

**Graduates and their Engagement of  
Jobcentre Plus Services in Difficult Times:  
A Mixed Methods Study**

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## **Abstract**

As the economy has become more knowledge based, policy makers have previously placed emphasis on investing in human capital as a route to economic success. One key trend has been an increase in the number of university graduates. The policy rationale for this refers to creating workforces that are able to meet the challenges of technologically advanced, and diverse market economies in an inter-connected global world where economies are competing against each other globally. This has led to policy makers emphasising the need to improve high level skills through expansion of universities – a development that has substantially affected workforce educational demographics in the UK. However, it has not been ascertained how such recent labour entrants negotiate the transition process of leaving higher education and acquiring employment, with instances of unemployment and underemployment increasing in prevalence amongst graduates in recent years.

Whether current social policy (in this case in the form of public employment services, such as Jobcentre Plus) has been able to engage with such issues sufficiently remains underexplored too. This thesis adopts a mixed methodology – involving an analysis of 11 years of UK labour force survey data (from 2002 – 2013), and 26 interviews with recent graduates. It suggests that recent graduate transitions have experienced labour market insecurity with more regularity, and that the current social policy framework could be improved. Furthermore, it investigates whether graduate transitions are a ‘missing’ group in youth transitions research. Overall, it attempts to provide insight into how young people experience precarious transitions to the labour market.

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## **Declaration**

I, Adam Formby, declare that this thesis is a presentation of original work and I am the sole author. This work has not previously been presented for an award at this, or any other, University. All sources are acknowledged as References.

# Chapter 1 – Introduction

This thesis examines the nature of recent graduate transitions to the labour market in the United Kingdom. Such transitions can be much slower for some graduates, with ‘settled’ careers being found over a longer period of time (MacDonald, 2011: 429). This has meant that graduate transitions now feature substantial diversity in regards to labour market experience (Purcell et al., 2013: 17). This has been particularly the case since the onset of the 2008-9 recession (ONS, 2013a: 1), whereby instances of labour market insecurity, such as graduate unemployment or underemployment have featured more substantially (ONS, 2011a: 1; ONS, 2013b: 14). These developments have prompted this thesis to understand further the nature of modern graduate transitions, and to investigate the efficacy of post-university social protection within such transitions. Chapter one will introduce the most important themes of the thesis, as well as describe the purpose and content of each chapter. It will also introduce the main research questions that this thesis attempts to answer. Chapter one will also reflect on some of my own personal motivations and interest in this area.

## 1.1 From ‘Cradle to College’

Coming towards the 2015 General Election, the Liberal Democrat leader, Nick Clegg, promised that “one of our front-page manifesto commitments will be to protect the education budget from nursery to 19 years, from cradle to college” (BBC, 2015). Evidently, Nick Clegg was emphasising that the Liberal Democrats were committed to education, yet the phrase from ‘Cradle to College’ also serves as a reminder of how policy makers increasingly perceive state involvement for young people, post-college. There has been substantial higher education reform, which has led to a reduction in teaching grants that has needed to be replaced by additional income from tuition fees – increasing individual tuition fee costs from around £3,000 to £9,000 annually (Bolton, 2012a: 4). Indeed, much of the emphasis that David Cameron and Nick Clegg placed on increasing tuition fees was because of presumptions that there were other vulnerable groups of young people that needed further support (BBC, 2010). Yet, as a result of the 2008-9 recession, people in their twenties have

fared worse than any other age group (Hills et al., 2015: 1). Furthermore, in an investigation regarding the prevalence of labour market insecurity, Gregg et al. (2015) find that “50 per cent of 18-29 year olds were insecure in 2014, up from 40 per cent in 1994” (Gregg et al., 2015: 5). At the same time, there has been a substantial reduction in state support for all young people (Wenham, 2015: 1).

Governments in recent years have sought to encourage young people to engage with higher educational pathways with more regularity. This has become a normalised youth transition for young people to follow (MacDonald, 2011). Hills et al. (2015) report that by 2013, a third of young people in their thirties had a degree, with those currently in their twenties expected to be even more qualified when they reach the same age (Hills et al., 2015: 1). The rationale behind this development is the positive returns associated with undergraduate degrees. Generally, empirical research points towards many positive benefits over the long-term. Britton et al. (2015) examine the returns of higher education through survey and administrative data. They observe “median earnings of English women around 10 years out from higher education is roughly 3.5 times that of the median for those who did not attend higher education. The corresponding male ratio is roughly 2.2” (Britton et al., 2015: 2). Yet, increasing the number of graduates in the youth labour market to such an extent has implications. Some graduate transitions, in particular, have experienced difficulties in finding the social and economic returns that are assumed to be part of the knowledge-based economy (Harris, 2001: 30). This means that there may be some graduate transitions with increased labour market insecurity and further engagement with social policy frameworks, such as Jobcentre Plus.

Roberts (2011) argues that a “missing middle” exists regarding ordinary youth transitions. This refers to a dichotomy that has emerged, whereby youth sociology has either focused on marginalised, socially excluded young people (such as those that are ‘Not in Employment, Education or Training’), or on knowledge-defined pathways associated with higher education. In this regard, Roberts argues for increased scrutiny on the ‘missing middle’, the

youth transitions that do not feature further or higher education pathways, who do not really particularly engage with social policy frameworks, as they are more likely to go straight into employment after school or college (Roberts, 2011: 34). Yet, the ‘missing middle’ concept can also be applied to graduate transitions – as a way of identifying less successful graduate transitions that have become detached from the graduate labour market. These graduates are also ‘missing’ in that they may have gone somewhat unnoticed in terms of ascertaining appropriate social policy support. Indeed, MacDonald (2011: 429) argues that more attention is needed in youth-transition-based research to understand new forms of labour market insecurity, such as graduate unemployment and underemployment.

The roots of this thesis lay on my own personal experience relating to the difficulty in finding employment upon graduation in 2008 at the start of the economic downturn. After graduation from the University of York with a 2:1 in Social Policy, I turned to my local Jobcentre Plus for assistance. My parents encouraged me to go. We did not have any knowledge of how to access the graduate labour market within our family. The staff were polite, engaging and helpful, but they reluctantly informed me that ‘there is not much we can do for you here’. In particular, the question I found myself asking after this experience was ‘where do I turn to for help?’ And perhaps more specifically, who supports those from socially disadvantaged backgrounds, when such graduates are identified by Furlong et al. (2005) as having more difficult graduate transitions? Social policy is a subject that focuses often on the most in need and the most vulnerable. Yet, because of the presumed social and economic returns associated with ‘graduate’ status (Harris, 2001: 30), how should policy support graduates more broadly? There are distinctions in how ‘vulnerability’ is engaged as it is “not taken as universal, but as something which differentiates people based on differences or deficiencies” (Brown, 2012: 49). In examining a group of people that are more likely to have middling socioeconomic status, one can understand better how these distinctions should be drawn (Roberts et al., 2013: 2).



Therefore, it is hoped that this thesis can shed further light on recent graduate transitions and the role of support mechanisms (such as Jobcentre Plus) within such transitions. This thesis is part of a growing literature base that attempts to conceptualise graduate transitions to the labour market (Brooks et al., 2009; Tomlinson, 2007, 2008, 2012; Purcell et al., 2004; 2012; Gordon, 2013). Understanding the distinctions between graduate transitions is important. This helps in creating an empirical base to understand better how graduates find positive paths to the knowledge-based economy. Further, this can also help identify examples of good practice that future graduates can employ in their future transitions after leaving higher education (Tomlinson, 2008: 55).

## **1.2: Research Questions**

The thesis attempts to engage with and answer the following research questions. The way these questions have been conceptualised is explored towards the end of chapter three.

- 1) Does the rise of the knowledge-based economy orthodoxy mean that social policy needs to pay greater attention to the ‘missing middle’ of young graduates?
- 2) How far are graduates being supported by public employment services such as Jobcentre Plus?
- 3) How do understandings of graduate transitions help to develop a better social policy framework?

## **1.3: Outline of Chapters**

Chapter two will serve as an introduction to the thesis. This chapter will examine the graduate labour market context in recent years. It will explore how the graduate labour market has developed, particularly in light of the post-crisis graduate transition (this term refers to the graduate labour market after the financial crisis of 2008-9). This includes an examination of the expansion of the higher education sector in the United Kingdom, as well as how the ‘graduate transitions’ have altered.

Chapter three will develop the conceptual outline of the thesis. This chapter will analyse two core concepts, the ‘knowledge-based economy (Harris, 2001; Giddens, 2000: 165) and the ‘missing middle’ in youth transitions (Roberts, 2011; MacDonald, 2011). These two chapters will make up the conceptual outline that has been applied to the qualitative data. The first part of this chapter will examine and critique the concept of the knowledge-based economy thesis. The second part will examine whether there is a ‘missing middle’ within the knowledge-based economy defined pathways through higher education. The second half of the chapter will focus on exploring the concept of the ‘missing middle’ of youth transitions (Roberts, 2011) in relation to graduate experiences of labour market insecurity, such as graduate unemployment and underemployment.

Chapter four will examine the historical and current social policy framework for graduates. This chapter will present a chronological examination of policy that graduates have engaged with throughout the graduate transitions in the context of the United Kingdom from the late 1970s to 2015. It will also explore how ‘general’ social policy is used by graduates. This will include an examination of Jobcentre Plus service provision (Wiggan, 2007: 418), Jobseekers Allowance (Manning, 2005: 9), the ‘Universal Credit’ (DWP, 2010a), ‘Mandatory Work Activity’ (Wiggan, 2015: 2), the ‘Work Programme’ (Meager et al., 2014: 32), ‘Sector-Based Work Academies’ and ‘Work Experience Placements’ (Coleman et al., 2013: 3). This chapter will also outline some recent ‘specific’ measures that have been put in place in recent years for graduates to engage with, such as the Graduate Talent Pool (Bourne et al., 2011). There will also be a discussion on some of the principles behind social policy provision, particularly that of ‘work first’ (Daguerre, 2004). The final part of this chapter will present the research questions of the thesis, and subsequent justification for a mixed methodological approach.

Chapter five will detail the results of the quantitative analysis. The first part of this chapter will explain the rationale for quantitative analysis, in reference to preceding quantitative literature. The latter parts will focus on the methodological approach undertaken, and then

present the results of the quantitative analysis. This analysis is to provide an account of the Jobcentre Plus service user-base, as well as ‘recent graduates’ use of Jobcentre Plus, and their general job search strategies. This will be presented through the use of descriptive statistics, based on which the qualitative findings can be understood better.

Chapter six will focus on the qualitative findings of the thesis. This chapter will be divided into two parts. The first will explain the methodology behind the qualitative approach that has been adopted. This section will provide details regarding the sampling framework, ethics, fieldwork and analysis. The second part of chapter five will comprise the qualitative findings of the study. This will involve qualitative interviews with 22 recent graduates from 2008 – 2013. A further 8 pilot interviews have also been undertaken as part of the qualitative inquiry of this research, with 4 pilot interviews to be included in the findings. The second part of chapter six will discuss the findings as a whole. The conceptual framework developed in chapter three will be applied to the qualitative findings. Different types of graduate transition will be examined – as there may be some that find entry to the knowledge-based economy with ease, whilst other transitions are considerably more prolonged and have higher rates of labour market insecurity, such as unemployment and underemployment. In these transitions, there is a higher propensity to engage with Jobcentre Plus provision more regularly.

Chapter seven will conclude the thesis. It will explore the implications of these findings in reference to the overall research rationale. This section will return firstly to the research rationale, directly reflecting on the research questions of the thesis. It will then explore the consequences of a missing middle in graduate transitions in three ways – firstly, it will examine the missing middle of graduate transitions in relation to youth transitional research (MacDonald, 2011), secondly, it will review the implications that may arise from a ‘missing middle’ of graduates that are overlooked in terms of policy and thirdly, it will examine the implications for the future welfare state in relation to young people’s future engagement. The following section will then emphasise the contributions of the theoretical and empirical

findings of this thesis to our knowledge, as well as the limitations and further research questions raised in the course of this research.

## **Chapter 2: The Graduate Labour Market Context in the United Kingdom**

The last 30 years have seen an increase of graduate pathways in youth transitions (Roberts, 2013: 4). Much of the impetus, particularly regarding the New Labour government of 1997 to 2010, has been to create an educational sector that prepares people for a knowledge-based economy. Roberts (2013), with a somewhat negative and perhaps simplified take on the knowledge-based economy, has argued that this is an economy “in which low-skilled work would either be eliminated by technology or exported, whereas there would be unlimited demand for the highly qualified to undertake high value-added work” (Roberts, 2013: 4). Placing such a strong emphasis on the higher education sector as a key instrument of labour market and economic policy is a relatively new historical development in the context of the United Kingdom (Bourner et al., 2008). In chapter three, the concept of the ‘knowledge-based economy’ and the ‘missing middle’ of youth transitions will be examined to explore why such broad social and economic change has taken place. The aim of chapter two is to present an account of the current graduate labour market context in the United Kingdom.

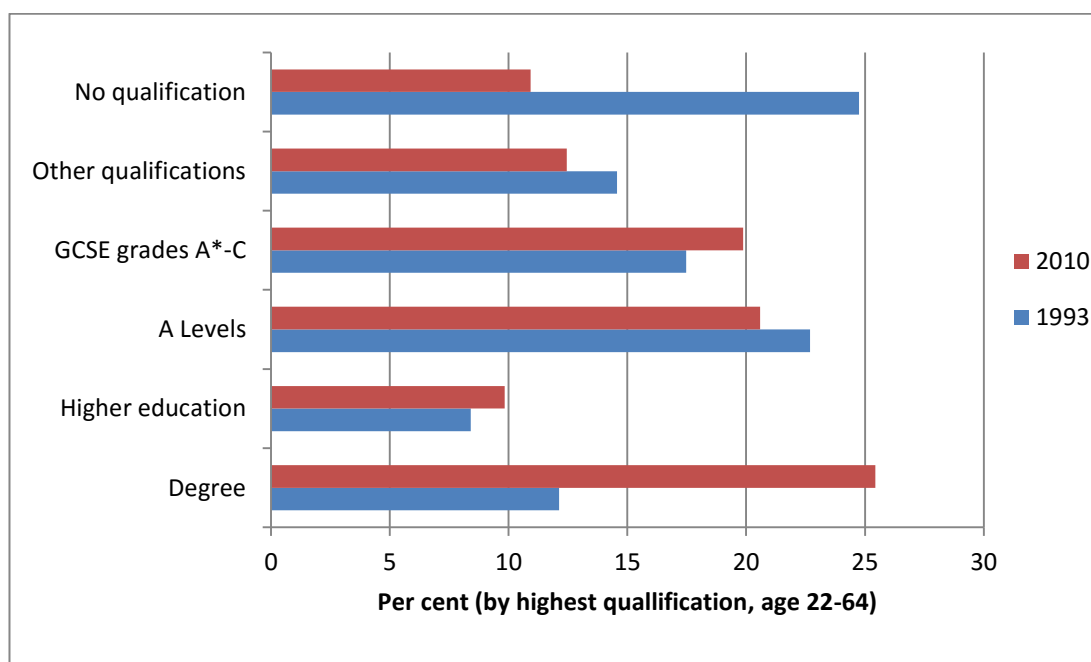
This chapter will be split into several sections. The first section will examine the development of the higher education sector, specifically focussing on the instrumental instances of policy that have contributed to the expansion of higher education. This will focus on some of the key developments in the higher education sector from the early 1990s to 2015. The second section of the chapter will focus on the changing nature of the ‘graduate transition’ over the specified time period. In particular, it will focus on providing a contextual account of graduate transitions that have come to be ‘slow-track’ transitions (Roberts et al., 2013: 1). This section will examine the role of some intersectional factors, such as socio-economic background, ethnicity, age, gender and disability, on graduate transitions. The third section will examine the nature of ‘graduate transitions’ after the financial crisis of 2008-9 in the context of the United Kingdom. The 2008-9 financial crisis increased instances of labour market insecurity, particularly regarding graduate

unemployment and underemployment (MacDonald, 2011). The nature of the post-crisis graduate transition needs to be examined in more detail to allow for a comprehensive account of how contemporary graduate transitions are now experienced. The fifth section of this chapter will provide an account of graduate transitions in 2015.

## 2.1 An Expansion of the Higher Education Sector in the United Kingdom

This section will present a chronological account of graduate transitions from the 1990s onwards. This starting point is considered because it is argued that the expansion of higher education is linked to reforms in the early 1990s, and the effects of these reforms are still pertinent to contemporary graduate transitions (Blanden et al., 2004; Roberts, 2013). The scale of the growth of higher education change in the United Kingdom is substantial. Between 1993 and 2010, the percentage of people aged 22-64 with no qualifications decreased from 25 per cent to 11 per cent, whilst the percentage of people with the minimum of a degree doubled from 12 per cent to 25 per cent over this same period. Other educational qualifications rates such as A levels and GCSEs have been generally stable, as can be seen in chart 1 (ONS, 2011b: 4).

**Chart 1: UK Population, age 22-64, by Highest Qualification (in per cent)**



Source: ONS, 2011b: 4

The reasons behind this growth are complex, yet it has undoubtedly occurred. In the 1960s, it is estimated that there was an annual average of 400,000 students in the higher education sector. This had increased to 2,000,000 by the year 2000 (Greenaway and Haynes, 2003). The expansion of the higher education sector can be traced to the 1960s, but it particularly intensified in the 1980s. This growth was partly “demand-led as students responded to the changes in the economy and the shift towards service industry jobs” (Blandon et al., 2004: 232). In particular, differences in wages meant that clear incentives to attend university were present for prospective students (Blandon et al., 2004: 232). Further, during this time period, government support for higher education was at its highest in various ways:

From 1977 to 1984 UK university students experienced the highest levels of state support ever. Many students received a means-tested maintenance grant to cover living costs and fees were paid by their local education authority. In addition, students could also make use of the social security system, receiving housing benefit to help with the cost of living off campus and unemployment benefit during vacations. Through the 1980s these privileges were eroded. The real value of maintenance grants was slowly reduced [...] and in 1987 student eligibility for unemployment and housing benefit was lost (Blandon et al., 2004: 233).

Other occurrences may have also influenced the expansion of higher education. The introduction of the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) in 1988 considerably improved exam results and led to increased numbers of young people staying in education (Blandon et al., 2004: 232). The amount of young people with 5 GCSEs (A\* to C) or equivalent increased substantially from the mid-1980s to the 1990s, from 26.7 per cent to 36.8 per cent (Bolton, 2012b: 19). Roberts (2013) notes a further reason for the expansion of higher education was the “brief window” that emerged in the late 1980s and early 1990s as the government uncapped funding for new students entering into higher education (Roberts, 2013: 4).

A further significant factor in the expansion of higher education was the introduction of policy in the early 1990s that placed former polytechnics and traditional universities together in the same sector. This “created the flexibility for the sector to respond to rising demand”

(Blanden et al., 2004: 233) and was the result of the 1992 Higher Education Act. This sought to “recognise the achievement of the polytechnics in pursuit of ‘cost-efficient expansion’ and expose the established universities to greater competition in their recruitment, research and teaching activities” (Parry, 2001: 125). After this development, the early 1990s saw higher educational expansion increase much quicker than anticipated, which alarmed the Treasury to such an extent that plans for further expansion were halted (Deem, 2004: 114). The result of more students now present in higher education increased the cost of the sector. The government sought to deal with this through transferring some of the costs of higher education onto individuals. Maintenance grants were phased out from 1990 to be replaced with subsidised student loans (Blanden et al., 2004: 233). By 2000, the overall participation of young people entering into higher education had increased to 33 per cent (Bolton, 2012: 14).

The Dearing Report in 1997 recommended that students had to contribute around £1,000 per year to contribute to the costs of fees, a recommendation taken up by the New Labour government in England. Yet, concerns remained about student financing (Blanden et al., 2004: 234). For socially disadvantaged students, paying £1,000 up-front could be problematic (Reay et al., 2001: 871). This was also contradictory as it went against governmental aims regarding encouraging an ‘inclusive’ higher education sector (Thrupp et al., 2005). Some years later, the white paper entitled ‘The Future of Higher Education’ was released (DfES, 2003), and similar concerns regarding social mobility were expressed. The report argued that fees should increase to £3,000 and paid back after graduates were earning over £15,000 per year (Pennell et al., 2005: 129). The government backed the proposals and variable fees were introduced in 2006 in England. These fees could not be over £3,225 and did not have to be paid up-front but instead using a tuition loan system (Bolton, 2015: 4). As no graduate could pay back tuition fees until they earned up to £15,000, it was argued that the socially disadvantaged would be adequately protected. Yet, as Pennell et al. (2005) comments, this rests on assumptions, such as whether “students will not be deterred by the level of debt that is likely to await them after they graduate, or indeed by the very fear of



getting into debt” (Pennell et al., 2005: 130). A further motivation behind these reforms was to mitigate financial concerns around the higher education sector, as with previous higher education reforms and, in particular, to ensure that the United Kingdom’s higher education sector retained competitiveness (Dearden et al., 2012: 8). The effect of these increases, however, did little to deter people from entering into higher education. From 2000 to 2011, the number of people awarded a first degree increased from 243,246 in 2000 to 350,800 in 2011 (Bolton, 2012: 20). The final significant tuition fee increase occurred in 2012, under the auspices of the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition. On this occasion, the nature of the increase was higher with fees rising to as much as £9,000 per annum in England. This meant modifying the loan repayment system with graduates now paying back when they earned over £21,000 (Bolton, 2012b: 4). The 2010 report – ‘Securing a Sustainable Future For Higher Education’ – outlined several concerns regarding the future of the higher education sector. These included continuing financial dependence on public investment, concerns around access, fairness and widening provision to include part-time students (Browne, 2010: 21). The general recommendations of the report were implemented by the Conservative Liberal Democratic Coalition of 2010 to 2015.

It must be noted that higher education policies in Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales have also changed in recent years. In Scotland, the introduction of the graduate endowment scheme in 2000 meant that graduates had to contribute £2,000 after earning over £10,000 through increased student loans or pay this off through taxes. Some students were exempt, such as those from poorer backgrounds or with disabilities. This scheme was scrapped in 2007, to be replaced by free tuition fees for Scottish domiciled students and for students from the European Union. The Scottish government makes direct contributions to Scottish higher education institutions<sup>1</sup> on a per annum basis. Further, those coming from England to study in Scotland are charged up to £9,000 paid for via student loans (with Scottish students

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<sup>1</sup> Minty (2014: 2) notes that these are “£1,285 for HNC and HND and any other sub-degree courses; £1,820 for first degree or PGDE courses; £2,895 for medicine degrees that commenced in 2011-2012 or earlier; and £1,205 for courses at private colleges”.

similarly being charged up to £9,000 if they attend a higher education institution in England. There are no caps on fees for international students (outside of the European Union) and these are set by individual universities (Minty, 2014: 2). Both Wales and Northern Ireland have had similar policies to England regarding higher education reform, although there are some variations in recent years. Both countries increased tuition fees to £3,000 in 2006 (or one year after in the case of Wales), yet they had different responses to the proposed £9,000 increase in 2012. Weedon (2014) notes:

In Wales, the Assembly continued charging Welsh domiciled students the lower tuition fee which had risen to £3,685 by 2014. Universities were allowed to charge up to £9,000 but any difference between the fee and £9,000 is covered by a tuition fee grant which Welsh domiciled student get irrespective of whether they study in Wales or elsewhere in the UK. In Northern Ireland a similar arrangement exists but students only get the tuition fee grant if they study at a Northern Irish university (Weedon, 2014: 4).

Bolton (2015) noted that in the case of England, each time fees have increased, there was a subsequent decrease in the number of students the following year. This was the case “in 1998 when tuition fees were introduced, 2006 when variable fees were introduced and 2012 when the cap was lifted to £9,000” (Bolton, 2015: 13). The highest number of students that applied for university was recorded in 2011 (as an attempt to ‘beat the fees’), leading to a 6.6 per cent drop of university admissions in 2012. So far, empirical research indicates that admissions numbers are increasing once more. Further, it is argued that the £9,000 fees in England have not deterred students from socially disadvantaged backgrounds although there has been a reduction in older age groups and those that have wanted to enter part-time study (Hubble, 2015: 4).

What is perhaps striking in examining some of these developments is that despite the substantial increase in costs, people have not been deterred from entering higher education and the numbers of graduates have actually increased further. In 2012, government statistics estimated that 49 per cent of all young people (aged 18 – 30) entered into higher education (DBIS, 2013: 1). For many young people, the engagement of knowledge-defined pathways

through higher education is a necessary part of their youth transitions. Roberts argues this is now the mainstream youth career (Roberts, 2013). Yet, how the relative value of a degree is perceived may be influenced by its cost, as noted by Roberts: “when fee loans were initially introduced, students were assured that their enhanced earning power would make repayment easy. By the time fees were reaching 9k, the message was that graduates might never earn enough to be required to repay their loans in full” (Roberts, 2013: 4). Such an expansion of higher education (and an increase of graduates in the labour market) may have an effect on graduate transitions – the period between leaving higher education and finding eventual positions in the labour market.

## **2.2 Lengthening ‘Graduate Transitions’**

The nature of the graduate transition in the context of the United Kingdom has changed significantly. This is because the expansion of the higher education sector has meant that graduate destinations have become much more diverse. Bourner et al. (2008) examine the destination of graduates in the 1960s and found that most graduates went into some form of teaching rather than move into the wider labour market. In comparison to contemporary graduate transitions, graduates found labour market destinations with a diverse range of employers (HECSU, 2015: 4). This is also because youth biographies have also become more diverse and fractured (Sennet, 1998: 26). Yet, eventual employment destinations remain important for young people in terms of developing a sense of identity. Subjective understandings of early labour market transitions will also impact and shape future careers, as “some graduates’ early experience may be empowering and confirm existing dispositions towards career development; for others, their experiences may confirm ambivalent attitudes and reinforce their sense of dislocation” (Tomlinson, 2012: 422).

Therefore, it is important to note that a substantial change in graduate transitions is that they are perhaps shifting towards ‘slower track’ transitions, with ‘success’ becoming a more elusive aim (MacDonald, 2011: 433). Purcell et al. (2004) analysed graduate transitions in the late 1990s and early 2000s and finds:

Graduate career paths evolve slowly, and some take 5 years or longer to settle into their careers – for some it involves further study, for others the process of assimilation into the labour market involves false starts or a rethink about their early career choices (Purcell et al., 2004: 15).

It is important to note, therefore, that these transitions have changed significantly. The simple explanation here is that as numbers leaving higher education have increased, the nature of the transition to the labour market has been fundamentally altered. Such a reading then implies that experiences of labour market insecurity within transitions is the result of a growing supply of graduates that cannot be accommodated sufficiently by the labour market (Lauder et al., 2012). Roberts (2013: 4) comments that: “student destinations have become an even larger issue. It has been impossible to absorb the enlarged graduate outflows into traditional graduate occupations”. This means that a growth in ‘niche’ graduate positions in the labour market that may stand outside of traditional graduate destinations has taken place (Purcell et al., 2004).

A more historical perspective can place graduate transitions in a broader context, as distinctions in labour market pathways have always been evident. In a similar way to other liberal market economies, the United Kingdom has tended to prioritise more ‘general’ skillsets (Hall et al., 2001), until perhaps the more recent focus on degree subjects comprising ‘science, technology, engineering and maths’ (DBIS, 2014: 23). This means that the distinction in how different groups of graduates transition into the labour market can also be explained by their respective degrees and areas of study. Brennan et al. (1988) in a study of graduate pathways in the late 1980s ascertained, “the transition from student to worker proceeds at different speeds according to the type of course taken. For some courses where students are educated for specific occupational roles the transition is relatively quick and via well known routes” (Brennan et al., 1988: 99). Further, Brennan et al. (1988: 104) found that there is a clear distinction between different groups of graduates. They argued that transitions could be divided into different types – ‘progressive’ (which is typified by linkage between the degree, the year after graduation and subsequent employment), ‘divergent’

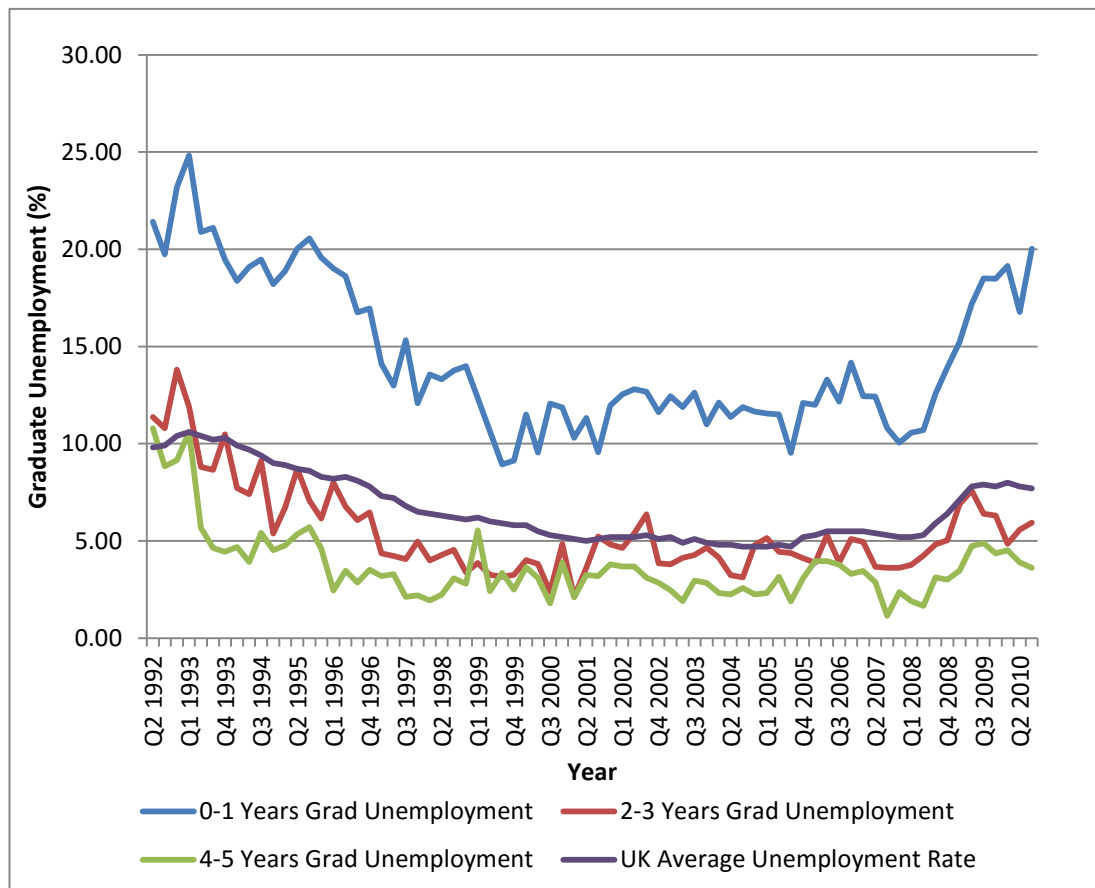
(where there is little relationship between degree and subsequent employment), and ‘delayed progress’ (where there is greater relevance of undergraduate studies over time). This implies that there have been groups of graduates for whom eventual positions in the labour market took longer to acquire – even before modern concerns about graduate transitions rose to prominence in recent years. Brennan et al. (1988: 105) identified graduates in art and design as a group of ‘delayed progress’ in this regard.

Yet, overall, graduate employment has been traditionally high in the United Kingdom and there have been substantial returns from obtaining an undergraduate degree (Teichler, 2000: 149). Acquiring higher qualifications has been understood to lead to greater opportunities in terms of employment and higher wage returns (Harris, 2001: 30). This is consistent with the approach of a knowledge-based economy, where the focus on developing human capital implies that “skills and productive knowledge imparted through education increases the productivity of the people, and thereby their earnings” (Tilak, 2002: 191-2). The knowledge-based economy thesis will be discussed in greater detail in chapter three. It is important, however, to touch on this concept here in order to explain graduate transitions. This is because the knowledge-based economy thesis implies that obtaining higher qualifications – such as an undergraduate degree – is a positive response to prohibit experiences of unemployment. There are many criticisms of this position. Mansell (2010) argues that this approach to unemployment represents a misunderstanding of employers’ needs regarding qualifications and young people (Mansell, 2010 cited in MacDonald, 2011: 435). Other commentators, such as Keep et al. (2010), emphasise “the scale and persistence of low-paid employment within the UK economy” and that “the numbers of jobs requiring little or no qualification appears to be growing rather than shrinking” (Keep et al., 2010: 569).

In examining the prevalence of unemployment in graduate transitions and the extent of unemployment through labour force survey data, there is an indication that unemployment rates are generally lower for most graduates. Chart 2 shows several unemployment rates split by the length of time graduates have been in the labour market. In the first two years

graduate unemployment is higher than the United Kingdom's national average. Yet, after two years, graduate unemployment decreases significantly and is generally lower than the United Kingdom's national average of unemployment – even at times of recession.

**Chart 2: Graduate Unemployment Rates by Number of Years since Graduation (Seasonally Adjusted)**



Source: ONS, 2011a: 2

This implies that the extent of graduate unemployment within graduate transitions is largely a *transient* process whereby graduates will secure employment in the long run. Yet, when there is a recession, unemployment becomes far more extensive with recent graduates that have left university within the previous two years. There are questions here regarding the effects of this transitional period upon these recent graduates, as well as their need to engage with employment policy support services at this time. Another feature of graduate transitions has been the rise of graduate underemployment (Scurry et al., 2011). There is arguably a long-standing concern about the efficacy of the labour market to find graduate levels of employment for all graduates in the United Kingdom. Again, the expansion of the higher

education sector and the increased numbers of graduates entering into the labour market may have exacerbated a labour market imbalance between supply and demand in terms of graduate positions (MacDonald, 2011: 435). Some commentators, such as Roberts (2009:4), go so far as to suggest that underemployment is now a “global normality for youth in the labour market”. In the case of the United Kingdom, the experience of underemployment may represent the key concern of graduate transitions. Keep argues that “many of the UK’s problems with graduate transitions into the labour market essentially stem from an over-supply of graduates relative to the scale of demand for graduates in many of the occupations towards which study has been aiming” (Keep, 2012: 20). Further, this affects youth transitions of non-graduates, as a process of labour market displacement occurs (MacDonald, 2011: 435) when graduates take-up positions they have traditionally eschewed. As experiences of unemployment and underemployment are significant aspects of graduate transitions, they will be analysed as part of the conceptual framework of this thesis in chapter three.

Perhaps the key aspect to consider about graduate transitions is that they have changed to reflect more aspirational approaches, and this may be because there has been a general increase in forms of labour market insecurity within graduate transitions. Unemployment and underemployment have already been mentioned and are arguably the most dominant (MacDonald, 2011). Yet, there are many more examples. These include unpaid and insecure internships (Percival et al., 2014), where graduates must adhere to the responsibilities of ‘work’ without adequate remuneration<sup>2</sup>; temporary employment, where graduates are engaged in short-term contractual employment and, therefore, not able to access further legal rights associated with longer-term contracts (Cartwright, 2015); and ‘zero-hour’ contracts, where graduates are in employment, yet with no knowledge of the number of hours they will be needed in future (Pennycook et al., 2013). Experiences of labour market insecurity can often fall outside the aspirations of the knowledge-based economy in graduate transitions,

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<sup>2</sup> In a legal sense, the nature of ‘unpaid’ internships can be difficult to define. According to government legislation, all internships must pay National Minimum wage, but only if the interns do ‘regular’ work for their employer (Gov, 2013).

leading graduates to look to individual explanations for their predicament through an “individualism that pervades public discourse” (Hardgrove et al., 2015: 1060). Indeed, it has been established that young people often take responsibility for perceived successes and failures alike (Hardgrove et al., 2015; Irwin, 2009; Hjort, 2014). Furthermore, both experiences of ‘risk’ (Beck, 1992 cited in Tomlinson, 2012: 25) and ‘individualisation’ are significant in graduate transitions because “the labour market constitutes [...] greater risk, including the potential for unemployment and serial job change” (Tomlinson, 2012: 25).

This echoes the views of students that perceive graduate transitions to the labour market much more competitively, as a way of avoiding labour market insecurities. Tomlinson (2007) undertook a qualitative study that involved interviewing several graduates about their experiences of the graduate labour market and comments “students view their employability as a crucial issue which has to be negotiated and worked at. This not only involves developing their individual graduate profiles and credentials, but also particular attitudes and appropriate labour market strategies” (Tomlinson, 2007: 301). It could be argued that the nature of a degree level qualification has changed. Whereas in the past, obtaining an undergraduate degree was constructed around the concept of ‘standing out from the crowd’, it is now shaped according to a different narrative altogether, due to larger numbers entering and leaving tertiary education. A degree has become a ‘requirement’ to compete effectively in the post-industrial and knowledge-based economy, even if such forms of employment can only amount to “white collar or semi-professional work which at best offers something like the remuneration and stability of skilled manual employment in the Fordist era” (Byrne, 1999: 142).

### **2.3 The Post-Crisis Graduate Transition**

The post-crisis graduate transition specifically refers to graduate transitions that are later than the 2008 financial crisis (transitions after 2008 and the subsequent recovery up to 2015). As noted in the previous two sections, there has been a substantial increase in the higher education sector, graduate transitions have become longer, increasingly diverse and appear to entail more forms of labour insecurity. In the context of a post-crisis graduate



transition, labour market insecurities, such as unemployment and underemployment, are particularly exacerbated (ONS, 2011a: 2; ONS, 2013b: 14) and may involve different experiences for graduates in other regards – this will be explored in this section.

Over the past decade, Purcell et al. (2012) have undertaken extensive longitudinal studies of graduate transitions in a study titled 'FutureTrack'. Starting with cohorts from 1995 and 1999 and examining their transitions into the early 2000s, they comment that at this time:

Graduate unemployment was virtually non-existent. Career pathways pointed to continued assimilation of graduates into graduate jobs. Earnings had declined somewhat between the two cohorts relative to average earnings in the economy, but graduates were, on average, receiving pay which represented a good return on their investment in higher education. Tuition fees were low and the higher education sector was expanding rapidly (Purcell et al., 2012: 192).

This is representative of typical graduate transitions in a non-crisis environment – whereby graduates are able to engage in a substantial way with the labour market. In contrast, Purcell et al. (2012) completed a more recent study, which began in 2005/6 that followed students over the course of their degree, graduation and subsequent careers up to 2011. In examining the transitions of these graduates, it is noted:

Ten years on from the last major graduate cohort study, FutureTrack provides a sharp contrast in terms of graduate career pathways. Unemployment is no longer insignificant, affecting more than one in ten of graduates with many experiencing difficulty in finding jobs. For those that did find jobs, there is a much greater likelihood that the job will not be a graduate job. The relative earnings of graduates continue to decline, although compared to suitably qualified non-graduates, a degree still confers an earnings premium (Purcell et al., 2012: 192-3).

The nature of graduate transition after the 2008-9 recession was very different for many graduates. In particular, labour market insecurities have increased. From the onset of the recession in 2008 graduate unemployment effectively doubled, rising from 10.6 per cent in 2008 to 20 per cent in 2010. In comparison to the national average of unemployment (which was 7.9 per cent in 2010), this was 2.3 times higher (ONS, 2011a: 1). Graduate

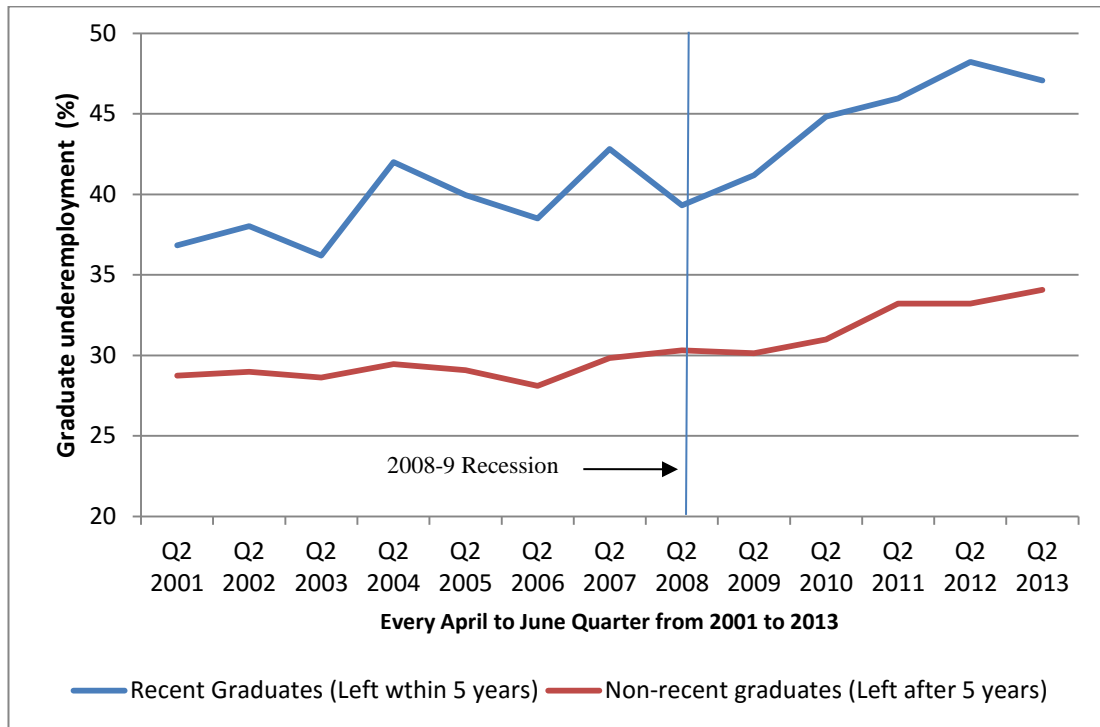
unemployment is a labour market insecurity that is particularly sensitive to negative economic circumstances, and the same pattern is evident when analysing the extent of graduate unemployment in the recessional context of the early 1990s (ONS, 2011a: 2). It also mostly affects recent graduates (who have graduated in the previous two years), rather than graduates that have been in the labour market longer (ONS, 2011a: 2). Therefore, with respect to graduate transitions, unemployment is a labour market insecurity that increases in prevalence in the period of an economic crisis.

Graduate underemployment also increased after 2008 for both recent graduates (that had graduated at some point in the previous five years) and non-recent graduates (that had graduated more than five years previously). This can be seen in chart 3. This chart shows the percentage of employed recent graduates and non-recent graduates working in non-graduate roles. This analysis was created by the Office of National Statistics and has been adapted from Labour Force Survey data. How this analysis defines graduate roles is based on the work of Elias et al. (2013) that define non-graduate and graduate positions in the labour market<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> Professors Elias and Purcell (2013) define ‘non-graduate’ as jobs in which “associated tasks do not normally require knowledge and skills developed through higher education to enable them to perform these tasks in a competent manner. Examples of non-graduate jobs include receptionists, sales assistants, many types of factory workers, care workers and home carers” (ONS, 2013b: 13).

**Chart 3: Percentage of Employed Recent Graduates and Non-Recent Graduates Working in Non-Graduate Roles**



Source: ONS, 2013b: 14

The first aspect to note about the chart is that 2008 is the year where substantial increases started to occur, which indicates that the overall graduate labour market is different in post-crisis transitions. The second aspect to note, however, is that underemployment was already increasing for both recent graduates and non-recent graduates from 2001 to 2013 – although at a much slower rate. This raises a question as to whether labour market insecurities are predominantly associated with negative economic contexts, which would mean that they may recede when the economy has sufficiently recovered (Philpot, 2011). Another interesting question is whether post-crisis graduate transitions deteriorate prior to existing labour market supply and demand imbalances to such an extent that this means underemployment continues to increase, even after economic recovery has taken place (Macdonald, 2011). The underlying question here is how we untangle whether such findings are due to the effects of post-crisis graduate transitions or because of longer structural changes to the labour market (Aronson et al., 2015: 1113).

Graduating in a post-crisis era also has implications for graduates later in life. Lahn (2010) suggested that graduates leaving higher education when the labour market is more difficult experience specific wage penalties for much of their later career. Lahn (2010) examines longitudinal data regarding American college leavers, analysing in particular the long-term consequences of graduating in a bad economy. Lahn concludes that “the results [...] strongly support the hypothesis that graduating from college in a bad economy has a long-run, negative impact on wages” and that “the business-cycle effects on recent labour market entrants are significant and persistent” (Lahn, 2010: 312). Other empirical analysis supports this argument, both from historical and contemporary perspectives and from a variety of international contexts. Oreopoulos et al. (2006) analyse some long-term effects of graduating in a recession “for a large sample of Canadian college graduates with different predicted earnings using matched university-employer-employee data from 1982 to 1999” (Oreopoulos et al., 2006: 1). They found that ‘wage scarring’ is persistent over the next eight to ten years, but these graduates do eventually catch up (Oreopoulos et al., 2006: 1). More recently, Aronson et al. (2015) examine the young graduate transitions in the city of Michigan in the United States of America. There are some limitations to this study, such as a 17 per cent response rate to their survey leading to concerns about selection bias (Aronson et al., 2015: 1113). Yet, they identify some common experiences of graduates in the context of the ‘Great Recession’:

Unemployment, underemployment, malemployment, low wages, and dissatisfying jobs were common. Concerns about financial issues and debt were also widespread, with some graduates reporting heartbreaking instances of poverty, hopelessness, depression, and anxiety (Aronson et al., 2015: 1112).

These issues were particularly important regarding socially disadvantaged graduates – particularly first-generation college graduates (Aronson et al., 2015: 1112). Overall, Aronson et al. argue that “social policy should be expanded to further support young adults” (Aronson et al., 2015: 1114). Attempting to acquire employment in adverse graduate transitions is also affected by governmental economic and political priorities, especially if

this leads to certain forms of recruitment being depressed. The Conservative Liberal Democrat Coalition Government of 2010 – 2015 sought to reduce government spending deficit levels and argued that the overall size of the public sector must decrease accordingly to reach this aim (HM, Government, 2010: 15). This meant that substantial cuts were made to recruitment in public services. In the United Kingdom, the public sector is a traditionally strong employer of recent graduates. Wright noted that the “Higher Education Careers Service Unit have argued that if only one fifth of the 39,000 ‘non front line’ public sector jobs that graduates go into each year are cut, the graduate unemployment rate will double” (Wright, 2011: 28).

In effect, labour market insecurities, such as unemployment and underemployment, evidently increase in post-crisis graduate transitions. This is also problematic as these experiences are identified more broadly as particularly negative. Cassidy et al. (2008) examined the psychological effects of underemployment and unemployment for recent graduates in the mid-2000s, and comments:

The significant decrease in distress levels for those employed in a desired job indicates the importance of appropriate graduate employment. It seems clear that both unemployment and underemployment are sources of distress for graduates, while finding employment in line with a career plan has significant benefits for mental health (Cassidy et al., 2008: 189).

Further, as post-crisis transitions are different depending on the overall economic contexts in which they take place, their effects may be more extensive. Tomlinson (2012) also notes the importance of subjectivity in graduate transitions to the labour market (Tomlinson, 2012), as graduates that struggle to engage with the labour market in a ‘successful’ way may have a higher propensity to individualise this labour market insecurity. In such a context, any form of labour market insecurity may be perceived more negatively, with graduates failing to attribute the causes of their predicament to structural trends in the labour market, but rather through a failure to adequately construct a youth biography that can engage sufficiently with the knowledge-based economy. Therefore, employment insecurity is attributed to a

deficiency of ‘human capital’ appropriate for the knowledge-based economy (Levidow, 2002: 11). Thus, in post-crisis graduate transitions, more responsibility is placed on young graduates to make even further personal investments (this could take the form of adding to their own human capital through post-graduate and further qualifications or to increase efforts in job-search activities to find ‘knowledge-based’ employment). In other terms, it is more likely within post-crisis graduate transitions that explanations for labour insecurities are shifted to the behavioural rather than the economic sphere (Bryson et al. 2003 cited in MacDonald et al., 2005: 376).

## **2.4 Entry to the Race but not a Place on the Podium**

There are also questions that need to be explored about ‘inequalities’ in graduate transitions (and whether such inequalities are worsened in post-crisis graduate transitions). One of the core concepts of this thesis is the knowledge-based economy – a notion that, when invoked by policy makers, often reflects a presumption that graduates will gain increased economic and social returns (Harris, 2001: 30) through the obtainment of an undergraduate degree. A critique of such understandings of the knowledge-based economy is that they presume that differential returns are awarded on a meritocratic basis (Lauder et al., 2012a: 4).

Yet, put simply, there are groups of graduates that are more likely to experience forms of labour market insecurity than others. Brennan et al. (1988: 116) noted that such intersectional factors have played an important role as far back as the late 1980s in graduate transitions. They identified gender, age, social class and ethnicity as non-educational factors that influence the employment of graduates. At this point, ‘ethnicity’ was the strongest of these intersectional factors. Yet, for Brennan et al. (1987), expectations of engaging higher education as a way of ameliorating such inequalities needed to be examined with some care. Writing for the Commission for Racial Equality in 1987, they noted:

Whatever the equalising force of educational qualifications, they do not eradicate inequalities grounded in gender, in social background, or in ethnic origins. The ‘value added’ from higher education for students from different backgrounds is notoriously difficult to assess. Thus, any difficulties faced by graduates from ethnic

minorities in the labour market should not be taken to imply that such students receive no, or reduced, employment benefits from the possession of a degree. What is at issue is how far other forms of social disadvantage have been reduced (Brennan et al., 1987: 45).

