. The overwhelming view of these graduates was that work-readiness is about having a sense of confidence: not only in one's self but also in being able to project an air of confidence to clients and colleagues. Whilst technical HR and some finance knowledge, along with transferable skills, were expected, the most significant factor in being successful at work seemed to be about being *accepted*, both within the team and to clients. Acceptance involved meeting new

standards of conduct and behaviour; especially, social skills and reliability within the team. As recruitment consultants, graduates were able to observe the behaviours of their peers, but develop their own style, which led to a greater feeling of personal confidence. They felt that the actual experience of completing tasks at work was the only way to understand and apply them properly. There were a number of examples of differences between skills required at university and at work, especially, regarding written work and the competitive process of getting one's message across to managers and clients in the workplace.

> *"I always think [back to] when I started here. I would write essays about what I had done, [but] you would see the directors and seniors writing two lines that would cover the same points." (G3)*

> *"...communication has to be a lot sharper and more succinct than at university where someone was being paid to read your work, whereas in business managers can choose to read someone else's work." (G2)*

4.3. Transitioning and learning

Particularly noteworthy in the development process was the ability to learn from peers and seniors through observing and then mimicking their behaviour. There were shades here of 'peripheral participation' as identified by Lave and Wenger (1991) in the process of acquiring and deploying tacit situational knowledge by learning from a 'master' practitioner, as one graduate put it:

> *"How do you put yourself in front of people and sell an idea? So it is a case of learning from the experienced people around you, but it is up to you at the end of the day, ... and you [have to] go and learn about it yourself." (G6)*

Most of these graduates were the first in their family to go to university, and they often talked about aspects of work behaviours as if somewhat new to them. This was especially so in soliciting feedback and then acting on advice given. They valued the contribution of both their seniors and peers in their development.

> *"I think the willingness to accept and act on feedback received is a massive one. You're learning from those around you, and if they've got feedback [for you] that's all right - it might sound negative, but they're critiquing you in order to improve you." (G7)*

Graduates talked about how social skills were important but that they also needed to learn how to apply those skills in a work environment, for example, knowing how to deal with different people (e.g. managers, work colleagues, clients) across different social contexts. Bourdieu (1990) argued that reflection and learning are key to developing in the field and strengthening one's position in order to climb the status ladder. Although the ability to self-learn was not one of the original interview prompts, its incidence in the transcripts was the highest, 180 mentions (see table 1). Aside from the frequency of citations to self-learning, there were some extremely insightful comments about the process of learning and the building of confidence at work compared to university.

> *"You don't have that confidence until you go out to work - I think university really prepares you for work but being in the [work]environment and doing the job builds up your confidence, you can't be taught that." [emphasis added as on the recording] (G1)*

> *"They [university] taught you the basics of how to do it in a classroom, but it is one of those things that you cannot really learn how to do until you start doing it. You can have all the training under the sun, but the best way to actually learn is just to do it repeatedly over and over again." (G5).*

This reference to learning through repetition was particularly interesting and highlighted a clear distinction with a university education, where learning has to be seen to be progressive; indeed, any sense of repetition might be interpreted as a throwback to old-fashioned 'learning by rote'. Learning through mistakes featured prominently in the interviews, and there were some interesting contradictions with university assessment. On the one hand, graduates explained how their experience of university was about doing a lot of things reasonably well (wide curricula), but at work, the final outputs to clients had to be 100% right (narrow focus), even though mistakes in the process of preparation could be tolerated as learning experiences. Furthermore, at university, the assessment of effort was episodic and of a 'high stakes' nature: with few opportunities to be evaluated and receive feedback in a continuous fashion.

> *"Resilience is important. In this job it's OK to have a bad day, you just have to learn from it, pick yourself up, and a do a better job tomorrow. At university, you only have a few chances to do your best." (G10)*

> *"...handling questions I think is important. Not really something that I was used to in university, because you do not get critiqued really. You hand the work in, it gets*

marked, and that is your mark. You cannot go back and properly understand that sort of thing, whereas here [at work], questioning is encouraged." (G2)

It was noted in both the field interviews and the working party discussions that the process of reflection at work involved unlearning existing skills and dispositions and then learning new ones (Hislop, Bosley, Coombs, & Holland, 2014).

In sum, there were a number of distinctions evident between learning at university and learning within a team at work and that there are different rules of the game with individuals playing the game according to their position in the field. Crucially, having accumulated work experience in a professional environment, these graduates had come to recognise which skills were important and in what context (Martini, 2019). They had become 'cultured' into the world of work.