The argument put forward by Brennan et al. (1987; 1988) is that 'objective' readings of higher educational success for such graduates are hard to establish, and a more a holistic account regarding the benefits of higher education is also necessary. Nonetheless, there is now an established body of literature exploring these different types of labour market inequality in graduate transitions. With increases in tuition fees now so extensive, it is also arguably important to understand the implications of intersectional inequality within graduate transitions (Roberts, 2013). One such example that has increased in prominence is social patterning (Furlong et al., 2005). There has been substantial socio-economic change in terms of the composition groups that enter into higher education, with some scholars now calling university a 'classed' experience (MacDonald, 2011: 433), referring to the breadth and range of young people that now enter into higher education. Yet, the nature of engagement and participation in higher education is still largely stratified, with traditionally advantaged students more likely to undertake degrees in older, more established universities and they may be better placed to make the most of their opportunities within higher education. Furlong et al. (2005) in a trilogy of reports (Forsyth and Furlong, 2000; Forsyth and Furlong, 2003; Furlong and Cartmel, 2005) employed a longitudinal research methodology to examine students' entry, participation in and exit from higher education, as well as their initial entry to the labour market. Towards the end of this study, Furlong et al. (2005) concluded that:

Experience of HE is also differentiated on the basis of social background: in short, working-class students often struggle to fit in with their more advantaged peers, have to spend longer hours working, and partly as a consequence, are more likely to follow non-linear routes through HE. Leaving the less desirable institutions with poorer qualifications, it is almost inevitable that the least advantaged will encounter greatest difficulties in the job market (Furlong et al., 2005: 39).

This discussion around inequality in graduate transitions must also make reference to similar discussions around entry into the university system – one of the primary and consistent justifications for higher-education-based reform to increase tuitions fees in recent years (Dearing, 1997; Browne, 2010). Graduates from disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to be over-represented on vocationally oriented courses in less prestigious Higher Education Institutions (Forsyth et al., 2000). This means that on entry to the labour market they are not competing equitably with their peers:

It is true that those who were particularly disadvantaged were marginally less likely to come away with degrees, but almost half of those from the lower working classes did so. Having survived the experience, however, those who came away with degrees were still not competing on a level playing field with their affluent peers: they were less likely to hold a ‘good’ honours degree and could be restricted by having attended a less prestigious institution (Furlong et al., 2005: 40).

Further inequalities are also identified. Distinctions in ethnic minorities and entry to ‘professional’ spheres of employment (Conner, 2003; Rafferty, 2012) is a particular area of concern, perhaps even more so considering that such inequalities were also present in the late 1980s (Brennan et al., 1988). Inequalities in labour market outcomes for specific disabled groups of graduates are also present, such as those with mental health difficulties<sup>4</sup> (Tunnah et al., 2013: 19). Further, patterning by age<sup>5</sup> (Purcell et al., 2007) is also identified as a possible labour market inequality. Lastly, inequalities in gender are also evident. Data from the Higher Education Statistical Authority shows that the mean salary for female graduates is £20,000 compared to £22,500 for males, although in relation to unemployment rates, 8% of male graduates were unemployed in 2012/13 compared to 5% of female graduates (HESA, 2014).

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<sup>4</sup> On analysing disabled graduates entering into graduate level employment more generally, there have been some positive developments. Tunnah et al. (2013) show that although non-disabled graduates have been more successful in securing graduate level jobs, the differences between their outcomes and those of disabled graduates is relatively minimal (Tunnah et al., 2013: 19).

<sup>5</sup> An examination on ‘age’ may be beyond the realm of this particular thesis as the focus here is on youth-based graduate transitions. It is important to note, however, that such inequalities exist in graduate transitions. Purcell et al. (2007) empirically examined older graduate labour market outcomes (over the age of 30) and finds that these groups have difficulties in accessing graduate level employment, as well as having lower earning potential.



Labour market insecurities, such as unemployment and underemployment, are now far more prevalent in graduate transitions. Arguably, the breadth of these experiences affects many graduates that are not perceived to be socially disadvantaged. The second key concept of this thesis is the ‘missing middle’ of youth transitions (Roberts, 2011). This refers to the groups of young people overlooked in recent years by youth scholarship and policy makers, who have instead focussed on marginalised groups of young people or on knowledge-defined graduate pathways – overlooking those young people that do not go to university, who have more ‘ordinary’ transitions to the labour market (Roberts, 2011; Roberts, 2013). Yet, in chapter three, it will be argued that graduates that experience labour market insecurities are another group of young people that have received little attention in recent years from youth scholars and policy makers (MacDonald, 2011). Thus, there are questions to be asked regarding the relationship between labour market insecurity and disadvantaged groups of graduates. Firstly, do these experiences fall on disadvantaged graduates more often, as graduate transitions are often stratified in terms social patterning? Put simply, “the well-known lack of social equity at the point of admission to higher education is matched by a further lack of equity at the point of exit from higher education” (Brennan et al., 2003: 39). Secondly, are experiences of labour market insecurity, such as unemployment and underemployment that increase in post-crisis graduate transitions, more impactful on such graduates? Aronson et al. (2015) note in their investigation of graduate transitions in the context of Michigan in the United States of America that labour market insecurity impacted on groups of graduates that are likely to experience inequality:

We found that women and first generation college graduates fared the worst in terms of their employment status, debt levels, and income levels, as well as their subjective assessment of the difficulty of finding a job (Aronson et al., 2015: 1112).

Crew (2015) identify that graduates from disadvantaged backgrounds experienced some form of disruption in their transitions to the labour market in the context of North Wales – particularly in that they had some experience of working in non-graduate roles and

unemployment. They noted that “there were high levels of temporary contracts, particularly for the least advantaged graduates” (Crew, 2015: 36).

Therefore, inequalities within graduate transitions are evident and such factors shape early experiences of the labour market, perhaps even more so at times of post-crisis graduate transition. It is already known that graduates from socially disadvantaged backgrounds note practices of their middle-class peers regarding transitions to the labour market, particularly when they identify individual limitations regarding social or cultural capital needed for certain jobs (Greenbank, 2007). Further, Tomlinson stresses that “studies of nontraditional students show that while they make ‘natural’, intuitive choices based on the logics of their class background, they are also highly conscious that the labour market entails sets of middle-class values and rules that may potentially alienate them” (Tomlinson, 2012: 423). The concern here is that as higher education has become a default choice for young people, with “all else implicitly defined as failure” (Roberts, 2013: 4), knowledge and awareness about labour market orientations are unequally distributed throughout the graduate population. It may be the case that socially disadvantaged graduates are pulled in different directions – by the values associated with their socio-economic background and by the middle-class, aspirational values of the graduate labour market. In times of post-crisis graduate transitions when there are limited employment opportunities, youth biographies become even harder to shape. As such, although many young people have an undergraduate degree (and will have undertaken actions to construct a youth biography that is competitive in the graduate labour market), it may be the case of having a ticket to enter the race, but not a place on the podium.

## **2.5 The Graduate Labour Market Context in 2015**

The graduate labour market context in 2015 is significantly improving in the United Kingdom (DBIS, 2015a: 1), as the Gross Domestic Product has grown in recent years and more employment opportunities have been added to the economy as a whole (ONS, 2015: 1). This has meant that graduate pathways are once more stabilising, in a similar manner to the mid-90s, after the early 1990s recession (ONS, 2011a: 2). According to surveys of

graduate recruiters, the graduate labour market is once more increasing the supply of labour market opportunities (HECSU, 2015: 4). Yet, more positively, as we come towards 2016, it may be the case that the post-crisis stages of graduate transitions are coming to a close, and graduate transitions are once again stabilising. This may also be reflected in a general recovery regarding household incomes that are now once again turning to the pre-recession levels of 2007 (ONS, 2015: 1). That graduate transitions will stabilise after several years is expected, as analysis concludes that affected graduates begin to catch up in terms of wages some years after the initial recession (Lahn, 2010; Oreopoulos et al., 2006).

Overall, the graduate transition in 2015/16 has improved in the more immediate aftermath of the economic downturn of 2008, and the weaker labour market that followed in subsequent years. Yet, at the same time, there are new developments taking place. Some labour market insecurities, such as graduate unemployment, have followed similar patterns to the mid-90s recovery by decreasing substantially (DBIS, 2015a: 1). Again, this is somewhat expected, as analysis of unemployment duration indicates that groups of people with higher qualifications are much less likely to be unemployed in the longer term (ONS, 2011a: 2). Other labour market insecurities, however, remain extensive within graduate transitions, such as graduate underemployment. This is still significant, much in the same way that it has been throughout the 2000s (ONS, 2013b: 14), with much of the debate now focussed on what constitutes an appropriate graduate job or role (HECSU, 2015: 4). More broadly, the graduate labour market context has shifted substantially in recent years. It has become more competitive (Tomlinson, 2012), as graduates seek to avoid labour market insecurities and follow career paths towards knowledge-based employment. Yet, negotiating how to avoid labour market insecurity, which has grown in prominence in recent years, is difficult, even more so in post-crisis graduate transitions and particularly in the case of socially disadvantaged graduates. It is somewhat paradoxical that despite heightened insecurity in graduate transitions, tuition fees have increased to the extent they have.

A key development in the graduate labour market context of 2015 and onwards is the prioritisation of degrees in ‘Science Technology, Engineering and Maths’, as there have been increasing calls from the business community for graduates with technical skillsets (CBI, 2010: 6, 7). Yet, labour market insecurity holds relevance for such graduates as well, as we can see labour market insecurity in all types of graduate transition. The publication, ‘Physics World’ (a UK-based publication for Physics graduates and academics) has written of the lack of ‘Physics’-based employment, the loss of STEM based skillsets from the labour market, and ‘unhelpful’ support from Jobcentre Plus for new graduates (Jackson, 2015: 46-7). Also, the UK government has recently launched an empirical investigation into the destinations of computer science graduates, following long-standing concerns in relation to the prevalence of unemployment and underemployment in their transitions to the labour market (Shadbolt, 2015). Other commentators note that labour market insecurities amongst graduate transitions of ‘Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths’ graduates are long-standing. Smith et al. (2011) analyse graduation destinations from 1986 to 2009 regarding the transition of engineering students from education to employment with a focus on the first six months after graduation and find that:

The pattern in all years is similar. In general, less than half of all graduates who report an occupation are in employment directly related to their degree. Even though this is only the first destination survey after six months, it is astonishing in light of claims of science graduate shortages that so few new graduates go into related employment. Of the rest, just under a quarter of newly qualified engineers report every year that they are working in what are considered to be non-graduate jobs, including unskilled and routine employment, such as being cashiers and waiters (Smith, 2011: 171).

This chapter has attempted to provide an account of the graduate labour context in the United Kingdom. It is not inclusive of all developments in higher education from the early 1990s to 2015. Rather, the intention was to introduce and frame the key themes and debates of this thesis. In chapter three, two key concepts will be explored – the ‘knowledge-based economy’ and the ‘missing middle’ of youth transitions. These will make up the conceptual

outline that will be applied to the qualitative data in chapter six. Both of these concepts have been briefly touched upon in this chapter. In engaging with these concepts in a critical way, this thesis will be able to understand further the developments that have helped shape the graduate labour market context in 2015.

## **Chapter 3: A Conceptual Framework to Examine Post-Crisis Graduate Transitions**

This chapter will analyse two core concepts: the ‘knowledge-based’ economy thesis and the ‘missing middle’ of youth transitions (Roberts, 2011). The focus of this chapter is to provide a conceptual framework in order to contextualise and analyse the qualitative data presented in chapter six. These two concepts are selected because they each provide a useful perspective and explanation into the graduate labour market context that has been discussed in chapter two.

The first part of this chapter will explore the concept of the ‘knowledge-based economy’ in terms of its origins and conceptual development. As a concept, the knowledge-based economy has featured prominently in academic discussions, government policy (Blair et al., 1999) and in public discussion (Brinkley, 2006). As it is engaged in different contexts, it may be ascribed to have different meanings (Lauder et al., 2012a: 8). There are many examples of how the ‘knowledge-based’ economy thesis is used. Reich (1991) argued that a nation’s standard of living rests on the worldwide demand for its specific skills and knowledge (Reich, 1991). Other scholars engage with ‘knowledge’ in order to conceptualise the political economy of welfare, such as Giddens (1998) who emphasised the importance of ‘knowledge’ in achieving a “social investment state”, as a key aspect of “positive welfare” (Giddens, 1998: 128-9). Other scholars, such as Castells (1996; 2010), emphasise the importance of ‘knowledge’ in creating the ‘information society’, driven by advances in technological innovation and transatlantic communication, as ‘real time’ has taken precedence over the geographically defined ‘clock time’ of the past (Castells, 1996: 476 cited in Hoogvelt, 2012: 29). This section will explore some of these conceptions of the term ‘knowledge-based’ economy, defining how the concept will be used throughout the thesis. It will provide a critique of the concept of the knowledge-based economy, drawing in

particular on the arguments of Lauder et al., (2012b). Further, it will also provide details on how policy makers have invoked the ‘knowledge-based economy’ in their policy rationales in the United Kingdom in recent years. In particular, it will explore how the knowledge-based economy ‘orthodoxy’ has influenced a number of people in higher education, specifically focusing on increasing graduate numbers since the early 1990s.

As noted in chapter two, labour market insecurity has been more prevalent in the UK graduate labour market in recent years. This contradicts a basic assumption about the efficacy of the knowledge-based economy, namely that it should generally provide a range of social and economic benefits to those that acquire higher levels of knowledge through the completion of a degree (Drucker, 1969, 1991; Reich, 1991). Further, assumptions of successful graduate transitions associated with the knowledge-based economy orthodoxy may lead to overlooking experiences of labour market insecurity. Consequently, we might ask whether a new ‘missing middle’ has developed as the knowledge-based economy orthodoxy emerged – in the form of a group of recent graduates that have not entered into a labour market context on the advantageous terms enjoyed by previous graduate cohorts (Roberts, 2011; MacDonald, 2011).

Therefore, the second part of the chapter will examine the concept of the ‘missing middle’ in youth studies (Roberts, 2011), largely in relation to graduates. More specifically, this section will examine how the concept of the missing middle can ascertain whether graduate experiences can be analysed using this approach. The ‘missing middle’ refers to groups of young people that youth scholarship (and policy) has overlooked in more recent years (Roberts, 2011). This follows criticism that youth transitions studies “have been over-occupied with the problems faced by those ‘at the bottom’ rather than with the wide range of youth transitions” (MacDonald, 2011: 432). Therefore, engaging with the concept of the missing middle allows for an examination of typical recent graduate experiences, as this may be one such group that deserves further academic attention and insight. This is because, as MacDonald (2011) argues, it is possible to “reflect critically on the way that the familiar and

new problems that face young people in the making of transitions are theorised and constructed by researchers and policy makers and, in doing so, to suggest important and sometimes underexplored questions that face youth research and policy” (Macdonald, 2011: 429). Arguably, as the graduate labour market context has changed, so have the experiences of recent graduates, and there may be a new theoretical need to contextualise and examine these experiences.

The second part of this chapter (focussed on the exploration of the ‘missing middle’) will be split into different sections. The first section will explore the concept of the ‘missing middle’ (Roberts, 2011) by examining the theoretical and policy questions that have become relevant to recent graduates. The second part will examine some labour market insecurities that recent graduates have experienced more regularly in recent years, including ‘zero’-hour contracts, instances of temping and paid and unpaid ‘internships’. It will, however, largely conceptualise these insecurities as forms of ‘unemployment’ and ‘underemployment’. This is because these experiences have become the central concerns in graduate transitions in recent years, and also because they allow for a more holistic examination of other types of labour market insecurities that graduates may have experienced as part of a ‘missing middle’ (MacDonald, 2011). The two concepts, the ‘knowledge-based economy’ and the ‘missing middle’, will be used to interpret the primary qualitative data presented in chapter six.

### **3.1 The Concept of the ‘Knowledge-based Economy’**

As noted in chapter two, there has been a substantial increase in the number of graduates in recent years in the United Kingdom. A particularly dominant rationale underpinning government policies expanding participation in higher education is that the emergence of the ‘knowledge-based’ economy demands higher skill levels. Yet, the origins of the idea of a knowledge-based economy can be traced much further back. Indeed, new and original uses of ‘knowledge’ arguably are an important part of continuous economic and societal development. Harris (2001) notes “economic activity based on knowledge production, consumption or distribution is not a new idea. It has played an important role in economic analysis since Adam Smith’s day”. What is distinct about the knowledge-based economy is



the assertion that it may be the most “important aspect of the economy as a whole” (Harris, 2001: 23). ‘Knowledge’, therefore, is important in terms of economic progress. One example is Jessop (2008), who emphasises that the move away from Fordist-industrial processes is characteristic of Western economies using advanced technologies and knowledge to adapt to a globalised world and retain economic competitiveness:

States at different scales have key roles in promoting the knowledge-based economy and managing the effects of the competitive treadmill and uneven development. They have reoriented policies towards competitive knowledge production and seek to reorganise not merely economies but whole societies around these imperatives (Jessop, 2008: 8).

The specific origins of the knowledge-based economy are most likely attributed to Clark (1940), who argued that it is the way that knowledge is utilised that helps societal and economic development. For Clark (1940), the relative success of a society is attached to the growth of key economic sectors, which are split into three areas: the primary, secondary and tertiary sectors. In this way, Clark argued that as demand for the service sector increases, a transfer of labour from the secondary sector (manufacturing) to the tertiary sector (service-based work) occurs and that, therefore, this is a key measure of economic development (Hudson & Lowe, 2009: 90). Bell (1979) took some of these theories further by splitting the service sector into additional areas – tertiary, quaternary and quinary, with a further concentration on the knowledge-intensive quinary sector. For Bell (1980), theoretical knowledge (alongside information technology) was the core driver behind this development. Bell comments that “the axial principle of the post-industrial society [...] is the centrality of theoretical knowledge and its new role, when codified, as the director of social change” (Bell, 1980: 501). Similarly, Drucker (1969) noted that a ‘knowledge society’ would mean that workers have to adapt to a new set of conditions. Mansell et al. (2009) comments that “for these authors and many others, the task at hand was to forge a strong commitment to technological innovation as the mobilizer of economic and social progress” (Mansell et al., 2009: 3).

Another influential aspect regarding the origins of the knowledge-based economy has been the increasing role of information technology in society. Masuda's (1980a: 146) vision of a "computopia" for Japan, where a society "brings about a general flourishing of human intellectual creativity, instead of affluent material consumption" (Masuda, 1980b: 3), is an early example of how influential ideas around ICT-based 'knowledge' can be in terms of restructuring economic and societal aims. Perhaps the most influential author who has explored notions of ICT-led social change in more recent years is Castells (2000a) in his notion of the 'network society'. For Castells (2000a), it is this combined use of knowledge and ICT that has facilitated influential social and economic change on a global scale. This has meant differences in relation to how 'time' is conceptualised, as ICT technology now allows for both international communication and the exchange of information to take place in an instant, around the globe. The proliferation of such technology has also meant that a global economy has emerged around what Castells (2000a) has dubbed the 'network society'. Profound changes in the nature of societal relationships are at the centre of this particular thesis, which highlights "cultural and institutional manifestations of network societies and the importance – or logic – of emergent social formations" (Mansell, 2009: 9). This means that there is propensity for businesses to be increasingly linked and dependent on each other rather than being isolated and individualised. Nonetheless, it is important to note that Castells' central thesis is sometimes criticised for its technologically determinist nature (van Dijk, 1999).

Perhaps the most important aspect of Castells' (2000b) argument (particularly in relation to this thesis), however, is his view on how the labour market must alter to accommodate labour. Throughout much of the development of the knowledge-based economy thesis, arguments have been made about the need for workers to adapt their skills according to a knowledge or information society (Drucker, 1969). This strand of reasoning still retains relevance in modern discussions about the concept, perhaps even more so because of the speed of computational developments from the 1980s onwards. Hudson et al. (2009) argued that the development and increasing importance of ICT-based technology has added a

further need for workers to adapt. This is because the knowledge-based economy “requires a workforce that is able to adapt to the ever increasing, technologically fuelled pace of change; one in which flexible programmable labour is predominant” (Hudson et al., 2009: 98). Indeed, in Castells’ specific thesis about the rise of a ‘network society’, labour must become ‘flexible’:

Induced by globalization, and the network enterprise, and facilitated by information/communication technologies, the most important transformation in employment patterns concerns the development of flexible work, as the predominant form of working arrangements (Castells, 2000b: 9).

A perception that labour is ‘programmable’ is key for several reasons. There is a need for labour to be reskilled and to find ways of coping with rapid change (particularly as the information networks are in a constant state of flux). In this regard, a polarisation is made between labour that is able to withstand these developments, and ‘generic labour’ that is more disposable and replaceable by machine-based technology (Hudson et al., 2009: 94). Indeed, Castells asserts that this is the underlying explanation behind rising social inequality, as “in the absence of a determined public policy aimed at correcting structural trends, we have witnessed in the last 20 years a dramatic surge of inequality, social polarization and social exclusion” (Castells, 2000b: 12). Indeed, much of Castells’ arguments were similar to those put forward by various governments in the 1990s and 2000s, in that the development and use of new forms of ‘knowledge’ were essential in making the most of the modernisation of the working environment (Blair et al., 1999), with the knowledge-based economy underpinning several government policy aims and outcomes (Giddens, 2000: 52). This is perhaps unsurprising, as one of the most attractive aspects of the knowledge-based economy thesis is that it is seemingly positive because of the opportunities it presents. Harris has notes that the knowledge-based economy implied:

New visions of economic growth based on the creation of new knowledge and applications. It offered an enormously optimistic view of the future. While a service-led post-industrial economy was doomed to ever higher restaurant prices and dead-

end jobs, a shift to knowledge-based growth promised ever increasing wealth based on the emergence of entirely new goods and activities (Harris, 2001: 23).

There are further economic reasons as to why the knowledge-based economy is attractive. Knowledge can be described as ‘weightless’ in the sense that it can be concentrated in non-material objects and, as such, knowledge can be re-applied with no loss of value (Harris, 2001: 23). Yet, there are certain aspects of the ‘knowledge-based economy’ that are particularly attractive to policy makers. This was the case during the New Labour government, as engaging the knowledge-based economy became a key part of the United Kingdom’s political economy of welfare. Tony Blair advocated strongly the need to have progressive ‘supply-side’ measures of economic and social reform. Where the previous Conservative government had adopted a supply-side economic orthodoxy characterised by the lack of intervention in the market in terms of job creation and full employment – and in many ways New Labour followed suit – the difference behind the New Labour government’s economic and social policies was the focus on improving labour skills as an economic (and social) policy. In the early years of New Labour, Tony Blair argued that moving towards a knowledge-based economy was essential as “the most important task of modernisation is to invest in human capital: to make the individual and business fit for the knowledge-based economy of the future”, a requirement that could entail a “lifetime access to education and training” (Blair et al., 1999: 2, 31). This point is well summed up by White (2004) who notes that “a better-educated workforce is essential to improving the perceived trade-off between employment and earnings equality in post-industrial economies” (White, 2004: 30).

Furthermore, part of the conditions in making the Western economies attractive to international capital also relies upon having a large base of highly skilled workers from which to draw. Brown et al. note “this has resulted in government policies dedicated to increasing education and skill levels to ensure that Britain has the requisite human capital to attract investment and sustain leading-edge industries” (Brown et al., 2010: 8). As noted, this is a strand of reasoning that has long been part of the development of the knowledge or

information society. In particular, academics such as Reich (1991) and Drucker (1993) have argued for the raising of education and skill levels, as economic prosperity was now based upon a “global competition for ideas, knowledge and skills” (Brown et al., 2010: 8).

### **3.1.2 The ‘Knowledge-Based Economy Pathway’ of Higher Education**

In the United Kingdom, the presence of the knowledge-based economy has become prominent in government policy, with the express prioritisation of education. It could also be argued that a knowledge, skill-based and more global economy allowed Centre-Left politicians to justify moving away from traditional positions of the post-war welfare state (Hudson, 2009: 99; 2003). A particular example of these developments was the expansion and development of higher education. The increase in the number of graduates in the United Kingdom, particularly following the 1992 higher education reforms (as mentioned in chapter two) is an important example of how the knowledge-based economy thesis has been applied. Further, the move towards engaging with fees and loans (and away from grants) has been justified in order to create a sustainable, high-skill economy that is able to compete with other countries (Browne, 2010: 17). Tomlinson notes that in modern graduate transitions, the concept of employability is now “centrally located in the changing relationship between higher education and the labour market. The development of mass higher education has intersected with the shift towards a so-called knowledge-driven or post-industrial economy” (Tomlinson, 2007: 285).

It could also be argued that the application of the knowledge-based economy has a global dimension. This is because of an assumption underlying the mass expansion of higher education, namely that the technological superiority of advanced economies would limit the competition between OECD nations “at the same as giving emerging nations including China and India the opportunity to grow their economies through their cost advantage for low skilled manufacturing and services” (Brown et al., 2010: 8). This, however, may be misguided as many nations (other than advanced economies) are also now focusing on economic restructuring based upon high-skill, high-value activities (Ogunsola, 2008: 1). China, for example, is expected to have 195 million graduates by 2020 (Lauder et al., 2012b:

45). The former UK Prime Minister, Gordon Brown, has noted that this orchestrates what could be called “a global skills race” (Brown, 2008). He argued that there will be an opportunity for highly skilled British workers to “achieve upward mobility through an expansion of high skilled employment”, which will involve individuals investing in higher education and skills as a means of contributing to and competing in the global economy (Brown et al., 2010: 8). Some scholars now argue that the knowledge-based economy thesis has become ‘orthodoxy’ (MacDonald, 2011), and is now firmly ingrained in the United Kingdom’s policy frameworks. The former Prime Minister, Tony Blair went so far as to suggest that the Keynesian welfare state had “broken down [because] globalisation has placed a premium on workers with the skills and knowledge to adapt to advancing technology” (Blair, 1999). More recently, the current Conservative Prime Minister, David Cameron, has argued that “Britain is in a global race to succeed’ and one aspect of this entails “reform[ing] education so we turn out the brightest graduates” (Cameron, 2012).

Therefore, emphasis on ‘human capital’-based policy has been one way of establishing this transition to the knowledge-based economy. The ‘human capital’ thesis argues that “the better educated a person is the more productive they are likely to be, for which they will earn a higher income” and, further, that “effectively, increased education ratchets up the levels at which demand and supply are in equilibrium. Underlying this theory is the assumption of material progress through education: a ‘win win’ story for individuals and nations” (Lauder et al., 2012b: 52). Yet, there is much criticism of the ‘human capital’ theory (Brown et al., 2011). It assumes that educational returns must be meritocratic (given employers will want the most productive workers), and that employers will continually invest in technology to harness the potential of knowledge-orientated workers – claims that have been described as “highly debatable” on both “theoretical and empirical grounds” (Lauder et al., 2012b: 52). Specifically, Lauder et al. (2012b) highlight the assumption that the labour market will continually adjust to the increasing supply of the productive potential of new entrants (Lauder et al., 2012b: 53). Instead, the governmental policy response towards the knowledge-based economy may be better conceptualised through the ‘Skill Bias Theory’.

Both ‘Human Capital Theory’ and ‘Skill Bias Theory’ share many underlying assumptions (both acknowledge that there is a need for an increased supply of skills, for example), yet ‘Skill Bias Theory’ emphasises technological innovation as the driver behind future economic competitiveness. Lauder et al. note regarding ‘Skill Bias Theory’:

Its significance lies in the support that it has provided and continues to provide for the rapid expansion of university education, while assuming that technology will drive the corresponding organisational and economic changes to utilise the skills that graduates require (Lauder et al., 2012b: 52).

This is somewhat similar to Castells’ (2000b) notion that a division of labour exists regarding the use and adaptation to new technology. Therefore, an emphasis is placed on engaging with education (particularly undergraduate degrees through higher education) to distinguish how labour may be potentially divided. In the case of the United Kingdom, such an approach became paramount throughout the New Labour period of government (and arguably still retains relevance in 2015). Papadatou comments:

This socio-economic model very much contrasts with the old labour market model’s binary divide between a majority unskilled/skilled, and a minority professional workforce: indeed the new ideal workforce is fluid, highly skilled, dynamic and flexible. This new workforce is now, evidently, the backbone of the UK economy, and, following from this, the possession of a first degree makes its holder much more likely to be employed than a non-graduate (Papadatou, 2010).

The clear existence of such a policy is perhaps best exemplified by New Labour’s aim to increase student participation in higher education to 50 per cent by 2010 (Papadatou, 2010). It must be noted, however, that between 1999 and 2007, student participation never went above 43 per cent (DIUS, 2009a: 4). Under the Conservative Liberal Democrat coalition, student participation within the higher education sector has been viewed somewhat differently, with emphasis being placed on a more ‘free market’ approach. With increased individual fees, a ‘core and margin’ system of student places was introduced. Lupton et al. (2015) explains that:

Core allocation of places would be gradually reduced, but there would be no limit on the numbers of students who scored AAB or above at A level (extended to ABB from 2013/14), thus encouraging competition for these students, while a pot of places outside the core (20,000 initially) was reserved for HEIs with an average fee of £7500 or below. In the 2013 Autumn Statement, the Chancellor announced that the overall cap on student places would be increased by 30,000 from 2014/15 (for universities only) and removed altogether (for universities and other HE providers) from 2015/16, allowing higher education to expand to meet demand (Lupton et al., 2015: 20).

As noted in chapter two, analysis has found that 49 per cent of 18 – 30 years olds entered into higher education in 2012 (DBIS, 2013: 1). Nonetheless, the expansion became a key part of government policy in an attempt to match the aspirations of a post-industrial, knowledge-based economy. Certainly, there is some empirical evidence suggesting that graduate transitions were stable in the case of the United Kingdom – at least until the early 2000s. Purcell et al. (2004) employed a longitudinal qualitative study that examined graduate transitions from the late 1990s to the early 2000s. This study is evidently pre-recession and is referring to a different labour market context, but concluded that:

The picture is positive – we find no evidence of an over-supply of graduates, although [...] the graduate market is changing in response to this increased supply. Seven years after graduation, there is little evidence of graduate over-supply or widespread failure of graduates to have become integrated into the labour market in appropriate occupations (Purcell et al., 2004:15).

The expansion of the graduate population, however, is still the cause of major debate, with commentators arguing that there is an over-supply of graduates that has become larger than the demand for them in the economy, causing issues in relation to unemployment and underemployment (Brown et al., 2004: 232; Brown et al., 2010; Cassidy et al., 2008; MacDonald, 2011; Smetherham, 2005). In addition, these concerns are further compounded for disadvantaged graduates that have come from poorer backgrounds and still face labour market inequalities despite obtaining a degree (Furlong et al., 2005; Tomlinson, 2008), as was discussed in chapter two.



Yet, the knowledge-based economy thesis retains importance, even with difficulties in graduate transitions becoming exacerbated by the global recession of 2008-9. Some commentators have argued that there is even a need to expand the United Kingdom graduate population further. This is because “the response of the labour market to the recession has reinforced the need for a highly skilled workforce” (Levy et al., 2010: 3). This can be observed in regards to where jobs were mainly lost, which was predominantly in manual, unskilled and elementary occupations. In comparison, less than 10 per cent of ‘knowledge-associated jobs’ were lost. Brinkley has comments that “it seems [...] the recession is accelerating the long term process of structural change towards the knowledge economy” (Levy et al., 2010: 6). Such empirical evidence lends weight to arguments that labour has indeed become ‘programmable’ to adapt to technological advances and new knowledge-based sectors, and that perhaps even further, an undergraduate degree is now a form of social protection.

### **3.1.3 Critiquing the ‘Knowledge-Based Economy’ Thesis**

There is, though, a need to be critical regarding the knowledge-based economy thesis. Indeed, many academics are critical about the concept because the global financial crisis in 2007 affected graduate transitions in both OECD and developing nations (Brown et al., 2004; Lauder et al., 2012a; 2012b). As a concept, there are questions about how ‘knowledge’ is appropriately defined and measured. As Smith notes, “the weakness or even complete absence of definition is actually pervasive in the literature [...] this is one of the many imprecisions that make the notion of the ‘knowledge economy’ so rhetorical rather than analytically useful” (Smith, 2002).

This is perhaps because in defining the knowledge economy it is difficult to identify exactly what *knowledge* is. Therefore, in quantifying and measuring the knowledge economy, care has to be taken, as it is “clear no single definition will capture all aspects of the knowledge economy. All indicators have advantages and disadvantages” (Brinkley, 2006: 29). According to the OECD definition (high to medium technology manufacturing, finance, telecommunications, business services, education and health), around 40 per cent of GDP in

the UK is generated by knowledge-intensive industries, while 40 per cent of the UK workforce are 'knowledge workers', although these terms do require further definition (Brinkley, 2006: 29-30). Yet, perhaps more significantly, it has been noted that it is difficult to actually measure the economic returns of the knowledge-based economy and, as such, if such a thesis was evident, "we should see economic growth accelerate above historical rates for a sustained period" (Harris, 2001: 23).

Further, the most substantial challenge for the knowledge-based economy in regards to the expansion of the graduate population (and more specifically 'Human Capital Theory' and 'Skill Bias Theory') is the lack of an adequate explanation for the inequalities that exist in graduate transitions. The extent of these inequalities has been explored in some detail in chapter two. Essentially, does a knowledge-based economy support those from socially disadvantaged backgrounds sufficiently – can it provide emerging graduates with both positive and meritocratic outcomes? Lauder et al. (2012b) sum up this simply as: "if graduates enter the labour market with roughly equivalent skills then why do some earn more than others?" (Lauder et al., 2012b: 54). The pertinence of structural social factors in graduate transitions, such as socio-economic background, gender, ethnicity and disability, may explain in part why these inequalities still exist. Arguably, this hints at a broader question relating to the limits of the knowledge-based economy. Although much of the economy has shifted towards new technological industries, as observed now in many cities, much of the economy has not developed in the same way, examples being the North East of England and Northern Ireland. Hudson et al. (2009: 99) note a growing divide between regions that are more knowledge intensive and regions that have retained their industrial base. This may mean that the value of an undergraduate degree may be rooted in its geographical proximity to knowledge-intensive locations. These limitations echo a key critique of the knowledge-based economy thesis: that it is simply just another part of the service sector, and the real narrative worth exploring is that associated with post-industrialism (Harris, 2001: 23). Taking this critique further, it could even be argued that, in some respect, the knowledge-based economy thesis is more about the political, rhetorical

language governments may employ, rather than the holistic technologically driven change that is suggested.

To conclude, there may be limits to what the knowledge-based economy is able to deliver to both individuals and to nation states. Achieving success in the labour market for new graduates can remain elusive because of factors beyond their individual control. Some of these factors may include the current demand for skills and technological proficiencies, structural factors, such as socio-economic background, and the structure of local labour markets in providing opportunities.

Yet, the knowledge-based economy thesis retains huge significance in policy discussion, and will continue to play a significant role primarily because it forms an “earning = learning” contract that appeals to politicians because it offers ‘rational’ economic arguments (Lauder et al., 2012a: 6). One of the interesting occurrences in the United Kingdom regarding graduates is that – similar to other liberal market economies – general skills rather than technical specialisms are preferred (Hall et al., 2001). This appears to be changing, however, with the government tentatively starting to direct its efforts towards Science-, Technology-, Engineering- and Mathematics-based degrees instead (DBIS, 2014: 23), engaging at the same time with the question of what form should a knowledge-based economy now take. So far, however, strategies towards encouraging STEM degree provision are somewhat “vague” and “tendentious” (Lauder et al., 2012a: 6). Furthermore, labour market insecurity is not solely confined to non-STEM graduate transitions, as evidenced by governmental investigations regarding computer science graduate destinations and their experience of unemployment and underemployment (Shadbolt, 2015). Yet, the government may have forgone its opportunity to alter the provision of higher education. This is because it has increased tuition fees and adopted a loan-based system that has largely moved away from subsidising higher education costs, resulting in transferring university costs to the individual. This means that regardless of what kind of graduates are needed for a knowledge-based

economy, such decisions will be driven by students rather than the government (Tomlinson, 2012). As such, it may be difficult for the government to address questions regarding skill imbalances in the future.

### **3.2 The Knowledge-Based Economy and the ‘Missing Middle’ of Youth Studies**

The knowledge-based economy thesis assumes economic and societal returns on knowledge (Harris, 2001: 30), and is an important concept in relation to young people in particular. This is because factors, such as innovative and new technology, education, job creation and training, may affect young people in their transitions to the labour market. As Harris note, “the KBE is that part of the economy where it is argued the new jobs and new wealth are being created and thus had a definite appeal to the younger generation” (Harris, 2001: 23). Exclusion from the benefits of the knowledge-based economy therefore, may be a particular concern regarding young people’s transitions to the labour market when they leave education. Somewhat similar to Castells’ (2000) notion of ‘polarised labour’ regarding the groups in society able to take advantage of technological advances, it could also be argued that young people’s marginalisation from the benefits of the knowledge-based economy has individual consequences for them and their communities. Those that are able to access the benefits of the knowledge-based economy may do so because of the advantages of class or educational success. Yet, for those young people without such advantages, MacDowell argues that they find themselves:

Embedded in sets of economic and social circumstances that make them unsuitable workers in the ‘knowledge’ economy and hardly more eligible for interactive ‘body work’ at the bottom end of the service economy where embodied social attributes of gender, accent, weight, and skin colour often disqualify them (MacDowell, 2012: 587).

That groups of young people have been marginalised from the successful transitions of the labour market is empirically well established (MacDonald et al., 2001, 2005; Roberts, 2011; Roberts, 2012; Shildrick et al., 2012). The Teesside studies into youth transitions indicate that for young people in disadvantaged neighbourhoods and locations, finding employment

outside of the knowledge-based economy is relatively easy – although these are often in temporary positions, sometimes ‘unofficial’, as well as being mostly low-skilled and low-waged positions (MacDonald et al. 2001, 2005). As such, young people may be still marginalised from the apparent social and economic benefits associated with being part of the knowledge-based economy. Roberts (2013: 5) notes this presents a challenge for policy makers and politicians in post-industrial Britain, as it is the “poverty of opportunities rather than any poverty of aspiration” that determines these poorer young people’s marginalisation from sustainable paths into employment. In the case of recent graduates, the financial crisis in the United Kingdom shed light on some of the ‘slow-track’ transitions young people experience when graduating from university. As noted in chapter two, graduate ‘success’ is now somewhat more elusive and appears to take longer to obtain (Purcell et al., 2004; MacDonald, 2011). Many of the post-crisis graduates, however, also experienced a situation where they were marginalised from the benefits of the knowledge-based economy (MacDonald, 2011), not necessarily because of their locations (such as in the Teesside studies), but because opportunities to engage became more limited after the financial crisis.

The broader question here is this: in the transition to the knowledge-based economy in recent years, has a ‘missing middle’ of graduates developed – hidden by an assumption that all graduates are privileged because they have obtained a degree? This may refer to structural inequalities (as noted in chapter two and earlier in this chapter) within graduate transitions, but it may also refer to a much wider cohort of graduate experiences than provisionally realised – particularly in relation to the prevalence of labour market insecurity (mostly in relation to graduate underemployment and unemployment). MacDonald (2011) argues that this represents a broader change regarding the shifting nature of a labour market that now has many more graduates. These assertions may be troubling for policy makers (and for advocates of the knowledge-based economy thesis), as it may be easier to argue that experiences of labour market insecurity should only be associated with the context of post-crisis graduate transition. Yet, this thesis takes a position that there is a link between the assumptions of the knowledge-based economy thesis (namely that obtaining an

undergraduate degree leads to positive employment outcomes), and the ‘missing middle’ of graduate experiences that do not fulfil these expectations. Further, these two concepts can also be applied not only to graduate transitions, but also to the policy support that is available to graduates when they experience labour market insecurity (this is discussed in more detail in chapter four). To build this argument, the next section of this chapter will examine the second primary concept of this thesis – the ‘missing middle’ of youth transitions.

### **3.2.1 Graduates: Are they Part of the ‘Missing Middle?’**

There is much debate regarding who constitutes the ‘missing middle’ in youth studies research (Roberts, 2011, MacDonald, 2011; Roberts 2012; Cairns, 2014). The concept was put forward in Steven Roberts’ influential study into male, non-graduate youth transitions of ‘ordinariness’. Roberts argued that, primarily, youth studies had somewhat ignored these experiences in favour of examining NEET-based biographies or examining government defined pathways that promote the knowledge-based economy, such as further and higher education (Roberts, 2011: 34). This definition of the ‘missing middle’ is also put forward by Ken Roberts (2013), who argued that the vanishing labour market occupations for middling youth has fractured ‘ordinary’ youthful transitions to adulthood.

For some commentators, the concept of the “missing middle”, “emerges when qualitatively interesting issues are prioritised in research and policy at the expense of less spectacular but quantitatively more noteworthy phenomena” (Cairns et al., 2014: 1047). This may be the case when there is a focus on the ‘fringes’ of a key issue rather than its centre. In this regard, the concept of the ‘missing middle’ can be somewhat broadened to include a wider variety of young people, who have also been overlooked in youth studies in recent years, such as graduates (Macdonald, 2011; Cairns et al., 2014). Cairns et al. (2014) suggest that a ‘missing middle’ may exist where tertiary education plays a dominant role in youth transitions. They refer to the case of tertiary-educated youth in Portugal where there is “little attention awarded to such young people by policy-makers or researchers”, leading to the conclusion

that “we are witnessing signs of a southern European version of the ‘missing middle’ in emergence” (Cairns et al., 2014: 1058).

For MacDonald, the ‘missing middle’ presents an opportunity to understand further different types of youth transition. Such a grouping of young people includes the “set of transition routes and identities” that “now lie between middle-class, inclusionary paths from school to ‘better universities’ and the exclusionary ‘poor transitions’ of ‘the NEETs’ and the worst sections of the working class” (MacDonald, 2011: 436; Roberts, 2011). In this regard, MacDonald (2011) was able to explore concepts of graduate unemployment and underemployment in further detail, which he argued have gone overlooked in recent years. A key aspect for MacDonald is that students that enter and leave higher education now have a mixture of socio-economic backgrounds:

One of the most profound changes to UK youth transitions [is] the blurring of university education as a singular, *explicitly* classed experience. Now far greater proportions of UK university students are working-class, even if the middle-class remains dominant (MacDonald, 2011: 433).

This is an important distinction. For MacDonald (2011: 433), there is a need to go beyond traditional social-policy-based concerns that often do not focus on middle-class transitions. This thesis takes these latter definitions by MacDonald (2011) and Cairns et al. (2014) as a springboard. It does not contend with the arguments put forward regarding ‘middling youth’ by Ken Roberts (2013), nor the ‘non-graduates’ of Steven Roberts’ study (2011), which are both valid. Yet, it does divert from these studies as it argues that graduates may also be an overlooked part of youth transitions studies – particularly in the context of post-crisis graduate transition. This is because the concept of the ‘missing middle’ is a metaphor that can be used as a “heuristic tool”, to “denote an absence of engagement with certain aspects of the mainstream youth experience” (Cairns et al., 2014: 1047). Further, the concept of the ‘missing middle’ can also be engaged to consider which groups of young people are not sufficiently supported in terms of policy. In chapter four, there will be a discussion regarding higher education and welfare-to-work policy in graduate transitions where this question will

be addressed in greater detail. Specific policy for graduates to assist them into employment (excluding support and initiatives available through higher education) has only been introduced in recent years and specifically in the context of post-crisis graduate transition. The ‘Graduate Talent Pool’ – an internship-based web service for graduates to engage after they have left university (Bourne, 2011) is one such example. Further, the ‘missing middle’ is an important concept because it is this emphasis on ‘ordinariness’ that helps illuminate different aspects of youth transitions. Coles emphasised this argument as far back as 1986, claiming that researchers needed to take a more holistic approach to youth transitions (Coles, 1986). Arguably, in adopting this position, it is important to understand ‘ordinary’ transitions that may not have been sufficiently analysed. Roberts (2011) notes that “historically [...] being ordinary and not neatly fitting into dichotomous categories has a rich, if somewhat overlooked, tradition in youth studies” (Roberts, 2011: 25).

The dominance of government-defined knowledge-based economy pathways through higher education has become in itself, an ‘ordinary’ aspect of youth transition (Roberts, 2013). This may mean that focus must also be applied to ascertaining whether there is a ‘missing middle’ in graduate transitions. As such, in a similar regard to the groups of young people that Roberts (2011) focuses on, the pathways of graduates that have experienced some labour market insecurity may have been overlooked (at least until the financial crisis). Brown (2006) raises the argument that for young people, higher education now offers an ‘opportunity trap’ – where many young people are forced to undertake tertiary education as it is the primary way of finding decent employment. This is despite the increasing costs of tertiary education and diminishing financial returns (Lauder et al., 2012a: 6). Employing the concept of the ‘missing middle’ helps disaggregate what can be considered as a ‘successful’ pathway into the labour market alongside pathways that have featured more labour market insecurity.



### 3.2.2 A ‘missing middle’ in Graduate Transitions: New types of Labour Market Insecurity?

The chapter will now examine some of the experiences of graduates regarding labour market insecurity. The purpose is to explore graduate experiences of labour market insecurity as a possible grouping of the ‘missing middle’. MacDonald (2011) highlights graduate unemployment and underemployment as two aspects of labour market insecurity that have not been sufficiently examined in terms of policy:

One criticism of policies that encourage extended educational transitions is that they underestimate the problems of graduate unemployment and underemployment that now face advantaged middle-class young people. In other words, underemployment is an experience that shadows ‘fast-track’ *and* ‘slow-track youth transitions’ yet remains relatively under-explored in youth studies and largely absent from contemporary policy discussion (MacDonald, 2011: 429).

The chapter will now seek to review these two key concepts: graduate unemployment and graduate underemployment (MacDonald, 2011). It will explore varying definitions and understandings of these states and also highlight their effects upon graduates. In particular, it will examine how unemployment and underemployment are conceptualised for graduates of the ‘missing middle’ in the knowledge-based economy of the United Kingdom. The rationale behind analysing these two concepts is that they present the dominant experiences of labour market insecurity in post-crisis graduate transitions. The nature of labour market insecurity can vary significantly with episodic experiences of temping (Cartwright, 2015), unpaid and insecure internships<sup>6</sup> (Percival et al., 2014), and ‘zero-hour’ contracts<sup>7</sup> (Pennycook et al., 2013) all becoming part of the modern graduate transition experience. The focus of these next sections, however, will be on the experiences of ‘unemployment’

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<sup>6</sup> Examples of insecure internships appear to be more apparent in the ‘creative’ rather than STEM based industries.

<sup>7</sup> A word of caution – up to this point, there has not been a sufficient analysis of how many ‘graduates’ have ‘zero-hour’ contracts. According to Pennycook et al. (2013), 21 per cent of people on such a contract have a degree (Pennycook et al., 2013: 3). We also know that ‘zero-hour’ contracts affect young people more disproportionately than older workers “with 37 per cent of those employed on such contracts aged between 16 and 24” (Pennycook et al., 2013: 3). Therefore, it is likely that many workers with a ‘zero-hour’ contract will be emerging graduates.

and ‘underemployment’, as these two largely encompass most other aspects of insecurity in graduate transitions.

### **3.2.3: What is ‘Graduate Unemployment?’**

This next section will examine the concept of graduate unemployment. In chapter two, graduate unemployment is mentioned with reference to the overall graduate labour market context. As noted, unemployment amongst graduates increased immediately because of the 2008-9 recession to 20.7 per cent (from 10 per cent in 2008). By the end of 2011, it stood at 18.9 per cent, just slightly lower than the peak of graduate unemployment of 26.9 per cent in 1993 after the recession in the early 1990s<sup>8</sup> (ONS, 2012: 5). The last several years have seen graduate unemployment fall. The Higher Education Statistics Authority analysed data from the Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education Survey and found that the proportion of 2012/2013 unemployed graduates (surveyed in winter 2014 six months after graduation) is 7.3% (HECSU, 2014: 4). Of course, these unemployment rates must also be contextualised somewhat – they are still well below those for non-graduates (ONS, 2013b: 5), whilst degree holders can still expect relatively positive labour market experiences in the longer term (ONS, 2013b: 1). This section will focus on defining the concept of graduate unemployment and its effects on graduate wellbeing (specifically referring to psychological and financial implications). As noted, youth studies often prioritise what is perceived as the most vulnerable unemployed groups, prompting questions about how others groups of the ‘missing middle’ may also experience unemployed states in their youth transitions (Roberts, 2011; Roberts, 2013; MacDonald, 2011). There is a need to analyse the concept of graduate unemployment, as this will be a key area that is examined in the qualitative data in chapter six.

Graduate unemployment in the context of the United Kingdom appears to be strongly related to recessions. After the recession of the early 1990s, unemployment amongst graduates fell considerably, was generally low throughout the 1990s and 2000s, and only significantly

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<sup>8</sup> Due to the substantial increase in the overall number of graduates since the early 1990s recession, the absolute number of unemployed graduates would be much higher (Bolton, 2012a).

increased in 2008 (ONS, 2012: 5). This means that graduate unemployment – as a concept – can be typified as a ‘temporary’ type of social risk (Taylor-Gooby, 2004). Further, there is empirical evidence that points towards graduate unemployment as a *transient* process, whereby graduates that have been in the labour market the longest have the lowest unemployment rates (ONS, 2013b: 7). In the context of the United Kingdom, the cause of graduate unemployment is related to different aspects of economic cycles when there is an imbalance between supply and demand (i.e. the amount of graduates leaving higher education combined with a lack of jobs available). This approach is perhaps best expressed in the ‘over-supply’ thesis, already put forward earlier in this chapter. This states that such imbalances have now become the underlying cause of graduate unemployment and underemployment (Brown et al., 2004; Wolf, 2002).

Establishing any definition of ‘unemployment’ (referring to any social group) can be complex, however, as perceptions are rooted in contemporary concerns and ideals. This is evidenced by the changes in the meaning of unemployment over the course of the last century. Walters notes some of the accounts in which the concept of unemployment has been understood:

As a problem of labour markets and industrial disorganisation (Beveridge); as a social psychological matter of ‘demoralisation’ amongst industrial workers (during the 1930s); as a risk which afflicts a given population (the insurance view); as a fully economic problem rooted in the structure of the national economy (Keynes) or, more recently, the local economy; and, most recently as a question of individuals and communities which lack the basic skills and capacity to adapt to the ‘information economies’ of the coming century (Walters, 2000: 4).

Throughout the timeframe that Walters mostly refers to here, unemployment amongst graduates has not always been significant. Bourner et al. (2008) argue that in the 1960s, unemployment amongst graduates was at 3% per cent (it is also most likely that unemployment rates were similarly low for non-graduates as well). Yet, the latter definition of unemployment as related to ‘information economies’ may help to define how ‘graduate unemployment’ is now understood by policy makers. In many respects, supply-sided

measures to ‘up-skill’ have become a default policy strategy to avoid ‘unemployment’, and the use of higher education has been a form of engaging with unemployment within youth transitions. MacDonald comments:

In policy circles, and among some academics, an orthodox, shorthand analysis of the problem of youth unemployment would go something like this. Unemployment, by and large, is a product of the low skills and aspirations of the young unemployed. Problems of young people becoming NEET or trapped in poor-quality jobs can be solved by ‘up-skilling’ [...] The numbers of low-skilled jobs in the UK will decline drastically. There will be more opportunities for higher-skilled workers, such as graduates, in the coming ‘high-skill, information economy’ (MacDonald, 2011: 434).

The points raised here are similar to the criticisms made about the knowledge-based economy thesis by Brown (2006) and Lauder et al. (2012a) – that there are assumed social and economic returns in the long-term, and that young people will not experience episodic unemployment because they have ‘up-skilled’ (Lauder et al., 2012a). A further consequence of these assumptions is that graduate unemployment is an area that has received little empirical investigation. As Axelsson et al. (2002) comment, however, “there are new groups of unemployed in our society, and therefore new research is needed focusing on the new living conditions of the large groups of unemployed, young people” (Axelsson et al., 2002: 118).

The psychological, social and exclusionary effects of unemployment are long established (Sage, 2013: 7-9). There is a history of psychological evidence that indicates that unemployment has negative effects on mental health indicators, with a noticeable improvement in terms of mental health upon acquiring employment (Warr et al., 1988: 64; Winefield et al., 1993; Dollard et al., 2002: 11-2). Indeed, it has been found that the positive effect of employment is perhaps stronger than the negative effect of unemployment (Gurney, 1980: 212; Donovan et al., 1986). This is particularly the case when it comes to young people. Schaufeli notes that unemployment can affect young people in a “developmental phase” and “is accompanied by psychological and social stresses that make the youngsters

more vulnerable” (Schaufeli, 1997: 282). Studying Swedish young people, Axelsson et al. (2002) examined the differences between employed and unemployed youth (aged 20-25) in terms of mental health. They found that “tearfulness, dysphoria, sleeping disturbance, restlessness, general fatigue and irritability” was common amongst unemployed young people and that, further, “the unemployed had more mental health problems than young people who were working or studying”. This study also found that educational attainment has limited impact to reducing mental health problems, in comparison to forms of social support, particularly from parents (Axelsson et al., 2002: 111).

In relation to graduate unemployment, the literature shows that the graduates have different experiences. The literature points towards two dominant responses, as noted by Schaufeli:

According to the first hypothesis, the well-educated are particularly vulnerable to unemployment stress, mainly because they experience considerable status inconsistency (“*The higher they climb, the harder the fall*”). According to the alternative hypothesis, the better educated can cope rather well with unemployment, since they can draw upon considerable education and other coping resources (Schaufeli, 1997: 282).

These two responses to unemployment – one based around the ability to cope and the other around the experience of difficulties are common themes in the literature regarding graduate unemployment. Firstly, the notion that graduates find coping strategies when unemployed in comparison to other groups will be examined. Feather et al. note this may be because “the successful graduate has presumably developed some skills in structuring time and in developing a sense of purpose and autonomy” (Feather et al., 1983: 251). Warr (1984) comment that young unemployed people with high education are generally “good copers” (Warr, 1984: 278). In a study of unemployed Dutch youth, using data from the 1980s to compare graduate and school leavers, Schaufeli (1997) finds:

The level of mental health of college graduates is not affected by their employment status. Only a negligible, non-significant proportion of variance in mental health (i.e. 1%) is explained by the graduates’ employment status (Schaufeli, 1997: 288).

This may be because there are cultural differences between school leavers and graduates, with graduates more able to acquire coping mechanisms in times of stress – what Hobfoyl (1989) refers to as a “conservation of resources” (Hobfoyl, 1989: 513). This degree of socio-cultural capital is inferred in obtaining a higher education qualification such as a degree. This might include “adequate information available about alternatives to paid work, like training programs or unpaid activities; they have learned to spend their leisure time in a useful and satisfying way; they generally have broad cultural interests and so on” (Schaufeli, 1997: 289). Secondly, there is also a practical explanation as graduates (being older) are entitled to state benefits, such as Jobseekers Allowance (as discussed in chapter four), therefore removing the potential issues of family dependency, unlike school leavers.

Such an approach also illustrates that perceptions of individual agency retain importance when structural factors (such as a negative job market or over-competition in a particular job sector, for example) might prohibit progress. Therefore, through perceiving unemployment as a temporary state, graduates are more likely to repeat attempts of finding employment. This means that although the 2008-9 recession (ONS, 2013a: 1) has inevitably increased graduate unemployment, the actual effect of unemployment upon graduate mental health should be negligible (at least in comparison to ‘school leavers’ in other youth transitions). Even so, the perceived extent of graduate unemployment also has implications. When media narratives present graduates as part of a ‘lost generation’ of young people, a “documentary reality” (Smith, 1974) of the social concern is formed. The impression of graduate unemployment is heightened beyond the empirical reality, as argued by Philpott (2011). In turn, graduates perceive their employment prospects as increasingly negative, impacting on their job search motivation. Schaufeli (1992) comments that “as a result they may become more distressed and may therefore be less likely to find a job, either because they are rejected by the employer, or because they do not engage in active job hunting” (Schaufeli, 1992: 301).

The other side of the argument that Schaufeli (1992) presented, however, – namely that graduates may have adverse experiences when unemployed – is also identifiable in the literature. Kaufman (1982), in particular, argues that graduates that experience unemployment are vulnerable because they obtain their self-identity from employment. Feather et al. (1983) empirically shows that graduates face a period of psychological distress when unemployed. Similarly, in a longitudinal study of Dutch graduates, Schaufeli (1992) found that a period of unemployment of more than 2 years is strongly associated with psychological distress. It was also found that “the unemployed who recently graduated from technical colleges appear to be effective copers who are all well equipped to handle their situation” (Schaufeli, 1992: 302). Also, as the overall socio-economic context changes so do labour market conditions. This can mean that graduates are amongst the groups that are most prone to the psychological effects of unemployment. Turner (1995), using American data from a national probability sample (N = 1,252), compared the effects of current and previous unemployment on depression and subjective physical health status across levels of educational attainment and local job availability. It was found that:

[...] current unemployment effects among the previously unemployed are strongest in low unemployment areas, particularly among individuals with a college-level education (Turner, 1995: 213).

In terms of more recent research, unemployment appears to have a detrimental effect upon the mental health of graduates. Cassidy et al. (2008), in a longitudinal study over two years after graduation, comments that there is “a significant increase in psychological distress for the unemployed graduates” (Cassidy, 2008: 189). It was also noted by Cassidy et al. (2008) that unemployment (alongside underemployment) also has an adverse effect on factors such as health behaviour, social support, optimism and achievement motivation (Cassidy et al., 2008: 189).

Therefore, the effect of unemployment upon graduate mental health is somewhat inconclusive. This thesis will shed light on the relationship between unemployment and post-crisis graduate transitions. From the literature, two sides of an argument emerge

regarding whether graduates are able to cope with unemployment or not. Cassidy summarises these two positions:

On one hand graduates have higher expectations about status and occupational identity, hence being unemployed should be more distressing. On the other hand graduates have access to more personal and situational resources and should cope better with the stress of unemployment” (Cassidy, 1994: 385).

These two arguments will be explored in tandem with the qualitative data in chapter six. How ‘graduate unemployment’ is experienced (in other words, whether graduates can identify coping strategies or not) is important in understanding how graduates have become part of a ‘missing middle’ in youth transitions. Graduates that are able to negotiate episodic unemployment positively, may do so because of a perception that they are on a defined knowledge-based economy pathway, whereas those graduates that negotiate the experience of unemployment adversely may do so because of a perception that they are excluded from the benefits of the knowledge-based economy. It is these experiences that may well be indicative of a ‘missing middle’ in post-crisis graduate transitions. Further factors, such as the duration of unemployment, labour market opportunity, type of degree, aspiration and individual capacity to cope with being unemployed, will also play a role here. Whether graduate unemployment is an important part of the experiences that make up a ‘missing middle’ of graduate transitions also has policy implications. Vegeris et al. (2009) note that a result of the economic downturn of 2008-9 was that Jobcentre Plus had to develop responses to an increasing number of service users with diverse characteristics:

Associated with this was a change in the type of JSA claimant and a broader range of customer needs to attend to: advisers reported they were seeing more highly-qualified customers, many of whom had little previous experience of unemployment or accessing services at Jobcentre Plus (Vegaris et al., 2009: 26).

This will be discussed further in chapter four. A concern could be that policy makers assume that graduates are all part of the knowledge-based economy pathway, and that experiences of unemployment are therefore limited.



### **3.2.4: What is ‘Underemployment?’**

This section will examine the concept of ‘underemployment’ and will be split into three parts. The first part will broadly discuss the conceptual origins of the term ‘underemployment’. The second part will explore underemployment in the context of graduate transitions, so that a working definition can be applied in the qualitative data in chapter six. The third part will examine some of the effects of graduate underemployment. In particular, it will gather empirical literature that has analysed experiences of underemployment with a view to its effects on graduate wellbeing.

Underemployment can be broadly described as “the underutilization of human resources” and commonly arises “when workers’ skills exceed the skill requirements of their jobs” (Glyde, 1977: 245-6). The term ‘underemployment’ usually refers “to a lower quality of employment relative to some standard of comparison” (Friedland et al., 2003: 33). Contrary to unemployment, ‘underemployment’ (as well as its effects) has not been studied with the same intensity – at least until more recently. Dooley et al. (2004) notes that governments publish routine official unemployment rates for analysis, yet “these analysts pay little attention to inadequate types of employment, and even less to their health consequences for individuals” (Dooley et al., 2004: 2). Throughout the 1990s, the employment rate of the United Kingdom saw a dramatic increase (Doogan, 2001: 424). This may have resulted in more insecure forms of employment – in which many have participated – being overlooked.

Dooley et al. comments:

[d]uring the late twentieth century, signs appeared that the post-industrial, downsized, restructured, and globalized economy had not banished the old unemployment but had only replaced it with an inadequate type of employment – a kind of disguised unemployment (Dooley et al., 2004: 1).

There is, however, an established literature revolving around the area of ‘underemployment’ largely derived from economics, business and management (Lahn, 2010: 303). Much of this research is concentrated on the consequences of skills mismatch (the effect this has on workfare morale and lower wage returns) for businesses and the economy. There is also a

further amount of empirical psychological research that examines the effects of underemployment in relation to mental and physical health outcomes (Burriss, 1983; Cassidy, 2008; Raykov, 2009). It has been argued, particularly amongst researchers, that the impact of underemployment in this context is largely under-researched (Feldman et al., 2002; Friedland et al., 2003: 34; Dooley et al., 2004: 2). As many of these fields are also quite disparate, discussions around underemployment often take place without reference to each other. As a result of this, there are different understandings of 'underemployment'. The term has undergone continual redefinition and measurement, and it can be difficult to ascertain whether underemployment is becoming more prevalent for these reasons. As Glyde noted in a classic work in regards to the concept of underemployment:

Much less attention has been given to this problem than to unemployment and sub employment. One of the major reasons for this neglect is that underemployment is both conceptually and empirically more elusive (Glyde, 1977: 246).

There are simply many ways in which an individual can be called 'underemployed'. For example, a graduate may work in a charity temporarily to obtain appropriate experience in preparation for a certain type of career, or might be content working for a low wage as job satisfaction may be more important than individual wage return. To be 'underemployed' also presents interesting questions around the formation of 'human capital'. As noted by Glyde:

What does highest level of skill mean? Does it mean potential skill or current skill, including both formal education and work experience? What does fully utilise mean? What numeraire would be used to determine the amount of [money] individuals would normally earn if their skills were fully utilised? Is it intended that part-time workers should be included or excluded from the definition? These questions serve to illustrate some of the difficulties inherent in the notion of underemployment (Glyde, 1977: 246).

These contrasting definitions also mean that it is difficult to quantify the exact scale of the issue. Recent empirical evidence does point to its increasing prevalence, particularly in light of the recent worldwide recession (Mckee-Ryan et al., 2011: 25; Tam, 2010). Therefore, the causes of underemployment are difficult to ascertain as it is a diverse term used in varying

contexts. It can also be categorised under other names, such as ‘over-education’, ‘overqualified’, ‘over-skilled’, ‘underpaid’, ‘inadequately employed’ or ‘underutilized’. The variance in how such terms can be used leads to differences in how the issue is examined.

Underemployment is often perceived as the result of ‘over-education’, and this leads to a definition that describes underemployment as a result of imbalances between supply and demand, essentially that there is an oversupply of graduates that results in a corresponding drop in the economic rate of return in higher education (Schumpeter, 1976). A similar but slightly different argument may be that there is an inverse relationship between human capital and productivity whereby the central assumption of human capital theory – that higher education ensures an increase in productivity and skill level – is challenged (Berg, 1970). Both of these accounts are rooted in the perception that issues around underemployment occur because ‘over-education’ is the central problem. Burris comments that “both Freeman and Berg view ‘over-education’ as quite literally that: an overexpansion of the system of higher education, which can be alleviated either by market forces (Freeman) or by policies designed to curtail or vocationalise higher education (Berg)” (Burris, 1983: 106). This is an argument similar to the one introduced earlier in this chapter made by Brown et al. (2004) in light of the expansion of the higher education sector:

Our analysis of occupational trends in Britain and the United States challenges policy assumptions about the growth in the demand for knowledge workers in the new economy. The problem remains that there are not enough high skilled, high waged jobs to go around. Studies have found up to 40 per cent of graduates in non-graduate work (Brown et al., 2004: 216).

It could be argued, however, that such perspectives (in regards to ‘over-education’) perhaps emphasise individual rather than structural explanations for underemployment. Burris (1983), in a qualitative study involving 32 low-level clerical workers, notes that ‘underemployment’ affected all workers irrespective of educational attainment: “workers are not mere repositories of skills, and [...] the efficient allocation of skills is not the foremost issue raised by underemployment. Underemployment is a structural problem which cannot

be explained by blaming individuals, but which does have ascertainable effects on individuals” (Burriss, 1983: 196). Essentially, it needs to be made clear that there is a distinction between ‘underemployment’ and ‘over-education’ that goes beyond “a mere semantic quibble” (O’ Toole, 1977: 57). It is necessary to recognise perhaps that the analysis of underemployment has much to do with the workplace dynamic, and even less so than the reformation of higher education towards the labour market (Burriss, 1983: 106).

### **3.2.5 ‘Underemployment’ in Graduate Transitions**

In recent years and particularly as a result of the 2008-9 recession, graduate underemployment has become a substantial topic regarding graduate transitions (MacDonald, 2011). ‘Underemployment’ in this regard has come to be defined as a mismatch between current positions in the labour market compared to an ideal, objective expectation regarding where the graduates *feel* they should be (Scurry et al., 2011). As noted, there are different notions regarding what counts as ‘underemployment’; in particular, an under-utility of skill and qualifications may be the most dominant type amongst graduate transitions. This is because underemployment broadly represents some loss in individual working capacity, i.e. part-time work as opposed to full-time work (lack of earnings), or lack of opportunity to use previously obtained qualifications and skills. Roberts (2009) identifies a broader definition of underemployment in youth transitions that includes unemployment, part-time employment, temporary and marginal positions (Roberts, 2009). Of course, these different experiences can cause both conceptual and methodological difficulty, as definitions of ‘underemployment’ may shift in relation to different experiences in the labour market. Grant et al. (2005) examine the notion of ‘underemployment’ in women working in part-time roles, noting that 53% of women worked well ‘below their potential’, i.e. they did not use all of their skills, labour market experience or qualifications (Grant et al., 2005: iv). More recently, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation estimated that there are 1.4 million people who work part-time and would prefer to work full-time (JRF, 2015). Different conceptions of underemployment are indicative of the challenges in creating policy to help alleviate such concerns.

In the case of recent graduates, an under-utility of skill may be indicative of how underemployment is perceived due to their relative position in the labour market when their roles do not fulfil more ‘desired’ labour market outcomes. To the contrary, for in-work households in poverty, experiences of underemployment are likelier to revolve around a lack of sustainable and high-quality employment opportunities (JRF, 2015). There exists also the added complexity that underemployment is also reflective of the self-domain (Morley, 2001), i.e. it encompasses both objective and subjective dimensions (Scurry et al., 2011). A characteristic example is how perspectives on current labour market positions are shaped. Factors such as agency (or lack thereof), motivation and aspiration can have a role in this regard. Scurry et al. (2011) make the distinction between voluntary and involuntary forms of underemployment as an example of such a process (Scurry et al., 2011). Essentially, in the case of graduates, we might hypothesise that a perception that underemployment should be avoided dominates; yet, there may be graduates who also acknowledge a degree of positive development from a temporary underemployed position in terms of skill development.

The amount of graduates in non-graduate labour market positions is increasing. A key factor for this increase is that many employment opportunities simply do not require degrees, as many of the positions that were “predicted to wither if not disappear completely under visions of a high skills, information society” (Shildrick et al., 2012: 196), actually appear to be increasing (Keep et al., 2010: 569). This contributes even further to the mismatch in the supply of highly qualified jobseekers and economic demand. Empirical analysis on the number of graduates in non-graduate roles,<sup>9</sup> such as receptionists, sales assistants, factory workers, care workers or home workers has shown an increase from 37 per cent in 2001 to 47 per cent in 2013 for recent graduates (ONS, 2013b: 13). A counter argument here could be that many of these roles have changed due to the broad technological transitions that Castells (2000) emphasised. Even so, for more established graduates in the labour market

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<sup>9</sup> Elias et al. (2013) presents a thorough account of differing roles of employment that can be considered as ‘graduate employment’.

(those out of education for more than 5 years), ‘underemployment’ has still increased from 29 per cent in 2001 to 34 per cent in 2013 (ONS, 2013b: 13).

‘Underemployment’, then, can be a difficult concept to clarify, measure and narrow down. Therefore, more empirical explorations of this phenomenon are required. What is perhaps clear is that in the case of the ‘missing middle’ of graduates, prolonged experiences of ‘underemployment’ may represent a key concern as they denote a future trajectory for graduates that falls outside traditional notions of graduate employability. This poses an individual problem for graduates (individual opportunity cost), businesses (unproductive workers) and policy makers (particularly regarding welfare-to-work emphasising ‘work-first’ notions of policy). It is also concerning for higher education as it subverts its traditional expectations as “a mode of cultural and economic reproduction (or even cultural apprenticeship)” that facilitates “the anticipated economic needs of both organisations and individuals, effectively equipping graduates for their future employment” (Tomlinson, 2012: 409).

The relationship between higher education and the graduate is increasingly perceived in terms of labour market outcomes (Olson, 2012), paradoxically at a time where experiences of underemployment are a ‘normal’ part of extended transitions. Indeed, in terms of graduate expectations, it is argued that undergraduate degrees are not enough to meet the demands of the ‘knowledge’ economy (Tomlinson, 2007) – with a notion of individual success reliant on competitive aspiration. Yet, if many graduate experiences of the ‘real’ economy are actually far closer to low-wage, unproductive and sustainable forms of underemployment, we can start to understand the scale of the problem that ‘underemployment’ presents, as a feature of modern economy where the precariat (Standing, 2011) can comprise part of the working poor and the newly graduated alike.

### **3.2.6 The Experience of Graduate Underemployment**

This section will examine some of the effects of graduate underemployment, specifically in regards to graduate wellbeing. Generally, empirical evidence suggests that

underemployment is a negative experience. Khan et al. (1991) confirmed that there is a relationship between underemployment and poorer job attitudes (Khan et al., 1991: 217). Other evidence has focussed on the relationship between the effects of underemployment and general mental health, with positive correlations between underemployment and depression established (Feather et al., 1986a; 1986b cited in Feldman, 1996: 396). It has also been suggested that underemployment can be linked with suicide particularly amongst younger people (Stack, 1982), although this research is dated and there is not sufficient evidence to establish such a relationship.

In regards to graduates, the literature points towards underemployment as a negative experience. Cassidy et al. (2008) undertook a study involving 181 graduates that attempted “to test the relationship between employment status, coping and psychological health in recent graduates”. It was found that unemployed graduates take a much more positive approach in regards to problem solving, higher achievement motivation, social support, assertiveness and felt less hopeless than the employed group overall. The findings showed that graduates dealt with unemployment far more effectively than underemployment:

The general conclusion is that opting for a job which does not meet expectations or aspirations may be more psychologically damaging in the short term than being unemployed and hopeful. This is a function of the individual’s vulnerability or resistance to stress and highlights the need for graduates to be prepared more effectively for the path to a career (Cassidy et al., 2008: 385).

Negative experiences of underemployment may also be compounded by other factors such as attitudes to career and progression. Borgen et al. (1988: 155), in a qualitative study of graduates, comments on the disillusionment of their situation, the lack of challenges and being more “worried about being stuck” in the same position over many years. Underemployment might also have further effects in regards to familial relations, as noted by Feldman: “for young adults who fail to find satisfactory employment upon graduation, underemployment often means moving back in with parents to save money”, which leads to a tension between the need to become ‘adult’, whilst still being clearly dependent on the

same family dynamics of their youth (Feldman, 1996: 400). The context and type of employment is also important. Mcvittie et al. (2010) presented empirical evidence that young people are particularly vulnerable to different forms of abuse and violence at work (particularly in call centres, marketing and the public sector), and that younger people are often reluctant to report these issues to their employer, instead accepting the poor working conditions (Mcvittie, 2010: 29-30). All these factors have much potential to create an environment of adverse mental health and exacerbate the underemployment experience.

Whether underemployment has negative effects on workers' wellbeing is also important for policy makers. Welfare-to-work policy developments in the UK have long emphasised 'work-first' (Daguerre, 2004: 42). From a governmental perspective, there is pressure to ensure that benefit recipients are entering employment. It is, however, also strongly assumed that any employment is always a much better alternative than unemployment in regards to mental health. Jahoda (1982) asserted that this is broadly correct: "judging by what people say, unemployment is subjectively the worse experience. This one infers from the fact that the overwhelming majority of the unemployed want jobs while nobody clamours for unemployment" (Jahoda, 1982: 86). Nonetheless, there is a concern that such an assumption "implicitly suggests that all employment is preferable to no employment, and that underemployment is more akin to satisfactory employment than to unemployment in its psychological impact" (Feldman, 1996: 396). Other evidence suggests that young underemployed workers can be in a similar psychological position to the unemployed, particularly since "positive development depends on repeated experience of challenging tasks requiring reasonable skill utilization — whether these tasks are done in employment or unemployment" (O'Brien et al., 1990: 164).

In chapter six, these negative experiences of the graduate underemployed will be explored through primary qualitative data. The counter perspectives will also be scrutinised, particularly whether graduates perceive underemployment in a positive way. Scurry et al. (2011) noted that distinctions are made by graduates regarding voluntary and involuntary



forms of underemployment; yet, there is a question as to how such perspectives are formed. It may be the case that irrespective of experiences of labour market insecurity, graduates contextualise such experiences in their career trajectory along a knowledge-based economy pathway. This, in turn, may help to rationalise periods of labour market insecurity, such as being underemployed.

### **3.3 Conclusion: A Conceptual Outline**

The concept of the ‘knowledge-based economy’ has been used to put forward arguments that we have a new form of economy: an economy where labour has needed to ‘upskill’ to take advantage of both technological advances (Castells, 2000) and an increase in knowledge-associated forms of employment (Brinkley, 2006). In turn, policy makers in the United Kingdom have (over several years and governments) turned towards engaging with higher education to produce graduates that are able to adapt to this social and economic transition (Tomlinson, 2007). Such positions engage with notions, such as Human Capital theory, that retain that graduate economic and social returns from higher education are able to be maintained (Drucker, 1969, 1991; Reich, 1991) despite increased numbers of graduates in the UK labour market (Lauder et al., 2012b).

A concern is that, throughout this transition to a knowledge-based economy, there may be groups of graduates that have not experienced the advantages of knowledge-defined pathways. This thesis will adopt Roberts’ (2011) notion of a ‘missing middle’ in youth transitions, as this helps to illuminate the groups of young people that have not received empirical or theoretical attention in recent years. Yet, the concept of the ‘missing middle’ will be engaged in a different way. It will instead focus on whether there is a ‘missing middle’ in policy-ascribed knowledge-defined pathways, specifically in regard to post-crisis graduate transition and labour market insecurity, such as unemployment and underemployment (MacDonald, 2011). The prevalence of such examples shows that although graduates receive positive returns on their investment in higher education in the long-term (ONS, 2013b: 1), a ‘missing middle’ within graduate transitions excluded from knowledge-based economy pathways may have also emerged in recent years. Therefore,

how experiences of labour market insecurity are negotiated can help to inform the types of graduates that may make up a 'missing middle'. Further, in exploring how and why graduates are able to negotiate these pathways differently, we can begin to construct theoretical perspectives about the ways in which graduates find their eventual places in the knowledge-based economy.

Further, the theories of the 'knowledge-based economy' and the 'missing middle' can also shed light on policy aspects of graduate transitions. In chapter four, focus will turn on the development of policy in the context of graduate transitions, particularly referring to the higher education sector and welfare-to-work based policy. Graduates who have been excluded from knowledge-based economy pathways are perhaps more likely to engage with state support, as exemplified by Jobcentre Plus. There has been an attempt to include 'human capital' approaches in order to assist the long-term unemployed into employment (Lindsay et al., 2007). The success of such strategies, however, to engage with the types of labour market insecurity identified by graduates excluded from knowledge-based economy pathways, such as extensive and repeated experiences of unemployment or underemployment, is questionable (Hadjivassiliou et al., 2015). The 'Universal Jobmatch' – a government-designed website, where jobseekers are able to look for available employment (DWP, 2015a), has been criticised for the lack of jobs available for high-skilled service users (HoC, 2014: 112). Other empirical investigations emphasise that graduates are largely unsupported when they engage with Jobcentre Plus (McLister, 2012: 24-5). An explanation for these negative experiences may be that graduates are attempting to engage with the knowledge-based economy, and the lack of support from Jobcentre Plus in this regard means that instead graduates ascribe to the 'stigma'-based narratives that dominate public beliefs about claiming government support (Baumberg et al., 2012; Garthwaite, 2015), leading to future reduced engagement and negative expectations. This will be discussed in more depth in chapter four.

In conclusion, greater acknowledgement that there are graduates ‘missing’ from the perceived success of the knowledge-based economy pathways by academics and policy makers may help to improve policy in future graduate transitions in various ways. Firstly, by examining the nature of labour market insecurity within graduate transitions, such as unemployment and underemployment, it can be ascertained how current social policy frameworks are able to engage with these concerns. Secondly, by identifying the types of graduates in need of support (the graduates that make up the ‘missing middle’), it is possible for both higher education institutions and state support services to identify and support such groups of graduates more comprehensively in future graduate transitions. These two concepts will be used to explore primary qualitative data in chapter six.

## Chapter 4: A Social Policy Framework for Graduates

This chapter is a descriptive account of past and present policies that graduates engage with in their transition to employment. It will examine policies from the late 1970s to the 2010s, in chronological order referring to policy examples in both welfare-to-work and higher education institutions. The discussion will begin in the late 1970s as the increase in youth unemployment at this time prompted the introduction of several national youth employment initiatives (Coles, 1995: 35). The first section will examine youth welfare-to-work schemes including the ‘Youth Opportunities Programme’ (1977-1983), the ‘Youth Training Scheme’ (1983-1991) and ‘Youth Training’ (1990-1998). Although such schemes were primarily focused on school leavers, they are pertinent because of the impression they have left on how state-organised schemes are perceived in modern youth transitions (Coles, 1995: 40). This section will also examine the provision available for graduates through higher education, such as the ‘Graduate Enterprise Scheme’ (1983-1991) and ‘Enterprise in Higher Education’ (1987-1996). These schemes are analysed specifically because they were formulated to support graduates in difficult labour markets (Bourner et al., 2011: 6). The second section will examine ‘general’ policy that graduates can engage with through Jobcentre Plus. This section will outline the purpose of Jobcentre Plus as an institution. Further, it will also examine relevant out-of-work benefits, such as ‘Jobseeker’s Allowance’ and ‘Universal Credit’. It will examine more general instances of employment-based support for graduates, such as ‘Sector-Based Work Academies’, the ‘Mandatory Work Activity’ scheme, the ‘Work Programme’ and the ‘Youth Contract’. The third section will summarise recent policy developments ‘specific’ to graduate transitions. These will include policies introduced in the New Labour government, the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition and the current Conservative government. As will become clear, in modern graduate transitions, provision tends to be offered through the higher education sector and in welfare-to-work services (Howat, 2011: 7). The fourth section will conclude this policy review through summarising the current social policy framework in graduate transitions. Further, it will

outline some of the key principles behind these policy developments. The fifth section will briefly explain the key research questions of this thesis, as they have emerged from an examination of the literature in chapters two, three and four.

#### **4.1 How did Policy Engage with Graduate Transitions from the 1970s to the 2000s?**

As noted, graduates have not been traditionally the main targets of youth welfare-to-work policy. This may be expected as graduates retain an advantageous position compared to non-graduates in many aspects (ONS, 2013b: 1). In chapter three, it was noted that graduates may form part of the ‘missing middle’ in youth studies (Roberts, 2011; MacDonald, 2011: 433). This implies that graduate transitions have been somewhat ignored in the study of youth transitions, as scholars and policy makers often focus instead on the more ‘spectacular’ youth biographies of socially marginalised young people or on young people that are NEET (Not in Employment, Education or Training) (MacDonald, 2011: 433). It is also perhaps likely assumed that graduates are disengaged from welfare-to-work policy as well.

Many of the advantages enjoyed by graduates in the labour market were even more pronounced before the ‘massification’ era of higher education, as “most were from privileged backgrounds and could be confident of progressing into management or professional jobs” (Roberts, 2013: 3). Whilst in recent years higher education “has become the new default option for Britain’s young people” (Roberts, 2013: 4), previously, young people’s general education-to-work transitions were characterised by quicker entry into the labour market – notwithstanding times of recession – as such positions were available for the majority of young people (Roberts, 2013: 2). Yet, this began to change when many of these entry-level positions started to disappear by the late 1970s (a development which still has much reticence in today’s youth labour market). Coles notes “the economic recession during the latter half of the 1970s and the early 1980s all but destroyed this simple, predominant, and one step transition from school to work”, and despite the subsequent economic ebb and

flow, “the youth labour market as it existed in the 1970s has not re-emerged” (Coles, 1995: 35). This prompted the development of national youth employment schemes.

The first major policy initiative, the ‘Youth Opportunities Programme’, was introduced in 1978 under the auspices of the Callaghan Labour government (Dolton et al., 2004: 1). The aim of the Youth Opportunities Programme, laid out in the 1977 Holland report (Raffe, 1981: 211), was to join together existing separate schemes (such as a 12-week training initiative, and some financial incentives for employers to take on young people) into a general 6-month scheme that would cater for up to half a million young people with offers of training and work experience after they had left school in the summer (Coles, 1995: 36). Yet, the scheme did not reduce youth unemployment, as many young people saw the experience akin to “slave labour” and resisted getting involved in it (Coles, 1995: 36), whilst youth unemployment continued to increase into the early 1980s. Strikingly, what is apparent in retrospect when examining the Youth Opportunities Programme is its similarity to modern-day employment initiatives. Roberts (2013) notes the ‘Work Programme’ of the 2010-2015 Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government “ha[d] a virtually identical rationale” to the 1978 Youth Opportunities Programme “despite the earlier measure having failed abjectly” (Roberts, 2013: 3).

The Youth Opportunities Programme ran to 1983 and was replaced by the Youth Training Scheme, which shared some similarities (and some weaknesses) with the previous scheme, as it again attempted a more sustained general strategy of work experience and employee incentives for up to a year, rather than 6 months (Coles, 1995). It still carried, however, the same perception of ‘slave labour’ leading to reduced take-up amongst young people (Coles, 1995). Some change came when the YTS was extended for a further two years in 1986, as this “presented a genuine portal to work by offering a much larger training element, work experience and a longer commitment to the participating individual by firms and the government” (Dolton et al., 2004: 1). Yet, it is questionable how successful the introduction

of different providers actually was, in some respects. Coles (1995: 37-8), noted that this introduced significant stratification where ‘training providers’ were often perceived in hierarchical terms – at the top, sponsorship schemes were ran by employers, and at the other end of the spectrum, schemes would be run by local authorities and charities. The Youth Training Scheme eventually developed into ‘Youth Training’ in 1991, which targeted young people with more ‘vocational’-based courses and training content (Coles, 1995: 37). Yet, some of the problems that affected previous youth employment policies came to the fore here as well. Although employers were encouraged to top up wages for young people on YT schemes, salaries were still far below amounts given to other young people employed outside of these schemes (Coles, 2005: 37). And once more, criticisms that involvement may be akin to ‘slave labour’ were prevalent:

By the mid-1990s many of these programmes were being run under brand names, in part at least, to distance them from the poor reputation previous schemes had had with young people and their parents (Coles, 1995: 37).

Perhaps unsurprisingly, graduates have historically stood outside these particular policy initiatives, since these have been mostly aimed at school leavers of 16 and 17 years of age. Yet, historical youth employment schemes are of interest for the general impressions they have left regarding their use. Coles (1995: 37) makes an interesting argument that by the end of the 1980s, engagement with any youth employment scheme had developed a reputation amongst young people and parents as a ‘last resort’. Further, the young people using these schemes were much more likely to be from working class backgrounds with parents from semi-skilled or skilled occupation groups – leading Coles to argue that “the extension of the school-to-work transition through Youth Training, is a feature of working class, but not middle class life” (Coles, 1995: 40). There is an interesting question here whether such historical associations and beliefs regarding public policy for young people has influenced how policy intervention is perceived in modern-day youth transitions. Graduates (and their parents) are no longer a socio-economically homogenous group (MacDonald, 2011: 433). Therefore, a factor in engaging with welfare-to-work services may be the familial socio-

economic background of graduates. For some graduates, engaging with some form of public employment scheme (such as Jobcentre Plus) may be considered as a normal form of job-search activity and an extension of working-class life. For traditional middle-class graduates, conversely, it may be the case that engaging with public employment schemes is a *generationally* new experience.

There are, however, some instances of policy that graduates may have come to engage with, especially in times of high youth unemployment, such as in the 1980s. This is because “the timing of the pressure to give more weight to graduate employability in university education tends to be strongest in economic downturns” (Bourner et al., 2011: 6). In response, the government has sought to fund projects publicly in order to stimulate graduate skills, but crucially often *within* higher education institutions, although they have historically been funded and administered through government departments focussed on training and skills (MacDonald et al., 1991: 23). Further, these policies tend to focus on stimulating ‘entrepreneurial’ activity amongst graduates.

The first of these schemes was the 1983 Graduate Enterprise Programme (GEP) launched at Stirling University in 1983, which then became a national programme that went on to support 3-4,000 students in the UK (from 1984 to 1991). This was introduced in response to UK Government concerns over high graduate unemployment in the early 1980s, and was aimed at third-year students about to graduate (Fletcher, 1999: 127). The British government was particularly concerned about a lack of self-employed graduates. As Fletcher argues “in setting up the Graduate Enterprise Programme the dominant constraints to enterprise were perceived to be institutional and cultural”. Therefore, instead, the “GEP was designed to weaken these cultural and institutional barriers and to attract a larger proportion of graduates into wealth creating businesses and to absorb some graduate unemployment” (Fletcher, 1999: 127). In particular, the GEP attempted to foster these entrepreneurial skillsets through workshops delivered in universities and regional training centres over an intensive 3-month period (Fletcher, 1999: 127-8). This type of training was generally perceived as positive by the graduates involved in the scheme, particularly as it often led to graduates getting a



business plan initiated – many GEP businesses came into being because of the scheme. Yet, interestingly, in an evaluation of the GEP, Fletcher (1999) found that 75% of survey respondents would have preferred training *after* graduation (Fletcher, 1999: 135), which may point towards the notion that, historically, a ‘gap’ in provision for graduates has existed in the UK social policy framework regarding graduate transitions. Further, many of the graduates involved in the programme came from diverse backgrounds:

The Graduate Enterprise Programme ensured that those with sufficient motivation had the ability and confidence to convert their idea into a business. Probably at least half of the participants have started their own business at some point. We found that 69 GEP participants were running their own business (60 full time), almost half were females. We found that GEP assisted predominantly young graduates from non entrepreneurial backgrounds. GEP attracted students from all disciplines which have been equally successful in starting businesses (Fletcher, 1999: 135).

Nationally, however, it is more open to question how successful the GEP was. Certainly, it could be argued that the GEP was somewhat successful, as many more graduates started their own businesses in the 1990s than before (Fletcher, 1999: 128). Arguably, this was because graduate numbers had substantially increased, and the proportion of graduates starting their own businesses was the same as in the early 1980s, at 1.5% (Fletcher, 1999: 128). Further, a substantial amount of ‘enterprise’ support was available for unemployed workers. MacDonald (1996: 433) comments that over 200 measures had been introduced by the mid-1990s focused on ‘enterprise’. Similar schemes ran in the 1980s, such as the ‘Enterprise Allowance’, with a similar rationale (MacDonald et al., 1991: 23). Therefore, it is difficult to ascertain whether the GEP was singularly effective in this regard. Lastly, it was deemed to be an expensive scheme at £4,500 a place, and as national unemployment declined towards the late 1980s (as did the national subsidies available for providers per each participant), the government started to question the value of the programme, eventually leading to its end in 1991 (Fletcher, 1999).

Other higher-education-based employability schemes included the ‘Graduate Gateway Programme’, which was “designed to encourage graduates to consider a career in business” (MacDonald et al., 1991: 21), and the ‘Enterprise in Higher Education’ initiative. Both of these were publically funded and had similar conceptual rationales to the ‘Graduate Enterprise Scheme’, in that they aimed for “every person receiving a higher education qualification [...] to develop competencies and aptitudes relevant to enterprise” (TA, 1989: 5). In particular, ‘Enterprise in Higher Education’ attempted to assist students in higher education to develop ‘entrepreneurial’ skillsets (funded once more by the Training Agency). Higher education institutions were invited to apply for £1 million in funding over 5 years. Eleven institutions were awarded grants in the first round, and a further 15 institutions received funding in the second round (MacDonald et al., 1991: 23). The aims of ‘Enterprise in Higher Education’ included developing students’ ‘transferable skills’ in order to incorporate appropriate work-relevant and work-based training and to encourage students to take more responsibility for their own learning. These aims were meant to be delivered through staff and curriculum development, employer partnerships, and student participation (Whiteley, 1995: 4). Similar publically funded initiatives also followed in higher education, such as the regional Science in Enterprise Scheme (1999-2004), which was designed to teach areas of commercialism and enterprise in the fields of science and technology, the Cambridge-MIT initiative and the Higher Education Innovation funding stream (Greene et al., 2007: 18).

Yet, there may be questions about the propensity of such schemes in responding to issues of graduate unemployment and underemployment, and alternatives have been offered. Bourner et al. (2011) noted that there is no evidence to indicate that employability skills initiatives in higher education led to positive outcomes in the graduate labour market. For instance, Mason et al. (2006: 24), in an empirical investigation of higher education employability measures, found no impact of enhanced employability teaching or training on obtaining employment in the first 6 months after graduation (although it was found that structured ‘work’ placements worked more effectively in securing graduate employment outcomes).

Bourner et al., (2011: 7-8) further note that, conversely, “we have been unable to find systematic empirical studies of the university teaching of employability skills that report reduced graduate unemployment or higher rates of employment in graduate-level jobs”. Instead, Bourner et al. construct an argument whereby a better response to issues of graduate unemployment and underemployment is offered through enhancing the learning capacity of higher education students. Bourner et al. (2011) asserts, somewhat patronisingly, that this is because the “root cause of graduate employability is enhanced capacity to learn” (Bourner et al., 2011: 22), as “a principal difference between graduates and non-graduates is that graduates are more prepared to learn and better prepared to learn” (Bourner et al., 2011: 26).

Yet, despite moves to narrow gaps between higher education and the employment market (Tomlinson, 2007), there may be other limitations to employability schemes in tackling issues such as graduate unemployment and underemployment, in that, principally, they are still ‘supply-sided’. Put simply, there is an assumption that it is the personal ‘defects’ of the graduate that explain their experiences of unemployment or underemployment. Evidently, developing employability skills or ‘enhancing learning capacity’ (Bourner et al., 2011) may be beneficial for individual graduates, as it stands to reason that increased individual productivity incentivises potential employers to provide further employment opportunities. Yet, graduate unemployment and underemployment are also outcomes of long-standing changes in the structure of the graduate labour market (Brown et al., 2004). There has been a marked increase in the amount of people with tertiary levels of education in the UK economy, while there has not been a corresponding increase in the levels of employment opportunities for these graduates (Brown et al., 2004). In this regard, typical government responses of using employability initiatives in higher education may be similar to modern government responses in welfare-to-work policy, where there is a tendency to look to ‘up-skilling’ as a form of integration with the knowledge-based economy (MacDonald, 2011: 434). Yet, increasing employability initiatives in higher education do not tackle issues related to ‘demand’, as there is now an abundance of graduates working in low-paid, low-skilled positions (Shildrick et al., 2012: 199). Further, and more pragmatically, policies such

as the Graduate Enterprise Programme or the Enterprise in Higher Education are aimed at students before they become graduates. This is crucially before any experience of unemployment or underemployment occurs – and as achieving ‘success’ in graduate transitions is now a much slower process (Purcell et al., 2004; MacDonald, 2011: 433), there may be limits as to how far any higher education provision, based on employability, can actually go.

#### **4.2 ‘General’ Welfare-to-Work Policies that Graduates Can Engage With (2010 – 2015)**

Generally, the transition to employment from higher education can be considered economically ‘liberal’ in the United Kingdom. The role of the government in terms of welfare-to-work policy is limited. Instead, the rationale behind welfare-to-work policy is that “public support is directed at areas of market failure – notably on young people that lack intermediate qualifications” (Howat, 2011: 7). Howat (2011) also maintains that this is simply because of the 2008-9 recession, as this has increased economic insecurity for graduates and, as a result, they may turn to public employment services more regularly in their job searches. Yet, arguably, a further explanation might also be linked to long-term structural changes in the graduate labour market (Brown et al., 2004). As a result of these developments, frontline provision has been made available for graduates (though delivery of these schemes has been administered either through welfare-to-work policy or through university-based provision). Indeed, public employment agencies such as Jobcentre Plus may act as a gateway to both more specialised support services, such as the ‘Graduate Talent Pool’ (Bourne et al., 2011), and more general welfare-to-work policy, such as the ‘Universal Credit’, ‘Sector-Based Academies’, ‘Mandatory Work Activity Schemes’ and the ‘Work Programme’. This section will focus on graduate engagement with these more general schemes.

In all these schemes, governments have sought to introduce policy mechanisms that reduce the amount of benefit claimants as a means to enhance cost efficiency (Taylor-Gooby, 2012: 63). The development of ‘conditionality’ has become a major part of welfare-to-work policy,

for example, with stringent consequences for service users that are deemed to not fulfil their obligations as ‘active’ jobseekers, often resulting in sanctions. These developments can be traced to the creation of Jobseeker’s Allowance in 1996, which resulted in the monitoring of job-search activity surveillance for all benefit recipients (Watts et al., 2014: 5). The New Labour government in 1997 introduced sanctioning in instances of non-compliance, where jobseekers did not meet ‘appropriate’ standards of job-seeking behaviour (Watts et al., 2014: 5). The Conservative Liberal Democratic coalition government cemented the principle of ‘conditionality’ in the social security system. Sanctions now range between four weeks to three years (DWP, 2015b).

Therefore, there may be difficulties in meeting the ‘needs’ of individual groups in a ‘work for all’, conditionalised social security system (Watts et al., 2014: 5). For graduates, an obvious problem is perhaps that they have specific expectations regarding obtaining graduate employment (Brooks et al., 2009). Therefore, the principle of ‘work-first’ sets up many problems for welfare-to-work policy in terms of delivery, as jobseekers with individual or distinctive aspects in their biographies (these experiences have shaped their needs in terms of provision), do not receive appropriate support in finding employment. This is further complicated as the unemployed are simply not a homogenous group, and this diversity presents a challenge to welfare-to-work services. This is reflected in how the frontline staff of Jobcentre Plus can socially construct distinctions in client groupings, as a way of managing competing demands in their daily interactions with service users (Rosenthal et al., 2006).

#### **4.2.1 Jobcentre Plus**

Jobcentre Plus is a major agency that graduates would need to approach to obtain both financial (such as Jobseeker’s Allowance) and employment-based support (including employment opportunities), as well as to access a range of welfare-to-work-based initiatives. It is part of the Department for Work and Pensions – a result of the major restructure of welfare services that subsumed the previous Benefits Agency and Employment Service into a ‘one-stop’ service in 2002. It was created “as a move towards an active work-first

approach to managing benefit and employment administration” (Wiggan, 2007: 418). As noted, the development of Jobcentre Plus has further enshrined concepts of ‘conditionality’ into welfare-to-work provision, as out-of-work-based benefits became more dependent upon “citizens meeting certain conditions which are invariably behavioural” (DWP, 2008: 1).

The creation of Jobcentre Plus was key in the New Labour government’s welfare-to-work strategy (DWP, 2001: iii; HoC, 2002), although it must be noted that labour exchanges have, in some form or other, been present since the late nineteenth century<sup>10</sup> (Wright, 2003: 50; Cole, 2007). The development of ‘Jobcentre Plus’ from ‘Jobcentres’ is important as this can be perceived as a response to post-Fordist economic change. Warde comments that if concepts of post-Fordism are “more fully elaborated they also suggest radical implications for the operation of the state services” (Warde, 2004: 223). This is due to the “contention that refined orientations of individual consumers undermine the acceptability of state provision” (Warde, 2004: 224). Indeed, Jessop (2004) argues that the traditional welfare state has changed towards a ‘Schumpeterian workfare state’, meaning that the public sector has increasing involvement in “privatisation, liberalisation, and an imposition of commercial criteria in any residual state sector” (Jessop, 2004: 30). Thus, in effect, Jobcentre Plus was formed as a modern public employment service, with the design and formation of the institution concentrated on communicating a more ‘consumerist’ form of public service, but also on creating more ‘tailored’ and individualised outcomes for jobseekers. Cole (2007), in describing the layout and design of Jobcentre Plus, notes explicitly:

Everything was augmented in comparison to a typical Jobcentre; notably more luxuriant carpeting and furnishings, better lighting, a more private browsing experience through partitioning of Job Points, and so on (Cole, 2007: 142).

A further motivation for this re-brand was to attract different types of service users, with Jobcentre Plus offices themselves moving to central and consumer-based environments, to

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<sup>10</sup> See Wright (2003) for a more in-depth discussion regarding the development and history of public employment services in the United Kingdom. Also, Cole (2007) presented an interesting historical analysis of unemployment through the institutional context of employment exchanges and the modern-day Jobcentre Plus.

“invite and anticipate not only the traditional clientele of unemployed men, but also other members of the ‘economically inactive’ population such as single mothers or the disabled” (Cole, 2007: 141). Whether this intention also included ‘graduates’ or the high-skilled is perhaps more open to interpretation, as initial Jobcentre Plus provision mostly prioritised vulnerable people. The ‘New Deal’ policies are a particular example. These policies offered a series of meetings with personal advisors for job-related advice and job search assistance. Some schemes were voluntary for particular groups, such as for single parents and disabled people, and others were compulsory, such as for the long-term unemployed and young people. The New Deal for Young People, in particular, was concerned mostly with low-skilled young men (Wright, 2009: 199).

Yet, perhaps more crucially, the modernisation of Jobcentre Plus was an attempt to instil aspects of ‘work-first’ (Dagurre, 2004) in its policy formation and design for *any* service user that came through the door. One concern here is that support in Jobcentre Plus can become homogenous, as it becomes primarily focussed on finding employment for any service user. Features of Jobcentre Plus – waiting times, job-points and quick meetings with frontline staff to check job-search activity (that often last no longer than 5 to 10 minutes) may contribute to a sense of being ‘processed’ (Leibetseder, 2011: 7), but not truly helped or supported. Yet, it is important to emphasise the role frontline staff have in terms of providing support. Wright saw “front line workers as active agents who have independent and collective interpretations of policy problems and solutions” (Wright, 2003: 298). As such, initial categorisations can be important in shaping future provision, and in the case of graduates and professionals, Wright (2003: 267) found that Jobcentre Plus staff sometimes struggled to place them in appropriate categorisations for further support.

A result of the modernisation of Jobcentre Plus is that its service-user base may have altered to include graduates. Empirical research, however, indicated that many graduates do not engage well with Jobcentre Plus. Atfield et al. (2010: 11) found that in examining the job-search strategies of graduates in the Futuretrack survey, Jobcentre Plus is the least used job-

search method. It is noted that this “aspect of the public employment service as predominantly to serve the low-skilled and socially excluded has been, if anything, amplified”. Somewhat more recently, Citizens Advice Scotland reported in a survey that 78.4% of graduates find the Jobcentre unhelpful – only 1.8% noted that it has been ‘helpful’ – and that there is a “strong feeling that the Jobcentre is not designed to meet the expectations or support needs of graduates” (McLister, 2012: 24-5). Further, frontline staff in Jobcentre Plus noted that ‘students’ and graduates can be amongst the most difficult groups to engage with (Rosenthal, 2006), primarily because it is difficult to ascertain appropriate support for them. Arguably, understanding these interactions further may be advantageous in helping to build an evidence base able to support Jobcentre Plus frontline staff.