5. **Discussion**

RQ1: How is the nature of professional work changing through the use of the SSC model and what are the implications for graduates?

The paper has highlighted the changing nature and location of professional work in business support functions, chiefly through the SSC model. In the context of the decline of entry-level roles and the continuing massification of HE, future management graduates in higher-income countries may find it more difficult to get a suitable first destination job through which to acquire the experience necessary to build a long-term professional career. This will likely have a greater effect on those graduates who do not enjoy good levels of social and cultural capital and/or have been able to form a pre-professional identity through work relevant experience before graduation. We suggest that due to the 'below-the-radar' nature of SSC evolution, those responsible for making HE policy may be unaware of the extent of the challenge for UK graduates who are now facing global competition for entry-level work, and particularly those in E&W incurring substantive study costs.

RQ2: What is involved in the process of becoming work-ready and the development of professional identity?

Both in the literature and field interviews, it was apparent that there was a distinction between the concepts of 1) employability as being appointable through graduate credentials; 2) actually getting a job and 3) achieving work-readiness in terms of becoming competent and confident in doing a job). Whilst the notion of employability, as a set of graduate

attributes, has become embedded in HE curricula, its ubiquity suggests that it is increasingly just another 'must-have credential' (Tomlinson, 2008). The achievement of work-readiness is more about a process of 'becoming' (Scanlon, 2011) and thus, bound contextually in terms of individual tasks and organisational situations. For the graduates at *ServiceCo*, work-readiness embodied a range of behaviours and dispositions, including exposure to corporate administration and information systems and the refinement of transferable skills such as communication. Indeed, work-readiness should not be dismissed as a low-level construct, but rather as a complement to employability (Caballero, Walker, & Fuller-Tyszkiewicz, 2011; VGW Consulting, 2017). Entry to higher-level managerial and professional roles requires a period of apprenticeship when the graduate observes how senior professionals conduct themselves and then puts into practice the expected behaviours. Work experience during study allows graduates to build a preprofessional identity in which they can select and then internalize the skills and behaviours required in their target professional pathway.

The work of Bourdieu sensitised our analysis of the data to changes in the fields of education and work, and how individuals transition from university to work. Interestingly, Bourdieu (1984: 87) talked extensively about different forms of communication in terms of observed behaviours; for example, seeing utterances, accents, language as important components of cultural capital. This came through in the way that graduates explained how styles of written and verbal communication were different at work, and how more flexible approaches were required depending on the recipient(s) and the context. This aspect might easily be dismissed as simply a training matter; alternatively, it might reflect the relative game-playing advantage enjoyed by job-seeking graduates from professional family backgrounds.

This sample of graduates had struggled to find a first destination job but had been fortunate to be given a chance in a supportive environment at *ServiceCo*. Nonetheless, they had to take responsibility for their own learning and learn quickly. Whilst self-learning may sound obvious in today's world of individual empowerment, as these graduates made clear, there is no textbook for learning the nuances of professional life. This highlights the potential disadvantage experienced an increasing number of students from the HE massification programme who whilst now having access to university education still do not have the benefit of a parent(s) who is a graduate or professional person, and who can act as a role model in the process of socialisation and culturing necessary to access and adapt to organisational life. The ability to project a sense of identity and readiness for professional life at interview, either directly from prior work experience, or indirectly from the possession of social and cultural

capital, presents an advantage in playing the game of careers; especially, in the face of declining entry-level jobs and global competition from an expanding graduate labour pool. SSC managers accepted that it was difficult for universities to teach some of the workplace skills and behaviours. Especially, where graduates were learning through observing and mimicking their seniors and peers, and then repeatedly practising the application of best practice within the process of developing their own style. With large class sizes, most university programmes simply cannot simulate such observation-based learning experiences. Thus, students who have good pre-existing levels of social and cultural capital will be at an advantage in the job market. It may be that the concerns of Hopper (2013) about HE reverting to an elitist model will be manifest if working-class students come to view HE as a path to incurring significant debt and the risk of under-unemployment if entry-level work dries up. In moving between the distinctive fields of education and work, graduates need to be able to understand the social practice of each field and the rules of the game in order to know *how* to play that game. Yet, in the light of Bourdieu's writings on the role of social engineering in maintaining the power of the privileged classes, our findings throw a new light on the massification of HE, given the essentially stagnant levels of social mobility in the UK - a situation that prompted the entire board of the Commission for Social Mobility to resign in November 2017 (Pickard, 2017).