#### **4.2.2 Jobseeker’s Allowance**

An incentive to engage with Jobcentre Plus is the primary out-of-work benefit for unemployed people in the United Kingdom, Jobseeker’s Allowance. In times where unemployment has increased, there is a rise in the number of people that claim out-of-work benefits (Gregg et al., 1996). This was particularly the case in the most recent recession of 2008-9, as younger people substantially increased their take-up of Jobseeker’s Allowance. In 2008, there were 240,000 18- to 24-year-olds that claimed Jobseeker’s Allowance. This had increased to 430,000 by May 2010 – a rise of 80% (DWP, 2012: 3). The majority of these claimants were most likely the youngest and the most vulnerable of the unemployed youth (Philpott, 2011: 4), although empirical evidence indicates that recent graduates have also been quite likely to have been in receipt of Jobseeker’s Allowance in more recent years. In 2013, a Totaljobs survey found that 34% of new graduates had claimed Jobseeker’s Allowance since graduation at some point. The evidence from this survey is questionable, however, as there is limited information available regarding its sample size and overall validity (Totaljobs, 2013).

In different local economic contexts, it can be empirically observed that young people (and graduates) have often been in receipt of Jobseeker’s Allowance in recent years. In York



(which has some of the lowest youth unemployment rates in the United Kingdom), York City Council provides empirical data showing that graduates regularly claim Jobseeker's Allowance. In August 2012, "York had 920 18-24 year olds on the JSA unemployment register with 164 of these being graduates", and in October 2012, "there were 100 graduates (18-24) claiming Job Seeker's Allowance", equating "to 11% of all claimants aged 18 to 24" (CYC, 2013: 8). By way of comparison, in Leeds (which has relatively high levels of youth unemployment), the City of Leeds Council report that there were 23,350 18- to 24-year-old Jobseeker's Allowance claimants in 2013 (10,000 of these were unemployed for 6 months or longer), and that graduates were particularly present in the initial 6 months of a Jobseeker's Allowance claim, with a smaller group still present between 6 and 9 months (CLC, 2013: 23).

Introduced in 1996, Jobseeker's Allowance replaced 'Unemployment Benefit' and was part of an overall strategy to tighten eligibility criteria. All claimants had to sign jobseeker agreements with employment service staff, which emphasised the requirement of claimants to 'actively' seek work. This Jobseeker Agreement:

[d]etailed the type of job being sought, when the claimant was able to work, and what steps will be taken to identify and apply for jobs. Claimants were required to keep a record of their job search activities and at fortnightly interviews these records were checked against what had been detailed in the agreement (Manning, 2005: 9).

The Allowance comes in two different forms – 'Income-based Jobseeker's Allowance' and 'Contributory Jobseeker's Allowance'. As of 2015, the weekly amount of 'Contributory Jobseeker Allowance' is £57.90 for 18- to 24-year-olds and £73.10 for over 25s, and is based on previous national insurance contributions over the last 2 years (Gov.UK, 2015). 'Income-based Jobseeker's Allowance' is somewhat different, as it is means-tested and there is a slightly higher amount of money available (Turn2us, 2015). The monetary amounts of these benefits, however, are described by the European Committee of Social Rights as "manifestly inadequate" (ERC, 2014: 19). In addition, most recent graduates will not be eligible for the Contributory Jobseeker's Allowance as they have not built up the required

national insurance contributions through employment. This only leaves the means-tested 'Income-based Jobseeker's Allowance' available to recent graduates. The 'means-testing' aspect of this benefit (and others like it) is problematic, as it can develop a "sense of social closure" by emphasising the distinction between productive and unproductive individuals (Watson, 2015: 650). There may be implications here regarding the take-up of Jobseeker's Allowance as well. Baumburg et al. (2012) find that 'institutional stigma' is the most prevalent type of 'stigma' that people experience in the United Kingdom. This refers to the stigma that "arises from the process of claiming benefits" (Baumburg et al., 2012: 5). More specifically, empirical evidence points towards service users increasingly experiencing stigma regarding out-of-work benefits (Guintoli, 2012), which can result in the exclusion of Jobcentre Plus from their job-search methods (Gush et al., 2015: 13). These negative connotations may contribute to recent graduates opting out of this provision altogether.

For those aged 18 – 24, Jobseeker's Allowance is available for the initial 9 months of a claim and then the service user must take part in the Work Programme (DWP, 2010a). Yet, there are several stages before this occurs. Modern Jobseeker's Allowance retains a 13-week review, followed by a restart interview at 26 weeks if employment has not been found – failure to attend these meetings can result in sanctions (CAB, 2015). These particular 'reviews' have been part of out-of-work benefit provision for some time (restart interviews were introduced in the employment service back in 1986) and empirical evidence suggests that such meetings can play a role in nudging people off Jobseeker's Allowance (Dolton et al., 1996). Analysis of Department for Work and Pensions data suggests that the caseload take-up rate of Jobseeker's Allowance fell substantially from 71-84% in 1997/1998 to 49-59% in 2008/09, although it must be stressed that there is considerable difficulty in establishing the validity of take-up rates in benefits. This is because data on whether people are eligible for a benefit, for which they have not applied, cannot always be ascertained (Baumburg et al., 2012: 72).

### **4.2.3 The ‘Universal Credit’**

The Universal Credit is a major reform of the United Kingdom social security system and has been under consultation since the beginning of the Conservative Liberal Democrat coalition government (DWP, 2010a: 2). This is an integrated working age-credit that attempts to provide a basic allowance with additional amounts for children, housing and carers. It supports people that are both in and out of work and replaces Working Tax Credit, Child Tax Credit, Housing Benefit, Income Support, income-based Jobseeker’s Allowance and income-related Employment and Support Allowance (DWP, 2010a: 3). Essentially, it attempts to bring together different forms of income-related support into a single integrated benefit for people in and out of work (DWP, 2010a: 13). So far, the Universal Credit has not been nationally implemented, but by 16 February 2015 it was available to single claimants in 112 jobcentres, to couples without children in 96 jobcentres and to families in 32 jobcentres. By 15 January 2015, the Universal Credit caseload had 29,460 claimants with 54,000 claims made in total since April 2013 (DWP, 2015: 8). Much of the impetus in the development of ‘Universal Credit’ was to provide a ‘simpler’ benefit system that incentivised work (DWP, 2011). In policy terms, this means an extension in the principles of ‘conditionality’ to different groups in the labour market (Dwyer et al., 2014), with sanctions introduced by the Welfare Reform Bill (2011) more substantial than any sanctions New Labour introduced between 1997 and 2010 (Melrose, 2012: 4).

More specifically, for younger people, the Universal Credit scheme aims to provide stronger work incentives to create a “smoother transition into jobs” (HM Government, 2011: 42). It may also be of importance to graduates for several reasons. As a replacement to ‘income-based Jobseeker’s Allowance’, it will affect many graduate jobseekers, as they are most likely ineligible for Contributory Jobseeker’s Allowance. It also attempts to alter the provision available in jobcentres through developing ‘work coaches’ and a new claimant commitment that attempts to mirror that of an employment contract. This is to emphasise that, “just as those in work have obligations to their employer, so too claimants have a responsibility to the taxpayer: in return for support, as some jobcentres now say, claimants

are ‘in work to find work’” (DWP, 2015c: 5). What this may amount to is a greater degree of ‘conditionality’, especially as work coaches “are able to establish these expectations and the consequences for failing to take action” (DWP, 2015c: 5).

In chapter 2, it was noted that the knowledge economy orthodoxy can mask inequalities in graduate transitions as it presumes all graduates to be privileged, despite evidence of apparent inequalities in graduate transitions (Furlong et al., 2005; Conner, 2003; Purcell et al., 2007). As the aim of Universal Credit is to remove barriers to work by ensuring recipients are always better off in work, and to increase the depth and breadth of conditionality (DWP, 2010a; Dwyer et al., 2014), there is an assumption that claimants should normally accept offers of work – even ‘zero hours’ work (Hansard: House of Commons, 2014) – and this may create stark choices for unemployed graduates from low-income households. As mentioned, the Universal Credit is still engaged in trials and has not yet been implemented nationally (DWP, 2015c: 8).

#### **4.2.4 Mandatory Work Activity**

The Mandatory Work Activity scheme “is a relatively small scheme geared specifically to imposing ‘work discipline’ by directing some short term JSA claimants into ‘work for your benefit’ placements” (Wiggan, 2015: 2). This was launched in May 2011 across the UK in 11 contract package areas. It provides a community benefit work placement for up to 30 hours a week (although this can vary dependent on whether prior restrictions are agreed upon), and is over a period of four consecutive weeks (DWP, 2015d: 5). Generally, it targets people who have been out of work for a long time. It must also be noted that skills, work history, level of education and attitude to work can vary, dependent on the nature of the scheme (DWP, 2015d: 7). For Jobseeker’s Allowance claimants, the Mandatory Work Activity scheme can be applied at any time, and it is up to ‘work coaches’ to decide who should be referred. Generally, however, referrals occur after the first review in week 13 of a Jobseeker’s Allowance claim (DWP, 2015d: 7). Lastly, it must be stressed that the scheme is mandatory for those that are placed on it, as sanctions to benefits apply if they fail to participate fully in the scheme (DWP, 2015d: 21).

Some graduates report difficulties with the ‘Mandatory Work Activity’ scheme, specifically as they perceive it to be unhelpful in their job searches, and are unsure as to why they have been placed on it (Paxton, 2012). Yet, as Wiggan (2015: 14) noted, the ‘Mandatory Working Activity’ is strongly stratified towards social divisions and the most disadvantaged in the labour market. As such, there may be limits in how far ‘soft skills’ can be developed amongst graduate jobseekers, and this may mean that they are perhaps likely to be unamenable to the scheme itself, as Wiggan notes:

For those who participate in MWA, its ‘training’ function is limited to crafting more amenable claimants willing and able to adopt the behaviour to compete for low waged service sector jobs. MWA reinforces the ‘work first’ message and imposes labour discipline at the margins of the claimant population (Wiggan, 2015: 13-4).

Perhaps a concern is that graduates may be an unlikely group to adopt such behaviours, in terms of competing for low-wage jobs, although many have found themselves in such positions in recent years (Shildrick et al., 2012: 199). Yet, more widely, welfare-to-work schemes that exercise compulsion in forcing jobseekers into training or employment may run a risk of placing jobseekers into precarious positions in the labour market, which opens up an alternative discussion on the extent of ‘choice’ available for jobseekers (Dunn et al., 2015). Therefore, graduates’ engagement in ‘Universal Credit’ or the ‘Mandatory Work Activity’ scheme may shed some light on these debates in future. Yet, further, these may be clear examples of policy that are not suited to the reality of modern graduate transitions (and a related argument could be made in relation to wider youth transitions as well).

#### **4.2.5 What Recent Long-term Support is Available for Unemployed Graduates?**

A further ‘work for your benefit’ scheme that long-term unemployed graduates may also engage with is the ‘Work Programme’. This is an integrated welfare-to-work programme introduced across the United Kingdom in June 2011. It replaced the Flexible New Deal and Pathways to Work programmes of the New Labour government, and was designed to address “concerns raised about the performance and cost-effectiveness of existing employment programmes targeted at unemployed and inactive people” (Meager et al., 2014:

32). In particular, as part of the attempt to reduce costs, the Work Programme engages with contracted providers to get people into work who are “free to design their own support provision, with minimal intervention” (Meager et al., 2014: 32). These providers can originate from both the private and third sectors. Wiggan (2015) describes the Work Programme as “the state contracting out delivery to (predominantly) for-profit providers, relying on a payment by results (PbR) contract to manage and direct provider activity to align with government policy objectives” (Wiggan, 2015: 4).

It is of importance to many young people, as all 18- to 24-year-olds who have been using Jobseeker’s allowance for 9 months, rather than 12 months, are placed on this programme (DWP, 2010b). This means that it is probably the most likely government policy that long-term unemployed graduates will use. Yet, national representatives’ surveys of the ‘Work Programme’ found that “a quarter had no qualifications and only one in ten were qualified to Level 4 (bachelor’s degree or equivalent) or higher” (Meager et al., 2014: 18). It has had some success with young people, with the DWP claiming that 74,000 young people have found ‘lasting’ work (more than 6 months) in 2013 (DWP, 2013a). Certainly, a shift in focus on ‘lasting’ employment is a positive development, as such an approach may help disadvantaged jobseekers find more sustainable outcomes in the labour market (Shildrick et al., 2012: 217). Yet, the overarching principles behind the ‘Work Programme’ are much the same as in the aforementioned welfare-to-work schemes (and therefore run into similar policy problems as the ‘Universal Credit’ and the ‘Mandatory Work Activity’). The ‘Work Programme’ again coerces jobseekers to engage with provision through a ‘workfare’-based response (with sanctions once more being the consequence, if they do not). This is because of an assumption that the workless need ‘activation’ towards employment.

In policy terms, criticisms of the Work Programme centre on its efficacy to deliver genuine employment outcomes for the most vulnerable of jobseekers (Shildrick et al., 2012: 218). An inclusion of a ‘payment by results’ system for providers can be problematic in welfare-to-work. This is “commonly known as ‘creaming and parking’, with creaming indicating

greater support to those assessed as job-ready with good prospects of finding work quickly and parking denoting minimal support to those deemed furthest from the labour market” (Meager et al., 2014: 174). Evaluation-based research of the ‘Work Programme’ has found that this may have occurred to an extent, particularly regarding the frequency of meetings and different groups of jobseekers; yet, it is also stressed that this may also be the “establishment of good practice in frequent and concerted job-searching for those nearest the labour market; and/or sequencing support for those whose barriers are greatest” (Meager et al., 2014: 179). Somewhat oddly (and perhaps unintentionally), graduates (and high-skilled service users more generally) may be a group that stands to benefit from the process of ‘creaming and parking’, simply because of their advantageous position in the labour market (ONS, 2013b: 1). As in the case of graduates (specifically long-term unemployed graduates), a perception that they have a high degree of human capital is likely to mean that they may be one of the groups that are positively targeted by providers. Yet, overall, it must be noted that the number of people with a level 4 qualification or above on the Work Programme is estimated at 10% (Meager et al., 2014: 47).

Lastly, some graduates may also be referred to the ‘National Careers Service’ (established in 2012). This was launched with the aim of providing “authoritative information on learning and work along with professional impartial advice to young people and adults” (Bowes et al., 2013: 6). In particular, the support and advice offered by the National Careers office attempts to personalise employment-based provision through offering job profiles, CV support, advice and training through face-to-face meetings, and web-based and telephone advice (National Careers Service, 2014). It attempts to assume a triage function with other employment-based provision, such as Jobcentre Plus and the voluntary and third sectors (Bowes et al., 2013: 7-8). In this way, employment-based support can be tailored to a diverse range of service user needs. There are now 538 National Career Centres in Job Centres and a further 2,429 venues. This includes National Careers Service premises, further education colleges, community centres, housing associations, libraries and local authority offices (Bowes, 2013: 11). So far, evaluation of the National Careers Service has found that

customer satisfaction is high, although awareness of the service is very low (Bowes, 2013: 7).

### **4.3 How Has Recent Youth Employment Policy Been Engaged with by Graduates?**

It is important to note that with increases in youth unemployment, recent governments have also sought once more to introduce effective youth employment policies, although mainly in regards to young people defined as ‘Not in Education, Employment or Training’. The Liberal Democrat – Conservative Coalition sought to introduce a range of schemes for younger people under the Youth Contract Initiative, such as ‘apprenticeship grants’, ‘work experience’ placements, ‘Sector-Based Work Academies’, more general extra support for Jobseeker’s Allowance claimants (18- to 24-year-olds offered weekly rather than fortnightly meetings), and wage incentive payments of £2,275 for employers that take on an 18- to 24-year-old for more than 6 months. In particular, this ‘incentive’ aspect of the scheme failed to make an impact and was terminated in May 2014 (Davies, 2015: 1). Overall, the ‘Youth Contract’ has had mixed results thus far. Milburn et al. note that “evaluation has found that 21 weeks after starting the programme, 46 per cent of participants are off benefits, compared to 40 per cent of comparable non-participants”. The youth contract, however, is not “working effectively enough. It is not making a meaningful enough dent in what are appallingly high levels of long-term youth unemployment” (Milburn et al., 2013: 217). More recent evaluation research, however, finds that service users are generally positive about the support they received from Jobcentre Plus when involved with the ‘Youth Contract’ (Coleman et al., 2014: 17).

Again, for graduates, it prompts further interesting questions of how they fit with the aims of welfare-to-work policy. The ‘Youth Contract’ has a substantial role in continuing a government “push on apprenticeships”. Foster notes that “if employers are given a monetary incentive to recruit a non-graduate with fewer technical skills but who can be paid less and can be trained for free as an apprentice, this acts as a direct disincentive to employ a graduate” (Foster, 2015). Further, more intensive, weekly-based support through Jobcentre



Plus could be positive for graduates in finding employment but, crucially, only if the support is useful to their individual circumstances. If intensive support entails increased instances of ‘conditionality’, backed further by threats of sanctioning, it may discourage graduates from engaging altogether. Foster notes that “for graduates claiming Jobseeker’s Allowance more intensive job search won’t really solve the problem that, however much they look, there aren’t many jobs. It may also contribute to under-employment as graduates take any job to avoid having to go into the Jobcentre every week” (Foster, 2015).

#### **4.3.1 ‘Sector-Based Work Academies’ and ‘Work Experience’ Placements**

Of the major elements in the series of ‘Youth Contract’ measures are ‘Work Experience’ placements and ‘Sector-Based Work Academies’. Combined, there have been 100,000 placements per year made available to 18- to 24-year-olds since 2012. Both of these schemes can be engaged with before the Work Programme becomes available (Coleman et al., 2013: 3). The ‘Work Experience’ placements offer young people the opportunity to work at a local employer, gain experience, and improve their CV and marketability (Coleman et al., 2014: 14). These placements are most likely in shops or offices, in either public-facing, stock-organising or administrative tasks. The profile of participants is mostly stratified towards the long-term unemployed (33 per cent have not worked in 12 months), which is expected as the work experience scheme is intended to target individuals with limited work experience (Coleman et al., 2014: 18). Evaluation research does indicate, however, that those on the scheme with higher educational qualifications are most likely to complete work experience placements at 83% (Coleman et al., 2014: 76). Further, it is also found that there is a direct link between higher qualifications and employment for those who have completed a ‘work experience’ placement, as 47 per cent of those qualified to degree or above, have moved into employment compared to 17 per cent of those that had no qualifications (Coleman et al., 2014: 79).

The placements of ‘Sector-Based Work Academies’ can last up to six weeks and have three key components: pre-employment training – relevant to the needs of the business and wider sector; work experience placements and a guaranteed job interview (Coleman et al., 2013).

A particular aim of Sector-Based Work Academies is to engage with sectors where there is a specific industry need or where there is a high amount of local vacancies (Hadjivassiliou et al., 2015: 20). Further, Sector-Based Academies are voluntary with any eligible Jobseeker's Allowance claimant able to participate in the scheme, but once so, they are also open to benefit sanctions if they fail to complete elements of the scheme (Coleman et al., 2013: 25). Evaluation-based research, drawing on the perspectives of customers, has indicated that Sector-Based Work Academies have had positive impact on many young people. In terms of experiences and attitudes, 87 per cent of participants noted that they were very positive, although, in total, only 45 per cent of participants were found to be in employment at the time of being surveyed (Coleman et al., 2014: 20). So far, there is no survey evaluation data on how recent graduates are engaging with 'Sector-Based Work Academies' (Coleman et al., 2013; 2014).

There is, however, the prominent example of a graduate named 'Cait Reilly' who was placed on a 'Sector-Based Work Academy' as a Jobseeker's Allowance claimant. Reilly was a recent graduate advised by Jobcentre Plus staff that she would need to engage with a local placement in 'Poundland', rather than volunteer at a local museum – a sector that she had planned to enter as a career (Malik, 2013). In this particular instance, Cait Reilly had been placed on the scheme against her consent, although she had already had the voluntary work arranged. This prompted legal proceedings to the High Court regarding the obligatory and 'forced' nature of the scheme, particularly in regard to a potential breach of the European Convention of Human Rights. It was ruled, however, more a communication error from Jobcentre Plus staff, rather than a contravention of jobseekers' human rights (*Caitlin Reilly and Jamieson Wilson v Secretary of State for Work and Pensions* [2012] EWHC 2292).

#### **4.3.2 'Specific' Social Policy Support for Graduates (2008 – 2015)**

More specific policies have been made available for graduates through Jobcentre Plus services, notwithstanding the general schemes offered for all jobseekers through Jobcentre Plus and the 'National Career Service'. New Labour employed several initiatives in response to increasing youth unemployment in 2008-9. The most substantial package of these

measures was the ‘Young Person’s Guarantee’, which “offered a range of options to young people reaching six months on Jobseekers Allowance” (Allaker et al., 2011: 4). This included promoting graduate internships for “all new graduates still unemployed at six months, access to an internship, training or help to become self-employed” (HoC, 2010: 19). A further scheme was the ‘Future Jobs Fund’, which supported the creation of subsidised jobs for 18- to 24-year-olds who had been out of work for 6 months or more (Allaker et al., 2011: 1). Although this scheme was mainly aimed at school leavers rather than graduates, it has been reported that graduates were also engaged by providers:

Many of the jobs on offer tended to be ‘swept up’ by unemployed graduates, although over time this tendency was replaced by more success for more disadvantaged and/or under-qualified groups (HoC, 2010: 23)

Further, in 2009, Birmingham City Council claimed that around 20% of their Future Jobs Fund participants were educated to first-degree level (HoC, 2010: 23). Subsequent analysis of the Future Jobs Fund, however, has found that qualifications can vary for those engaging with the Future Jobs Fund “from those with no qualifications to a small number who had degree level or equivalent qualifications” (Allaker et al., 2011: 8). These specific policies have since been discontinued by the Conservative Liberal Democrat coalition government, who cited the ‘Future Jobs Fund’ and ‘Young Person’s Guarantee’ as too costly (Fishwick et al., 2011: 4). There was also an attempt to engage with employment-based provision in higher education. A graduate internship programme was set up, funded by the Higher Education Funding Council for England, to provide funding for 8,500 internships in 2010 and 2011 (Howat, 2011: 6).

Yet, perhaps the most substantial policy put forward by the New Labour government for graduates was the ‘Graduate Talent Pool’, which is still ongoing as of 2015. This attempts to match graduates with internships through a website and was introduced in 2008 (Graduate Talent Pool, 2014). In terms of ‘early adopters’ of the ‘Graduate Talent Pool’ in 2008 and

2009, 22% respondents secured an internship in the first six months of the programme (Bourne et al., 2011: 3). More specifically, many graduates felt that the ‘Graduate Talent Pool’ scheme offered a better range than any other internship website or scheme, with adequate representation of atypical sectors (Bourne et al., 2011: 5). Yet, evaluation research has found that this scheme requires further promotion amongst graduates (Bourne et al., 2011: 7). There are also questions about which graduates are engaging with the scheme. Bourne et al. found that “the scheme seems to have been taken up by many ‘mainstream’ graduates, as opposed, perhaps, to types of graduates who might need it most. The research was not able to distinguish fully the range of types of graduates whom it will particularly serve well in future, when economic conditions change” (Bourne et al., 2011: 8). Greater acknowledgement relating to the inequalities of graduate transitions may help to tailor policies, such as the Graduate Talent Pool, more effectively. Further, there has also been concern about the advertisement of unpaid internships on the webpage (Foster, 2015).

The strategy of the Coalition government was similar regarding graduate transitions, with a specific focus on establishing internships as a form of engaging with the labour market. Yet, there is a difference in that more institutions are now involved in how graduate transitions are governed. This includes further focus on engaging with employability measures in higher education through encouraging the involvement of employers in terms of offering sponsorship and internships (HM Government, 2011: 50). Yet, many higher education institutions are now beginning to extend career support for recent graduates after they have left university, particularly where there may be a higher concentration of graduates due to a larger number of higher education providers in a certain area (HigherYork, 2013: 1, 3). These new institutional arrangements, called ‘Local Enterprise Partnerships’ (LEPs), attempt to combine businesses, local authorities and other local stakeholders in helping young people into employment and, particularly in the case of graduates, to stimulate entrepreneurial activity with the promotion of internships and placements in small businesses (Hadjivassiliou et al., 2015: 30; HM Government, 2014).

Alongside the continuation of the ‘Graduate Talent Pool’, there has also been some more general advisory support through Jobcentre Plus, with some ‘workclubs’ specifically designed for new graduates (BIC, 2015), as well as the introduction of a new advisory web-based service called ‘Graduate Success’ (Graduates Success, 2015). Yet, on the whole, stakeholders note that employment provision for graduates, as outlined in government documentation, has been “wishy-washy” in recent years and lacking in “real conviction” (Foster, 2015). In particular, there is a sense that responsibility to ensure sustainable graduate transitions is not a priority for the government. A particular example is that prominent strategic government documentation regarding youth unemployment mentions graduates transitions in only a limited way (HM government, 2011: 50). As noted by Foster:

In the NEET strategy document itself there is very little about helping graduates to find work. Over the longer term, the government is reaffirming existing commitments to widen participation in Higher Education and to require universities to publish performance data. We can also expect to see universities encouraged to work more closely with employers to co-design and 'kite-mark' degree courses. The aim of this is to make future graduates more directly employable but what about those who have already graduated and are looking for work now? What support is available to them? The section of the strategy entitled ‘Graduates’ is two paragraphs long and says only that the government is asking more employers to work with universities to plan courses, to sponsor students and to provide relevant work placements (Foster, 2015).

#### **4.4 Conclusion – A Historically ‘Weak’ Policy Framework in Graduate Transitions**

This chapter has attempted to examine how some instances of policy have targeted graduates both in higher education and through welfare-to-work delivery. It maps changes from the late 1970s through to the 2010s in terms of the potential to support graduates in their transitions. In examining the principles behind these policies and their overall impact, it was found that there is a weak social policy framework for graduates, and it could be argued that this has always been the case. The driver for such provision is often that of economic downturn (Bourner et al., 2011), which may prompt more short-termism in the policy response to weak graduate transitions (Philpott, 2011). When provision is introduced, there

is a tendency for it to be in the higher education sector, rather than in the public welfare-to-work sector, at least until more recently. There are questions about the effectiveness of such a strategy. Some graduates may not engage with career provision at university and some may need more support after they have left higher education. More critical analysts argue that many of these employability initiatives need to be re-examined more comprehensively (Bourner et al., 2011). Yet, perhaps the largest concern regards questions related to the governance of ‘graduate transitions’ and who has overall institutional responsibility.

Determining the responsibility for weaker ‘graduate transitions’ is a difficult question to answer. The Higher Education sector as a whole must bear some responsibility (least of all because of the importance of graduate employability statistical measures, which means there is considerable pressure to ensure graduate transitions are positive in order to indicate that the ‘degree’ retains value). Yet, there may be limits to higher-education-based support when there is a lack of graduate employment opportunities, which is arguably a governmental matter. Further, the government has seen fit to introduce many youth employment initiatives in the United Kingdom in the past – why should this not be the case with recent graduates? The distinction is that these previous youth employment initiatives have mainly looked to support the most vulnerable and the most in need. Yet, the nature of youth transitions can change drastically. In 1995, Bob Coles noted that young people that went to university in the 1980s or early 1990s were the ‘winners’ over those who did not or could not go, but Coles also emphasised presciently that “graduate unemployment is considerable, and rising. As with the displacement of youth jobs into training schemes, it is too early to tell whether this group may become the next generation of highly qualified, older, wiser, but disillusioned unemployed” (Coles, 1995: 55).

Further, this review has also shed light on issues regarding graduates engaging with the current welfare-to-work policy framework, the principles behind welfare-to-work reform and what a lack of policy may entail. There are several aspects to consider here. The pursuit of ‘work’ has become the central principle that informs provision. The growth of ‘workfare’-

based initiatives, whereby benefit entitlement becomes attached to participation in employment or training has become a fundamental part of welfare-to-work provision (Vickerstaff, 2012: 115). This means that welfare-to-work delivery is often geared towards a “labour market attachment approach” that “emphasizes rapid job placement regardless of the quality of the work” (Daguerre, 2004: 42), otherwise known as ‘work first’. This has meant that modern “welfare-to-work policies are conceptualised as a means of forcing individuals to undertake poor work in flexible labour markets” (Del Fletcher, 2013: 109). In other words, the aim for social policy has become to “facilitate that project of flexibility that defines post-industrial capitalism”, and to get people into employment as quickly and efficiently as possible (Shildrick et al., 2012: 200; Bryne, 1999).

In reference to recent graduates engaging with Jobcentre Plus, it has been shown that policy that solely focuses on obtaining any form of employment without the consideration of wider factors, as can be found in the ‘work first’ approach (Daguerre, 2004: 42), may represent an ill-fitting policy to the extended and complex youthful transition experiences of the ‘missing middle’. Modern welfare-to-work policy often amounts to “boom-time supply-side work first” initiatives (Wright, 2013: 830), as provision is formulated on the basis of quick re-entry into employment governed by stricter access to benefits and instances of punitive policy. This may mean that graduates look for ‘any job’ in a framework of artificially timed constraints. Furthermore, “they are likely to re-enter following a period of low quality employment (‘revolving doors syndrome’) [...] leading to underemployment or employment in sectors which are not relevant either to young people’s field of study or competence” (Hadjivassiliou et al., 2015: 36). Empirical evidence has suggested that poorly suited labour market outcomes will simply result in jobseekers reclaiming Jobseeker’s Allowance later in their life-course when unemployed (HM Government, 2010: 28).

There are also implications in the lack of policy available to highly skilled young people. Interventions are left to higher education institutions and employers, and government welfare-to-work provision becomes centred on a socially excluded and posited ‘underclass’

(Shildick et al., 2012; Byrne, 1999). Yet, as already acknowledged, ‘precarity’ is now a modern, cross-sectional feature of modern labour markets, affecting a wide variety of people (Standing, 2011). What these developments may signal is a retreat of government policy from engaging with these more difficult concerns, such as graduate ‘underemployment’ or skill mismatch issues (Hadjivassiliou et al., 2015: 36). Policy responses become governed by continually seeking to ‘upskill’ jobseekers in order to acquire employment for a ‘high skills’ economy through supply-sided initiatives (Shildrick, 2012: 199) – yet, this is a ‘knowledge-based economy’ that graduates have already invested considerably in preparing for, begging a question about the difficulty of determining the most appropriate formulation of policy for graduates in their transitions.

#### **4.5 Research Questions**

As a result of examining the graduate labour market context in chapter two, the primary concepts of the thesis in chapter three, and the overall policy framework for graduates in chapter four, three questions emerge with which this thesis will engage. These are:

- 1) Does the rise of the knowledge-based economy orthodoxy mean that social policy needs to pay greater attention to the ‘missing middle’ of young graduates?
- 2) How far are graduates being supported by public employment services such as Jobcentre Plus?
- 3) How do understandings of graduate transitions help to develop a better social policy framework?

These three questions were developed as they allow for a thorough understanding of recent post-crisis graduate transitions in the context of the United Kingdom. There are several reasons to engage with the concepts of the ‘knowledge-based economy thesis’ and the ‘missing middle’ of youth transitions. Firstly, the concept of the knowledge-based economy has been a substantial ideological factor behind governmental policy aspiring to use the higher education sector “to restructure the UK labour market by means of individual and



collective skill development at graduate level” (Morley, 2001: 132). The results are that higher education pathways have become a normal transition for young people to take (Roberts, 2013: 4). This is, in many respects, a positive development, as there are many benefits to obtaining undergraduate degrees (ONS, 2013b: 1). Indeed, the concept continues to be employed by the current Conservative government for these precise reasons (DBIS, 2015b: 10). Yet, by capturing graduates’ perspectives and critiques on the nature of the knowledge-based economy, it can be ascertained whether policy has actually considered some of the implications in normalising higher education pathways to this extent. As finding ‘settled’ careers in graduate transitions takes longer (Purcell et al., 2004), there is considerable variance in labour market experiences within graduate transitions to the labour market. Therefore, in ascertaining whether a ‘missing middle’ in knowledge-based economy pathways exists, distinctions can be drawn between different types of graduate transition. These ‘missing middle’ pathways may involve further experiences of labour market insecurity, and graduates may have increased propensity to engage with social policy frameworks as a result. Secondly, applying the ‘missing middle’ concept allows for some empirical exploration of these more ‘difficult’ graduate transitions to the labour market. This is important in order to understand the efficacy of current social policy frameworks within such transitions in terms of supporting such graduates appropriately.

#### **4.5.1 The Need for a Mixed Methods Strategy with a Parallel Logic**

In order to engage with these questions, two empirical lines of enquiry will be used to create a mixed methods framework. This approach has been chosen as it allows for a diverse range of data to be collected for an extensive analysis of the research questions. This mixed methods approach to the overall research inquiry is based on a parallel logic. This means that “each part of the study, or each mini-study, has its own logic of design, data generation, analysis and explanation, and these run in parallel”, with emphasis on the “co-presence of multiple methods rather than their integration” (Mason, 2006: 5). Table 1 below shows how each method corresponds with each research question.

**Table 1: Research Questions and Methods with a 'Parallel' Logic**

Does the rise of the knowledge-based economy orthodoxy mean that social policy needs to pay greater attention to the 'missing middle' of young graduates?	Qualitative – with an emphasis upon applying the conceptual outline of (developed in chapter three) onto the overall findings
How far are graduates being supported by public employment services such as Jobcentre Plus?	Quantitative – an analysis of Labour Force Survey data to ascertain graduate usage of public employment services in recent years  Qualitative – to understand graduates' perspectives on public employment services in greater depth
How do understandings of graduate transitions help to develop a sufficient social policy framework?	Qualitative – to understand the different aspects of graduate transitions (particularly experiences of labour market insecurity)

A mixed methods approach is also important as a wider range of research methods can develop a more extensive empirical base. It attempts to engage with the notion of 'completeness' in regards to developing a sufficient research methodology to address these questions. Bryman notes that such "completeness indicates that a more complete answer to a research question or set of research questions can be achieved by including both quantitative and qualitative methods" (Bryman, 2008: 612). For instance, analysis of quantitative data can be used to ascertain graduate engagement with Jobcentre Plus. Such an approach, however, may not yield descriptive accounts of provision from graduate perspectives nor insights on the service itself. By adding a qualitative methodology, this empirical study is able to capture emergent themes (Denzin et al., 2011) about Jobcentre Plus services, and wider labour market insecurities, such as graduate unemployment and underemployment. According to Brooks et al. (2009), building this empirical base is important, as "to date,

there have been few studies that have explored in any depth young people's feelings and experiences on graduation. While increasing numbers of studies are tracking the routes taken by graduates as they enter the labour market for full-time work, relatively few have explored how young adults' feelings and perceptions change over this period" (Brooks et al., 2009: 337). Qualitative understandings are also particularly important for shedding further light on the issue of 'graduate underemployment'. As Morley noted, this is a "notoriously difficult concept to capture as it incorporates a reference to the affective domain, such as self-esteem, identity and motivation" (Morley, 2001: 133).

Therefore, briefly outlining the methodology, in chapter five we will present the results of a quantitative analysis. This will be focussed on answering the research question relating to 'How far are graduates being supported by public employment services such as Jobcentre Plus?' The investigation will involve secondary data analysis of labour force surveys in order to provide data regarding patterns of graduates' usage, and effectiveness of public employment services in the United Kingdom. There is some recent quantitative empirical research upon these areas – with empirical studies focusing on smaller samples of graduates (McLister, 2012) or on specific regions (YU, 2011). Yet, the use of Labour Force Survey data allows for a national picture to be established, so that findings can be nationally representative. The Labour Force Survey data also has the appropriate variables in regards to job-search methods and public employment service effectiveness. This research will differ from previous quantitative job-search literature that also uses Labour Force Survey data (Green et al., 2011; Gregg et al., 1996), in that while these empirical approaches engage in longitudinal panel-based analysis, the present study is based upon descriptive statistics, rather than on inferential and multivariate analysis. This quantitative analysis will focus on the creation of a series of annual 'snapshots' regarding two areas: graduate usage of public employment services and graduate effectiveness of public employment services. This approach has been followed, as it will provide the context upon which the qualitative element will be built. The overall reliance on a descriptive approach will "indicate important aspects of a data set in a way that helps us understand our findings" (Brace et al., 2009: 3).

In chapter six, the qualitative part of the study will be put forward. This will engage with all of the main research questions, drawing upon data from 26 interviews with recent graduates from universities of varying 'market' positions obtained in 2012-3. These institutions have been selected in reference to the Complete University Guide 2014, with one Russell Group University in the upper 20, and two post-92 universities positioned between 80 and 110. A purposive sampling strategy has been implemented to ensure that "those sampled are relevant to the research questions being posed", and to "ensure that there is a good deal of variety in the resulting sample, so that sample members differ from each other in terms of key characteristics" (Bryman, 2008: 415). This approach entails sampling graduates from specific university institutions, rather than focussing upon overall degree type or degree class. This is to ensure that the overall sample does not become too homogenous, as obtaining graduates from a single institution will create considerable bias, particularly regarding social class. Forsyth et al. (2000: 39) comment in a study that socially disadvantaged students tend to be over-represented in lower ranked institutions. Therefore, the sampling framework has been prepared with a view to providing contrasting 'polarised' perspectives regarding graduate transitions to the labour market. At no point will the data accumulated from the mixed methods be put together; instead, it will only be focussed on individual research questions. This will mean that, as the findings are presented, different parts will be combined so as to illuminate pertinent connections of interest between the varying types of data.

## **Chapter 5: Quantitative Findings – How Far are Graduates Being Supported by Public Employment Services such as Jobcentre Plus?**

This chapter will focus on the quantitative methods employed in this thesis, and in particular how they engage with the research question: 'how far are graduates being supported by public employment services such as Jobcentre Plus?' By presenting a quantitative analysis of secondary data from the British Labour Force Survey, it will form the first part of the empirical findings of the thesis. Chapter five aims to contextualise the background of Jobcentre Plus usage and engagement by people that have degrees, and recent graduates in particular, whilst Chapter six will explore through a qualitative research strategy the perspectives of recent graduates that have undergone a transition to the labour market after leaving higher education.

The structure of Chapter five is such that it will firstly briefly review previous quantitative empirical studies regarding graduate engagement and Jobcentre Plus services, specifically focusing on studies that explore how recent graduates and degree holders have engaged with Public Employment Services in the context of the United Kingdom. Some of the findings from these empirical studies have been referred to in Chapter four. In this chapter, however, there is a more specific focus on the respective quantitative approaches that have influenced methodological choices regarding this quantitative analysis.

This first half of the chapter will detail the choices that have been made regarding the quantitative methodology. It will explain why the Labour Force Survey has been selected as the basis of the analysis, in particular noting the different ways in which the Labour Force Survey datasets have been combined to ensure that findings can be 'weighted' appropriately. Also, it will explain the different variables used throughout the analysis to engage accordingly with the overall research rationale.

The second half of Chapter five will provide the results of the quantitative findings of the thesis in a succession of ‘time-series’-based graphs, from the year 2002 to 2013. Lastly, the chapter will attempt to explain these results in further detail in reference to some relevant policy debates regarding degree holders’ involvement in Jobcentre Plus between the years 2002 and 2013. As noted, these findings have the particular focus of providing a context for the qualitative findings in Chapter six and, therefore, should be interpreted in such a context.

### **5.1: Previous Quantitative Studies that have explored graduates’ engagement with Jobcentre Plus**

Engagement with public employment services is often explored quantitatively. In the UK, there are several in-depth studies relating to job-search intensity and job-search methods. Such studies often employ a secondary data analytic approach. Boswarth (1990) examine Labour Force Survey data from 1988 in relation to job-search intensity and methods. Gregg et al. (1996) engage with Labour Force Survey data from 1984 to 1992 to analyse the different factors regarding how state employment agencies are engaged, whilst Boheim et al. (2002: 1) examine “various job search strategies and their impact on the probability of subsequent employment and the re-employment wage among working age men in Britain” – this also involve employing the British Household Panel Survey to create an econometric conceptual framework. In more recent years, Green et al. (2011) also engage with Labour Force Survey data to ascertain “job-search practices of benefit claimants, with particular reference to those who are unemployed and claiming Jobseeker’s Allowance (JSA)” (Green et al., 2011: 1). More specifically, the efficiency of Jobcentre Plus services was often examined through quantitative approaches and methods, in terms of the efficacy and sustainability of new policies. National customer satisfaction surveys with service users of Jobcentre Plus provisions have taken place previously (Sanderson et al., 2005). Indeed, evaluations of flagship policies, such as the ‘Universal Credit’ (DWP, 2013b) and the ‘Work Programme’, have also been performed through primary quantitative research (Lane et al., 2013).

Yet, in reference to how graduates and degree holders engage with methods of finding employment, a growing literature is starting to develop in the UK that has placed an emphasis on engaging with primary data collection. Mallier et al. (1997), through the creation and analysis of primary data (n=1,918), consider “the differing job search methods used by university students seeking summer vacation employment and to examine their intensity of use and relative effectiveness” (Mallier et al., 1997: 702). They found that “the use of a Job Centre by itself increased the probability of gaining employment by 12 per cent” for jobseekers that preferred full time employment in the holiday periods between academic terms, and that overall 19% used a Jobcentre to identify vacation employment (Mallier et al., 1997: 712, 707).

The Institute of Employment Research (1999) completed a longitudinal survey of graduates for the year 1995, and then tracked this cohort until 1999. In this survey, sources of careers information and guidance for graduates since leaving higher education were analysed. Regarding where graduates turn for advice and guidance, it was found that 47% of graduates approached a Jobcentre to obtain such information; 55% approached a Jobcentre to find information on vacancies; and only 22% approached a Jobcentre for information on careers (IER, 1999: 12). A further primary study is that of Docherty et al. (2000) involving 301 graduates that obtained a degree and left higher education between the years of 1995 and 1999 in North West England. This study showed that 9% of these graduates found employment through a Jobcentre (Docherty et al., 2000 cited in Webber et al., 2007: 225). A further primary empirical study in relation to how young people in the Yorkshire region (in Sheffield) engage with Jobcentre Plus as an information source is that of Webber et al. (2007: 223, 225), who examine “how Chinese young adults (18–26 years old) in Sheffield seek employment information, and what sources and channels they use”. Indeed, although this study does not solely focus on graduates, but rather on Chinese young people in general, it finds that 57% of people within this sample approached Jobcentre Plus to identify vacancies (n = 74).

After the 2008-9 recession (ONS, 2013a: 1), the breadth and nature of these empirical investigations that examine the relationship between graduates and public employment services has somewhat changed, as support agencies started to experience issues regarding graduate unemployment and underemployment. The CAB, for example, commissioned further research in this area, focusing upon primary data collection rather than secondary data analysis. McLister (2012) conducted an online survey for the Citizens Advice Scotland with a small sample of recent graduates (n=476), who had engaged with Jobcentre Plus services after the 2008-9 recession. The analysis of this quantitative data is descriptive, focussing on graduate perceptions of states of unemployment and underemployment, and Jobcentre provision. It is a thorough analysis; however, it is limited in that it has a small sample size and is based on Scottish young people rather than from the whole of the United Kingdom. In a similar way, 'Yorkshire Universities' (2011) examine Jobcentre Plus provision to graduates in the Yorkshire region from 2000–2009, and finds that 44% of graduates had engaged with Jobcentre Plus at some point; however, the report comments “this is a pertinent issue because according to the survey responses, Jobcentre Plus is not meeting the specific demands of graduates, with comments such as ‘I didn’t really get any help they just showed me where the machine was to print jobs off’” (YU, 2011: 6). The most extensive of these more recent empirical studies that engage with primary data, however, is that of Atfield et al. (2010), a FutureTrack study. This examined a graduate cohort from 2006, tracking them to 2009 and examining the different job-search methods they employed. This study found that 26% of graduates from the 2006 cohort engaged with Jobcentre Plus. Atfield et al. (2010) noted that the “Job Centre was used relatively infrequently, and were least often regarded as having been useful” (Atfield et al., 2010: 11).

All these studies are important, as they shed light on how graduates engage with Jobcentre provision. The breadth in their findings, however, raises questions relating to the efficiency and effectiveness of Jobcentre Plus services with graduate service users. This may be a result of the emphasis on primary research that has taken place in different regions and at different points in the economic cycle. Evidently, regional economic disparities are important and



may influence Jobcentre Plus service provision. Therefore, it appears that data which could provide a national outlook regarding Jobcentre provision and graduate usage may be advantageous in developing our understanding further.

## **5.2: Quantitative Methodology**

The starting point, therefore, for this quantitative empirical investigation is to engage with an appropriate conceptual framework for the research question that is being explored, namely 'how far are graduates being supported by public employment services such as Jobcentre Plus?' Indeed, in reviewing the literature, it appears that many empirical investigations in relation to Jobcentre Plus and graduate engagement are largely weighted with the gathering of primary data through the use of surveys. This may be because there are not many questions in relation to Jobcentre Plus usage in current quantitative datasets. In order to engage with the above research question, however, such a dataset would indeed be useful.

Therefore, this thesis will engage with a secondary data analysis in a similar way to Gregg et al. (1996) and Green et al. (2011), and will diverge from the approach of gathering primary data through surveys. This is because in determining how Jobcentre Plus is used by graduates, it will focus on data that is nationally representative. This approach also has the advantage of tracking change over time. Also, from a pragmatic perspective, to undertake primary data gathering on such a scale would be beyond the cost confines of this thesis. Instead, the quantitative approach employs a secondary data analysis of Labour Force Survey data, as such a dataset enables an examination of the research questions posed in this thesis, relating to how people with degrees and recent graduates engage with Jobcentre Plus. It is also important to note that the broad methodological approach of the quantitative research is 'descriptive' in that it focuses purely on presenting data to engage with questions relating to the usage of Jobcentre Plus, rather than focusing on explaining the relationships between variables in relation to *why* graduates may choose to engage with Jobcentre Plus services. Therefore, the analysis is not an attempt at explaining inferences, but rather at providing background and contextual data regarding Jobcentre Plus services, which can ideally support an in-depth qualitative investigation.

The British Labour Force Survey began in 1973, in the form of an annual survey. It is "a unique source of articulated information using international definitions of employment and unemployment and economic inactivity, together with a wide range of related topics such as occupation, training, hours of work and personal characteristics of household members aged 16 years and over" (UK Data Service, 2014a). In 1992, a quarterly version of the dataset was launched that became known as the 'Quarterly Labour Force Survey' (QLFS). The British Labour Force survey takes place quarterly and at present there are "about 44 thousand responding households in the UK and 102 thousand people" (ONS, 2011c: 21). This is the version that has been used in relation to the quantitative component of this thesis. Yet, there are other forms of the dataset, as "several sub-sample and derived datasets are also produced, including longitudinal series and a Eurostat version of the dataset" (UK Data Service, 2014a).

Evidently, the data contained in these datasets has originated from the same source; however, they are different in how they are organised. The methodological breadth of the QLFS allows for a range of different types of tests and investigation. For example, some recent empirical investigations with the Labour Force Survey include a focus on labour market issues such as that by Devereux et al. (2011), who examined earning returns in relation to educational expansion. Alternative studies include more health-based empirical investigations, such as Rushton et al. (2010) who examined the relationship between occupation and cancer. The use of the Labour Force Survey can also encompass studies that have a dual focus and need to be linked to other datasets. Purhouse et al. (2012) engage with the Labour Force Survey to examine the effectiveness of alcohol pricing policies in reducing crime and health issues, linking it to five other datasets. They specifically engage with the Labour Force Survey to find baseline absenteeism and employment rates.

The subsets of the Labour Force Survey datasets that are outside of the main QLFS version include a Eurostat version, a household-level version (this does not include individual data relating to the people who have been surveyed but rather survey responses at a

household level), and a longitudinal QLFS series – these comprise a two-quarter and a five-quarter format. Essentially, the format of the longitudinal series is useful as individual cases from the survey can be linked over a year period to formulate a series of observations. These surveys remove new entrants from the LFS, instead focusing on individuals who are retained throughout the four quarters of the year (UK Data Service, 2014a).

Yet, in the case of the quantitative component of this thesis, none of the sub-sample datasets are employed, as the quarterly version of the LFS is the most useful in addressing the research questions of the thesis. The longitudinal versions of the LFS could be used; however, they have a smaller sample size than the alternative quarterly LFS version of the dataset. As the LFS comprises both cross-sectional and longitudinal forms of data, the sample size is larger and, therefore, best suited to investigate Jobcentre Plus engagement with recent graduates and people with degrees more broadly.

The QLFS dataset presents data in each quarter of the year, splitting the year into four individual groups each comprising three months. As of 1992, the QLFS is subdivided into:

Quarter 1: January to March

Quarter 2: April to June

Quarter 3: July to September

Quarter 4: October to December

A particular advantage of the QLFS is that it can be accessed with a degree of ease, with quarterly datasets being kept at the UK statistics website from as far back as 1992 all the way to 2014 (UK data service, 2014a). Therefore in the case of this quantitative investigation, 51 quarterly BLFS datasets have been downloaded and analysed ranging from 2002 to 2013. One dataset – Q1 2004 – is missing as the education attainment variable is not present due to an ONS re-weighting (ONS, 2007: 296). This means that there is a 'break' in the time-series from January to March in 2004.

The years 2002 – 2013 have been identified as an ideal timeframe for this analysis. The starting point, 2002, was chosen because of the amalgamation of the benefits office and the

employment service that occurred in 2001 – 2002, with the launch of One Pathfinder Pilots in 2001 (Wright, 2003: 307) and with the national launch of Jobcentre Plus in April 2002 (Karagiannaki, 2005: 1). A key part of these changes was to integrate a model of new public management practice (Newman, 2000; Wright, 2003) in the formation of Jobcentre Plus. The present analysis begins in 2002 because this year marks a point of significant institutional policy change, meaning that comparisons before this point would be between different types of public employment service. Nonetheless, it must be noted that academic commentary has also pointed out in 2003 that "Jobcentre Plus reinvents the same tensions that Jobcentres did before them. Encompassing a wider range of users within the activation aim is likely to bring the pressures on staff time, the unresolved dilemma of whether to dedicate effort to benefit administration or vacancy matching, more sharply into focus" (Wright, 2003: 308). The concluding point of the time-series is the year 2013, chosen because it is the last year which retains data from all quarters. Including the year 2014 would conclude the time-series with a partial analysis.