We suggest that within the contemporary model of full-time management education in the UK's HE sector there are insufficient immersive learning opportunities required for the true acculturation of aspiring professionals, despite the commonplace addition of a 'bolt-on' transferable skills in the employability curriculum. A third-year 'placement' year provides a valuable experience (Herbert & Rothwell, 2004), but perhaps management educators should aspire to more? For example, this could involve management students also being engaged in part-time work throughout their course of study, in work environments similar to the professional 'training nurseries' still available in onshore SSCs, deriving academic credit from work-based learning experiences. Work-based learning, as described by Raelin (1997), along with suitable support from management educators, can address the criteria expressed by Bourdieu for reflection alongside work experience. For many management students, this was provided traditionally through full-time work and part-time study but, as Callender and Thompson (2018) noted, this pathway had declined very substantially in E&W since 2010, due to training cutbacks and the higher full-time study fees that, paradoxically, encourages many students to do a three-year degree and get into a first destination job as soon as possible after graduation.

The challenge from Anderson et al. (2018) can, we suggest, be addressed through a more innovative blend of study and work, where entry-level professional work takes place alongside and is interwoven with study, potentially in collaborative ventures between education and industry (self-reference anonymised). Work-based learning (e.g. work project dissertations) is far from new (e.g., Willis, 2008) but, in contemporary management education, it tends to be associated with executive education (e.g. MBAs). Our conception alternatively, places greater emphasis on an employer-HE partnership approach. The ability to earn while learning could support widening participation and mitigate the burden of debt; at the same time providing the development opportunity for work-ready management graduates that employers demand. We recognise that such an initiative would require unprecedented levels of education-industry collaboration and student support; however, it would provide authentic learning in a real context as well as paid employment.

6. Conclusion

Our initial concern in preparing this paper was in response to Anderson et al. (2018) to answer the call: *"as educators, what should we be doing, and helping future managers learn how to do, to deal with turbulent times"* (p. 7). We have suggested what universities are not doing: that traditional models of management education lack contemporary relevance, do not necessarily address employers' requirements for skills and personal behaviour/dispositions and thus, do not sufficiently support aspirations to widen participation in HE, or at least that all graduates are able to gain access to satisfactory career opportunities. University employability initiatives have received considerable attention in the last two decades, but a shortage of entry-level jobs is now manifesting as both graduate under-employment and unemployment in many labour markets.

We have extended our understanding of 'turbulent times', by addressing a hitherto under-recognised issue, that significant entry-level jobs are being lost in higher-income countries such as the UK, largely but not exclusively through the SSC model: as confirmed by the SSC managers and management consultants in our stakeholder group. We suggest that this will have implications for those graduates faced with repaying substantive study debts. Moreover, in the longer term, even those countries which have recently been enjoying inward migration of managerial and professional work will see an eventual decline in work due to further labour arbitrage as new, even lower-cost, areas compete to attract and retain work (e.g. China in Mok & Qian, 2018). Based on our empirical findings, we propose that the achievement of work-readiness as the outcome of a process of *becoming* (Scanlon, 2011) in the workplace,

should be seen as distinct from graduate employability credentials. However, both should be seen as complementary in the development of a pre-professional identity in order to access entry-level employment in a competitive market, especially for those graduates without existing social and cultural capital. In this respect, the work of Bourdieu has continued relevance (Sullivan, 2002).

In the spirit of Wilson (2012), we call on educators and business to work together to create more opportunities for students to access substantive, paid and relevant work experience alongside their studies and for educators to feel more confident in delivering intellectual/conceptual learning experiences, rather than risk diluting academic rigour through placing too great an emphasis on generic employability skills, which our fieldwork suggests are best learnt in the habitus of work. Continuing the Bourdieusian theme for students from non-professional backgrounds, this should promote development in the 'culture' of work which they might otherwise find difficult to access. To implement this, we propose further adoption of credit-bearing work-based learning, which is embedded longitudinally in the management education programme, enabling progressive skill development as well as providing an income opportunity for the student.

We acknowledge the modest extent of our exploratory data gathering and analysis, along with the retrospective nature of the Bourdesian analysis. Whilst we have chosen to focus on the employment situation of students in the UK and particularly, the vast majority of those in E&W incurring substantive study debts, we believe that the findings are generalisable to other higher-income countries. We suggest that further research to explore the extent of diminishing entry-level jobs would be helpful to policymakers, especially how graduates might be helped to transition from education to work in the face of intensive global competition for scarce jobs.

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