### **5.2.1: Structure of the QLFS**

It is important to explain the Labour Force Survey in some detail, as it has "a complicated data structure" (Rafferty et al., 2011: 64), comprising both cross-sectional and panel-based data. For the purpose of this analysis, it is to be treated as a repeated cross-section. Rafferty et al. (2011) comment:

Since 1992 in England, Scotland and Wales, and 1994 in Northern Ireland, the Labour Force Survey has been conducted quarterly to obtain seasonal labour market estimates. A longitudinal element was introduced in 1992, with respondents being interviewed for five consecutive quarters with 20% of the sample being replaced each quarter. This design was implemented to obtain stable employment estimates on a quarterly basis. The datasets therefore represent a 'rotating panel' with a fifth of the panel being refreshed at each quarter (Rafferty et al., 2011: 18).

Table 3 shows the UK Quarterly Labour Force Survey design. It is taken from the ONS guide to linking together datasets (Rafferty et al., 2011: 18). The dark diagonal boxes

represent one group of people that are followed through successive quarterly waves of the Labour Force Survey.

**Table 2 ‘Rotational’ sample in the UK Labour Force Survey**

	Spring	Summer	Autumn	Winter	Spring +1
<b>W1</b>	12k	12k	12k	12k	12k
<b>W2</b>	12k	12k	12k	12k	12k
<b>W3</b>	12k	12k	12k	12k	12k
<b>W4</b>	12k	12k	12k	12k	12k
<b>W5</b>	12k	12k	12k	12k	12k

Source: Adapted from Rafferty et al., 2011: 18

Table 2 shows that the QLFS has an interesting and perhaps somewhat atypical structure, where cases can be both individually examined in their respective quarters to form a cross-section and also longitudinally over the whole of the five quarters. Rafferty et al. (2011) comment that:

The sample group who are highlighted in wave 1 in the first quarter are in wave 2 at the second quarter and so forth until they exit the survey after being interviewed in the fifth quarter. In each quarter, a group (of 20 per cent of the sample) pass beyond their fifth wave and so exit the sample. After their fifth interview, respondents are replaced or ‘refreshed,’ by a new sample of respondents who are in the first wave of their interview. The diagram represents the intended sample rather than the achieved sample. As a result of sample attrition [...] respondents may be lost from the sample between waves, reducing sample sizes in later waves (Rafferty et al., 2011: 18).

This is extremely pertinent for this quantitative empirical investigation, as it means that the LFS can support a cross-sectional analysis and, therefore, proportions regarding Jobcentre Plus engagement by different educational attainment groups can be obtained. There are several ways in which the Labour Force Survey can be used – for example, as a cross-section to study one specific quarter or through the combination of datasets for repeated

cross-sectional analysis across survey years. It is also possible to pool quarters together to create repeated cross-sections across survey years to increase sample sizes (Rafferty et al., 2011: 19). Indeed, Green et al. (2011), pooled quarterly datasets from 2006 – 2009 to increase sample sizes in their investigation of job-search methods. Lastly, the quarterly element of the Labour Force Survey can also be used as panel data for longitudinal investigation. The important aspect to note, however, regarding the use of the Labour Force Survey as repeated cross-sections is the importance of ensuring that the samples that are combined represent independent and separate individuals.

Therefore, in regards to the data analysis for this thesis, different methods have been employed. The analysis has been somewhat iterative with the data being merged and combined in different ways, before settling on an analytical approach that best engages with the overall rationale, and also accurately represents the findings from the Labour Force Survey. The first attempt at analysing the data follows the guidance literature in regards to pooling together datasets from the ONS. This guidance states that "if you wish to combine quarters for longer periods than four quarters, you can select those in their first wave only. No matter how many datasets you merge, you will have only one record per respondent if you select only wave 1 cases from each quarter survey" (Rafferty, 2011: 64). Therefore, the first real attempt at analysing the Labour Force Survey uses this method.

This involves merging datasets together from quarter 1 to quarter 4, but only taking the new entrants to the QLFS – wave 1. In so doing, this combined dataset totals a cross-section of Labour Force Survey new entrants across an individual year (i.e. the removal of w2 to w5 ensures that no individual case can re-occur). This sample can then be analysed to find an annual proportion in regards to Jobcentre usage and educational attainment through cross-tabulation, therefore, giving each year an appropriate 'snapshot'. A provisional analysis from 1995 to 2012 took place in this regard with LFS datasets.

Yet, this approach is problematic and the data inaccurate. It soon became clear that there is no appropriate 'weight' for an annual merged dataset. The weights present in the LFS are

only present for each individual quarter and are therefore unsuitable for yearly merged datasets, which would require their own individual 'weight'. The LFS has been weighted since 1984 "to produce population estimates and to compensate for non-response among sub-groups" (Rafferty et al., 2011: 6). Without such a weight, it is not possible to generalise the findings to the wider UK population. On advice from ONS, other methods were considered, such as the possibility of ascertaining 'snapshots' through longitudinal data for a particular year instead. Yet, this is problematic as a time-series needs to be linked over a number of years through percentages, and this would involve a much reduced sample size than what is available through the central Labour Force Survey data series.

A further alternative was suggested by the Office of National Statistics, relating to the possibility of examining each quarter separately (as each quarter retains a weight from the original QLFS survey), and then linking these quarters to a corresponding quarter a year later. For example, an analysis of Q1 (January to March) in 2010 can then be compared to Q1 (January to March) in 2011, and so on throughout the rest of the time-series. Rafferty et al. comment "when combining data over several years, an alternative approach is to take a particular quarter of the year (e.g. spring quarter) and to drop wave 5 responses to avoid replication with wave 1 year respondents from the previous year. In this case, four waves contained in a single (same) quarter for each year are used" (Rafferty et al., 2011: 64). Therefore, this presents an alternative way of linking together the findings from each individual quarter from 2002 to 2013. As noted, this involves an analysis of 51 datasets, which are then used as the basis of a descriptive analysis. Although this method involves a large amount of data manipulation, it also means that the analysis is accurate due to the correct application of 'weights' and also because of the general consistency of the Labour Force Survey (Rushton et al., 2010 cited at UK data Service, 2014b).

### **5.2.2: Data Analysis – Methods**

The steps put forward here were repeated in the same way for each dataset from 2002 to 2013. As noted, the steps taken for the descriptive analysis revolve around two major strands

of research inquiry in relation to JCP engagement with degree holders and recent graduates.

These two questions are:

- What proportion of graduates/degree holders approach Jobcentre Plus as a job-search method?
- What proportion of graduates/degree holders find employment through Jobcentre Plus services?

This next section examines how these questions are answered with the use of Labour Force Survey data. The analysis undertaken here is a 'snapshot' analysis, whereby a snapshot is taken of each quarter relating to job-search method and the effectiveness of JCP service provision. This section will now explain the various methodological steps regarding how these tests have been completed.

1) The first step is to remove any form of duplicity, where an individual may feature in the analysis twice. As noted, through the variable 'thiswv', the different waves of the QLFS can be isolated and removed. As the LFS is a 'rotational' survey, wave 5 is removed to prevent participants from featuring twice in any analysis of a quarterly dataset. This means that an analysis of a quarterly dataset encompasses cases from wave 1 to wave 4, therefore making it a sample of independent cases.

2) The second stage is to select the appropriate variables to examine the questions in hand. There are many variables in the QLFS that relate to Jobcentre Plus provision. In particular, this analysis engaged with a series of variables relating to job-search methods and Jobcentre Plus engagement. These include:

- 'MethM' – This variable represents the main method of looking for work in the Labour Force Survey. There are many further variables in the Labour Force Survey that can also be used to understand job-search methods. This variable, however, is selected as it has been in the Labour Force Survey since 1992 and also because it "combines the responses of MAINME, MAINMS, MAINMA to give one variable for the main method of seeking work". It applies



to all respondents who have been looking for work or a place in a government scheme in the last four weeks (ONS, 2013c: 187). The following list represents the 'MethM' variable's response categories from Summer 1994 onwards:

1. Visit a Jobcentre
  2. Visit a Careers office
  3. Visit a Jobclub
  4. Have your name on the books of a private employment agency
  5. Advertise for jobs in newspapers or journals
  6. Answer advertisements in newspapers and journals
  7. Study situations vacant in newspapers or journals
  8. Apply directly to employers
  9. Ask friends, relatives, colleagues or trade unions about jobs
  10. Wait for the results of an application for a job
  11. Look for premises or equipment
  12. Seek any kind of permit
  13. Try to get a loan or other financial backing for a job or business
  14. Do anything else to find work
- 'Howget' – this variable represents how an individual's current job has been obtained. It applies to all respondents who are employees, and people in government schemes who have been with their current employer for less than one year/12 months. This is particularly useful as it lists numerous key ways in which an individual has found employment, including public employment services such as Jobcentre Plus. It is important to note that this variable has been slightly altered – from Q1 2008, Connexions is included in the response category (3). This change needs to be taken into account and, therefore, the time-series is split into two distinct periods: from 2002 to 2007, and from 2008 to 2013 (ONS, 2013c: 114). The following list represents the 'Howget' variable's response categories and their alterations:

From Winter 1994 to Q4 2007:

1. Replying to a job advertisement
2. Jobcentre, jobmarket etc.
3. Careers office
4. Jobclub
5. Private employment agency or business
6. Hearing from someone who worked there
7. Direct application
8. Some other way

From Q1 2008 to present:

1. Replying to a job advertisement
2. Jobcentre / jobmarket or Training & Employment Agency office
3. Careers office / Connexions office
4. Jobclub
5. Private employment agency or business
6. Hearing from someone who worked there
7. Direct application
8. Some other way

**Hiqua11D; Hiqua8D; Hiqua5D; Hiqua4D; HiquaD** – This is a series of variables that represents different detailed groupings of highest qualifications. The response categories of these variables have stayed consistent throughout the Labour Force Survey. These variables apply to all men and women aged 16 – 69 or those in employment with qualifications (ONS, 2013c: 266; ONS, 2007: 296). These variables have been updated every few years, as each is derived from other more general variables that provide more detailed information on qualifications criteria. Yet, these grouped variables allow comparisons to take place over corresponding quarters. They are important in that they allow an understanding of how

people with different educational attainment levels might engage or not engage with Jobcentre Plus.

Of course, there is a central interest regarding how people with a 'degree or equivalent' engage with public employment service provision. The following list represents the 'Hiqua' variable's series response categories, which have been present in this format since 1996 (ONS, 2007: 296):

1. Degree or equivalent
2. Higher Education
3. GCE A Level or equivalent
4. GCSE grades A\*-C or equivalent
5. Other qualification
6. No qualification
7. Don't know

3) For a cross-tabulation analysis relating to public employment services engagement, these variables are ideal; however, some alterations are needed to make the data more suitable. Some response categories are subsumed together due to their limited sample size and response rates. For example, in both the 'MethM' and 'howget', there are response categories that can be described as part of 'public employment services', and these are merged in order to make the data somewhat cleaner. These sub-categories include 'jobclubs' and 'careers offices' (ONS, 2013c: 114). The number of people that had engaged with careers offices or jobclubs is very limited, similar to the findings of Green et al. from 2006 – 2009 (2011:14), with Jobcentre Plus being the optimum public employment agency of choice.

4) Lastly, there is also a need to understand how 'recent graduates', as well as 'degree holders' more generally, might be engaging with Jobcentre Plus. This is because 'recent graduates' may be more likely to engage with Jobcentre Plus as they attempt to find employment. Therefore, a variable needs to be constructed inclusive of all recent degree holders that have left higher education in more recent years. Purcell et al. (2004) notes that it

can take up to 5 years for newly graduated individuals to find their career path. Therefore, in order to identify recent graduates, a variable has been created titled 'recent graduates' that encompasses every individual with a degree that has left education in the last five years.

5) At the point where all the necessary variables have been computed or re-coded, a series of cross-tabulation tests are then completed. The first cross-tabulation examines the make-up of the client base of Jobcentre Plus in terms of educational attainment. This requires a combination of the 'MethM' and 'HiqualD' variables, whereby the percentages and raw numbers regarding the relationship between educational attainment and main method of looking for work can be observed. The same test is then applied with the 'recent graduates' variable (but as opposed to including everyone who is looking for work, only those that have obtained a degree within the past 5 years are included). This process is then repeated with 'weighted' data (with each weight matching that particular quarterly dataset).

A further contingency table is then constructed regarding 'Howget' and a 'HiqualD'-based variable, yet this time the raw numbers and percentages examine the relationship between how an individual has found employment and their educational attainment. More specifically, this contingency table yields information relating to how educational attainment groups engage with Jobcentre Plus to ascertain how effective JCP provision is in finding employment. This contingency table engaged with the 'recent graduates' variable and combined it with 'Howget', to understand further how effective Jobcentre Plus provision has been for new graduates entering into the labour market. Once more, the contingency table is repeated with the correct 'weight' applied.

6) Once a 'snapshot' analysis has been completed for each quarterly dataset, the output data is saved to Microsoft Excel where a time-series can be computed through the creation of graphs indicating the trends of Jobcentre Plus engagement from the years 2002 to 2013. In particular, percentages have been taken for two groups of people – 'degree holders' and

'people with no qualifications'<sup>11</sup>. This is so that a 'polarised' example can be put forward to contextualise the usage of JCP provision by degree holders/graduates in comparison to other groups in the labour market. In regards to the construction of the time-series, it is important to re-emphasise that quarters can only be compared to the same quarter in a different year, rather than different quarters in the same year. This means that Q1 in 2010 is compared with Q1 in 2011, Q1 in 2012 and so on. To do otherwise and compare directly Q1 2011 to Q2 in 2011 would mean a comparison of the *same* cases, due to the quarterly and longitudinal component of the Labour Force Survey.

### **5.3: Results of Quantitative Analysis**

This section will show the results of the time-series through a number of charts that examine the proportion of Jobcentre Plus service users that have a degree or are 'recent' graduates (i.e. these service users have graduated in the last 5 years) and, secondly, how many of these degree holders and recent graduates have obtained employment through Jobcentre Plus. For both of these questions, data from each quarter is put together to represent multiple quarters of the same year for the sake of added clarity. Furthermore, in terms of the presentation of these results, each quarter has been put into single charts to reduce the overall number of charts in the chapter.

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<sup>11</sup> Towards the end of the next section (chapter: 5.3.3), graphs that include all other educational attainment groups will provide a more comprehensive account of the client base of Jobcentre Plus.

### 5.3.1: The Proportion of JCP Service Users

Chart 4: % of JCP Service Users from 2002 - 2013

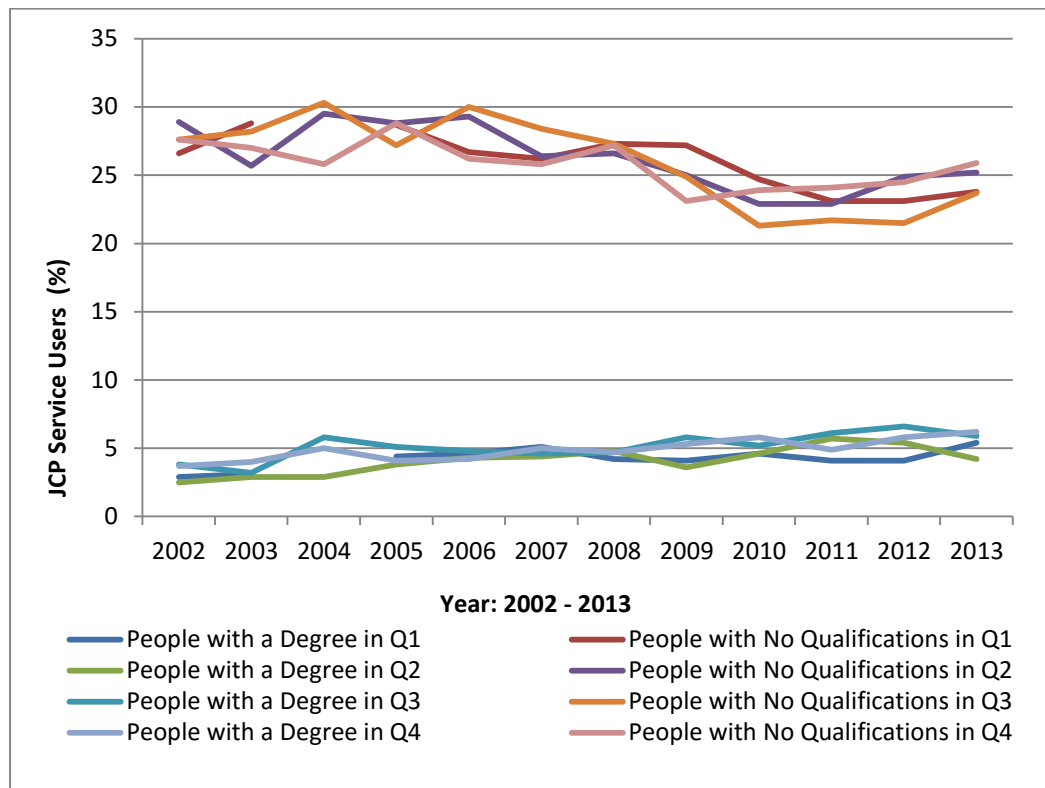
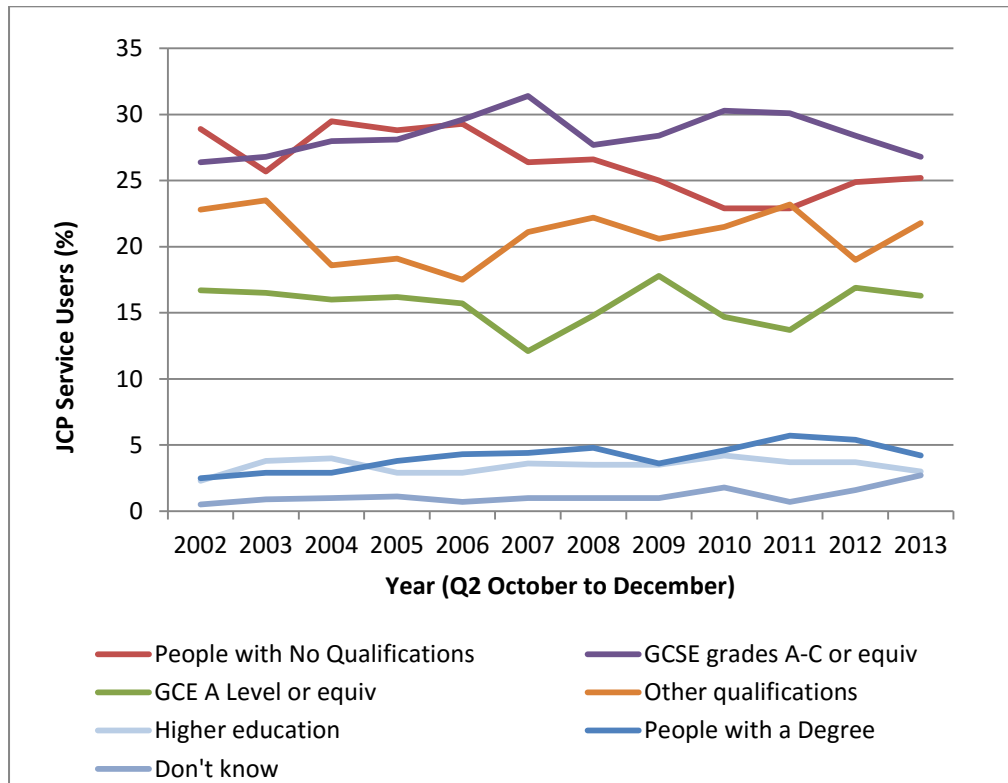


Chart 4 shows the percentage of JCP service users from 2002 to 2013. The analysis indicates that the client base of Jobcentre Plus comprises few people with a degree. It also emphasises that degree holders have been minority users of Jobcentre Plus for some time, unlike those with no qualifications. It appears that there is no substantial difference in relation to different quarters throughout any given year in the time-series. Moreover, there is an expectation that groups with high levels of educational capital do not need to rely on public provision to find employment, in comparison with groups in the labour market with lower levels of human capital. Green et al. (2011: 23) in their analysis of Labour Force Survey data from 2006 to 2009 find a similar result, with an average 5% of Jobcentre Plus service users having a degree, and 38% having no qualifications.

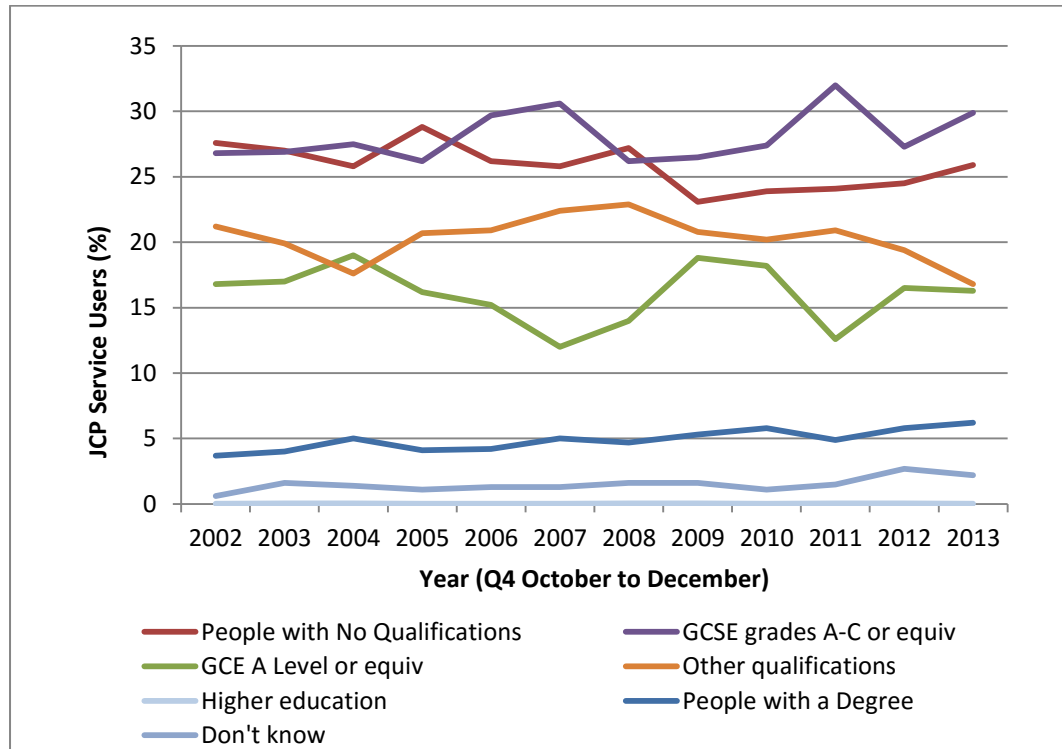
When other educational attainment groups are added to the analysis, there is an also interesting trend regarding educational attainment and the client base of Jobcentre Plus. In

particular, the data supports the notion that groups with further human capital appear to be more likely minority user groups in the overall Jobcentre Plus client make-up. Charts 5 and 6 show the service user make-up of Jobcentre Plus in Q4 and Q2 from 2002 to 2013 including all of the educational attainment groups.

**Chart 5: % of JCP Service Users from April to June (2002 - 2013)**



**Chart 6: % of JCP Service Users from October to December (2002 - 2013)**

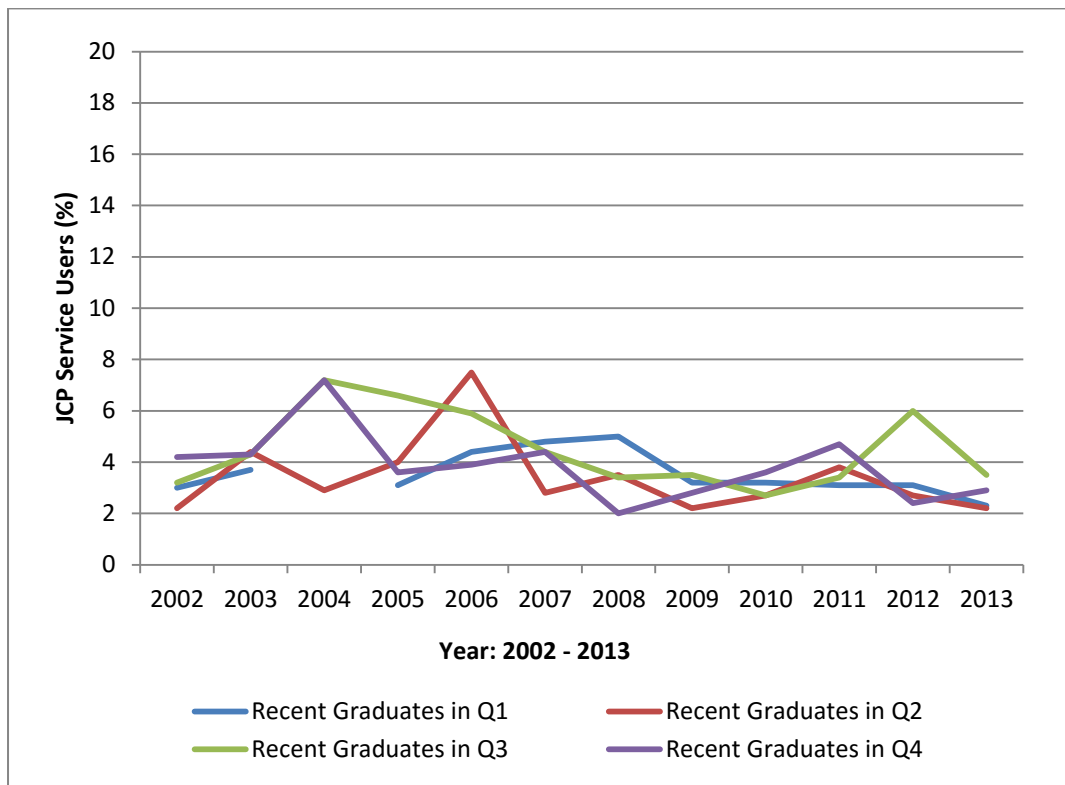


**5.3.2: Analysis of Recent Graduates’ Jobcentre Plus Engagement**

The next chart examines the proportion of ‘recent graduates’ who have named Jobcentre Plus as a main method of finding employment in their job-search strategies. In 2004/2005/2006, recent graduates were slightly more likely to use Jobcentre Plus. This trend declines throughout the rest of the time-series. Also, the analysis does not particularly indicate that there is movement in between quarters – particularly where recent graduates are entering or leaving university in Q2 or Q3. Yet, overall the time-series analysis generally indicates a similar trend to those with a degree, namely that Jobcentre Plus engagement is generally quite low, irrespective of their status as new graduate entrants into the labour market.



**Chart 7: % of Recent Graduates that approached JCP in January to March (2002 - 2013)**



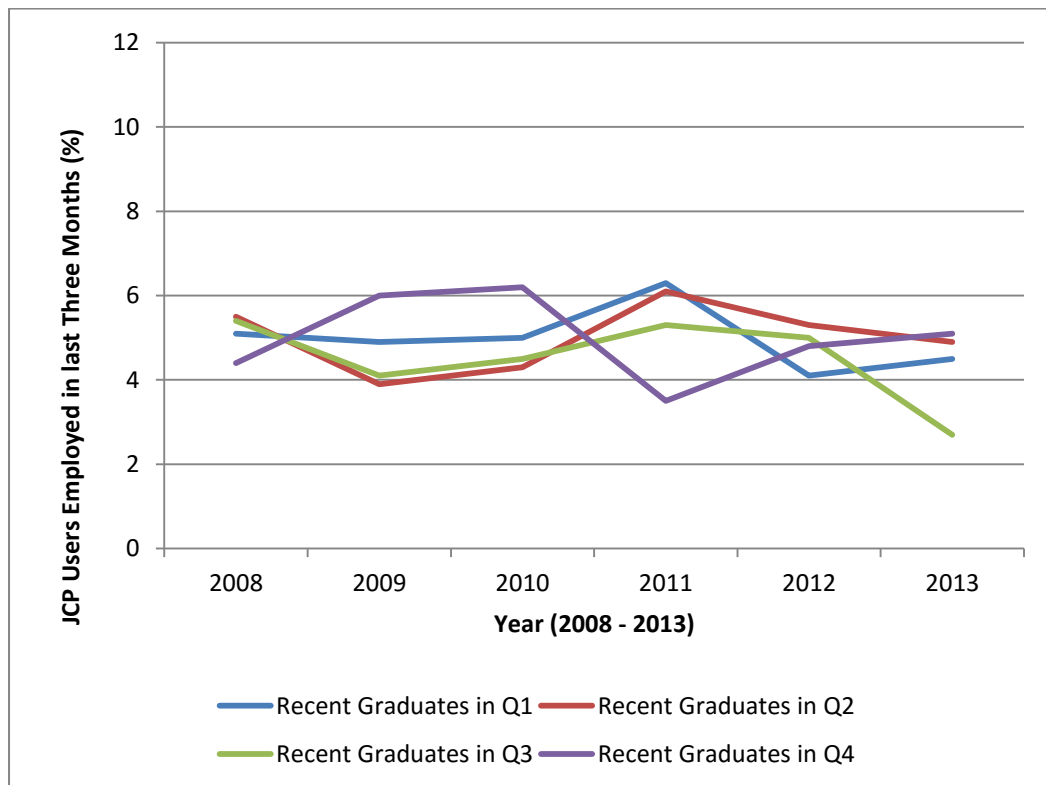
What would perhaps improve this analysis would be to break down the ‘recent graduates’ group even further to understand how ‘unemployed’ graduates may have engaged with Jobcentre Plus. Yet, the sample size of the ‘recent graduates’ variable is already small, meaning that generalisability would be difficult to ascertain.

### **5.3.2: What Proportion of ‘Recent Graduates’ Have Found Work through Jobcentre Plus?**

As noted, the Labour Force Survey is also able to support an analysis in relation to the proportion of graduates who have obtained employment through Jobcentre Plus via the ‘Howget’ variable. The following graphs represent the four quarters of a year where ‘recent graduates’ have found employment in the last year. Chart 8 shows Jobcentre Plus engagement between the years 2008 and 2013. The analysis also includes the years 2002 – 2007. As of Spring 2005, however, the routing reference period of ‘Howget’ changed from 3 months or less to one year. For the sake of brevity (otherwise this chapter would have a substantial number of graphs), the graphs from 2002 to 2007 are not included although they

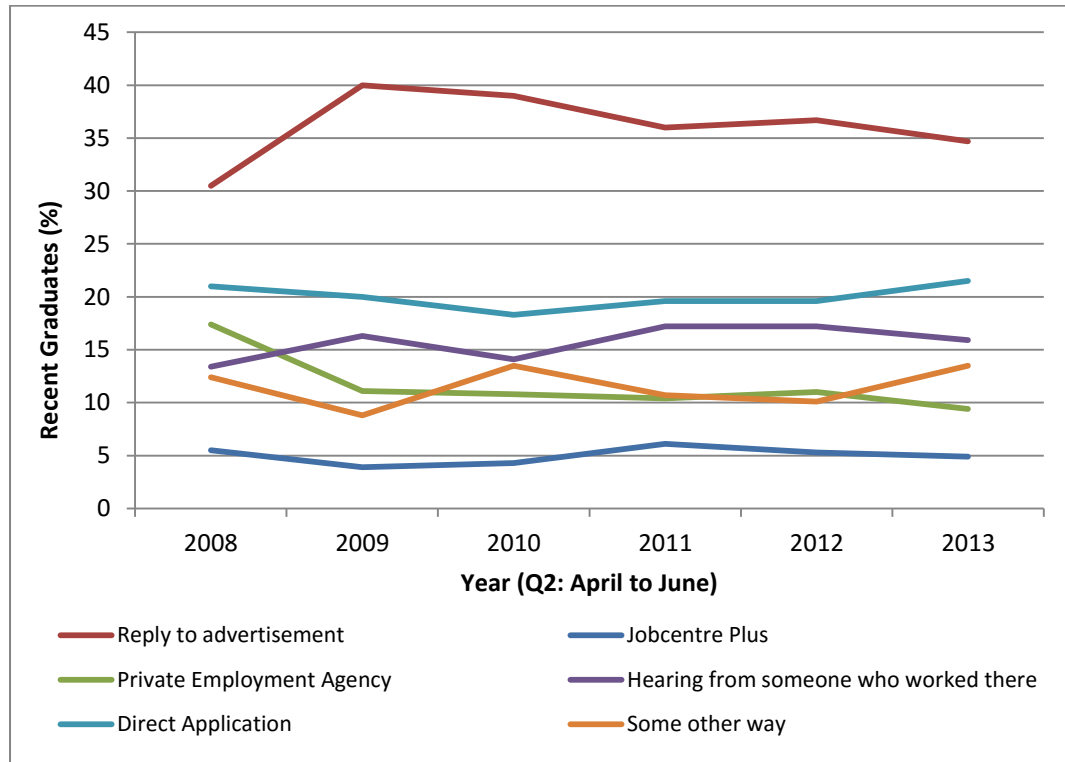
indicate similar trends. The analysis suggests that the proportion of ‘recent graduates’ who have found employment through Jobcentre Plus is between 3% and 6% in the years between 2008 and 2013.

**Chart 8: % of Recent Graduates employed through JCP Services in January to March (2008 - 2013)**



As can be observed in chart 8, it appears that the number of ‘recent graduates’ (defined as graduates who have left higher education in the previous 5 years), who have found employment through Jobcentre Plus varies between 3% and 6% over the years 2008 to 2013. There is perhaps a need to contextualise further how ‘recent graduates’ have found employment using other job-search strategies in recent years. This is because it is important to understand what are the dominant job-search strategies employed by ‘recent graduates’. Chart 9 shows how graduates have found employment in the years 2008 to 2013 in Q2. It can be observed that the most dominant job-search strategy is that of ‘Reply to advertisements’, while ‘Jobcentre Plus’ is the least used job-search strategy.

**Chart 9: Recent Graduates Employment Strategies (2008 – 2013)**



### 5.3.3: Limitations

Returning to a principal question of this thesis, the analysis indicates that degree holders and graduates are amongst the rarest service user groups of Jobcentre Plus provision. These findings echo those of Green et al. (2011: 22-4). Yet, it is also worth pausing to take into account the flaws in this quantitative analysis before such findings can be fully explored and realised.

This analysis is not a substantially deep analysis, unlike Gregg et al. (1996) or Green et al. (2011). It does not engage with econometric analysis. It is descriptive and only engages with proportions that can be observed over time, while it does not include an attempt to analyse variables in-depth in order to explain why graduates and degree holders are limited users of Jobcentre Plus through logistical regression, for example. There are two reasons for this:

- a) Although the Labour Force Survey is an excellent and versatile resource, it has limitations. One particular issue is that of small sub-sample sizes. For example, in all of the datasets, the variable 'howget' only has several hundred people engaging with Jobcentre Plus (this limits the potential 'degrees of freedom' that are needed for more

inferential analysis). Also, the creation of the ‘recent graduates’ variable is a very small sub-sample of degree holders in all datasets; therefore, some care must be taken regarding the interpretation of these statistics in terms of their generalisability.

- b) It is apparent from the results of this time-series that instead of further quantitative analysis, it would be more advantageous to understand the choices, experiences and processes that affect graduates in engaging (or not engaging) with Jobcentre Plus service provision. Such insight can be gained through speaking to graduates individually.

A further challenge with the Labour Force Survey is that it undergoes much change and, indeed, the alteration of key variables means that constructing a time-series to examine trends over time necessitates the creation of separate graphs (such as in the case of ‘howget’). This means that in constructing a time-series, it may end up being split further and further into different individual time-series rather than a larger comparison from 2002 to 2013, and it can get to a point where only a few data points can be compared. In this case, it would be preferable to have a more holistic analysis of the whole data series from 2002 to 2013. It is also worth mentioning that Labour Force Survey analysis involves a large amount of data manipulation (even for a small-scale, descriptive quantitative analysis as in this instance), in order to ensure that findings can be weighted accurately. Indeed, in the case of this project, there have been subsequent attempts at putting data together to ensure the accuracy and validity of the data as much as possible.

#### **5.4: How do Graduates (and Degree Holders) Interact with Jobcentre Plus?**

Overall, this analysis indicates that despite the modernisation of Jobcentre Plus in 2002 – 2003, its client base consists of people with lesser amounts of human capital. The first part of the analysis – the construction of a Jobcentre user base – indicates that people with degrees are less common service users than other educational attainment groups. This is particularly apparent when all educational attainment groups are compared together. The

stability of these trends (from the years 2002 – 2013) indicates that regardless of post-Fordist modernisation (Jessop, 2002) or increasing personalised service delivery (Stafford, 2009: 260), service users with degree level attainment do not make up a substantial amount of the Jobcentre Plus service user base. Indeed, the most dominant service user groups are people with no qualifications and people who have GCSE-level educational attainment. For ‘recent graduates’, the analysis focusses on what percentage name Jobcentre Plus as a main method of acquiring employment. Over the years 2002 to 2013, this varies from 2% to 7%. Therefore, it appears that a small, but not insignificant, proportion of ‘recent graduates’ have approached Jobcentre Plus as a main method of finding employment.

In relation to the proportion of ‘recent graduates’ who have found employment through Jobcentre Plus directly, the analysis indicates a range between 3% and 6% between the years 2008 and 2013. Although these percentages may be small, this may show that Jobcentre Plus is particularly effective with ‘recent graduates’, as only a small proportion appear to approach Jobcentre Plus as a main method to find employment to begin with. Yet, when contextualised amongst broader graduate job-search strategies that graduates deploy to find work, Jobcentre Plus is the least successful job-search method, with graduates preferring less formal methods such as ‘reply to advertisements’, ‘direct applications’ and ‘hearing from someone who worked there’. These findings are similar to those of Atfield et al. in the FutureTrack survey series (2010: 11).

Therefore, in terms of general usage it appears that Jobcentre Plus may be perceived through a residual context for graduate service users and degree holders (and, of course, such a perspective may also be true for many other groups of people in the labour market as well). As people with degrees appear to be a small service user group of Jobcentre Plus, there may be implications when the Jobcentre Plus services are approached and used. Wright, in examining Employment Service provision in the early 2000s, noted these complexities: “graduates and professionals encountered particular problems in the administrative

classifications used by Employment Service workers to categorise clients” (2003: 267).

Indeed, perhaps even more fundamentally and as far back as 2003, Wright found that:

Staff and users alike are aware that the vacancies advertised through the Jobcentre are not usually applicable to professionals. Unemployed professionals found this particularly frustrating because this meant that their visits to the Jobcentre were purely for benefit administration purposes, the second organisational goal of assisting people to find work being far removed from their needs. The Jobcentre had very little to offer people (Wright, 2003: 184).

More recently, similar concerns have been put forward relating to the efficacy of the ‘Universal Jobmatch’ service – an online service to increase the efficient matching of unemployed people with vacancies – in regards to engaging with service users that have degrees, particularly since professional service users emphasise a lack of employment opportunities. Evidence submitted to Parliament by the Centre for Economic and Social Inclusion notes: “Jobcentre Plus’s market share of vacancies varied by occupation—with a higher market share for elementary and sales vacancies and a very low market share for professional occupations. With the growth in graduate claimants, this lack of professional vacancies was seen as a problem” (HoC, 2014: 112).

Indeed, although the time-series is limited in gathering information regarding experiences of Jobcentre Plus (this is collated in the qualitative findings in Chapter six), it appears to indicate that Jobcentre Plus is not a key service for people with degrees and more ‘recent graduates’. In Chapter six, there is a wider focus on graduate transitions whereby graduates engage with Jobcentre Plus as an adequate form of social policy. Therefore, questions regarding the efficacy of this social policy will be explored in more detail.

# **Chapter 6: The Design of a Qualitative Strategy to Understand Graduate Transitions to the Knowledge-based Economy**

## **6.1 A Qualitative Strategy**

The qualitative part of the study involves drawing upon data from 26 interviews with recent graduates from universities of varying 'market' positions obtained in 2012-3. It includes data from 4 research pilot interviews and a further 22 interviews that comprise the central qualitative study<sup>12</sup>. The first part of chapter six will examine the methodology behind the qualitative research strategy and the second will focus upon the findings.

### **6.1.1: Sampling Strategy**

This section will detail the overall sampling strategy. It will focus on the steps taken in regards to how such a sampling strategy has been developed by focussing on each stage of that process. This will include the conceptual justifications in regards to the choice behind the sampling strategy, as well as practical considerations. This is because of the need to ensure that there is clarity in the sampling framework, as "sampling procedures in qualitative research are not so rigidly prescribed as in quantitative studies" and because the sample has a "profound effect on the ultimate quality of the research" (Coyne, 1997: 623). This, consequently, means that the lack of well-defined guidance regarding sampling principles can cause confusion for both quantitative and qualitative researchers. Morse exemplifies such an observation through the example of a qualitative researcher who "violates both the quantitative principle that requires an adequate sample size in order to ensure representativeness and the qualitative principle of appropriateness that requires purposeful sampling and a 'good' informant (i.e. one who is articulate, reflective and willing to share with the interviewer)" (Morse, 1991: 127). This next section will analyse the process followed in regards to determining what constitutes the most effective approach in

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<sup>12</sup> Overall, 8 research pilots were completed; however, only 4 have been included in the qualitative data. The rationale for this is discussed in section 6.1.7.

ascertaining the appropriate sample framework in terms of the qualitative findings of the thesis.

A difficulty regarding sampling in qualitative research is that an “element of possibility can be taken too far in terms of ascribing a certain level of universality to the findings of studies into conversational and interactional phenomena” (Silverman, 2010: 37). Therefore, to ensure that there is ‘transferability’ of data, detailed information needs to be provided regarding the “setting context (or the sample)” (Seale, 1999: 108). In this study, the focus is to be exploratory rather than definitive, “so further analytical possibilities can be opened up” (Silverman, 2010: 37). Therefore, a purposive sampling strategy has been implemented to ensure that “those sampled are relevant to the research questions being posed”, and to “ensure that there is a good deal of variety in the resulting sample, so that sample members differ from each other in terms of key characteristics” (Bryman, 2008: 415).

In terms of sample stratification, the qualitative study prioritises certain key attributes regarding research participants – the overall aim is to understand labour market transitions in greater detail. Therefore, it is advantageous to study a broad range of research participants with diverse experiences somewhat in line with a maximum variation sampling strategy (Marshall, 1996: 523). As graduate experiences, however, vary substantially because of different university experiences, divergences in terms of type of degree or degree class and socio-economic background, it is difficult for a qualitative study to capture appropriate data sufficiently. Therefore, a sampling framework must take into account such limitations in regards to generalisability and, instead, focus on “developing an understanding of complex issues relating to human behaviour” (Marshall, 1996: 523).

The first stage of this process has been to list key codes to create a purposeful sampling strategy, before narrowing these codes down in regards to engaging with the overall research rationale, making a distinction between ‘individual’ and ‘institutional’ codes. This is because of the “increasing individual variability in the transition to adulthood that has been observed



in most industrialised societies, as well as the broader de-standardisation of the life course” (Person et al., 2005: 145).

Moreover, codes at the ‘individual’ level are always important in creating purposeful sampling strategies “by virtue of characteristics thought by the researcher to be likely to have some bearing on the perceptions and experiences” (Barbour, 2008: 52). In attempting to understand different types of graduate transition further, the sampling framework of this study has attempted to isolate such key individual codes that elucidate further these social processes. Although it must be noted that these are quite broad, as Barbour comments, “we can all sit in our offices and draw up neat sampling diagrams, only to find that it is impossible to achieve our desired diversity of respondents, often due to factors beyond our control” (Barbour, 2008: 58). This increasing variance regarding emerging adulthood can also be empirically understood through measuring different social processes and contexts, and it is increasingly difficult to find commonalities that all young people may share, which once again raises questions regarding how data is adequately captured in terms of generalisability.

This is why it is also important to consider codes at an ‘institutional’ level as a further method to draw together shared and common experiences between research participants. Such an approach is emphasised in Brooks et al. (2009), who employed a qualitative method focussed on biographical perspectives in order to understand how recent graduates view leaving higher education and re-entering it for further qualifications. A purposeful sampling framework is used at an ‘institutional’ level, whereby graduates have been approached depending on their experience of attending university institutions that represent different ‘market’ positions.

In terms of the qualitative sample framework employed in the qualitative element of this thesis, a somewhat similar method is employed; however, the focus of this analysis is to understand prevailing perspectives regarding the social processes of the labour market. Therefore, understandings at the institutional level can also be sought in attempting to build

an appropriate sampling framework that can take into account the “concrete forms of social organisations” (Dannefer, 1984: 107), especially if higher education is now recognised as an institution where people “are judged and judge themselves in terms of their progress in attaining certain markers of life stage accomplishments, including the attainment of college degrees” (Person et al., 2005: 127). The advantages, however, of engaging with a sample at an institutional level also go much further. As university institutions share similar features and characteristics, a singular university institution can be a ‘typical’ example of numerous others that share and embody those certain characteristics (although there are clear limitations to such an approach if these institutions are directly compared). Also, in terms of affecting policy change, it is perhaps easier to do so through changing institutional procedures rather than focussing on qualitative, abstract observations of data derived only from ‘individual’ codes.

- Overall, by examining codes at both institutional and individual levels, the sampling strategy framework is able to support an inquiry able to address the overall research rationale. It also ensures that sufficient variation exists within the sample. This is important in engaging codes related to the knowledge-based economy and a possible ‘missing middle’ within such graduate transitions, as a wide array of codes can capture data on graduate experiences related to employment destinations, labour market insecurities and the use of social policy frameworks, such as Jobcentre Plus. The importance of such variation and diversity of experiences means that in sampling potential research participants, an approach can be constructed whereby “categories achieve theoretical saturation” through the selection of “further interviewees on the basis of an emerging theoretical focus” (Bryman, 2004: 334). A purposeful sampling strategy with sufficient numbers of research participants and a sufficient ‘balance’ of experiences ensures that new epistemological understandings, in relation to how graduates may interpret their social world, can be made “through the interpretation of that world by its inhabitants” (Bryman, 2004: 266).

### 6.1.2: Initial Codes

In order to find adequate data, this qualitative analysis first attempted to map out appropriate ‘individual’ and ‘institutional’ codes in line with the overall research rationale. There are limits in the amount of ‘codes’ that can be applied in qualitative research. For instance, a somewhat peripheral factor in initial graduate transitions may be the engagement of parental/family influences, as a resource to find ideal graduate destinations (Bouderbat et al., 2007). Yet, rather than centrally engaging with this code as one of the main themes of the study, it was deemed better to allow research participants themselves shape their own responses and carve out themes based on their experiences of their own graduate transitions. This is because:

Qualitative research is a means for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. The process of research involves emerging questions and procedures; collecting data in the participants’ setting; analyzing the data inductively, building from particulars to general themes; and making interpretations of the meaning of the data (Creswell, 2009: 232).

In generating empirical data and understandings, the primary investigator has to ensure that although they are the key architect regarding sample design, there is a focus upon generating data, which gives “an authentic insight into people’s experiences” (Silverman, 2001: 87). Therefore, it is necessary to ensure that when designing potential lists for purposeful sampling frameworks, ‘room’ is left for inductive ideas to emerge. Table 3 illustrates these initial key codes in regards to potential interview criteria.

**Table 3: Key Qualitative Codes**

Institution Codes	Individual Codes
University	Prior Socio-Economic Background
Geographical Location	Prior Location
Employment Prospects	Prior Educational Attainment (A-levels/Foundation Degrees)
Russell Group	
Post-92	Ethnicity

League Table Ranking	Gender Age Type of Degree Degree Class Current Location Completed Internships Year of Graduation Experiences of Unemployment Experiences of 'Underemployment' Jobcentre Plus Experience
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These codes have emerged through numerous sources, as certain codes are manifestly required for inclusion due to their relevance in engaging with the overall research rationale. This denotes codes that can support an examination of the core concepts in the thesis, such as the knowledge-based economy and the 'missing middle' in youth transitions, both of which are necessary to include. Secondly, other codes have emerged through the synthesis of relevant academic conceptual literature and empirical studies. In Brooks et al.'s (2009) study, a sampling strategy was employed to engage with graduates who had attended universities of varying market positions, thus exemplifying the importance of engaging with an appropriate 'university' code that is representative or 'typical' of similar institutions. This ensures "selecting [the] people or setting that the researcher believes to be the most typical for the target population" (Wellington et al., 2008: 66). It must be stressed, however, that in examining the potential list of codes, it is clear that a qualitative research study may struggle to capture data adequately due to constraints in sample size, in regards to both individual and institutional codes. The substantial number of recent graduates (as well as the large number of undergraduate courses and university institutions) means that it is difficult to draw inferences around common experiences.

This list of codes has been narrowed down to create an overall sampling strategy with the primary goal of understanding the relevant “social processes” (Arber, 2001: 62). To an extent, however, all the codes within this initial list are relevant. This means that codes that are not part of the overall sampling strategy become important in developing potential interview guides, as this allows “a fairly clear focus, rather than a very general notion of wanting to do research on a topic” (Bryman, 2008: 439). Therefore, each code has been analysed in relation to the research rationale, validity and parameters of the overall study, and a judicial process can be established to select key codes in an attempt to “document and understand how young adults may be experiencing and negotiating new social conditions” (Brooks et al., 2009: 336). In more practical terms, this means researching the potential of data from each code in detail. The next section will explain why certain codes have been left unused.

### **6.1.3: Unused Codes**

In creating a purposeful sample stratification, it is clear that providing information on some key codes comes with difficulties, as a focus on particular codes would lead to an imbalance in terms of data collection. This is the case with some individual codes in the sampling framework where it was found that socio-economic background or current socio-economic status, for example, are difficult to establish with a degree of accuracy (especially as the qualitative study is based upon telephone interviews), without further information regarding the various components that can be ascribed to varying socio-economic positions. Similarly, controlling the sampling framework for individual codes, such as ‘prior educational attainment’ or ‘prior geographical location’, may lead to further redundancy in data collection, as these individual codes would be better employed in a longitudinal study, such as that of Forsyth et al. (2000; 2003). These codes would also be better engaged with a research rationale focussed upon discussions regarding social mobility, which although it has some relevance to graduate transition outcomes, lies outside the parameters of the research rationale of this study.

In addition, taken individually, these codes may be somewhat limited in relation to the data that can be accrued. For example, a 'prior geographical location' code within the sampling framework refers to a situation research participants found themselves in before attending university, perhaps yielding information on how initial geographical locations may influence graduate transitions to employment later in the life-course. Yet, this does not always mean that establishing where a graduate has previously lived retains relevance in the modern-day context of seeking employment.

In conjunction with other individual codes, such as 'prior socio-economic status' and 'previous educational background', the 'prior geographical location' would prove effective in a sampling framework that has an aim to provide a detailed overall profile or case study regarding why decisions are made to enter higher education. In particular, do university students from socially disadvantaged areas choose their local institution even if they have obtained qualifications that would extend their choice to more 'established' universities, and does this decision have consequences in the graduate labour market? Studies, such as those by Forsyth et al. (2000; 2003; Furlong et al., 2005), have been able to achieve this outcome in a qualitative context through a longitudinal methodological approach, whereby data was drawn from research participants from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds, at various times over an individual's educational career.

Further, applying social constructs such as 'ethnicity' or 'gender' in regards to graduate employment outcomes in a sampling framework would be advantageous, especially in examining whether graduate transitions are aligned with intersectional factors, as discussed in chapter two. Yet, the rationale of the study is to understand the broad differences regarding accessing destinations associated with the 'knowledge-based economy', and the propensity to engage with public employment services when this becomes difficult for graduates to achieve. These factors would instead be better examined under a longitudinal quantitative or qualitative approach. This is not to state, however, that these individual codes are unimportant. Conner et al. (2004) employed a mixed-methods approach in their study

and found that 'ethnicity' has an initial adverse effect in determining graduate labour transitions. To the contrary, drawing upon data from the 2008-9 recession, Thompson found that: "in 2009 17.2 per cent of young male graduates were unemployed compared to 11.2 per cent of young female graduates" (Thompson, 2010: 1). Therefore, such social constructs are included as potential areas for discussion in the interviews, although they are somewhat on the periphery, being beyond the confines of the overall research rationale of the study.

In terms of an 'age' code, there is growing variance in the different age groups now leaving higher education; however, it is still mostly younger age groups that do. In 2008, almost three quarters of UK graduates were between the ages of 20 and 24 (72%). Therefore, it is expected that the qualitative study will attract research participants from these younger age groups (Little et al., 2008: 4). How older age groups are engaging with the labour market, however, is also important and under-researched. Purcell et al. (2007: 58) found that some 'older' graduates appear initially to struggle more in the labour market in comparison to their younger counterparts. Therefore, the qualitative sampling framework attempts to provide further understandings of how older graduates are coping in light of the recession by having an 'open' age-based code (whereby any recent graduate could take part, irrespective of age). This would ensure that the sample would enable data to accrue from varying age groups. Most graduates who responded to the study, however, were younger cohorts who had graduated within the last 5 years; thus, unfortunately, it was not possible to examine sufficiently how different age groups of graduates respond to an adverse labour market.

Further, the potential use of a code referring to 'type of degree' poses difficulties due to the substantial number of courses in the UK university system. It would be problematic to draw appropriate inferences between different groups unless a qualitative approach only engaged graduates who read specific comparable courses, or through a quantitative context (by banding together degree courses into wider groups; however, such an approach still risks making incorrect assumptions leading to generalisations). Also, by focusing on the 'type of degree' as a code for the sample potentially risks the loss of relevant data in examining the

overall research rationale: how are graduates engaging with public employment services and experiences of unemployment or underemployment? It is clearly important, however, to examine whether the differences in ‘type of degree’ affect labour market transitions. Therefore, this became a code for discussion in the topic guide and subsequent interviews, as opposed to a code used in the sampling strategy.

Another important code in regards to the overall project is the ‘class of degree’. Evidently, this may imply that graduates with successful transitions have better degree qualifications. Yet in 2013/4, 70 per cent of graduates in the United Kingdom achieved a 1<sup>st</sup> or 2:1 in their undergraduate degrees (HESA, 2015). Furthermore, the extent of labour market insecurity in relation to unemployment and underemployment within graduate transitions (ONS, 2011a: 1; ONS, 2013b: 14) may imply that there are other factors that may explain distinctions between graduate transitions. As the qualitative research has been undertaken at a time of an economic downturn in the UK economy, there is greater likelihood that many graduates with varying degree attainment levels are experiencing labour market insecurity or engaging with Jobcentre Plus. Therefore, by focusing only on particular degree classes, good quality data may be missed. Thus, even if not part of the overall sampling strategy, it is an area which is discussed with graduates in the interview schedule (this can be found in ‘appendices E’), as it may have particular relevance regarding graduate propensity to engage with public employment services. Try (2005) examines degree attainment levels using Norwegian graduate destination survey data and how this relates to their usage of public employment services. The analysis indicates that graduates with lower degree attainment level engage with public employment services more extensively. Try found that “graduates with poor job prospects (either because they did obtain poor marks in the study, or belong to an educational group with excess supply, or live in areas with weak labour-market conditions) are generally over-represented among the PES clients” (Try, 2005: 240).

Where research participants currently live or previously have lived are also potential codes that could be used in a purposeful qualitative sampling strategy of this nature. The



geographical area where current research participants live is important, as information can be ascertained regarding how graduates engage generally with their local labour markets. An example is Florida's thesis (2002), which argued that successful urban cities with higher levels of tolerance, talent and technology will, in turn, attract high-skilled workers and, therefore, have more of a cutting-edge economy. Indeed, according to ONS analysis (based on the UK Labour Force Survey), it appears that there are large regional disparities between different proportions of graduates in finding employment. In examining which regions had the highest and lowest proportion of degrees holders aged between 21 and 64, the ONS comments that "London had the highest in 2011 at 49 per cent. Northern Ireland, the West Midlands and the North East had the lowest at around 28 per cent", and also that this is because "graduates are more likely to work in high skill jobs and therefore may be more likely to move to London for work rather than to regions where there are fewer high skilled jobs available" (ONS, 2012: 6-7).

Regarding the qualitative sampling framework of this study, in examining graduates' perceptions of their local labour market, an individual 'current location' code has not been directly used in the sampling strategy. This is because by engaging graduates living in specific locations, there would need to be a further justification of why such locations have been chosen. For example, should the focus of such a sampling strategy examine areas that have a high prevalence of graduates? Or, instead, should it examine how graduates cope in adverse labour markets where there is a structural lack of graduate employment? Or attempt both by splitting the sample? Each approach would require the sampling strategy to make large general assumptions about graduate retention and location movement, and therefore increase the potential for data loss. Instead, the 'current location' code is used as a topic for discussion throughout the research in relation to research participants' understandings of their local labour market and their views on the 'knowledge-based' economy.

The prevalence of internships within the graduate labour market means that an 'internship' code can also arguably be put forward as part of the overall sampling framework, as "there

has been growth in the number of internships but also growing evidence of abuse, particularly in certain sectors” (Low Pay Commission, 2010: 107). Additionally, gathering data on internships may also be important because the government has become directly involved with the promotion of internships through their Graduate Talent Pool policy, which by 2010 had matched over 5,000 young people to internship opportunities (Low Pay Commission, 2010: 107). Also, since 2010, graduates who have been in receipt of Jobseeker’s Allowance for more than six months can choose to take an unpaid internship for up to 13 weeks and receive a training allowance equivalent to Jobseeker’s Allowance (Low Pay Commission, 2010: 107-8). In relation to the overall sampling strategy, however, controlling for internships would shift the focus of the study from an analysis of graduate views on the ‘knowledge-based economy’, labour market insecurities and public employment services. Therefore, seeking perspectives upon ‘internships’ became one of the areas discussed throughout the qualitative study in order to address the fact that there appears to be a lack of empirical data from where understandings of internships can be drawn. This is of particular importance because “better evidence on interns and internships would help us understand what interns do, who they are and what they go on to do. At the moment, the lack of data can make policymaking difficult and it is impossible to demonstrate robustly some of the problems with unpaid internships” (Lawson et al., 2010: 14).

#### **6.1.4: The Final Qualitative Sampling Strategy**

**Table 4: Final Qualitative Sampling Strategy**

<b>Institutional Codes</b>	<b>Individual Codes</b>
University Institution	Experience of Jobcentre Plus
Russell Group	Inexperience of Jobcentre Plus
Post-92	Experience of Unemployment
Geographical Location	Experience of Underemployment
League Table Ranking	Year of Graduation (after 2005)
	Undergraduate Degree Attainment

Table 3 shows the overall sampling framework employed to engage with potential research participants. These codes have been selected to ensure that they address the overall research rationale. This is necessary so that the sampling framework engages with research participants that can relate to the key topics of the research. There is a distinction, however, between the two sets of codes. The institutional codes have been employed to determine the appropriate context for the research to take place, whilst the individual codes have a stronger focus on the overall research rationale.

#### **6.1.5: Institutional Codes Used**

The institutional set of codes attempts to ensure that meanings can be ascribed from the data appropriately, although there are limitations in terms of representativeness. It would not be possible to create a sample on the basis of engaging numerous graduates who have attended a variety of universities, in a small qualitative study of this nature, as “they are not probability samples from which precise inferences can be made about the characteristics of the population from which the sample was drawn” (Arber, 2001: 62). In order to capture data from graduates who have attended a wide range of university institutions would have taken the study too far towards a ‘random sampling strategy’ (Marshall, 1996: 523). This would mean that it would be difficult to draw meaning from data that has been accumulated from a wide range of varying sources, and also that data would be prone to bias (due to the smaller size of the sample). Therefore, the sampling framework identified a general strategy to provide a sample of graduates that represent different market positions in terms of their university institution. There is also a need, however, for the sample framework to strike a balance in terms of ensuring that there is some extent of variance regarding university institutions, as to focus only on graduates who have attended a single institution would create biased data.

In the United Kingdom, universities are categorised into several groups that are perceived to correspond loosely with an overall measure of quality and value. Over the past four decades, successive UK governments have continually encouraged the promotion of tertiary

education, with several universities being created in the 1960s. Following the 1992 Higher Education Act, however, educational institutions could be awarded university status and degree-awarding power with the post-92 charter, thus creating a distinction between the older and newer form of university, as discussed in chapter two. Chevalier notes that “within the old universities, with a charter prior to 1992, a self-selected group encompassing the oldest and most prestigious higher education institutions in the country has been formed. This group of institutions is referred to as the Russell Group” (Chevalier et al., 2003: 3). Consequently, although governmental focus has been generally to promote access to higher education in an attempt to address social inequalities and as a response to the needs of the knowledge-based economy, there is a further challenge in terms of promoting differing ‘types’ of higher education institutions. Boliver notes:

Despite the shift from a binary system to a nominally unitary one, prestige differences between ‘Old’ (pre-1992) and ‘New’ (post-1992) universities have persisted and further prestige distinctions have emerged between more and less research-intensive ‘Old’ universities, most notably between the universities that make up the Russell Group and the rest (Boliver, 2013: 345).

These distinctions between different types of university can manifest themselves in several ways on an individual’s labour market experience, such as in wage disparities, routes into professional forms of employment, or potentially in terms of internship opportunities. As a result of these differing perceptions of university institutions, the sampling framework has employed institutional codes through a ‘polarised’ perspective involving a small number of universities. The nature of this ‘polarisation’ will attempt to capture how such graduate experiences of labour market transitions are affected by attendance to a ‘Russell Group’ or ‘Post-92 University’, which is why these key institutional codes were placed within the sample framework. This is advantageous in numerous ways. Firstly, it still allows for enough variation within the overall sample that data does not become too homogenised by dominant factors, as only employing graduates from a single institution (or degree course) creates considerable bias, particularly regarding socio-economic backgrounds. Forsyth et al.

(2000: 39) find that socially disadvantaged students tend to be over-represented in lower ranked institutions. Secondly, sampling graduates who have attended specific university institutions, rather than focussing on overall degree type or degree class, ensures that thematic interpretation can be linked to different types of university institutional habitus (Reay, 1998). This is important because of the potential of university institutions to embody individually an “organisational culture and ethos” that is “linked to wider socio-economic and educational cultures through processes in which universities and the different student constituencies they recruit mutually shape and re-shape each other” (Reay et al., 2009: 111).

Engaging graduates who have left a certain institution, however, is difficult in the context of the United Kingdom due to the diversity of the university sector. Whilst the Russell Group has 24 universities (RG, 2014), the post-92 universities have become the predominant form of higher educational provision in the UK, encompassing both former ‘polytechnic’ institutions, as well as university institutions created after 1992 (Deem, 2004: 113). This means that a process of selection needs to isolate a correct number of universities in terms of sampling graduates, and that these universities need to be differentiated enough to ensure that the sample of graduates is relatively unbiased through minimising institutional habitus (Reay et al., 2009).

Therefore, a key pillar in establishing a set of institutional codes for the sampling framework is to create an overall strategy that ‘polarises’ graduates into groups of ‘Russell Group’ and ‘post-92’ graduates. Such a separation strategy ensures that differences regarding how graduates experience initial labour transitions can be explored. These institutions have been selected (and a strategy of ‘polarisation’ has been implemented through the use of institutional codes as above) by referring to the Complete University Guide 2011 and 2012 (CUG, 2014a). By examining the universities placed in the top 20 of the Complete University Guide and isolating the appropriate Russell Group Universities from where to sample graduates, and following a similar process for the post-92 university institutions positioned between 80 and 100, a ‘polarised’ sample of graduates was created.

There are several guides that can be used in the UK, with newspaper outlets such as *The Guardian*, *The Times* and *The Sunday Times* also creating annual league tables regarding university quality and provision. These datasets, however, can be criticised for their lack of ‘completeness’ in their statistical methodologies, and also for incurring a cost in terms of their use (in turn making it somewhat difficult to refer to data in creating a sampling strategy regarding the appropriate choice of university institution). For example, *The Guardian’s* league tables have been criticised as inconsistent, as they exclude key measures that are found in other league tables, such as ‘Research Assessment’, ‘Completion Rates’ and ‘Good Honour Degrees’. Overall, this league table often gives “the impression that it is there for completeness but not to be taken too seriously” (CUG, 2014b). *The Sunday Times* and *The Times*, however, have a statistically robust survey and subsequent league table, but which “can now only be viewed in their entirety on payment of a fee” (CUG, 2014b). To the contrary, the Complete University Guide is free to access on the basis that “there is ample evidence to suggest that buyers of guide books are skewed towards the higher socio-economic groups” (CUG, 2014b). Therefore, having direct access to league table data online is advantageous as this data goes back over several years, meaning that the sampling strategy can compare and contrast key universities appropriately.

Table 4 presents the universities placed between number 1 and number 20 in 2012 in an overall league table that measures the top 100 universities in the UK. These graphs are useful as they include data on a range of relevant codes; however, the main code needed for this study relates to ‘graduate prospects’, and has been highlighted accordingly. This code is particularly relevant as it relates to the employability of graduates upon leaving their institution. The sampling strategy can, therefore, take into account not just the overall position of the university but also where it ranks it terms of employability. As expected, the top 20 are predominantly Russell Group institutions (although not exclusively, as some are outside the top 20). There are three institutions in the top 20 that are not part of the Russell Group; these include SOAS (University of London), Loughborough University and the University of Sussex. The remaining Russell Group Universities outside of the top 20 – the

University of Leeds, the University of Birmingham, the University of Manchester, the University of Newcastle, the University of Sheffield, Queens University Belfast and Queen Mary (University of London) have also not been included regarding the selection of a Russell Group institution. The shaded university institutions represent what was included in the sampling strategy at the institutional level. Taking a contrasting perspective in creating a 'polarised' sample, Table 5 (which can be found in appendix A1), illustrates the position of universities that were placed between 80 and 100 in the Complete University Guide 2012. Most of these are post-92 institutions, apart from Salford University.

This isolated numerous university institutions regarding their overall position in the Complete University Guide. There is then a need, however, to examine which singular universities should form part of the overall study. There were two primary factors that had to be taken into account, and these were typical 'graduate prospects' and the pragmatic limitations regarding the study itself. Firstly, an average was taken of 'graduate prospects' values from both quartiles of the university league table – this ensures that a hypothetical example of universities' typical graduate employment prospects can be made. For the Russell Group Institutions positioned between 1 and 17, the average in terms of graduate prospects is 77.7, whilst the average for the universities positioned between 80 and 100 is 58.2. These averages can then be used to separate the sample into distinctive groups, and also be used somewhat as a test to ensure that there is variance between the two institutions in terms of their comparison regarding graduate employability. Secondly, in order to ensure that the study can be carried out efficiently, in relation to cost and pragmatic need, the sample frame focussed on a singular geographical area. As Arber notes, "although researchers usually seek a representative sample, they often only have sufficient resources to study a small number of people" (Arber, 2001: 62).

The region of Yorkshire and the Humber was selected on the basis that this is where the principal study is taking place. It does have, however, a diverse number of university institutions that have varying overall league table positions and differing graduate prospects

(YU, 2010). Consequently, empirical research has identified issues within the region regarding graduate unemployment and underemployment and the usage of public employment services. A report put together by a consortium of Yorkshire Universities comments that “focus should shift in the region from a graduate retention agenda to one of graduate utility, ensuring that the economic recovery does not lose momentum as a consequence of displacement in the job market and high levels of long-term unemployment amongst young people” (YU, 2010: 9). Therefore, using Complete University Guide data, a table of Yorkshire Universities can be formulated. The shaded columns represent the universities placed inside the upper quartile (top 20) and the lower quartile (80 – 100) of the league table. These institutions were used throughout the qualitative study and include the University of York and Leeds Beckett University.

There is a limitation in this approach, however, as the University of York’s ‘graduate prospects’, measuring at 68.2, are much lower than the average of the Russell Group universities inside the top 20, at 77.7. At the same time, Leeds Metropolitan University’s measure of graduate prospects is at 55.5 and, hence, much closer to a ‘typical’ post-92 university institution positioned between 80 and 100 in the overall league table, measuring at 58.2. Subsequently, this may mean that there are limitations in the generalisability of findings regarding the University of York as a ‘typical’ Russell Group institution. There is enough variance between the two institutions, however, that a comparison can be made, and any bias towards institutional habitus to be reduced (Reay et al., 2009).

#### **6.1.6: Individual Codes Used**

The individual codes largely relate to the overall research paradigm. The primary research question requires an examination of different types of graduate transition. This means that experiences of how young graduates initially step into the labour market, their labour market insecurities, and their views and engagement with public employment services are a necessary part of the research sampling framework. The sampling framework, therefore, needs to include the following ‘individual’ codes in order to engage with the research rationale:



- **Undergraduate degree**
- **Year of Graduation**
- **Experiences of Unemployment**
- **Experiences of Underemployment**
- **Experience of Jobcentre Plus**
- **Inexperience of Jobcentre Plus**

The overall research question of this thesis is to understand whether the rise of the knowledge-based economy means that social policy needs to pay greater attention to the ‘missing middle’ graduate transitions. This requires the examination of several individual factors, including graduate experiences and perspectives on labour market insecurities and public employment services. Graduate ‘unemployment’ and ‘underemployment’ are important as these have been identified as key examples of labour market insecurity (MacDonald, 2011). Further, they are also important in understanding how graduates negotiate transitions away from instances of labour market failure (especially in considering how graduates on more ‘knowledge-based economy’ pathways may do so). Furthermore, perspectives on labour market insecurity may affect propensity to engage with public employment services. This is also important as the data can then frame what a sufficient policy response would be. Subsequently, the sampling framework does not control for these factors directly, instead allowing graduates to express perspectives upon which inferences can be drawn. Furthermore, codes in relation to the engagement of ‘Jobcentre Plus’ are also included, so that the sampling framework encompasses experiences of those who use the service and those who do not. This allows for a broader exploration of how current social policy frameworks are perceived by graduate service users. In chapter five, it was found that small numbers of graduates are engaging with public employment services, and the inclusion of these perspectives can help to understand why this may be the case.

There is a need in the sample framework, however, to ensure that key parameters are able to define the meaning and construction of findings. These following codes controlled for such factors:

- **Undergraduate Degree Attainment** – As universities have expanded their range of qualifications in recent years, the diversity regarding the degree provisions has also subsequently changed. There is a growing proportion of post-graduate degrees as graduates up-skill to face a difficult and adverse labour market. Wakeling et al. notes that “in 2010-11, almost one-quarter of students in UK higher education were postgraduates” (Wakeling et al., 2013: 9). Therefore, research participants needed at least one undergraduate qualification to take part in the study. A small number in the study also had experience of post-graduate qualifications. These research participants have been included in order to understand their motivations to acquire further qualifications in adverse labour markets, as well as their general experiences of unemployment, underemployment and public employment services.
- **Year of Graduation (after 2005)** – Only graduates who have left higher education from 2005 onwards are included in this analysis. There are numerous reasons why 2005 was selected. Firstly, it ensures that the study is able to draw on a diverse range of experiences regarding leaving higher education throughout the different years, so that the study is not only influenced by graduate experiences of the recession in 2008 and 2009, and afterwards. Secondly, Purcell et al. (2005) find that the modern transition of graduate career trajectories is now taking five years to settle into an overall career arc. Subsequently, an approach that attempts to capture more recent biographical information will prove fruitful in gathering in-depth data regarding graduate emergence into the labour market. As the quantitative element of the study is able to provide snapshots of public employment services engagement, the qualitative element of the study is able to analyse these processes in further depth, ensuring that there is a synergy between both methods.

### **6.1.7: Employing the Sample Framework**

In regards to accessing research participants and engaging with the overall sampling framework, the qualitative study secured access to interviewees through several differing inquiries. The study approached career services in both the Russell Group and post-92 institution to ascertain if an overall research inquiry could be facilitated through the contacting of recent graduates. These institutional career services can generally vary between universities in significant ways. As Lehker et al. comment, “given the lack of a one-size-fits-all model for graduate career services, a number of approaches exist for providing such services. Among them are centralized services, academically based career services, campus collaborations, and developmental approaches” (Lehker, et al., 2006: 75). In this instance, however, both the Russell Group and the post-92 institutions share a similar approach regarding the career services offered, with a focus “on campus recruiting, job fairs, self-assessment instruments, career counselling”, as well as “other resources that can be adapted to serve the needs of graduate students” (Lehker et al., 2006: 75). This entails that they are suitable gatekeepers regarding seeking out graduate research participants. As such, engaging with the appropriate ‘gatekeepers’ is important, as it is “these individuals at the research site that provide access to the site and allow or permit the research to be done” (Creswell, 2009: 178). Both institutions responded positively to this request; however, there were difficulties in this approach. The post-92 institution did not have records of recent graduates that could be contacted, whilst the Russell Group institution only included small numbers of contactable graduates on their database.

Through the support of ‘gatekeepers’ at both career services, advertisements were placed on professional networking websites where graduates engage with their overall job-search. Both the post-92 institution and the Russell Group institution used web-based resources to keep contact with recent graduate alumni through the website ‘LinkedIn’. This website allows professionals to join networks that may facilitate resource allocation and networks, as well as seek out potential job opportunities (LinkedIn, 2015). Subsequently, the qualitative study could be advertised to much larger groups of graduates who had attended both post-92 and

Russell Group institutions. These adverts were placed in the summer of 2012 until spring 2013. Over this period of time, a total of 30 interviews were recruited for the initial pilot and overall qualitative project. Other empirical research has adopted a similar approach in terms of accessing graduates, such as Brooks et al. (2009), who in a study of 90 graduate adults who had graduated in 2000 engaged with the website 'Friends Reunited' to acquire research participants.

Therefore, the overall structure of the qualitative research has been split between a pilot case study and the main study itself. A pilot case study enables particular questions and topics to be tested before the main study takes place. Fielding et al. (2001) notes that "many studies begin with 'pilot interviews', to gather information about the field before imposing more precise and inflexible methods; this is why interviews are the most often used research method. Such interviews use a broad topic guide with as few direct questions as possible" (Fielding et al., 2001: 125). In this instance, the pilot study engaged with a broader set of initial questions, rather than attempt to test out an appropriate sampling framework. This meant that both the pilot study and the main study followed similar structures, with an emphasis on creating an equal balance to create a 'polarised' sample that includes both a Russell Group institution and a post-92 institution. The research pilot interviews were conducted through approaching recent graduates from the Social Policy and Social Work Department at the University of York and then using snowball sampling. Graduates from Manchester Metropolitan University were sought through initial internet adverts on LinkedIn, and then subsequently through snowball sampling. Arber notes that such snowball sampling involves, "contacting a member of the population to be studied and asking him or her whether they know anyone else with the required characteristics" (Arber, 2001: 63). This was achieved by ensuring that the pilots had some experience and perspectives on transitions from higher education to employment (particularly regarding Jobcentre usage) before interviews took place. The data accrued from the pilot studies is somewhat biased as "it only includes those within a connected network of individuals" (Arber, 2001: 63).

Yet, despite collating 8 pilot interviews in total, only 4 are included in the overall qualitative findings alongside the 22 interviews that comprise the central findings of the qualitative study. These are 4 pilot interviews from a post-92 institution – Manchester Metropolitan University – whilst the 4 research pilots from the University of York are excluded. This is because the graduate pilot participants ‘snowballed’ from the University of York Social Policy and Social Work Department were known to me in a personal capacity, as I have previously taught them in their undergraduate degrees. Although this means that there is a slight bias in the overall study towards post-92 graduates with more research participants from post-92 institutions, as Furlong et al. (2005: 39, 40) notes, the transitions to the labour market for graduates from post-92 institutions can be more difficult, and it is these groups of recent graduates that may be more likely to engage with Jobcentre Plus.

#### **6.1.8: Ethics**

Regarding the overall ethics of the thesis, it is extremely important that social research minimises harm and protects research participants at all times. This is because research about people will generally involve research with people (Punch, 2005), and also because, “throughout the project, it is important to engage in ethical practices and to anticipate what ethical issues will likely arise” (Creswell, 2009: 73). This means that in research design, practice (fieldwork collection), analysis and dissemination, there is the need to ensure that correct ethical principles are taken into account (in both the quantitative and qualitative elements). This section, however, will focus on the ethical considerations throughout the qualitative element of the overall study.

In general, the main ethical consideration of the study has been to adopt:

[a] balance between society’s desire, on the one hand to expose hidden processes at work in modern society, and on the other, to protect the privacy of individuals and groups (Bulmer, 2008: 150).

Therefore, an ideal point to start is to ask: “how do ethical issues enter into your selection of a research problem?” (Hesse-Biber et al., 2006: 86). In the case of this study, a question needs to be asked regarding whether there is the need of an investigation regarding graduate

employability issues in reference to public employment services; or whether there is a risk that such an inquiry may actually disempower research participants further. Lastly, is this problem meaningful to those involved with the research (as well as the subsequent people the research may inadvertently affect), besides the researcher? (Punch, 2005). Several steps were taken in addressing these initial questions. A review of the available literature indicated the substantial adverse effects of unemployment upon younger people, and whilst there is limited research upon graduate transitions specifically, this may strengthen further the ethical case to understand how graduates approach new forms of ‘risk’ regarding the labour market. In reviewing the literature relating to the prevailing policy that deals with these issues, it appears that graduates are not engaging with services, such as Jobcentre Plus, extensively. This also raises a further question regarding how such policy best supports graduates in adverse economic conditions. Therefore, an inquiry of this type fulfils the overall ethical requirement that it focuses on, by furthering better understandings regarding these issues. In order to ensure that this is the case, a series of pilot studies have been undertaken to ascertain that such assertions arising in the literature are thoroughly tested. Creswell notes that “proposal developers can conduct pilot projects to establish trust and respect with the participants so that inquirers can detect any marginalization before the proposal is developed and the study begun” (Creswell, 2009: 88).

The study has sought to place importance upon ethical procedures in the processes of gathering empirical data involving research participants, and this is important in order to ensure that research participants feel as though their input has been sufficiently recognised; otherwise, this may have an effect on future involvement in other social research studies. Therefore, the qualitative research has adopted the following set of criteria put forward by Bulmer (2008: 150-4).

- Informed consent
- Respect for privacy
- Safeguarding the confidentiality of data
- Minimising harm to subjects and the researcher

- Ensuring there is no deceit in the course of the research

The principle of informed consent has been made clear to research participants from both the outset of the research and also at subsequent stages throughout the data collection process. The principle of 'informed consent' is important because the research participant needs to be made aware of the full implications of the study. As noted in the Social Research Association guidelines, "inquiries involving human subjects should be based as far as practicable on the freely given informed consent of subjects" (SRA, 2003: 27). Therefore, prospective documentation was sent to all research participants who expressed an interest in taking part in the qualitative section of this study. Firstly, information sheets were sent prior to interviews detailing the aims and purposes of the study, what data collection will involve, the amount of time required on their part, the way in which data will be collected and the overall dissemination of the study (Bryman, 2004: 511). Secondly, once research participants responded, they were sent a statement of 'informed content' that had further details clarifying how research participants could opt out at any time before any primary contact was made. Once an interview took place, these ethical considerations were once again emphasised to the research participants so that they could opt out at this point. This is important, as it ensures that research participants have "voluntary participation and the right to withdraw", during and after interviews have taken place (Silverman, 2010: 153).

In terms of privacy, there is a need to protect research participants' privacy by ensuring that all personal information is kept confidential and anonymous. Therefore, all data has been stored securely and all discernible features regarding interviewees (such as names, employers, geographical location etc.) have been removed. Bryman comments that "raising issues about ensuring anonymity and confidentiality in relation to the recording of information and the maintenance of records relates to all methods of social research" (Bryman, 2004: 513). The willingness of research participants to take part in investigative social research depends upon a respect for their privacy on the part of the principal

investigator. Therefore, throughout the research, steps have been taken to ensure that the data is adequately secured both digitally and physically. Digital data has been stored in secure computer drives, whilst physical transcripts have been stored in lockable and secure cabinets when they are not in use. Once the research has been completed, all records will be destroyed.

A key principle is also to ensure that during all steps taken throughout the research, there is minimum harm to the subjects and the researcher. In practice, this requires the study to adopt an ethical framework that takes into account the questions and concerns of differing research participants at all points. Therefore, to minimise such harm, research participants have been made aware that telephone interviews would be digitally recorded, and that they could opt for a written response through e-mail if that would be preferred. As the interview content could potentially cover sensitive and personal experiences of unemployment and underemployment, it was also stressed to research participants at the start of each interview that they did not have to answer all questions.

A further complication regarding ‘minimising harm’ for research participants also arises regarding the need to offer financial incentives, as this may affect a research participant’s right to have genuine ‘informed consent’. Goodman et al. (2004) comments that “[...] financial compensation may have different meaning in different contexts” (Goodman, 2004: 821). In the case of this study, unemployed graduates who are struggling financially may feel they have to co-operate “if the level of ‘reward’ is too high to refuse” (Head, 2009: 339). Sullivan et al. undertook a study that examined female reactions to domestic abuse where financial incentives were offered to research participants, and argued that there is a need to take into account some key factors, in that financial incentives should be:

[c]ommensurate with the amount of time and how difficult their participation might be (emotionally as well as physically) [...] [C]ompensation for participating in any research should be high enough to show respect for women’s time and expertise but not so high that it might coerce women into participation when they would rather not (Sullivan et al., 2004: 615).



Therefore, in terms of engaging with financial incentives in the study, the first approach was not to provide cash incentives at all. Such an approach became difficult to maintain, however, due to the lack of response from potential research participants. Subsequently, the research study engaged with an appropriate form of financial incentive to encourage participation. Previous studies had noted that such an approach does bear a degree of success. Singer et al. (2002) examined pre-paid incentives in relation to surveying welfare populations, noting that they are generally positive for increasing response rates. To the contrary, Edwards et al. (2002: 1183) reviewed 292 randomised controlled trials that used postal questionnaires and found that a 'monetary incentive' doubled the odds of a response. A concern, however, still exists in the sense that research participants may co-operate in the research with little interest in the topics at hand, thus relaying bias in the results of the overall data, as their primary motivation is financial. The qualitative study engaged with this issue through relying upon a clear sampling rationale, therefore enabling the qualitative study to engage with appropriate 'interested' and 'relevant' research participants. The study also took an approach of using financial incentives as a way of expressing thanks to research participants in terms of their taking part. As Goodman et al. notes: "on the one hand [...] it seems obvious that they [research participants] should be compensated for their time, especially since the researchers themselves are likely compensated through salaries or other external rewards" (Goodman et al., 2004: 821). The amount given to research participants was a £10.00 Amazon gift voucher.

Lastly, it was also made sure that there was no deceit in the course of the research. This involved ensuring that research participants were made fully aware that personal statements would be included in reports and publications, as well as the actual thesis itself. Bulmer comments that there is a need for social scientists to ensure that research participants are made aware of "the consequences of publishing studies" that "make previously private information public" (Bulmer, 2003: 53). Having considered such ethical issues, the outline of the project was submitted to the Humanities and Social Sciences Ethics Committee at the University of York in late 2011 and was then approved in early 2012. This committee made

no major recommendations or revisions regarding the ethical nature of the research, apart from the need to ensure that research participants are made fully aware that personal statements would also be used for future publications and reports.

### **6.1.9: Field Work**

The qualitative study engaged with in-depth semi-structured interviews on digital telephone. In-depth interviews have been deemed the most effective approach to explore the research rationale of the study. These interviews lasted between 30 and 45 minutes, and have all been digitally recorded. A semi-structured interview is advantageous as it allows an exploration of key topics and themes, whilst also giving leeway to the research participant to include further topics in the overall study. Wellington et al. claims a further advantage of semi-structured interviewing is that it allows the researcher to be comprehensive with their overall topic guides:

This general approach is often the most valuable. The approach will involve some kind of interview or checklist. The guidelines may involve a checklist to be covered, or even a checklist of questions (Wellington et al., 2008: 83).

The mode of data collection for this study is that of telephone interviewing. This became prominent because of the need to interview graduates that reside in varying geographical locations (although graduates may have previously lived in Yorkshire, many have moved after university to find appropriate employment). Another advantage of telephone interviewing relates to its relatively inexpensive nature, and that it secures an extent of relative anonymity in the way that respondents are able to disclose personal information (Sturges et al., 2004: 108-9). Much of qualitative empirical research, however, does not rely upon telephone interviews for a variety of reasons. There may be a lack of telephone coverage for some participants (Carr et al., 2001), and they generally have to be kept short compared to face-to-face interviews (Creswell, 1998). Possibly the main disadvantage of telephone interviewing, however, is that it “deprives the researcher of seeing the respondents informal, nonverbal communication, but [...] it is appropriate when the researcher does not otherwise have access to the respondent” (Sturges et al., 2004: 110). This is of particular

importance in qualitative contexts where respondents' perspectives are at the forefront of the data collection process. Generally, telephone interviewing is used in relation to quantitative studies as a principal survey method (Novick, 2008: 391), since the advantages of decreased cost and travel, and the ability to reach geographically dispersed respondents, are important in creating large and appropriate datasets for quantitative analysis. Within qualitative empirical research, it could be argued that there is perhaps "a bias against the use of telephones" in that they are perceived as "inferior to face-to-face interviews" (Novick, 2008: 394). Empirical evidence, however, that has compared the two methods of data collection generally indicates that "telephone interviews are not better or worse than those conducted face-to-face" (Miller, 1995: 110; Sturges et al., 2004). Therefore, in regards to this study, engaging with telephone interviewing is justified as necessary in terms of financial constraints.

The interview guide has comprised several "categories of inquiry" (Maykut et al., 1994: 85). This means, firstly, identifying the common areas for discussion linked to the study's research inquiry: in this instance, the dominant research questions of the study that have been identified through prior literature – the experiences of the labour market for graduates, the experience or inexperience of public employment services and, more specifically, how experiences of unemployment and underemployment have been negotiated. Secondly, within these broader areas, more targeted questions were put forward. Wellington et al. noted that this involves "turning all the ideas or areas of inquiry into meaningful questions for the target interviewees" (Wellington et al., 2008: 84). Having broad research areas also proves advantageous, as the difference in research participants' personal experiences means that a diverse number of perspectives could be explored regarding graduate transitions to employment. As Bryman notes it is important that "the researcher has a list of questions or fairly specific topics to be covered [... and that] the interviewee has a great deal of leeway in how to reply" (Bryman, 2004: 321). Having a structure, however, also ensures that the qualitative inquiry keeps a particular and clear focus, "rather than a very general notion of

wanting to do a research on a topic”, and also that “more specific issues can be addressed” (Bryman 2004: 323).

In terms of the actual execution of the in-depth interviews, an effort has been made to avoid factors that might affect the quality of the overall data. This is of particular importance due to the nature of telephone interviewing, as “qualitative researchers generally rely on face-to-face interviewing when conducting semi-structured and in-depth interviews” (Sturges et al., 2004: 108). The interaction between the interviewer and the research participant is crucial, as if “social involvement is too high then bias may result”. Therefore, a sufficient rapport needs to be established between the researcher and the interviewee in an attempt to remove bias and ambiguity (Wellington et al., 2008: 85). The above involve different types of questioning such as ‘introducing questions’, ‘probing questions’, ‘direct and indirect questions’ (Kvale, 1996 cited in Bryman, 2004: 326). It is also important when undertaking telephone interviews to listen attentively to research participants as the data relies upon anecdotal and personal experiences; therefore, being attentive is important as new ideas can be explored (Bryman et al., 2004: 327).

The data has been gathered through digital audio telephones and was transferred to CD-R audio discs, which were then used for subsequent transcription. The process of transcribing carries importance, as Silverman notes, because “it should not be assumed that the preparation of transcripts is simply a technical detail prior to the main business of the analysis” (Silverman, 2010: 241). Therefore, the transcription of data took into account that this can be particularly time-consuming, with “a danger that after having spent ages defining your research problem, finding your interviewees and piloting your interview protocol, you then lose yourself in transcription” (Silverman, 2010: 200). Assistance was sought from a professional transcriber to shorten this process, as much as possible. Most of the interviews (16) have been transcribed by the principal investigator, and a third by a transcriber (10). These transcriptions have been compared to ensure that there are no major differences in transcribing style. Also, in order to maintain quality throughout the transcribing process,

interviews have been transcribed in groups rather than iteratively, and then analysed separately in groups. This ensures that it is easier for subsequent analysis to identify provisional themes in the data (Silverman, 2010: 201).

#### **6.1.10: Analysis**

The analysis relies upon a general inductive approach. This “allows research findings to emerge from the frequent, dominant, or significant themes inherent in raw data, without the restraints imposed by structured methodologies” (Thomas, 2006: 238). It is advantageous in that it provides an analytic approach in developing a robust coding framework that is able to examine the key research questions of the overall study.

More specifically, the approach in regards to coding relies on breaking down data into component parts. These codes are then given names (Bryman, 2004: 401). In order to code the data appropriately, the process loosely followed that by Tesch (1990: 142-5).

1. Upon completion of the transcripts – all data has been read through with annotations added. This was important in order to establish a general description of the overall samples in the research, for example, in noting how many graduates were long-term unemployed or how many graduates were underemployed.
2. The first group of interviews that was analysed in-depth involved the pilot data. This helped refine the overall approach regarding the rest of the data. This starting point focused on several areas of analysis, such as perceptions of the labour market, undergraduate degrees, labour market insecurities and experiences of Jobcentre Plus. Although these areas do not cover the more conceptual content of the thesis – such as the ‘knowledge-based economy’ or the ‘missing middle’, they provide good entry points as this subsequently allows for greater exploration of the data in terms of developing thematic narratives.
3. For the remaining 22 transcripts, a thorough analysis took place with a focus to identify underlying meanings, which correlated with the general research questions,

and subsequently create a set of codes. The conceptual framework, developed in chapter three, has been applied to the data. More specifically, this analysis explores graduates' perspectives on the returns of the knowledge-based economy, and their experiences of labour market insecurity, such as graduate unemployment and underemployment. Some examples of the codes include: 'employment', 'experiences of labour market insecurity', 'internships', 'long/short term unemployment', 'types of underemployment', 'positive/negative views of underemployment', 'perspectives on Jobcentre Plus usage', 'experiences of Jobcentre Plus' and 'instances of work-first policy in Jobcentre Plus'.

4. These categories are then re-sorted in accordance to particular types of graduate transition, as a pattern emerges from the data regarding graduates' perspectives of the knowledge-based economy. Some of these graduate transitions are much closer to pathways associated with the knowledge-based economy than others (Harris, 2001: 30), creating very different perspectives on the graduate labour market, labour market insecurities and the propensity to engage with social policy frameworks. There are three categories that emerge: 'clear' transitions to the knowledge-based economy, 'distorted' transitions to the knowledge-based economy and 'distanced' transitions to the knowledge-based economy.

With these three groupings of graduate transitions identified, the qualitative data is re-analysed with reference to the conceptual framework, as developed in chapter two. At this point, the analysis attempts to "identify patterns across the data, and tentative theories and explanations" in light of previously established literature (Brooks et al., 2009: 336). A focus, therefore, is on graduate perspectives on the returns and criticisms of the 'knowledge-based economy'. This is because these alter substantially in relation to different types of graduate transition, as do perspectives on labour market insecurities, such as unemployment and underemployment. Furthermore, the propensity to engage with social policy frameworks (as discussed in chapter four) is more likely in graduate transitions that are considerably further

away from knowledge-based economy assumed pathways of the graduate labour market. It is such graduates who may be part of a 'missing middle'.

Therefore, numerous core categories and sub-categories can be established from the data. These can be put together to create additional themes of analysis, which then become theoretical models. Some of these themes have become major findings and formed headings within the qualitative section of this study (Crasswell, 2008: 189). There is also need to check qualitative findings in terms of their reliability and validity. This is of particular importance regarding minimising 'drift' in the definition of codes, which is "accomplished by constantly comparing data with the codes and by writing memos about the codes and their definitions" (Creswell, 2008: 190). In practice, this has meant re-examining existing codes to ensure that they have retained their original assigned meaning. On completion, the analysis was triangulated with previous literature in order to ensure that there are "different data sources of information" and, finally, using such evidence "to build a coherent justification for themes" (Creswell, 2008: 191).

## **6.2 – Qualitative Findings: Does the rise of the knowledge-based economy orthodoxy mean that social policy needs to pay greater attention to the missing middle of young graduate transitions?**

The next section details the results from 26 qualitative interviews conducted for the purposes of this thesis. It will focus on applying the conceptual framework discussed in chapter three to the interview data. This section is split into four parts. The first explains the sampling framework. The second examines some distinctions regarding graduate pathways into the labour market when targeting knowledge-based economy forms of employment. These different pathways will then be referred to when examining graduates' perspectives of the knowledge-based economy and of the 'missing middle' of graduate transitions in the latter sections of the chapter. The third and fourth parts of this chapter examine graduate perspectives of the knowledge-based economy and the 'missing middle' of graduate transitions respectively. These sections directly apply the conceptual framework discussed in chapter three.

### **6.2.1: Sampling Framework**

Before moving into exploring the qualitative data further, this section will provide an outline of the sampling framework. Most of the graduates had left university at the age of 21 in both the Russell Group and the post-92 samples and, therefore, the findings were not able to explore to any real extent how older graduates are engaging with the labour market. The qualitative findings are best able to draw inferences in light of how younger graduates are engaging with the labour market, positioning the qualitative research of the thesis in a context of contemporary studies of graduate transition (Tomlinson, 2007; Brooks et al., 2009). The overall sample framework includes a wider disparity of graduates in regards to 'age', although most research participants were between the ages of 22 and 25 at the time of interview. In terms of the 'year of graduation', the earliest year in the sample framework is



2008 and the latest 2012. This means that the sample only examines graduate transitions to employment in the context of a negative labour market (after the 2008 recession). In particular, the themes developed in the qualitative part of the thesis can be ascribed to this key part of the economic cycle. Lastly, both the post-92 and the Russell Group sub-samples have similar ‘years of graduation’, with the Russell Group sample having slightly more recent graduates.

In both sides of the sample, the most prevalent ‘class of degree’ is 2:1. In the post-92 sample, only 4 research participants had a different level of degree class out of the total 15 research participants, whilst in the Russell Group sample only 4 research participants achieved a different degree class. This is unsurprising due to the prominence of graduates obtaining a degree class of 2:1, which was 64% in 2011 (HESA, 2012). There are also evident differences relating to the varying ‘types of degree’ for each research participant, but both the post-92 sample and the Russell Group sample leaned towards ‘humanities’-based subjects. This may potentially bias the sample, as empirical evidence suggests that graduates with STEM-based degrees have positive outcomes initially in the labour market (ONS, 2013b: 18). Some slight variation exists between the post-92 and Russell Group samples in terms of years spent in the labour market upon graduation. By taking an average of each sub-sample, a direct comparison can be made. The average for a graduate in the post-92 sub-sample in terms of their ‘Years spent in Labour Market’ is 2.26, whilst for the Russell Group sub-sample this is 2.27.

**Table 5: Details of Research Participants (Leeds Beckett: post-92 sample)**

Post-92 Institution	Current Age	Age at Graduation	Years in Labour Market at time of Interview	Year of Graduation	Degree Class	Degree Subject
R1	23	21	2	2011	2:1	Sociology
R4	26	21	5	2009	2:2	Sports, Business and Management

R11	23	21	2	2011	2:1	Law
R26	22	21	1	2012	2:1	English Literature
R27	26	21	5	2008	2:1	Sports Science and Psychology
R29	23	22	1	2012	2:1	Computing
R30	24	21	3	2010	2:1	Economics and Business
R32	23	21	2	2011	2:1	Advertising, Marketing and Management
R33	25	22	3	2010	1 <sup>st</sup>	Economics
R34	24	21	3	2010	2:1	Sociology and Criminology
R35	25	22	3	2011	2:2	Social Science with Criminology

**Table 6: Details of ‘Pilot’ Research Participants (Manchester Metropolitan: post-92 sample)**

Post-92 Institution	Current Age	Age at Graduation	Years in Labour Market at time of Interview	Year of Graduation	Degree Class	Degree Subject
RP5	24	22	2	2010	2:1	English and Politics
RP9	23	21	2	2010	2:1	Politics
RP12	30	27	2	2010	1 <sup>st</sup>	English
RP24	22	22	0	2013	2:2	Geography

**Table 7: Details of Research Participants (York: Russell Group sample)**

Russell Group	Current Age	Age at Graduation	Years in Labour Market at time of Interview	Year of Graduation	Degree Class	Degree Subject
R7	23	21	2	2010	2:1	History
R13	23	21	2	2011	1 <sup>st</sup>	History
R15	23	21	2	2010	2:1	English Literature and Philosophy
R16	24	21	3	2009	3 <sup>rd</sup>	Biology
R17	24	21	3	2009	2:1	Maths and Finance
R18	25	21	4	2009	2:1	Sociology
R19	24	21	3	2009	2:1	English and Philosophy
R20	22	22	0	2012	1 <sup>st</sup>	English and Related Literature
R21	24	23	1	2012	1 <sup>st</sup>	Politics, Philosophy and Economics
R23	22	21	1	2012	2:1	Economics and Politics
R25	25	21	4	2008	2:1	Electronic Engineering

Tables 1, 2 and 3 indicate that there are several commonalities shared in all sub-samples. This helps to create a ‘polarised’ sample of research participants that represents a ‘typical’ group of graduates (although creating an ideal ‘typical’ group of graduates in this regard is difficult). Henceforth, the data can subsequently support analysis that is able to extort understandings and themes to the wider graduate population.

The study explicitly attempts to remove all sample bias, as research participants have been sought from an online context, through the website ‘LinkedIn’ (LinkedIn, 2015). This allows for a balance to be reached between amounts of variation within the sample framework, and

also ensures that research participants are informed actors who can contribute high-quality content to different research questions. Therefore, research participants, whilst sharing institutional level codes ('university institution', 'undergraduate degree'), can also retain a diverse range of individual codes (different experiences of labour market insecurity, such as unemployment, underemployment and Jobcentre Plus usage). This ensures that the sample framework is representative of a 'typical' group of graduates but that it also allows for some variation within the sample so that a diverse range of perspectives can be captured in order to answer and, indeed, engage with the central research questions appropriately.

### **6.2.2 A 'Missing Middle' in Knowledge-Based Economy Defined Pathways**

This first section will examine how graduates understand their own transitions to the labour market. It will draw upon the notion that a 'missing middle' may exist in knowledge-defined pathways, as discussed in chapter three. In particular, the assertion that some graduates have increasing "slow-track" transitions to their eventual career positions in the labour market will be explored (MacDonald, 2011: 429). In addition, a discussion on the distinctions between graduate pathways will be included, so that a contextual account of different types of graduate transitions will be provided. This will then be referred back to later in the chapter in order to contextualise perspectives on aspects of the knowledge-based economy and the 'missing middle'.

Distinctive pathways through the labour market following higher education can be discernible. Brennan et al. (1988) found certain pathways that are defined by relative closeness or distance to an eventual settled position in the labour market that is explained by different types of degree. Brennan et al. (1988: 98) argued this to be a quicker process for graduates that have specialist knowledge for a specific career. The present study indicates a similar finding, with the type of degree sometimes being a distinction in this regard – education in law or teacher training sometimes exhibit more specified pathways into careers that can be considered as knowledge-based. Yet, this study instead found that it is the amount of labour market insecurity that shapes graduate transitions. This may also be because data has been collated in the context of a post-crisis graduate transition. Four

separate transitions into the labour market emerge from the sample, which are described below:

Clear transitions to the knowledge-based economy: these are groups of graduates that find employment quickly. These pathways have very little, if any, experience of labour market insecurity throughout their graduate transitions to the labour market. There is some limited involvement with Jobcentre Plus with a minority of these graduates. The following experiences are typical of this type of graduate transition:

R29: Yes. I did the industrial placement in my sandwich year. I was looking for work before that obviously. When I split up at the end of the second year of university, I went straight looking for jobs on job-boards, online, and there were quite a lot of different things I used. I got an interview for a full job and it was not a placement or anything. It was a small company near where I lived. I got into there straight away in the summer and continued to work there for a year and a bit, I think it was. In September, I had to return back to university but I had figured out I could combine my course with working for that same company – I think I continued to do so two days a week. When I graduated from my third year I just carried on and went from working two days a week to five days a week (R29, post-92 graduate, graduated in 2012).

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R17: So in my second year I did a ten-week summer internship in between my second and third year at a company called Barclays Global Investors, which has now been sold to Black Rock. So I did that and I was expecting that after that, you know, I'd get an offer for a job there which is kind of the norm and they actually only offered jobs to two of the interns, so normally they would just offer jobs to everyone as long as you don't really mess about. So that was a bit of a blow but so in my... I got to the last day of finishing my degree or getting my results, I didn't have a job so I went on to Milkround and found a job in London at an IT consultancy company and worked there for three and a half years on their graduate scheme and then I moved to the Financial Times last December. I've been there a year (R17, Russell Group graduate, graduated in 2009).

Out of the 26 research participants, nine belong to such a grouping. This is also a balanced sample as it includes a similar number of graduates from both the Russell Group and post-92 sub-samples. Some common experiences include internships and student placements, and occupational pathways tied to specific careers (Brennan et al., 1988), such as teaching. These graduates also tend to emphasise ‘employability’ as a specific goal or aim regarding their planned outcomes from higher education.

Distanced transitions to the knowledge-based economy: these are groups of graduates that have had some experience of labour market insecurity, but have found eventual ‘career’ positions. These transitions can take several years, similar to Purcell et al.’s (2004) findings. These groups of graduates are more likely to engage with Jobcentre Plus to some extent. These following experiences and descriptions are typical of this type of graduate transition:

Int: So straight away, you found a job basically?

R7: It wasn't a dream job. It was a job, I thought having a job is better than having no job. I got a couple of job offers for a local thing in my hometown of Halifax and then I got offered a job in London. And I went for the London one and I had [no] friends or anybody, it was really scary...So I moved to London in August, a month after leaving university, and found a job in recruitment. I find it so strange that despite the job market being the way it is, recruitment seems to be the only place which is hiring graduates. I did that for a year and a half and then I moved into more of a sales job because it has shorter hours. I'm still trying to find out what I'm going to do eventually. I quite like the idea of having more of a life in my twenties with the shorter hours...to do job applications as well because recruitment was like 12 hour days. It was just really intense. So now I'm doing a sales job (R7, Russell Group graduate, graduated in 2010).

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R27: It is not always clear what leads to a career – a lot of people I knew took on jobs in Tesco’s and Sainsbury’s just because they would prefer that to being on the dole so they started doing that. Some would get stuck in that for 3 or 4 years. Even if they had good degrees, such as 1<sup>st</sup>s and 2:1s in quite decent subjects but because they go back to the town they were from, with the same circle of family friends and carry on with that – it is almost like it all retracts again and the idea that there is a

career out there, and how to look for it is just lost. I mean the Jobcentre is not going to help you once you are in employment, and they are really not that bothered (R27, post-92 graduate, graduated in 2008).

There are ten examples of such transitions out of the 26 research participants and this makes the distorted transitions to the labour market the most common transition in the study. Five of these are from the Russell Group sub-sample and five are from the post-92 one. The common experience of this transition is labour market insecurity, mostly in the form of underemployment rather than graduate unemployment (although some episodic instances of unemployment are also common). Further, in these transitions, there is a higher propensity for such graduates to engage with Jobcentre Plus than graduates on a clear transition; five out of ten graduates do so.

Distanced transitions to the knowledge-based economy: these are transitions where groups of graduates are looking for career-focussed employment, but are experiencing particular difficulties. These pathways have extensive experiences of labour market insecurity, usually involving prolonged experiences of graduate unemployment and underemployment. All of these graduates engaged with Jobcentre Plus. There are five graduates in the sample that have had such a transition and all these have undergraduate degrees from post-92 higher education institutions, although some have undertaken post-graduate qualifications. Similar to graduates on 'distorted' pathways, these groups of graduates are most likely to be on 'slow-track' transitions to the labour market (MacDonald, 2011: 429). Yet, the distinction here is that such graduates are still ascertaining what the most appropriate route to the knowledge-based economy is:

R12: I expected to have to work for about a year, a year and a quarter and I was expecting to start my doctorate October just gone. I didn't get funding at the place I applied to so I'm having to wait another year because I couldn't afford it...and I couldn't find anything for six months. Anything at all. And the job that I did find, and it's the job that I'm in, is like part-time in an office. Seventeen hours a week and not much more than minimum wage. And it's got me into this kind of underemployment loop, I guess. I can't leave it, because – this is my current

situation. I have another job at the minute that I'm doing on the side, like freelance writing. I've had it for about two months – two or three months. And it pays well and if that was the only job that I had and it was secure, I could do that and it would be fine. And I wouldn't be complaining about my employment situation. But it's not secure, so I'm kind of – I've got a good job that's insecure, and a badly paid underutilized job that is secure, basically. But it was just that job for like nine months. And I'm still living at my parents and I'm 30 next year and it's been a real blow to my self-esteem (R12, post-92 graduate, graduated in 2011).

There is also a fourth grouping regarding post-graduate qualifications. These transitions are focused on preparing for the knowledge-based economy. Yet, there are only two transitions in the sample – one graduate from the Russell Group sub-sample, and one from the post-92 one, both reading for PhDs. One of these graduates has experience of Jobcentre Plus. Both engaged with post-graduate qualifications as a strategy to avoid experiences of labour market insecurity, as well as to improve existing skillsets.

Engaging with graduates' perspectives of their graduate transitions sheds light on distinctions between different types of transitions, and why these may differ. Young graduates construct biographies to ensure employability in difficult labour market conditions (Brooks et al., 2009). Yet, the qualitative data emphasises that avoiding labour market insecurity within such transitions is often difficult. Three of the graduate transitions mentioned here feature varying forms of labour market insecurity. Put simply, much like two ends of a spectrum, there is a large distinction between graduate transitions defined by knowledge-based economy pathways and graduate transitions defined by labour market insecurity (MacDonald, 2011: 429). These differing forms of transition point to very different understandings of the graduate labour market. Throughout the following discussions of graduates' perspectives of the 'knowledge-based economy' and the 'missing middle' of graduate transitions, such different understandings will be drawn on to provide more in-depth discussion of these concepts.



## **6.2.2 Graduate Views of the Rise of the Knowledge-Based Economy**

This next section will examine graduate perceptions of the knowledge-based economy. The discussion will apply several of the concepts discussed in chapter three regarding the concept of the knowledge-based economy, and will examine the following areas: firstly, how graduates perceive the economic and social returns from higher education in their initial transitions to the labour market (Harris, 2001: 30) and, secondly, their critical perspectives of the knowledge-based economy. These critical perspectives will include the knowledge-based economy as an ‘orthodoxy’ (MacDonald, 2011), whether graduates believe that there is an ‘oversupply’ of graduates in the labour market (Lauder et al., 2012b) and whether higher education now constitutes an ‘opportunity trap’ (Brown, 2006).

### ***6.2.2.1 Graduates’ Perceptions of the Economic and Social Returns of an Undergraduate Degree***

This first section will examine graduates’ perception of the economic and social returns they receive because of their participation in higher education. This is a long-standing predicate of the knowledge-based economy (Harris, 2001: 30). As discussed in chapter three, it forms the basis as to why many graduates enter into higher education (Minty, 2014: 27). In the sample, this is a theme that is apparent with graduates that have ‘clear pathways to the knowledge-based economy’. They generally acknowledge that their undergraduate degree has been a necessity in securing positive labour market outcomes:

Int: Do you think a degree helped you do all that? I mean, would you say you were happy with your decision to do a degree?

RP5: I mean, I don’t know how much it’s changed since, but I didn’t really – it seemed kind of like, you know, you had to have a degree to really get anywhere. So I certainly wouldn’t have got the jobs that I got even just having the piece of paper. I’m sure I got, I mean I did plenty of volunteering and joined plenty of societies at University and other skills, I’m sure they helped me...Yeah, I mean, I don’t think I’d have been able to have done any of it without it.

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Int: Were you happy to do a degree – did you think it was a good thing to get?

R11: Yeah, definitely. I always thought that to get a degree was the best thing to do, rather than go into work. My parents are both – my dad is a painter and decorator and I just never thought that was for me and I thought a degree would do it. And I didn't know whether to do law or not. But I decided on it and I enjoyed it. And I'm happy with what I got as well. I'm not the most academic of people – I'll admit that. I'm more commercially aware. I think that's my strength. So I did have to work for the 2:1. But I was pleased with it when I did get it (R11, post-92 graduate, graduated in 2011).

In order to access the positive social and economic returns of the knowledge-based economy (Harris, 2001: 30), however, the undergraduate degree is seen as one aspect of labour market transition, alongside many others. As such, combining these differing experiences will eventually lead to long-term social and economic returns from the labour market. For some graduates (particularly those with 'clear transitions to the knowledge-based economy'), the undergraduate degree is perceived as a necessary step to complete so that career-based forms of employment can be acquired. It is generally acknowledged, however, that there are further steps to complete in such a process. The following instance is of a graduate that has found a two-year contract with a law firm:

R11: Sixth form and then university and then into employment. I'm currently studying a postgraduate course. It's a legal practice course. It's going to entitle me to become a qualified solicitor. Because to be a qualified solicitor, you obviously have to get a degree or a GDM it's called. Then you have to do an LPC, which is post-graduate, a legal practice course. And then you have to get a two-year training contract with a law firm. And I've managed to obtain one of those. They're like gold dust (R11, post-92 graduate, graduated in 2011).

Further, the motivations behind graduates that have 'clear transitions to the knowledge-based economy' are predominantly driven by the expectations of a labour market where the undergraduate degree is perceived as a necessary qualification to complete (Tomlinson, 2007). This awareness of the expectations of the knowledge-based economy (and the graduate labour market more broadly), in turn, helps these graduates to develop profiles that capture long-term economic and social returns in the labour market. In other words, for many of these graduates, there is explicit awareness regarding the need to emphasise certain

achievements. A key example is the emphasis placed on the degree class of 2:1, with success or failure in finding knowledge-based economy employment resting on whether graduates fall on either side of this divide. This is emphasised in the following examples:

Int: Do you think then, that your degree helped?

R26: I'm not sure really. I think a degree helped – for me, I had to have a degree as part of the graduate scheme obviously. So for me, mine wasn't really optional. I had to get a degree and I had to get a 2:1. But to be honest, I didn't think of it like that. I sort of applied for the job after knowing I'd got the 2:1, because I'd not really looked at graduate schemes until I sort of got to that point where I thought, I've got a 2:1 so I might as well – I'm at that point where I can sort of go for it... (R26, post-92 graduate, graduated in 2012).

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R23: I think within the degrees, you needed to get a 2:1. There are some employers, but there are very few employers – in terms of high-calibre top 100 companies and top 100 graduates – if you're looking at the best of the best then you want to have a fantastic job and a good career, you've got to go to university most of the time, and you've got to get at least a 2:1 (R23, Russell Group Graduate, graduated in 2012).

Therefore, for graduates that have 'clear transitions to the knowledge-based economy', there is an awareness that acquiring the long-term economic and social benefits associated with the knowledge-based economy is strongly related to developing overall educational biographies that would allow for transitions to the labour market to show success and development. Furthermore, they are aware that undergraduate degrees retain importance in acquiring economic and social returns in the knowledge-based economy (Harris et al., 2001: 30), as they potentially 'signpost' particular skills and abilities to prospective employers. In this regard, the undergraduate degree secures important returns in the knowledge-based economy:

R23: It's more signposting. It's not in terms of the way it happens. Going to university is just signposting you've got the skills. You get taught them as well, but it's a mix between signposting to where, you know, you [become] a graduate. But,

also university is going to teach you skills, but it's not always the employers are looking for that.... (R23, Russell Group Graduate, graduated in 2012).

For graduates with more 'distorted transitions to the knowledge-based economy', there is some variance as to whether they identify long-term economic and social returns in the knowledge-based economy (Harris, 2001: 30). This is perhaps to be expected as they are on much 'slower track' transitions, and their search to find good quality employment has taken far longer (MacDonald, 2011: 429). Further, these transitions are distorted as they are far more closely linked to post-crisis graduate transitions than pathways found in the study. Indeed, one of the common features of the 'distorted transitions to the knowledge-based economy' grouping is that nearly all of these graduates left university between the years of 2008 and 2010, at a time of high graduate unemployment (ONS, 2011a: 1). Therefore, building a settled career is uniquely challenging:

R27: I don't really know anyone who finished their degree and then did nothing else. Even if it is patchy work, they will do something to find employment, but whether it is gainful or not, I don't know. I would say honestly, I reckon 60 per cent from [post-92 institution] are not yet on a career path, and they graduated in 2008. They are in their mid-twenties and have not yet found their career path, apart from those ones that have gone into teaching. I don't think many of them would consider what they are doing right now to be a career (R27, post-92 graduate, graduated in 2008).

Whether the benefits of the knowledge-based economy can be ascertained for graduates that have 'distorted transitions to the knowledge-based economy' is also complicated by diverse experiences in the labour market. This group in particular features long-term forms of labour market insecurity, such as underemployment and temping. As such, when there are long-term social and economic returns in their career development that are more in line with knowledge-based economy expectations (Harris, 2001: 30), this is often explained as a result of 'skills' they have developed through employment, and not because of their undergraduate degree. Instead, it is the skills gained from employment that are cited as key to their career development:

Int: I guess you've been working for 3 years now. How long do you think it takes to get 'settled' into an ideal career?

R4: Yeah, completely. When you leave university, you are working at the bottom of the pecking order. You are the one who is doing all the admin and everything like that. You are not actually using that degree but when you start climbing that ladder you know. When we go for pay rises, the most successful way of doing it is to look at small steps... 2 grand here and/or 3 grand there rather than a 6-grand jump. Looking back now I sort of think I've had to work to get here. My new job as an account manager has taken me 3 years to get there, to be a successful one at a successful company. People are always driven a lot by titles but this is actually a real role but I definitely wouldn't have got it straight after university. No way. It has taken 3 years to get here and it'll take me another two years to get to my next role (R4, post-92 graduate, graduated in 2009).

Overall, graduates on 'distorted transitions to the knowledge-based economy' identify that there are some benefits to an undergraduate degree that help graduates achieve the outcomes linked to the knowledge-based economy in the long-term. Unlike graduates on 'clear transitions to the knowledge-based economy', however, there is much more emphasis on other routes to finding such employment. These graduates often assert that it is possible for young people to achieve settled careers, without the need for an undergraduate degree:

R30: I think it helps generally. But I don't think it always matters, necessarily. If you are hard-working enough, aspirational enough or ambitious enough – I think you could make your way up to a certain point whether do it through apprenticeships or progressing your way through promotions. However, without a degree, you might have to work harder and do night school, and do qualifications whilst you are learning. But if people want to do it, they can do it. But a degree definitely helps fast-track that first initial 5 years or so (R30, post-92 graduate, graduated in 2010).

This is in particular contrast to graduates that experience more 'distanced transitions to the knowledge-based economy'. These graduates are facing transitions of particular uncertainty. This means that the long-term economic and social benefits are much further away than in other types of graduate transition. This lack of progress regarding their transition to the labour market means that they are somewhat critical about the possible returns of the

knowledge-based economy. This may point towards different types of ‘slow-track’ transitions (MacDonald, 2011: 429). The following interviewee is reflecting on the difficulties of embarking on an appropriate knowledge-based economy pathway, when underemployed:

R12: Well, in terms of the people I work for, there’s no ladder. There is only three of us in the company and it’s like, the director, the woman who deals with accounts, well I’m not going to go and do her job because she’s got a degree in accountancy, and then there’s me. And I’m not going to become the director of the company when the director goes. It’ll be another academic. He’s an academic on secondment. There’s no sense of progression (R12, post-92 graduate, graduated in 2010).

More specifically, graduates on more ‘distanced transitions to the knowledge-based economy’ are also the most likely to experience labour market insecurity. This means that, unlike other groups in the sample, these experiences are more prolonged and they occur repeatedly throughout their graduate transitions. These are often episodic experiences of unemployment, underemployment and temporary forms of employment. At the point of interview, these graduates had not yet conceptualised what their overall position in the labour market may be and, therefore, gains from higher education are perceived to have limits:

R24: Yeah. I’ve always been told that if you get a degree, you get a good job. That’s always been told to you at school. So that’s why people think that’s the best way to go – I want a good job, so I might as well get a degree. You’re always told that if you want a good job, you have to have a degree, so...

Int: So in a way, it’s down to people not really thinking about the alternatives. Or in a way thinking, you know what, even if I don’t know what I want to do, again the degree will mean I’ve got access to look for better work...

R24: Yeah, it opens more doors. That’s how I thought it would work.

Yet, it is important to stress that these graduates still have a conception of knowledge-based economy employment. They are also still attempting to engage with the graduate labour market, which could vary between applying for further positions in the labour market and

returning to higher education. This implies that a relationship is perceived to exist between the undergraduate degree and individual success in the labour market. Amongst graduates on ‘distanced transitions to the knowledge-based economy’, however, such a relationship is perceived with less importance, in comparison to other types of transitions identified in the study:

R35: ...And they don't know you've sat there and put in 250 job applications, but on paper you are unemployed and there is no way of changing that...

Int: I guess, as a graduate you are looking for that career job – does this affect your job-search effort?

R35: It has got to the point that I have the same cover letter and I am just sending it off. Most of the jobs are in sales and marketing, and I just change whatever section it is. I've almost sort of lost faith. Rather than putting quality applications in I feel like I'm doing quantity rather than quality. Spreading the net further to find something (R35, post-92 graduate, graduated in 2011).

That an undergraduate degree secures economic and social returns in the knowledge-based economy is a view held strongly by most graduates in the study. Indeed, in each of these differing transitions, achieving knowledge-based economy employment retains importance and shapes how graduates engage with the labour market. This is particularly the case with graduates that have a ‘clear transition to the knowledge-based economy’. Yet, for the graduate transitions that are prolonged and have more episodic experiences of labour market insecurity, these returns become harder to obtain, particularly for graduates on ‘distorted’ and ‘distanced’ transitions to the knowledge-based economy. There is, however, a distinction in how the knowledge-based economy is perceived in different types of ‘slow-track’ transition. ‘Distorted’ graduate transitions to career-based employment occur slowly (which helps to rationalise experiences of labour market insecurity), whereas ‘distanced’ graduate transitions to knowledge-based pathways are much harder to discern and follow. Both such groups are ‘missing’ groups of graduate transitions, as much of their early labour market experiences fall outside of the knowledge-based economy.

### ***6.2.2.2 Critical perspectives of the Knowledge-Based Economy***

This next section will explore graduates' critical perspectives of the knowledge-based economy and will examine several areas, which include: whether the knowledge-based economy is perceived as an 'orthodoxy' (MacDonald, 2011), whether higher education is perceived as an 'opportunity trap' (Brown, 2006) and whether graduates believe that there is an 'oversupply' of graduates (Lauder et al., 2012). There will be some references to different types of graduate transitions, yet this section is more focussed on the critical perspectives of the knowledge-based economy that was discussed in chapter three.

Most graduates in the study note that the undergraduate degree is now a default option for young people, similar to Roberts' (2013) argument that higher education is now seen as the dominant transition for young people to choose (Roberts, 2013: 4). Throughout the study, many graduates reflected on their earlier educational experiences (prior to university) as the time whereby such beliefs were perpetuated:

R24: I definitely think that a lot of people don't know what they want to do so they just go to university because it is something to do and that's the norm now. So I think that's the reason that a lot of people [go] – it may be too many. No one really helps you decide what you want to do before colleges or before going to university if you don't really have an idea. That's how I felt, anyway (R24, post-92 graduate, graduated in 2012).

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R33: I think primarily I was fortunate enough to go to good schools – they were state catholic schools. They kind of brainwash you as they are that focussed on getting [you] into university. So my mind-set was all about getting into university (R33, post-92 graduate, graduated in 2010).

Further, this sense of higher education as a default option regarding young people's transitions can also be explained by the knowledge-based economy becoming an 'orthodoxy' (MacDonald, 2011). There is a concern that young people are engaging with knowledge-defined pathways based around undergraduate degrees, when the notion of the



high-skills economy is really a “myth” (Shildrick et al., 2012: 196). This argument continues that there is not sufficient demand for graduate skills, leading to substantial implications for the youth labour market. Such concerns include an oversupply of graduates relative to demand, employers prioritising the strongest candidates, and more graduates taking non-graduate positions thus displacing other young people in the youth labour market (MacDonald, 2011: 435). These themes are present throughout the qualitative study, specifically when graduates reflect on the relative worth of their degrees. A strong theme that runs through the qualitative data and in all forms of graduate transition is that undergraduate degrees do not help young people ‘stand out’ as much as they have in the past. The degree has merely become a requirement for young people to obtain (Tomlinson, 2007):

R5: I don’t think a degree separates you at all any more. It’s kind of just a prerequisite almost as much – like identification documentation (R5, post-92 graduate, graduated in 2010).

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Int: Do you think your degree has kinda given you...do you think you have to do a degree these days?

R35: Yeah, without doubt. Over the past few months – I have a job now but it is part-time. I only get around 10 or 15 hours a week. I work as a barman at a local restaurant. Over Christmas I was working 50 hours a week easily but now the hours have all dried up. I’d say in the last four months I’ve probably made about 250 jobs applications and 90 per cent asked about degree qualifications. So I think it is definitely now seen as something you must have, to get a degree at this level (R35, post-92 graduate, graduated in 2011).

Brown (2006) likens participation in higher education to an ‘opportunity trap’ that young people engage in on the basis that they are responding to the perceived necessity that an undergraduate degree has become the dominant way to transition to the labour market. Yet, graduates in the sample – particularly those on distorted transitions to the knowledge-based economy – often note that the undergraduate degree isn’t always enough to help them

engage with the graduate labour market and avoid labour market insecurity. Even when graduates have a 1<sup>st</sup> class undergraduate degree, they are held back by other factors. The following research participants mention prior educational experiences as pertinent instances in this regard:

R33: I also had another problem because I ended up getting expelled from that school. I left in the middle of my GCSEs, and then I had to go to college and do GCSEs and A-levels at the same time. Which is why I didn't get great UCAS points. So I wanted to get to university to prove a point. I wanted to prove another point by getting a first (R33, post-92 graduate, graduated in 2010).

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R11: Well, I mean, I didn't get very good A-levels – I got straight Cs, so I came to uni – I didn't know that all the top firms want three As. And I was like, 'what, you want three As? As well as a 2:1?' I'm like...I can't even apply to them. So I was restricted from the start. So I tell my brother now, he's going into his A-levels, look, if you're going to do them, make sure you get the best. Because if you come out with nothing, you need to really decide what you want to do (R11, post-92 graduate, graduated in 2011).

The oversupply of graduates in the labour market now (Brown, 2004: 216) is another strongly present view in the qualitative data. This is consistent, regardless of different types of graduate transition. Yet, it is important to note that this is possibly exacerbated because of the context of a post-crisis graduate transition, where competition for labour market positions is concentrated and labour market insecurity is more prominent. For some graduates, their response to these experiences is to question the monetary value of their higher educational achievements:

R19: I think that attitudes are beginning to change though because of what has happened in the last couple of years because of tuition fees, because of all this unemployment. I think people are beginning to realise that it is becoming much less valuable. I mean, I remember...ten years ago, having a degree made your chances of employment...doubled your chances of employment no matter what the degree was (R19, Russell Group graduate, graduated in 2009).

In this instance, the research participant refers to an expectation that undergraduate degrees will ‘double’ chances of employment and, arguably, this is not the labour market reality for many graduates at the moment, as labour market insecurity has substantially increased for young people (Gregg et al., 2015). An implication of the knowledge-based economy ‘orthodoxy’ (MacDonald, 2011) is that it perpetuates a belief, whereby engaging in higher education will ensure positive labour market outcomes for all graduates. This does not quite reflect the labour market reality that most graduates in this study have experienced. In chapter three, it was noted that one of the defining features of the knowledge-based economy thesis is that it provides a ‘positive’ view of the future, which looks beyond a post-industrialised service-led economy towards new, innovative, knowledge-based growth (Harris, 2001: 23). Yet, as Hudson (2009: 99) comments, the intensity of knowledge-based economy employment varies across different regions of the United Kingdom. As such, graduates acknowledge the difference between what they expected from their undergraduate degrees and the labour market reality:

Int: In 2009...did you and your friends expect to find the job market the way it was?

R4: No. We were in a bubble. We felt we were going to get a fantastic job with KPMG or Deloitte would be knocking on our doors. At university, you only ever hear of the success stories. You only ever hear of the graduate that went onto something brilliant...you only hear of that percentage, you don't really hear of the rest (R4, post-92 graduate, graduated in 2009).

It is important to note, however, that despite these critical acknowledgements of higher education and the labour market, the aim of achieving decent graduate employment is entirely consistent throughout the qualitative data. Even in more ‘distorted’ or ‘distanced’ graduate transitions, where graduates have been engaging with varying forms of labour market insecurity, often for several years, engaging with graduate-based careers is still seen as an important goal. The sense of being within a graduate transition is still present, despite their individual difficulties in finding work within the knowledge-based economy.

## **6.3 How Do Graduates of the ‘Missing Middle’ Respond to Labour Market Insecurity?**

This part of the chapter will examine evidence as to the extent that graduates may be part of a ‘missing middle’ – specifically, graduate understandings in post-crisis transitions of labour market insecurity. The nature of labour market insecurities (such as graduate unemployment and underemployment) will be examined, as will the manner in which graduates have engaged with policy, such as Jobcentre Plus, in their transitions to the labour market. This part of the chapter will mainly draw on ‘distorted’ and ‘distanced’ graduate transitions in an effort to understand the ‘missing middle’ of graduate transitions.

### **6.3.1 The ‘Missing Middle’ in Graduate Transitions**

There is substantial prevalence of labour market insecurity throughout the qualitative data.<sup>13</sup>

This supports Roberts’ (2009) view that youth transitions are more likely to involve rapid change through different unemployment and employment states. As noted, the ‘normalisation’ of these experiences, particularly in relation to ‘distorted’ and ‘distanced’ graduate transitions to the labour market, denotes a ‘missing’ group of young people within the knowledge-based economy, who have gone unnoticed by policy makers in recent years. Roberts et al. (2013: 2) notes that the importance of the missing middle is located in the “opening-up of the biography of new uncertainties”. They also note that this is so that “greater consideration can also be given to the diversity of experience and outcomes of those within the ‘successful’ half of the dichotomy: for instance, what does success mean when extended educational transitions feed high levels of graduate un- and underemployment?” (Roberts et al., 2013: 2).

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<sup>13</sup> Out of the 26 research interviews, 13 research participants had some experience of unemployment. Research participants were unemployed for several weeks up to six months. Also, experiences of unemployment slightly weigh towards the post-92 sub-samples, as the Russell Group sample included 5 examples of unemployment, and the post-92 sub-samples included 8. Underemployment is more prevalent (14), with such experiences mostly differing between an under-utility of skill provision and a lack of working hours. It must be stressed, however, that there are difficulties in defining ‘underemployment’ due to graduate perceptions of their own self-efficacy in terms of levels of human capital and experience (Morley, 2001: 133). In regards to the different types of underemployment, there is more prevalence of under-utility (12) rather than a lack of working hours (2) within the findings.

Taking such questions forward, then, the qualitative data suggests that many graduate transitions are dominated by labour market insecurities, such as unemployment and underemployment. The extent of these experiences suggests that a ‘missing middle’ in this regard is prominent regardless of socio-economic position – at least in the context of a post-crisis graduate transition. Furthermore, as graduate transitions also show evidence of social patterning (Furlong et al., 2005; Brennan et al., 2003: 39), it is most likely that many graduates from socially disadvantaged backgrounds will also form part of the ‘missing middle’ of knowledge-defined transitions. This is because such graduates might find it difficult to access the graduate labour market (Greenbank, 2007), which may mean that their graduate transitions are more prone to experiences of labour market insecurity than those of other graduates.

This study is somewhat limited regarding the provision of representative views of socially disadvantaged graduates, as the focus is, rather, to examine the general nature of graduate transitions to the labour market. Yet, many of the graduates (particularly from the post-92 sub-sample) explicitly mention socio-economic factors whilst within ‘distorted’ or ‘distanced’ graduate transitions to knowledge-based economy forms of employment, particularly regarding accessing internships and engaging with connections:

R13: I think that paid internships are very good. I think unpaid internships are questionable, in that a lot of people argue that they’re only open to people who can – they’re supposed to help people get into the employment market, but if they’re only available to people who can support themselves without being paid, or someone else can support them, while they’re doing the internship, they’re perhaps not targeted very wide. And I don’t know, I’m not sure it’s entirely fair to employ people for nothing. Why not just call it voluntary work? (R13, post-92 graduate, graduated in 2011).

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R33: No. I reckon you need connections and you need somebody that will just give you a chance, and again that comes down to connections (R33, post-92 graduate, graduated in 2010).

For other graduates, it is the university institution that affects their future graduate transitions, particularly referring to the distinctions between Russell Group and post-92 institutions. Greenbank (2007) found that graduates from socially disadvantaged backgrounds are aware of the distinctions between their individual job-searches and those of their middle-class peers when it comes to accessing the graduate labour market. It may be beyond the domain of this particular thesis to make such an argument (as a socio-economic ‘code’ is not part of the sampling framework), but there is certainly tentative evidence to suggest that some graduates acknowledge these inequalities:

R33: I think prestigious universities attract certain types of students. I reckon a lot of those students come from well-to-do families. And I can’t imagine many of them going straight to the Jobcentre once they have left. People at my metropolitan uni, to find a job they would have to use Jobcentres but graduates from Russell Group unis just won’t have to (R33, post-92 graduate, graduated in 2010).

The ‘missing middle’, then, can be briefly defined as graduate transitions that fall short of knowledge-based economy expectations over prolonged, slow-track transitions that may last several years. Identifying the ‘missing middle’ in graduate transitions, however, is also difficult as it includes a wide range of graduate experiences. Both middle-class graduates struggling to engage with the labour market, as well as socially disadvantaged graduates may count as part of this grouping. A criticism of the knowledge-based economy orthodoxy and its effect on graduate transitions is that it has led to an overflow of graduates into non-graduate positions (Roberts, 2013). It is these groups that experience most labour market insecurity and, therefore, future research needs to disaggregate the different dimensions of the ‘missing middle’ in the overall graduate experience. Otherwise, the concept remains ‘fuzzy’ as the boundaries between different types of graduate transition are not always clear cut.

### ***6.3.1.1 The Nature of Labour Market Insecurity***

There is particular diversity of experience in graduate transitions. Internships (both paid and unpaid), travelling, voluntary work, temporary work and post-graduate education all feature

prominently throughout the study as part of young people's biographies. Yet, a substantial theme emerges of graduates actively positioning themselves away from experiences of 'unemployment' and 'underemployment'. Furthermore, how these issues are perceived is linked to different experiences of labour market insecurity that are largely dependent on different types of graduate transition. For instance, graduates that are on a 'clear transition to the knowledge-based economy' do not have any experience of labour market insecurity. Yet, for graduates outside of this knowledge-defined pathway, labour market insecurity features far more in their graduate transitions in varying ways.

Graduate unemployment is generally perceived to be a negative experience for most graduates in the study, yet it mainly affects graduates on either 'distorted' or 'distanced' graduate transitions to the knowledge-based economy. In chapter three, it was noted that graduates can respond to graduate unemployment in two ways: either they are able to manage such experiences because of the skills they have obtained as a result of their undergraduate degree or graduate unemployment is acutely adverse because of the expectations they have that they should be engaged with the labour market in a definitive way (Cassidy, 1994: 385; Schaufeli, 1997: 282). The evidence from the qualitative data is supportive of the latter theme:

R4: Yeah, it is just de-motivating. It is a constant stream of having phone interviews, of going to recruitment agencies. You leave the recruitment agency full of hope, and two weeks later you haven't heard anything from them. You get a first interview but you don't always get feedback. And you apply for a job and you don't always get feedback. So you know there is no consistency there to keep you motivated to look for a job (R4, post-92 graduate, graduated in 2009).

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R20: I have worked hard, but even when there was this period between June and September – it's very, very difficult. It's a very solitary thing. And trying to keep that motivation when you are facing emails full of rejections and none of it is personalised. I think there does have to be some kind of support in place with them – people are spending longer out of work after university. That's something that might

have to be considered, so your PhD is at the right time – that you're raising the questions. I don't know what format that support should be in. That's one of your questions (R20, Russell Group graduate, graduated in 2012).

Frustration with experiences of graduate unemployment is also linked to the lack of response on the part of the labour market to engage with graduates after they have completed applications. Over longer periods of unemployment, this can make such experiences increasingly adverse:

R35: Yeah, it is not just the monetary value. But if you have missed 6 months of work, that is £6,000 you could have earned out of the window. If you finally find something and get an interview but have a gap on your CV of 6 months, you will get asked about that, and it certainly puts off potential employers. They actually say, *'what happened? What's wrong with you? Why didn't you work?'* Again, it's another way in which you can automatically get dismissed. *'This person is unemployed for 6 months and not that bothered about it – why should we employ them now?'* And they don't know you've sat there and put in 250 job applications, but on paper you are unemployed and there is no way of changing that (R35, post-92 graduate, graduated in 2011).

Therefore, the qualitative data infers that graduates who are struggling to engage with the knowledge-based economy may begin to perceive unemployment as a personal fault. This is because they are reacting to a labour market that deems their youth biography as inadequately equipped for the types of employment they want to engage with (Bryson et al., 2003, cited in MacDonald et al., 2005). Some graduates may also seek an explanation for their labour market insecurity through an “individualism that pervades public discourse” (Hardgrove et al., 2015: 1060), as many young people take individual responsibility for successes and failures in the labour market alike (Hardgrove et al., 2015; Irwin, 2009; Hjort, 2014). The following examples note just that:

R7: I think my friends were all quite similar to me. Most of them who were unemployed got stuck into finding a job. It is quite miserable – I know a few got quite down about it. I know a few who were questioning why they had not found a job in comparison to others. And even friends at home without degrees or A-levels have got jobs, and you haven't (R7, Russell Group graduate, graduated in 2010).



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R15: When I was in my first year at Teach First my boyfriend, who is also a [Russell Group] graduate, was unemployed for probably about four or five months and it was awful seeing what effect that had on him because his self-esteem I would say went from being fairly, not high, but you know it massively dropped. It had a massive impact on him and he was very, very unhappy (R15, Russell Group graduate, graduated in 2010).

In regards to graduate underemployment,<sup>14</sup> again, it is generally understood in a negative way (Cassidy et al., 2008). The extent of graduate underemployment is substantial, with most graduates in the study having some role in their initial transitions to the labour market where they felt they have been under-utilised. More significant and prolonged experiences of underemployment are generally understood to impact on well-being and job-search motivation:

RP9: Oh yeah, I mean I think underemployment in that context sums things up pretty perfectly in terms of what's going on. I'd say what it does for some people is it leads to a kind of certainly disillusionment. I think there are a lot more people like clinically depressed out there than maybe we are kind of letting on, as well. And this has been like a worrying that I've seen in a few of my friends, like more than I would have expected, as well. To find out eventually that yeah, they're going to therapists and they're on medication and all of this. And that's becoming more common (R9, post-92 graduate, graduated in 2010).

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R32: I think one thing I've mentioned a few times is the importance of the motivation of the graduate, or the lack of that, which has led to being unemployed or underemployed. I think that is a key area of concern. That can really be addressed or strongly influence at a young age. Also, people's motivation is strongly affected by confidence, and if people are out of work or underemployed for a long time then

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<sup>14</sup> The types of underemployment throughout the study are similar to what Elias et al. (2013) identified. These roles include working in cafés, call centres, factories, care work, recruitment and data entry. Some graduates also identified working in 'temporary employment' as part of being underemployed.

they get worse. And continual rejection from interviews deters graduates (R32, post-92 graduate, graduated in 2011).

Yet, there is a particular distinction in how underemployment is approached between different groups of graduates. A key factor to emerge from the study is the distinction made between voluntary and involuntary experiences of underemployment (Scurry et al., 2011), which then dictates the extent to which graduates are able to rationalise adverse experiences in the graduate labour market. This is particularly the case between graduates on ‘distorted transitions to the knowledge-based economy’ and graduates on ‘distanced transitions to the knowledge-based economy’. For graduates who can discern a path to the knowledge-based economy, episodes of short-term underemployment can be perceived in more positive terms:

R16: Yes, kind of, because there are lots of graduates out there so you kind of have to show it’s not just about having a degree, it’s about how you might use those skills that you’ve learned. So I got my job by saying, *‘well, even though I did a degree in biology, all the skills that I learned in biology I can apply to this job directly, plus all these skills I learned in the other jobs that I’ve done, I can use’*. Also, working and the confidence of having been in employment rather than coming straight from university and being sat on benefits for a year, I think that came across quite a lot (R16, Russell Group graduate, graduated in 2009).

This means that such ‘underemployed’ roles in graduate transitions can be perceived as ways of building on existing skills to achieve more long-term, ‘desired’ employment outcomes. In contrast, graduate underemployment in the context of ‘distanced transitions to the knowledge-based economy’ is perceived differently. This is because, although research suggests that experiences of underemployment are especially negative for all graduates (Cassidy et al., 2008), the study finds involuntary underemployment is even more so when graduates have transitions that are more distant from their expectations of the knowledge-based economy (Tomlinson et al., 2007). Therefore, such graduates find it difficult to discern what skills they are gaining in working in non-graduate positions:

R33: I mean it’s that thing of how do you keep applying when you don’t have the time because you have to work? I think, to be honest, at one time when I was

building boxes...in this back office and I remember thinking 'I would literally rather be on benefits here and have the time to go for a run or the gym, and then really look for jobs and get £55 a week. Rather than getting £200 a week and be depressed from Monday to Friday (R33, post-92 graduate, graduated in 2010).

An explanation regarding graduate disillusionment with underemployment is also, as Tomlinson et al. (2007; 2008) notes, that graduates have adjusted in internalising a perception that the pursuit of graduate employment is now key to individual notions of 'success', and this is rooted in meeting the expectations inherent in the knowledge-based economy. When graduates do not do so, despite the range of strategic activities to upskill further even after obtaining a degree (through paid and unpaid internships, further training and Master's postgraduate qualifications), this pursuit of 'idealised' employment can become increasingly difficult to maintain. This means that experiences of 'underemployment' become more difficult over the long-term. This is concerning as the prevalence of graduate underemployment in the findings reflects arguments that underemployment is becoming increasingly normalised in youth transitions (Roberts, 2009). Whereas graduate unemployment will fall as a result of the post-crisis graduate transition period coming to an end (Philpot, 2011), graduate underemployment is a labour market insecurity that will most likely carry pertinence even as graduate transitions begin to stabilise. This will be discussed further in chapter seven.

What these qualitative findings imply is that labour market insecurity is both prevalent and diverse in graduate transitions. The graduates within this study emphasise that labour market insecurities are defining aspects of their graduate transitions. This is particularly apparent for graduates who form part of the 'missing middle' – those graduates who find accessing the knowledge-based economy more difficult and who are continuing to do so over several years. Such graduates are most likely to experience unemployment and underemployment. Yet, the nature of labour market insecurity differs depending on the type of graduate transition. In graduate transitions where there is a more defined path to the knowledge-based economy, experiences of 'graduate underemployment' are easier to rationalise. This brings

to the foreground the importance of whether underemployment is voluntary or involuntary (Scurry et al., 2011). More broadly, these findings emphasise that the extent of labour market insecurity within graduate transitions is such that examining available social policy frameworks for graduates is necessary, particularly for those graduates who may be part of a ‘missing middle’.

### ***6.3.3.2 The Social Policy Framework in Graduate Transitions***

As graduates transition into the labour market, there may be some engagement with welfare-to-work social policy, particularly in the context of post-crisis graduate transitions. In chapter five, it was found that graduates (and those with degrees more broadly) do not engage substantially with Jobcentre Plus, nor do graduates engage with such services in their job-search strategy. Yet, from examining the graduate transitions in the qualitative study, it becomes evident that graduates of the ‘missing middle’ – who are more likely to have ‘distorted’ or ‘distanced’ relationships to the knowledge-based economy – do engage with Jobcentre Plus services.<sup>15</sup> This is to be expected as these graduates are experiencing the most prevalent labour market insecurities, whereas graduates on ‘clear’ transitions to the labour market have reduced experiences of labour market insecurity and have, therefore, reduced engagement with Jobcentre Plus. These graduates have instead sought to engage with career provision in the higher education sector before leaving university. This next section will examine how graduates engage with Jobcentre Plus. It will draw on some of the policy discussion in chapter four and will examine the following areas: firstly, attention will be placed on understanding the general perspectives of graduates in the sample as regards the reasons they may or may not use such provision; secondly, graduates’ views on Jobcentre Plus provision, when they do engage with it, will be explored.

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<sup>15</sup> Twelve out of 26 graduates in the study have engaged with Jobcentre Plus. This includes four from the Russell Group sub-sample and 8 from the post-92 sub-samples. The types of usage throughout the 12 Jobcentre Plus service users vary – eleven approached Jobcentre Plus to claim both employment support and Jobseeker’s Allowance. One graduate, however, only engaged with Jobcentre Plus to update National Insurance information, whilst another was unable to claim Jobseeker’s Allowance as they did not meet eligibility criteria. Therefore, 10 research participants from the sample in the findings were able to claim Jobseeker’s Allowance through Jobcentre Plus, and two could not.

### **6.3.3.3 Graduate Engagement with Jobcentre Plus: Why Are They Not Used?**

In chapter four, analysis found that graduate engagement with Jobcentre Plus is limited. It was also found that engagement with Jobcentre Plus is not a substantial job-search strategy for graduates. Despite several employment initiatives offered through the service, such as the ‘Graduate Talent Pool’ (Bourne, 2011), there has not been a corresponding increase in graduate usage of these services according to analysis of Labour Force Survey data, even as youth transitions have become more difficult as a result of the 2008-9 recession. Even further, this remains the same despite substantial increases in the proportion of degree holders in the labour market in recent years (DIUS, 2013).

Various reasons are put forward for this lack of engagement from graduates in the qualitative interviews. Roughly half of the sample has some experience with engaging with Jobcentre Plus provision, with the most prevalent reason for approaching the service being to claim Jobseeker’s Allowance, and for employment support and advice.

R34: No. Part of me thinks my parents have paid taxes their whole life. I am going to pay taxes my whole life, why not go and get that money when I'm out of work, so that was part of my logic. But the other part of it was that I wonder what help and support in terms of actually finding a job I could get. (R34, post-92 graduate, graduated in 2010).

The other half of the sample did not engage with this provision at all. For these graduates, there was simply no need to use Jobcentre Plus, as employment has been sought elsewhere. These graduates have clear transitions to the knowledge-based economy and, therefore, had no need to engage with Jobcentre Plus provision. Yet, a dominant theme of the research (that cuts across all the graduates in the study) is a view that Jobcentre Plus is not meant for graduates in particular:

R11: I don’t think I would, no. I’d find it quite embarrassing to go. Especially if I saw someone from my year in my school. And I went in there and they obviously saw me. You know, that I’ve gone to university and got a degree and all of a sudden I’m in a Jobcentre. I think that they’d think, ‘*oh I’m not doing too bad*’. So I’d find

it quite embarrassing. I don't think I would and I don't think I'd sign on the dole. I'd find some other way of getting a job. I wouldn't know how, but if I did lose my job then I – it would stress me out and I would feel quite embarrassed (R11, post-92 graduate, graduated in 2011).

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R26: Because of course, you sort of look at some of the people that go to Jobcentres and think, *I'm not like that. I've got an academic degree I've worked hard for*. I don't want to be classed in the same...as these people. I think there is a bit of an embarrassing factor and I think there's a lot of pride there, because you feel you've worked hard to get where you are, also you're almost taking a step back by accepting the help and accepting the Jobseeker's. A lot of graduates, I presume, would go back and live with their parents for a while, rather than taking hand-outs (R26, post-92 graduate, graduated in 2012).

These graduates may be reflecting a more societal level of 'othering' regarding welfare-to-work policy, with a subsequent effect being that of a 'stigmatic barrier' amongst graduates that impacts on propensity to engage. If so, it is likely that such value judgements on welfare-to-work provision are linked to historical notions of an 'undeserving poor' (Lister, 2004: 103). This construction of the 'poor' as "a source of moral contamination, a threat, an 'undeserving' economic burden, an object of pity or even as an exotic species [...] a process that takes place at different levels and in different fora: from everyday social relations through interaction with welfare officials" is important (Lister, 2004: 101), as forms of stigma then come to be associated with social assistance.

In exploring these statements further, it is found that graduates are likely to perceive welfare-to-work 'stigma' in several ways. Baumburg et al. (2012) found three dominant forms of 'stigma' amongst welfare claimants more broadly – personal, social and institutionalised – and each of these themes are well represented amongst the graduates in the study. 'Social' and 'personal' notions of stigma are named by most graduates as reasons not to engage with Jobcentre Plus. In terms of 'social' stigma, as in the above statements, many graduates cite the perception that other people will judge this behaviour as shameful or

will confer to them a lower social status (Baumburg et al., 2012: 5). Further, as graduates often intend to engage with the graduate labour market they may perceive government-based support as ‘socially unacceptable’ due to societal beliefs that such action may not provide entry into the ‘knowledge-based economy’.

R4: ...If you ask any of my friends if they had been to the Jobcentre who had graduated. They'd be like...*'no, why would I go there? That is for low-paid, low skilled workers'*. Graduates, we should be on specialist recruitment sites where they are looking for a higher calibre of people. There should be someone out there recruiting for us, not the other way round (R4, post-92 graduate, graduated in 2009).

More ‘personal’ notions of stigma, however, are also present with graduates, unlike Bamberg et al. (2012), who found that personal notions of stigma applied on the actual act of ‘signing on’ to be less prevalent (Baumburg et al., 2012: 16). Some graduates do attribute a form of ‘shame’ to claiming unemployment benefits but, generally, mention ‘pride’ as a strong aspect of their feelings against stigma:

R11: For me it's more of a pride thing. I wouldn't – I know I could always get a job in a bar. I know I could...get a job. I know I could do that. If I could stoop lower than what I'm worth, I would go to those type of jobs rather than sign up to the dole. Because there's always a job out there (R11, post-92 graduate, graduated in 2011).

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R12: Oh yeah, massively. There's definitely this element of like pride – *'I'm not doing that!'* Yeah, massive! I spoke to people about when I was at [local town] and they said, *'oh what are you doing after this – have you got a job? No, no'*. So I would ask, *'so what are you going to do for money – are you going to sign on?'* and again, *'no, no, I'll just stay with my parents'* (R12, post-92 graduate, graduated in 2010).

The mention of ‘pride’ articulated by graduates may be indicative of how perceptions of their own job-search behaviour may change as a result of obtaining a degree. As noted, young people individualise experiences in their transition to employment (Hardgrove et al., 2015: 1060) and will invest job-search behaviour with a sense of personal responsibility for

the outcomes they experience. Thus, there is a clear disincentive for graduates to engage with state support, as it runs counter to their expectations of themselves. There is an implication here that ‘individualised’ transitions to employment may undermine the collective traditions on which state support is based. Further, some graduates appear to take perceptions of ‘self-worth’ into account, essentially making a value judgement about the types of employment they are willing to do (despite the fact that due to the limitations of the ‘knowledge-based economy’ orthodoxy opportunities in the labour market may be limited). The Jobcentre Plus, which relies on punitive forms of conditionality to reach policy goals (Wright, 2013: 830) and can be restrictive in terms of employment outcomes, is not perceived as conducive in assisting graduates to reach these particular aims.

In contrast, nearly all of the engagement with Jobcentre Plus services is conducted by graduates with ‘distorted’ and ‘distanced’ transitions to the knowledge-based economy – the ‘missing middle’ of graduate transitions. These are also the graduates that are most likely to experience some form of labour market insecurity. For many of these graduates, personal and social notions of stigma still apply (Baumburg et al., 2012), with decisions to engage with Jobcentre Plus often tangled between their own needs and personal circumstances, and ‘stigmatic’ associations with Jobcentre Plus provision:

R35: I went to [my local city centre] Jobcentre. I've sort of...been on the machines there. I didn't find it hugely helpful for someone with my qualifications. I only went in there once. I had thought about signing on. I got to a point where I thought 'I'm fed up with this'...You do see those things in the news about benefits. I just thought 'everyone else is doing it – why shouldn't I?' (R35, post-92 graduate, graduated in 2011).

Generally, however, the graduates that may be placed in a ‘missing middle’ grouping are more open to the benefits of engaging with Jobcentre Plus. There is an acknowledgement that the usage of Jobcentre Plus retains importance due to the fact that it can also be perceived in terms of a social right, as defined by national citizenship (Dwyer, 2002: 294; 2008). Furthermore, some of these graduates reflect on the choice to engage with



contributory support and challenge social or personal notions of stigma (Baumburg et al., 2012):

R7: For me, I knew I had already paid tax when I had worked before so I felt entitled to it. So I felt like I deserved it. I think some graduates might not need that £60 per week – I certainly did. I definitely needed it. I didn't come from a family that could afford to put me up whilst I searched for a job. So I did not really have a choice to but even if that was not the case I would still have claimed it. It is really hard to say, people just can't get over the fact that they see people on benefits as '*chavs*', for example. Or they use negative terms like '*bums*' or '*people on the dole*'... (R7, Russell Group graduate, graduated in 2010).

For other graduates of the 'missing middle', their motivations to engage with Jobcentre Plus include parental influence (or perhaps, more accurately, their socio-economic background). In this regard, graduates who are struggling to engage with the knowledge-based economy may be caught between different sets of values regarding the negotiation of their job-search strategy, which then impacts on their choice to engage with Jobcentre Plus. On the one hand, these graduates intend to engage with a strategy that encourages high-quality graduate employment outcomes, in order to stay on course with knowledge-based economy expectations (Brooks et al., 2009). In this way, they have a higher propensity to "other" welfare services, such as Jobcentre Plus (Lister, 2004: 101). On the other hand, these graduates are also faced with values and expectations associated with their upbringing, as they return home. As inferred by the following research participant:

R34: There is a little a bit of that. I remember feeling that I was too proud to use the Jobcentre as well. But I think it was my mum who said, '*you've got nothing to lose and you don't have to tell everyone about it*'. And the point is, this is the brief opportunity for you to get something back, especially considering for the rest of your life, you'll be paying into the system. Obviously, there are many other benefits to paying tax. But you may as well get something back from the system for the short period of time that you need it. But maybe there is a stigma attached to it. It's funny, my cousin who has never been to university and worked in manual labour for most of his career – he could not believe I had signed on – '*you've been to university,*

*what do you need to sign on for?'* That was quite strange (R34, post-92 graduate, graduated in 2010).

Further, propensity to engage with Jobcentre Plus for 'missing middle' graduates is also explained by other factors regarding their graduate transition. Graduates who have youth biographies with prior experience of labour market insecurity had sometimes engaged with Jobcentre Plus provision previously. This has helped frame expectations regarding what Jobcentre Plus services provide, and such graduates are therefore more willing to identify its monetary benefits:

R12: I think so. I mean, I was thinking about this the other day. When I didn't have any qualifications – it was about the second time I was unemployed. I was on the dole for about six months, and then after six months, I was put on to this other thing, where I was given more money, but I had to go in every day and like look for a job. I've still got a copy of one of the cheques upstairs (R12, post-92 graduate, graduated in 2012).

In graduate transitions defined by pathways of the 'missing middle', where there may be extensive experiences of labour market insecurity – particularly in relation to unemployment – a further reason for engagement with Jobcentre Plus is financial circumstances. All of the following graduates attempted to engage with Jobcentre Plus:

R12: It was definitely a monetary need – I can't deny that. I didn't need guidance. I didn't need their help getting a job. I was going to the Jobcentre to look for work before I went on the dole, but I knew how to look for work. I've had over 20 jobs and I know how to find jobs. I went to them purely for the money. I had none. I'd come out of university with none (R12, post-92 graduate, graduated in 2012).

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R24: I've started to get very worried now because I've got debts to pay as well. I've got my bank overdraft to pay in a couple of months, so I'm worried about that. And having debts doesn't help for that bit – if I want to go out and do something, I'll spend most of that on the overdraft. I'm worried about, because if it lasts any longer, I'll be considering my options. I've already decided that I might go back to uni or something like that... (R24, post-92 graduate, graduated in 2012).

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R25: It would have had to have been income assessed and I was just about to do that, and at that point I kind of put the feelers out for graduate jobs – wasn't really happy, because again, I need to pay the rent, I need to pay the bills (R25, Russell Group graduate, graduated in 2008).

Overall, graduates do not engage substantially with Jobcentre Plus provision, as indicated by the analysis of Labour Force Survey data in chapter five. This may emphasise that graduates do not need such provision. Indeed, many do not, especially if they are on a clear transition to graduate employment, associated with the knowledge-based economy. Further, this argument grows in pertinence when empirical evidence indicates that graduates retain advantageous positions in the labour market (ONS, 2013b: 1). In turn, it may be argued that it does not matter whether graduates are engaging with these services.

Yet, evidence from the qualitative study emphasises a propensity for graduate engagement with Jobcentre Plus that is strongly related to the type of transitions that graduates experience. Indeed, the graduates that form the 'missing middle' of knowledge-based economy pathways are more likely to engage with Jobcentre Plus. This is because they are also the graduates that experience most labour market insecurity through 'slower track' transitions to the graduate labour market. As such, care must be taken with assumptions that graduates do not approach such services because they do not need to. The general lack of engagement by graduates also has further implications. In chapter four, it was noted that there are specific policies now available for graduates to engage with and become aware of through Jobcentre Plus, such as the 'Graduate Talent Pool' (Bourne, 2011) and 'Graduate Success' (Graduate Success, 2015). Yet, no graduates in this study have had any awareness of these schemes at all, nor did any of the Jobcentre Plus service users.

Instead, the prevailing perceptions of Jobcentre Plus are that it is generally a service that has 'stigmatic' associations and this may play a part as to why it is scarcely used. Yet, such an interpretation may be too simplistic. The underlying principle that guides graduate

transitions is idealised engagement with the knowledge-based economy. This shapes their choices regarding their overall employment profiles (Brooks et al., 2009). As noted earlier in the chapter, even amongst graduate transitions where there is considerable distance to knowledge-based economy forms of employment, engagement with the concept of the knowledge-based economy is still adhered to. Therefore, what might explain the lack of engagement with Jobcentre Plus is that it is not considered a way in which ‘graduate employability’ (Tomlinson, 2007) can be improved.

#### ***6.3.3.4 Graduate Engagement with Jobcentre Plus: Is ‘Work-First’ an Appropriate Approach?***

Baumburg et al. (2012) found that ‘institutional stigma’ is the most prevalent type of benefits ‘stigma’ that people experience in the United Kingdom. This refers to stigma that “arises from the process of claiming benefits” (Baumburg et al., 2012: 5). Empirical evidence points towards service users increasingly experiencing stigma in this regard (Guintoli, 2012), which can result in the exclusion of Jobcentre Plus in their job-search methods (Gush et al., 2015: 13). Yet, conceptions of stigmas are complex. Garthwaite (2014: 9) notes that long-term incapacity benefit recipients develop positive notions of identity linked to familial responsibilities and through the recasting of illness and disability in a positive way, and yet simultaneously acknowledge ‘stigmatic’ experiences of the benefits system.

For graduates that engage with Jobcentre Plus, ‘institutionalised stigma’ is prevalent. Yet, these perspectives are often contextualised in terms of the specific limitations of Jobcentre Plus in supporting graduates appropriately. As many young people’s initial experiences of the labour market involve various forms of flexible working arrangements (such as temping, internships, unemployment and underemployment), graduates may prefer employment support that helps them find more sustainable and long-term work. Gregg et al. (2015), examining the prevalence of insecurity in the labour market, finds that “50 per cent of 18-29 year olds were insecure in 2014, up from 40 per cent in 1994” (Gregg, et al., 2015: 5).

Against this backdrop, ‘work-first’ policy is problematic for graduates, as it provides a holistic framework on which all support and interactions with frontline staff is then based:

R33: Yeah. In between temping – I had like four major temping jobs – and in between I was signed on for two or three weeks. The Jobcentre was useless. They asked if I was looking for work, to ‘prove it’...and if you are not going to take this rubbish job then the benefits stop. I remember thinking 'hang on...I'm not just going to go into a job and then still be looking for a different one constantly'. It is like moving into a house, you do not move into one straight away to start looking for another one (R33, post-92 graduate, graduated in 2010).

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R34: And as well I just felt the person who is meant to help you just didn't. The people working in the Jobcentre do not have a clue what to do with somebody with a degree. They were recommending jobs to me that are £15,000 a year, that are administration jobs. It is like I have a degree and I have £15,000 of debt, I need a job better than that. It is just really, really low-skilled jobs and this is not me being a snob about the jobs I've been offered – I know a job is a job but they treat you as if you have no aspirations. I think unfortunately, that is a reflection of their normal clientele that they see. They are ill equipped to deal with people that have been through higher education (R34, post-92 graduate, graduated in 2010).

These perceived constraints in Jobcentre Plus provision go some way towards explaining why graduates may experience a form of ‘institutionalised stigma’ (Baumburg et al., 2012). Arguably, ‘stigma’ is also heightened for graduates because they often have a particular need to compete successfully in a competitive labour market. Graduates often perceive their degrees as a “basic minimum”, the initial steps of a lifetime “obligation to learn and maintain one’s marketability” (Brooks et al., 2009: 347). And yet, graduates mostly perceive Jobcentre Plus as unable to provide them with the opportunities to meet these expectations. This can be in terms of direct support from frontline staff, but also through the types of employment opportunities provided. The lack of graduate-focussed employment may be consequently problematic, as it coincides with the use of punitive threats to withdraw support when service users are deemed ‘inactive’; yet, graduate service users generally intend to engage with a different part of the labour market entirely:

R34: It was 3 years ago so I can't remember specific jobs but it was very much administration jobs, secretarial jobs and that sort of thing. There was a couple of assistant manager at supermarket type jobs. I would have probably been prepared to look at those jobs if they had a path of progression. But they were very bottom rung jobs where there was not much chance of advancement and they had quite low salaries (R34, post-92 graduate, graduated in 2010).

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Int: And how did you find the experience of using...[Jobcentre Plus]?

R25: I had a very negative experience of it. Or a very negative impression of my experience. You know, they tried, I guess, but the jobs that they were recommending weren't graduate jobs (R25, Russell Group graduate, graduated in 2008).

There are further consequences of the 'work-first' approach (Daguerre, 2004: 42). Instances of 'institutional stigma' are raised by graduates in other respects in their interactions with Jobcentre Plus. Graduates identify that provision often amounts to a sense of being in a 'process' that resembles a more simplified and generic provision. A further example is the surveillance of 'benefits' that appears to take precedence in Jobcentre Plus provision, rather than the desired employment support that graduates indicate they need:

Int: So, are staff focussed on helping you into work?

R33: They are just trying to tick boxes and fill numbers, and get their statistics up - that is all that is (R33, post-92 graduate, graduated in 2010).

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R34: Questions like...*'Are you applying for jobs? Have you been to this? What interviews have you had this week?'* And for people who need that money...I signed on purely because I thought there could be some worthwhile support and not for the financial gain. It did feel like the atmosphere was very negative. It is not particularly private in there when you are speaking to your job officer. Other conversations can be heard quite easily. And it was very much a case of listing where you have applied and then getting a cheque and off you go. It wasn't that much quality time or engagement spent with people or myself to really try and help them (R34, post-92 graduate, graduated in 2010).

Inherently, many of these concerns occur due to the underlying principles of a ‘work-first’ policy approach, which is to facilitate employment into flexible labour markets quickly and efficiently (Shildrick et al., 2012: 200) at a reduced cost to the state. This means that graduate experiences of ‘institutional stigma’ (Baumburg et al., 2012) may be a result of welfare-to-work policy attempting to achieve such an aim. Consequently, there is both reduced graduate take-up in approaching Jobcentre Plus, and more negative experiences when they do so.

#### **6.4: The Knowledge-Based Economy Graduate Transition and the ‘Missing Middle’ Graduate Transition: What are the implications?**

This chapter has demonstrated many aspects of post-crisis graduate transitions. It engaged with two concepts: the ‘knowledge-based economy’ thesis and the ‘missing middle’ of youth transitions. It applied both of these concepts to 26 qualitative interviews of post-crisis graduates (having graduated between 2008 and 2013). In so doing, it found considerable variance within graduate transitions regarding how graduates have approached knowledge-based economy employment, with some graduate transitions closely aligned with knowledge-defined pathways that retain quick social and economic returns from higher education (Harris, 2001: 30), whilst others being much further away from idealised perceptions of knowledge-based economy employment, instead featuring more instances of labour market insecurity. These latter graduate transitions are on a much ‘slower track’ to eventual settled careers (MacDonald, 2011: 429; Purcell et al., 2004), and are a ‘missing middle’ of graduate transitions.

These graduate transitions feature extensive labour market insecurity; yet, a distinction is drawn between the extent of these experiences and how they are understood. Graduates with more ‘distorted’ transitions to the knowledge-based economy have a higher propensity to perceive ‘graduate underemployment’ as a way to build skills, whereas graduates with more distanced transitions to the knowledge-based economy perceive graduate underemployment substantially more negatively. The ‘missing middle’ graduate transitions are more likely to

identify a need for support because of their experience of labour market insecurity and, therefore, have a higher propensity to engage with Jobcentre Plus provision, although social and personal stigmatic associations (Baumburg et al., 2012) are acknowledged and may deter graduates from doing so. When graduates do engage with Jobcentre Plus, they often perceive provision as an “institutional stigma” (Baumburg et al., 2012: 5). Further, it was shown that the provision available through social policy frameworks, such as Jobcentre Plus, is defined by a ‘work-first’ approach (Daguerre, 2004: 42), which does not support graduates in finding transitions defined by the positive returns of the knowledge-based economy (Harris, 2001: 30) that other graduates are able to enjoy.

Overall, what these findings imply is that a ‘missing middle’ in graduate transitions is clearly apparent in the overall labour market. In examining some of these transitions more thoroughly, we can begin to understand the distinctions between graduate transitions more closely, and how such transitions are formulated. The findings imply that some graduates have been ‘missed’ in several regards.

Firstly, their experiences have not, as yet, been sufficiently understood in the context of youth transition research (MacDonald, 2011).

Secondly, as discussed in chapter four, graduates have historically been ‘missing’ from social policy frameworks, resulting in critical perspectives of Jobcentre Plus provision. The findings imply that current provision does not take into account that graduate transitions are attempting to engage with knowledge-based economy forms of employment. The implication of ‘missing’ graduates from social policy frameworks, however, goes further. This is because there is a question regarding the expectations of future generations of graduates and their propensity to support the welfare state, as a protective and progressive institution, when it did not support them in their own graduate transitions that featured substantial labour market insecurity (Formby et al., 2015). This is particularly pertinent considering that graduates pay substantially high fees for their higher education.



Thirdly, discussions regarding graduate transitions are ‘missing’ from wider debates on the political economy of welfare. Should future welfare state provision begin to reflect the changing nature of the labour market, where undergraduate degrees (and increased demand for further qualifications more broadly) are becoming increasingly ‘normalised’ leading to implications for welfare provision? Furthermore, are social policy frameworks able to support vulnerable groups prone to traditional notions of ‘social risk’ (Taylor-Gooby, 2004), such as unemployment and sustained deprivation, whilst engaging with newer and perhaps more subtle forms of labour market insecurity, such as ‘graduate underemployment’? These questions will be discussed in chapter seven.

## **Chapter 7 Discussion: Graduate Transitions and Labour**

### **Market Insecurities**

Chapters five and six both emphasised key aspects of modern graduate transitions. Chapter five suggested that recent graduates are not engaging with social policy frameworks in their graduate transitions. Chapter six argued that there are different types of graduate transition, whereby the likelihood of engaging with public employment services is heightened because of experiences of labour market insecurity. Furthermore, graduate perspectives on current public employment services (Jobcentre Plus) indicated that they are largely unhelpful in negotiating the challenges associated with entering into the labour market. In this chapter, these findings are examined in the context of wider conceptual debates, particularly in relation to the major research questions that originally prompted this analysis. These three questions will be referred to throughout the chapter:

- 1) Does the rise of the knowledge-based economy orthodoxy mean that social policy needs to pay greater attention to the ‘missing middle’ of young graduates?
  
- 2) How far are graduates being supported by public employment services such as Jobcentre Plus?
  
- 3) How do understandings of graduate transitions help to develop a better social policy framework?

Chapter seven will attempt to shed light on debates regarding different types of graduate transition and what this means in relation to social policy frameworks. In the first half of the chapter the focus will be on examining three areas that both the qualitative and quantitative data have indicated require further analysis and consideration. The first section of the chapter will examine the nature of the ‘missing middle’ in relation to youth studies research

(Roberts, 2011; MacDonald, 2011), by concentrating on the debates regarding the experiences of graduates in the wider context of the youth market and in light of the qualitative data in chapter six. The second section of the chapter will examine the prevalence of a ‘missing middle’ within graduate transitions in relation to social policy frameworks. This will draw on the qualitative findings in chapter six, as well as the discussions in chapter four about the development of a sufficient policy context for graduates. There will also be some reflections on the nature of current policy provision within Jobcentre Plus, particularly the efficacy of a ‘work-first’ approach (Daguerre, 2004). The third section will examine graduate transitions in relation to conceptual considerations of where graduate transitions may fit into debates about welfare. In the latter half of the chapter, the focus will lie on identifying the theoretical and empirical contributions of this thesis. There will also be a discussion of the potential limitations of the study and reflections on future research directions.

### **7.1 Locating a ‘Missing Middle’ in Graduate Transitions?**

The findings of this study have indicated that there is a ‘missing middle’ within graduate transitions, which may be seen as a missing grouping from youth transitions research. These transitions are part of the ‘marginalised mainstream’ (Roberts et al., 2013), in that further understandings of their realities can help define more thorough theoretical perspectives about contemporary youth transitions. Yet, as found in chapter six, the nature of these transitions varies substantially. In the case of recent graduates who constitute a ‘missing middle’ grouping, the advantages of understanding this group can be found in their ability to offer new perspectives on the nature of inequality, particularly as such perspectives are not always sought from those considered as ‘privileged’. The implication that all graduates will consistently obtain economic and social returns from the knowledge-based economy is problematic, especially since the prevalence of young people entering into higher education has become extensive (DBIS, 2013: 1). On the question of graduate transitions, Roberts et al. (2013) note:

Addressing the gap in our understanding about those young people who live their lives a ratchet or two up the social scale from the most disenfranchised and most vulnerable allows for a more thorough and holistic theorisation of the contemporary youth period. For instance, a broader lens would allow us to better identify and even address the ways in which social inequality manifests in the lives of those who, on the surface at least, might appear to be 'getting by'. We would also be better placed to understand the full range of possibilities that the excluded are excluded from, which would in turn enable us to understand the limits, constraints, and/or forms of resistance experienced and exhibited by those in the 'middle' in relation to more successful transitions (Roberts et al., 2013: 2).

Indeed, the findings of this study have indicated that a 'broader lens' in youth transitions research is extremely helpful. Young people's transitions are often disparate and dependent on individual biographies and experience (Furlong & Cartmel, 2007; Woodman et al., 2013). Even within the context of this thesis, there is considerable diversity in the labour market experiences and perspectives of recent graduates. In examining these different types of youth transition, researchers can achieve more holistic overviews of what modern 'youth transitions' are becoming, as well as identify some shared underlying experiences that many young people face. Furthermore, it helps to limit heterogeneous assumptions about youth transitions more broadly. In the case of this thesis, employing a 'broader lens' regarding graduate transitions helps to understand perspectives regarding the efficacy of the 'knowledge-based economy' (Harris, 2001: 30) and, more specifically, whether the assumptions associated with the knowledge-based economy are reflected within the initial labour market experiences of graduates. In more practical terms, this means that broader examinations of different groups of young people should be encouraged. For instance, in examining socially excluded or marginalised groups of young people, as has been done in the Teesside studies (MacDonald et al. 2001, 2005) or the 'ordinary transitions' of middling youth (Roberts, 2013), more holistic overviews of youth transitions can be developed that can help researchers define new agendas, formulate new critiques and ask new questions.

The above can be observed in the case of this thesis. A ‘broader lens’ on youth transitions has allowed for specific experiences within graduate transitions to be identified and placed together in order to understand what a ‘missing middle’ pathway within the overall knowledge-based economy may encompass. As noted, Roberts et al. (2013: 2) emphasise that there can be a ‘surface level’ to youth transitions, whereby the impression is given of young people doing well, when, upon further examination, they may actually not be. Such an observation is particularly pertinent in regards to the findings of this thesis. The emergence of ‘missing middle’ pathways are observed as a result of a changing graduate labour market context (as discussed in chapter two), which changes how many graduates perceive and experience modern graduate transitions (as discussed in chapter six). These transitions have also been exacerbated somewhat because of the 2008-9 recession, as graduate employment opportunities in the post-crisis period became somewhat limited (Keep, 2012: 20). This has resulted in an increased flow of graduates entering non-traditional graduate destinations (MacDonald, 2011: 435) and an increase in instances of labour market insecurity within recent graduate transitions.

Yet, it is important to note that this is certainly not the case with all graduates, as many find positive economic and social returns relatively quickly in their graduate transitions. This has been particularly observed in chapter six, where the concept of the knowledge-based economy was explored. Even in graduate transitions that are more ‘distorted’ or ‘distanced’ from the graduate labour market – and, therefore, involve candidates in a ‘missing middle’ pathway – there is still an attempt to engage with knowledge-based careers to some extent, although this varied. It is not the case that any graduates within the study ‘gave up’ on such aspirations; rather, some pathways were considerably more difficult than others. As noted by Tomlinson, “for some graduates, HE continues to be a clear route towards traditional middle-class employment and lifestyle; yet for others it may amount to little more than an opportunity cost” (Tomlinson, 2012: 411).

A distinctive factor, however, regarding graduates on clearer paths towards the knowledge-based economy is the propensity to engage with the concept of ‘employability’ (Tomlinson, 2012). Such graduates are conscious of the need to build on experiences that are not just defined by the pedagogical benefits obtained through their undergraduate degree. Indeed, some common occurrences include experiences of internships and work placements, increased engagement with university career services (often prior to leaving university), the need for a 2:1 class degree and the engagement with degree courses that offer more specific employment outcomes, all with the aim to access knowledge-based careers. Interestingly, these graduates do not focus so much on developing ‘skills’ (as it is assumed that these can be learned in their new professional roles and because of their experiences in higher education), but rather on developing a sufficient profile for employers – as put forward in discussions in chapter six on ‘signposting’. Tomlinson (2012) comments:

Perhaps one consensus uniting discussion on the effects of labour market change is that the new ‘knowledge-based’ economy entails significant challenges for individuals, including those who are well educated. Individuals have to flexibly adapt to a job market that places increasing expectations and demands on them; in short, they need to continually maintain their employability (Tomlinson, 2012: 412).

Further, the issue that graduates often found most concerning here was unfair access to ‘internships’. This makes some sense, as these graduates perceive internships as a gateway to graduate-related employment outcomes. Their employment profiles are carefully constructed so that they can find positions in the knowledge-based economy, resulting in concerns about inequalities that prohibit them from doing so – such as unpaid internships. As noted in chapter two, socially disadvantaged graduates perceive an association between middle-class values and the graduate labour market (Tomlinson, 2012: 423). Therefore, accessing internships is a priority for those on clear pathways to the knowledge-based economy; yet, the social stratification within graduate transitions shapes whether these opportunities occur on an equitable basis. Bathmaker et al. (2013), in a study that analyses access to internships involving graduates from two United Kingdom institutions, notes:

Middle-class students in both institutions were more successful than their working-class counterparts in gaining access to internships, particularly in high-status areas such as law or banking, even though many working-class students had clear internship goals and were achieving top grades on their courses. Largely this was down to middle-class social capital advantage (Bathmaker et al., 2013: 736-7).

For graduates with ‘missing middle’ transitions in this thesis, internships were understood as important but not necessarily as a defining feature in their graduate transitions. Additionally, graduates from the post-92 sub-samples were less likely to have undertaken internships, and there were some post-92 graduates who were not familiar with any of their peers having completed internships at all. Such differences in how ‘unpaid internships’ are perceived by graduates reflect a diversity in how labour market insecurities are perceived more broadly. Put simply, the type of graduate transition determines graduate understandings of the inequalities experienced.

In chapter six, experiences of ‘missing middle’ graduate transitions were identified in relation to two types of transition – both are reflective of ‘slow-track’ transitions whereby it can take several years to find settled positions in the labour market (MacDonald, 2011). Yet, the findings emphasised considerable variation within ‘slow-track’ transitions. The nature of these ‘slow-track’ transitions are either ‘distorted’ (whereby graduates are more likely to stay on a pathway towards the knowledge-based economy, where there is some experience of labour market insecurity) or distanced (whereby graduates consistently struggle to engage with the knowledge-based economy and have extensive experiences of labour market insecurity). These are both identified as ‘missing middle’ due to their respective difficulties in accessing the knowledge-based economy. In both these graduate transitions, labour market insecurities strongly relate to instances of unemployment and underemployment. For many graduates, the findings point towards such experiences as increasingly ‘normalised’ aspects of graduate transitions, especially in the context of post-crisis graduate transitions.

The experience of ‘graduate unemployment’ is prevalent throughout these groupings, and it is understood as a particularly negative experience for graduates – often because their

intention is to engage effectively with the knowledge-based economy. In chapter three, it was noted that there are two types of reaction to experiences of 'graduate unemployment': one where graduates engage with their skills as a way of negotiating these experiences, and another whereby experiences of graduate unemployment are more arduous because of prior expectations to engage with the labour market (Cassidy, 1994: 385; Schaufeli, 1997: 282). The graduates in this study are more likely to experience some disillusionment with unemployment, and this strongly relates to their expectations. This occurs because despite holding an undergraduate degree, accessing knowledge-based economy jobs remains challenging, especially when graduates have to repeat the application process continuously without 'hearing back' from employers, thus increasing their disillusionment and demotivation. Graduates are becoming increasingly aware of the need to compete and build appropriate employability profiles (Tomlinson, 2008; Brooks et al., 2009; Bathmaker et al., 2013); yet, they are simultaneously being rejected from the knowledge-based economy when they attempt to engage with it. Therefore, these periods of unemployment can become harder for graduates to negotiate.

The graduate transitions that make up 'missing middle' pathways are also strongly impacted by 'graduate underemployment'. In chapter three, there was a discussion about the nature of 'underemployment'. Morley (2001) notes that there is a need to understand further what 'underemployment' entails more broadly. In the case of 'graduate underemployment', two dominant experiences were revealed in the qualitative data – skill under-utilisation and a lack of working hours, with skill under-utilisation being substantially more extensive. Although 'graduate underemployment' is largely perceived in negative terms, there is some variance in how this is understood in regard to different types of graduate transition, as discussed in chapter six. Some graduates on 'distorted' transitions to the knowledge-based economy 'volunteer' to take on underemployed roles, as they identify that these experiences will help build their skillset. Yet, for graduates with more distanced relationships to the knowledge-based economy, episodes of 'underemployment' are often perceived as 'involuntary' and become much harder to negotiate (Scurry et al., 2011).



The prevalence of graduate underemployment is particularly concerning. It is a dominant experience in both ‘missing middle’ transitional pathways (meaning that it affected most research participants in the study). More widely, it is likely to remain a feature of graduate transitions even after the economy has begun to stabilise (ONS, 2013b: 14), due to rising numbers entering into higher education. Furthermore, it has also been noted in recent government documentation as a concern for the higher education sector and the wider economy (DBIS, 2015b: 10). Debates around ‘graduate underemployment’ are often influenced by how it is defined and measured – particularly in terms of what constitutes ‘graduate’ or ‘professional’ employment (HECSU, 2015: 4). Although such debates are necessary, there are wider considerations here related to how graduates negotiate these experiences after leaving higher education. This analysis had indicated that the experiences of graduates can be grouped together and that particular pathways can be discerned as a result. In employing such an approach, specific underemployed roles that may have a higher propensity towards positive, long-term outcomes can be identified. Essentially, there may be potential for social policy support in graduate transitions to help graduates move onto clearer paths towards the knowledge-based economy during the course of their ‘slow-track’ graduate transitions (MacDonald, 2011).

A substantial challenge, however, is to identify specifically which groups encompass a ‘missing middle’ within graduate transitions. It is important to note that there is a degree of ‘fuzziness’ here, as some care must be taken with over-prescriptive and heterogeneous accounts of transitional pathways, especially considering the diverse nature of modern graduate transitions (Purcell et al., 2012: 17). There are also further underlying factors that cannot be confirmed by this thesis in relation to more intersectional inequalities, such as social class, ethnicity, gender, age and disability. As discussed in chapter two, graduate transitions are likely to be aligned according to social stratification (Furlong et al., 2005; Gordon, 2013). Disaggregating whether labour market insecurities mostly relate to socially disadvantaged graduates or are a cross-sectional feature of graduate transitions is a key task, especially as higher education is increasingly perceived as a way of boosting social mobility

(DBIS, 2015b: 10). Empirical research is starting to engage with this question further. Gordon (2013) examines the nature of graduate transitions in relation to social background, finding that there is a link between graduate employment trajectories and social class, with middle-class groupings retaining an advantage in the graduate labour market:

Graduate recruitment into the professions favours middle class graduates because they are able to symbolically convert their experiences and practices into legitimate evidence of competence, whilst exerting their market power to accumulate experiences and opportunities necessary to achieve a competitive labour market advantage (Gordon, 2013: 237).

Yet, Gordon (2013) also stresses that “whilst superior market power and established social homology make success more likely, there are no guarantees. Social closure is not orchestrated in some grand conspiracy; it occurs as a consequence of the practical strategies of individuals” (Gordon, 2013: 237). Within this study, the prevalence of labour market insecurity affects graduates from a variety of different social backgrounds. Yet, this thesis provided some compelling evidence to suggest that social class may play a significant role in how graduates negotiate these differing forms of labour market insecurity.

In all, locating and exploring different experiences can help researchers link together the diverse transitions of young people into the labour market. The theory of the ‘missing middle’ (Roberts, 2011) is traditionally used to understand how non-graduate groups fare in a labour market that has fewer traditional occupational opportunities for them to engage with (Roberts, 2013; Dorling, 2012: 182–3). In relativizing the concept of the ‘missing middle’ to graduate transitional pathways, a ‘missing middle’ can be identified in relation to those that have not received the initial economic and social returns associated with the knowledge-based economy (Harris, 2001: 30). Such graduate transitions feature more labour market insecurity and, as a result, a higher propensity to engage with Jobcentre Plus. Indeed, there is a question here as to the nature of the similarities and differences between these two groups of young people that could be explored in future research, particularly as initial destinations for many graduates likely include positions traditionally taken up by non-graduate young

people in the youth labour market (MacDonald, 2011: 435). This emphasises that youth scholarship needs to avoid heterogeneous assumptions where possible. Studies are starting to examine young people at different exit points from education – namely school, college and university – in order to provide a comprehensive overview of contemporary youth transitions (IES, 2015), which will help evaluate how different youth transitions can relate to each other. Currently, Purcell et al. (forthcoming) are conducting a study regarding youth transitions in the Midlands area of the United Kingdom. Their work is titled ‘Precarious pathways to employment for young people? Unpaid, temporary and involuntary part-time work in transitions from education to employment’, and contrasts the experiences of school leavers and graduates through the analysis of qualitative research and surveys. The project is important as:

[i]n an increasingly competitive youth labour market, young people's early labour market experience has become progressively more protracted, unstable and fragmented. In the transition from education to employment, participation in unwaged work, temporary work and involuntary part-time work have become an increasingly conspicuous aspect of many young people's early labour market experiences, whatever their qualifications (IER, 2014).

Lastly, the findings from this thesis emphasise that analysis of youth transitions can help focus appropriate policy responses more clearly. It was found in chapter five, through quantitative data analysis, that recent graduates are limited service users of Jobcentre Plus. This might imply that graduates do not need such provision. Yet, the analysis of graduate transitions showed that graduates on ‘missing middle’ pathways are more likely to engage with this provision and do so often out of need. In examining different types of graduate transition, policy can target such groups more effectively, especially as evaluations of current policies, such as the ‘Graduate Talent Pool’, report ‘missing’ groups of graduates that may be in need of further support (Bourne et al., 2011: 8). The implication of the ‘missing middle’ in terms of social policy frameworks is discussed in the next section.

## **7.2 Graduates: A ‘Missing Middle’ in Social Policy Frameworks?**

The findings also pointed towards a missing middle in social policy frameworks. This section will examine what the findings demonstrated regarding social policy frameworks. To some extent, it will refer to chapter four. Firstly, it is important to stress that whilst labour market insecurities have been difficult for recent graduates following the recession, non-graduates fared much worse (ONS, 2013b: 1), making them a more obvious group for further support. Current policy frameworks are often designed for such groups (Foster, 2015; HM Government, 2011). Yet, this may mean that a ‘missing middle’ within graduate transitions not only relates to academic analysis, but also to current social policy frameworks.

This is perhaps not surprising when considering that the development of policy support within graduate transitions is historically limited in the United Kingdom, as discussed in chapter four. The United Kingdom has long prioritised ‘liberal’ pathways to employment (Howat, 2011: 7). Therefore, policy in graduate transitions has tended to focus on ‘employability’ initiatives in the higher education sector, rather than public employment services. Indeed, in chapter five, it was found that graduate engagement with Jobcentre Plus is very limited. The quantitative analysis showed generally stable, limited engagement by graduates: since the early 2000s, the proportion of recent graduates who approached Jobcentre Plus as a main method of finding work has not increased above 6% (between 2002 and 2013). Furthermore, engaging with Jobcentre Plus is the least likely job-search option used by recent graduates.

This prompts the question why graduates have limited engagement with these services, despite the adverse nature of some graduate transitions in relation to experiences of ‘unemployment’ or ‘underemployment’. There are numerous explanations, which may be linked to the notions of ‘social’ and ‘personal’ stigma (Baumberg et al., 2012: 3) that are sometimes associated with public employment services more broadly. Yet, perhaps the simplest explanation is that many graduates do not need to engage with Jobcentre Plus at all. This is particularly the case regarding graduates on ‘clear transitions to the knowledge-based

economy'. There are many advantages that come with graduate status in the context of the United Kingdom and these can be observed empirically through the use of Labour Force Survey data. The Office of National Statistics emphasise some of these advantages (ONS, 2013b: 1):

- Graduates are more likely to be employed than those who left education with qualifications of a lower standard.
- Non-graduates aged 21 to 30 have consistently higher unemployment rates than all other groups.
- Non-graduates aged 21 to 30 have much higher inactivity rates than recent graduates.
- Over 40% of graduates work in the knowledge-intensive sectors of public administration, education and health.
- Graduates are more likely to work in high-skilled posts than non-graduates.
- Annual earnings for graduates reach a higher peak at a later age than the annual earnings for non-graduates.

Additionally, the qualitative findings emphasised that graduates on 'clear transitions to the knowledge-based economy' are able to identify appropriate activities that can help them access the knowledge-based economy (Harris, 2001: 30). Furthermore, their pathways are strongly wedded to maximising individual graduate employability (Brooks et al., 2009). In turn, they have no need to engage with Jobcentre Plus, as their experiences of labour market insecurity – particularly in regards to unemployment and underemployment – are minimised. Yet, interestingly, such graduates show a greater propensity to engage with university career services whilst at university than any other transitional pathway. This may denote that the support needs of these graduate transitions are instead found in the higher education sector.

Another explanation as to why graduates are limited users of Jobcentre Plus is on account of the 'stigmatic' associations with such provision – what could be described as a "social

construction of benefit dependency” (Wright, 2009: 202). As discussed in chapter six, the most likely graduates to engage with Jobcentre Plus have more ‘missing middle’ pathways. In negotiating adverse experiences of labour market insecurity, such graduates have a higher propensity to engage with state provision, throughout the duration of their slow-track transitions (MacDonald, 2011: 437). Yet, the qualitative findings emphasised that notions of stigma, both ‘personal’ and ‘social’ (Baumberg et al., 2012: 3), can provide disincentives for prospective graduate service users. Further, prospective Jobcentre Plus engagement may be linked to expectations that come with individualised perceptions of socioeconomic position. Put simply, graduates may equate obtaining a degree with middling socioeconomic status, irrespective of prior biography. Such a view fits with the core concepts of this thesis – namely that Jobcentre Plus is not perceived as useful in accessing the graduate labour market, which is often associated with the aspirational values of the middle class (Greenbank, 2007). This, in turn, means that Jobcentre Plus engagement is perhaps more likely for graduates who have extensive experience of labour market insecurity – such as in ‘missing middle’ graduate transitions.

### **7.2.1 How do Graduates Find their Interactions with Jobcentre Plus?**

When graduates engage with Jobcentre Plus, it is often through the guise of ‘work-first’ policy (Daguerre, 2004). As noted in chapter six, the graduates who engage with Jobcentre Plus note aspects of this provision that they do not find particularly supportive. It is an approach that is rooted in ensuring that jobseekers find employment quickly and efficiently, without wider consideration of the types of employment that jobseekers may intend to go into (Daguerre, 2004). Cagliesi et al. (2015) examine how the ‘Youth Contract’ has been implemented in Jobcentre Plus for 18- to 24-year-olds in London. They find that ‘work-first’ activation was a substantial part of interactions with Jobcentre Plus staff. Indeed, they also identified that staff leaned towards work-first activation, rather than ‘work-coaching’, even though they recognised the advantages of more ‘coaching’-based provision. This is because:

[a] benefit-enforcer model was more achievable in a thirty-minute appointment with existing workloads of clients. Again, this move towards ‘a benefit-enforcement

service' is likely to be an inevitable consequence of a high-level national policy agenda that assumes that individual behavioural deficits are the root of the problem, and that work-first activation is the only possible solution (Cagliesi et al., 2015: 65).

Graduates are arguably not as vulnerable as many other jobseekers who engage with Jobcentre Plus, and this is reflected in the quantitative data of this thesis as shown in chapter five, where it was observed that those with lesser or no qualifications engage with Jobcentre Plus to find work more regularly. Yet, the qualitative data of this thesis also showed that a 'work-first' approach is no more helpful for graduate service users (Antonucci et al., 2014: 256-7). More specifically, 'work-first' is identified as problematic as it can push graduates to engage with 'underemployed' positions – towards which they may be somewhat ambivalent, as they do not fit with their aspirations of accessing the graduate labour market (Tomlinson, 2008). As noted in chapter four, provision that seeks to place jobseekers into any job may result in young people entering into a range of insecure employment positions. Indeed, the findings from chapter six stresses that policy needs to consider how to engage with concerns around 'underemployment'. Furthermore, Hadjivassiliou et al. (2015) notes that this represents a "gap" in current provision:

Whilst support is geared toward the most disadvantaged, there is little policy intervention focused on highly skilled young people who struggle to integrate or are under-employed. Interventions are largely left to employers and HE institutions, but this may not be sufficient and may lead to skills mismatch and human capital under-utilisation (Hadjivassiliou et al., 2015: 36).

Furthermore, this raises some complications due to the increasingly 'conditional' nature of Jobcentre Plus provision (Fletcher, 2011). This is now wedded to a sanctions regime throughout the whole of the social security system (Watts et al., 2014), with provision increasingly focussed on the reduction of claimant counts, rather than sustained transitions into employment (Hadjivassiliou et al., 2015: 36). Such policy is limited in how far it can potentially support jobseekers. Dunn (2015) argues that 'choosiness' is ignored by social policy analysts. For Dunn, 'voluntary unemployment' represents a serious, widespread problem in the United Kingdom. Yet, this analysis fails to take into account that 'choice' to

take on employment does not amount to a binary switching between states of employment and unemployment (Dooley, 2004), and that there is a danger in these simplified notions when applied too holistically in policy, without consideration of wider factors. These may include a growth in precarious forms of work (Shildrick et al., 2012) and the increase in forms of labour market insecurities that now mean 50 per cent of young people are currently in ‘insecure’ positions in the labour market (Gregg et al., 2015: 5). In this thesis, graduates experienced a range of responses to underemployment. When this is involuntary, prolonged and devoid of instances of skill development that could help precipitate access to the knowledge-based economy, graduates became substantially disillusioned. It would be difficult to envision graduates taking up such roles if they were offered them through welfare-to-work policy. Such factors should be considered regarding the future implementation of ‘Universal Credit’, as this will instil even further conditionality (Dwyer et al., 2014) within the social security system than present, especially regarding the take-up of employment. This will limit ‘choice’ for all prospective jobseekers in that they will have to take any employment on offer – even if such employment is defined by precarious and insecure labour markets – as Formby et al. (2015) comments:

If Universal Credit continues in its current vein, debates over when and on what basis it is legitimate for an unemployed recent graduate to turn down a zero hours contract for a job unrelated to their degree may gain attention and serve to underline that there are often reasonable grounds for jobseekers to exercise ‘choosiness’ (Formby et al., 2015).

Therefore, the reflections of graduate service users on Jobcentre Plus emphasise that there are implications regarding the prevalence of the ‘work-first’ activation-based policy of recent years in that it is often incompatible with the needs of the claimant. An emphasis of ‘supply-side’ principles initially realised in the ‘New Deal’ policies of New Labour (Zaidi, 2009: 2) continues to be part of modern welfare-to-work provision (Wright, 2013: 830). This stipulates that causes of unemployment are perceived as individual rather than structural (Wright, 2009: 195-6; Wright, 2013: 830), with emphasis that there is a ‘lack of motivation’



on the part of the unemployed being dominant in policy thinking (Shildrick et al., 2012: 31). These policy approaches continue – now justified by notions of austerity – to make eligibility, claiming and maintaining Jobseeker’s Allowance much harder (Wright, 2013: 830).

This was reflected throughout the qualitative accounts regarding graduates who engaged with Jobcentre Plus, particularly in the process of claiming Jobseeker’s Allowance. This is particularly problematic when interactions become defined by ‘surveillance’ and ‘policing’ rather than the provision of employment support. There are various aspects to stigma. Finn et al. (2008: 45-6) note that it can refer to a lack of privacy or a sense of ‘being looked down on’. In the same vein, Gush et al. (2015: 13) find in a study of jobseekers’ engagement with social networks for the purpose of finding employment that concerns around stigma can exclude Jobcentre Plus as a prospective job search method:

Respondents who engaged with Jobcentre Plus found the experience to be unsatisfactory not only due to the stigma of becoming a benefit claimant but also because the employment support they provide was perceived as ineffective (Gush et al., 2015: 13).

Indeed, instances of ‘stigma’ may be an explanatory factor behind why graduates have less involvement with Jobcentre Plus, as was found through the quantitative data analysis in chapter five. As noted, for many graduates such support is not necessary. Yet, ‘institutional stigma’ also depends on individual beliefs and values (Baumberg et al., 2012: 12). For many graduates, the choice not to engage with Jobcentre Plus may be the result of being on a ‘graduate transition’. Therefore, for those who do engage (more likely, graduates on ‘missing middle’ graduate transitions), perceptions of ‘institutional stigma’ occur, as claiming out-of-work benefits does not match their overall aspirations to engage with the concept of the knowledge-based economy (Tomlinson, 2008). Furthermore, as discussed in chapter six, graduate intentions to engage with the knowledge-based economy continue to exist after several years of experiencing labour market insecurity.

Overall, the findings indicated that concepts behind social policy frameworks, such as ‘work-first’ and ‘institutional stigma’ are becoming synonymous with the overall aim of recent welfare-to-work social policy, which is to facilitate transition to employment quickly and efficiently in insecure labour markets (Shildrick et al., 2012: 201). The emergence of ‘poor’ work, or “a global precariat”, is explained by the rise of labour market flexibility through the “transferring of risks and insecurity onto workers and their families” (Standing, 2011: 1). This means that policy is operationalised towards the aim of engaging with such labour markets, even if this means an increase in precarious and insecure working conditions. As noted by Byrne (1999: 99), “the logic of the employment form of post-industrial capitalism is that the work will not be good work. However, people have to be made to do it [...] Welfare to work is a constitutive process for this” (Byrne, 1999: 99, cited in Shildrick et al., 2012). These processes affect all service users of welfare-to-work services. The findings from this thesis emphasise that atypical service users of Jobcentre Plus (such as graduates) can be analysed in relation to how these processes occur in frontline provision, in a similar vein to other empirical investigations of Jobcentre Plus provision (Wright, 2003). Furthermore, a focus on facilitating precarious labour markets means that Jobcentre Plus continues to be unhelpful in supporting graduates avoid instances of labour market insecurity in their graduate transitions.

Overall, the findings of this thesis emphasise that a ‘missing middle’ in graduate transitions has emerged as a result of the difficulties in ascertaining clear routes into the knowledge-based economy. For such graduates, initial labour market experiences are more likely to feature insecure and precarious forms of employment. Understanding such experiences can help illuminate how this ‘missing middle’ is able to find routes, through such precarious transitions, to more sustainable and secure positions in the labour market. There is a need to understand further how young graduates build strategies of resilience during such transitions. Furthermore, current social policy frameworks may be ‘missing’ such graduates, as well as struggling to develop an adequate supportive framework for the graduates who do

reach out. There may be further implications that arise because of these developments and these will be discussed in the next section.

### **7.3 What are the Implications of Graduates Becoming a ‘Missing Group’ for the Future Welfare State?**

Arguably, future welfare state provision may need to reflect on the changing nature of the labour market, in which higher qualifications are becoming increasingly ‘normalised’. Yet, current social policy frameworks have only in recent years started to account for graduates sufficiently. Indeed, social policy frameworks may need to reconsider what constitutes social risk beyond the post-industrial transition (Taylor-Gooby, 2004), and account for more subtle forms of labour market insecurity that feature substantially in graduate transitions. These include different forms of underemployment (Scurry et al., 2011), ‘insecure internships’ (Percival et al., 2014), ‘zero-hour’ contracts (Pennycook et al., 2013) and ‘temping’ (Cartwright, 2015).

Indeed, a substantial ‘weak spot’ is developing a social policy framework for all young people. There have been severe cuts to youth-based policy in recent years (Wenham, 2015: 1). Cuts to youth services include the loss of educational support grants, such as the Educational Maintenance Allowance in England (Howat, 2011); the continued emphasis on individual higher education tuition fees in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (although there are variations in the overall amounts of higher education fees, as discussed in chapter two); the abolition of living allowance maintenance grants for university students that will be converted into further individual loans as of 2015 (Hubble et al., 2015); and the removal of 18- to 21-year-olds from housing benefit allowance from 2016-17 onwards (Wilson, 2015: 3). Elsewhere, local authority statutory provision of high-quality career services has been removed, leading to cuts in ‘connexions’ and other career services (ICU, 2011). Furthermore, the announcement of a new ‘National Living Wage’ to increase wages to £9 per hour by 2020 is typified by the exclusion of those under 25 (D’Arcy et al., 2015).

The implications of overlooking groups of young people that encompass a ‘missing middle’ in social policy frameworks go beyond current concerns of youth transitions, the graduate labour market and welfare-to-work policy. If the welfare state fails to protect and support young people in times of precarious transitions, it may be no surprise to find that young people will similarly forgo choosing to support the ‘welfare state’ in future. There is an echo here of Richard Titmuss’ argument (1956) that welfare systems retain support because public provision has a universalistic appeal to different social groups. In providing assistance for all those who are in need, welfare services are able to stay relevant, to the benefit of all.

## **7.4 Contributions to Knowledge**

In chapter three, a conceptual outline was developed regarding the concepts of the knowledge-based economy and the ‘missing middle’ in youth transitions. This next section will explore some of the findings of the thesis in relation to how it makes an overall contribution to knowledge.

In terms of new conceptual understandings, the thesis critiques the concept of the knowledge-based economy in the context of initial graduate transitions. In this regard, it adds to a growing body of literature that seeks to shed light on how contemporary graduate transitions are understood and conceptualised (Tomlinson, 2007; 2008; 2009; Brooks et al., 2009; MacDonald, 2011; Lauder et al., 2012; Gordon, 2013; Antonucci et al., 2014; Purcell et al., forthcoming). Furthermore, the thesis has sought to analyse graduate perspectives of the concept of the ‘knowledge-based economy’, in a similar manner to other empirical studies that have explored graduates’ responses to the increasing competitive nature of the graduate labour market (Tomlinson, 2007; 2008; 2012; Brooks et al., 2009). This thesis, however, differs from other studies into graduate transitions in the way that some concepts were engaged. It sought to examine whether a policy focus on the ‘knowledge-based economy’ has led to groups of young people being overlooked in youth transitions research, as well as in recent social policy frameworks. To do so, it employed Steven Roberts’ influential concept of the ‘missing middle’ (2011), but sought to apply it to graduate

transitions. The conceptual contribution of this thesis, therefore, is found in its examination of whether the concept of the 'missing middle' can be applied to the higher education pathways associated with the 'knowledge-based economy' (Keep, 2012: 9-10). This may help to illuminate different types of graduate transition. It allows for analysis of the 'slow-track' transition upon leaving higher education (MacDonald, 2011: 433). Researchers in youth studies have emphasised that such research is necessary to understand further how graduate transitions may fit into broader conceptualisations of youth transitions (Roberts et al., 2013: 2; MacDonald, 2011).

In pursuing this overall conceptual framework, some empirical contributions were made in relation to how graduates perceive experiences on 'missing middle' pathways. These include instances of unemployment, underemployment and public employment services. Some of this content adds to a relatively new debate in the case of the United Kingdom, which has generally had stable graduate employment transitions in the past (Howat, 2011: 7). In terms of youth unemployment, it was noted that some contemporary studies do not engage with the older groups of the unemployed youth (Rec, 2010: 15). Accordingly, understanding graduates' reactions and responses to unemployment may be of use to future researchers interested in such issues. This study found these to be predominantly negative experiences for graduates. Furthermore, although studies on the measurement and extent of 'underemployment' have been conducted with various levels of effectiveness (Green et al., 2010; Felstead et al., 2012; Elias et al., 2013; ONS, 2013b), there is a lack of empirical research on underemployment outside of a quantitative context (Morley, 2001: 132). As this thesis has explored how graduates rationalise and approach experiences of underemployment, it may offer future researchers some grounding on which to base their studies. It has been found that graduates perceive underemployment strongly in terms of under-utilisation of skills. Furthermore, it was demonstrated that this is predominantly a negative experience for graduates, although some found underemployment easier to engage with when viewed as part of a trajectory towards the graduate labour market, and whether this was involuntary or not (Scurry, 2011). Furthermore, this thesis added a policy dynamic

to recent empirical studies that have focussed on graduate transitions to the labour market (Tomlinson, 2007; 2008; Brooks et al., 2009; Purcell, 2004; 2012) through its examination of Jobcentre Plus in quantitative and qualitative ways. In analysing how graduates engage with Jobcentre Plus, perspectives into the efficacy of social policy provision can be ascertained. This allows for some insight into both policy and the principles on which such policy is based. A focus on ‘work-first’ did not appear to be conducive to supporting graduates throughout their transitions to the labour market. Furthermore, both qualitative and quantitative findings highlighted the difficulties Jobcentre Plus faces in reducing instances of “welfare stigma” (Giuntoli, 2012: 26; Gush et al., 2015). More specifically, this thesis has provided an empirical account that stresses the limitations in the current provision for graduate transitions.

## **7.5 Policy Implications**

There are various policy implications that have arisen from this thesis, which mostly apply to improving social policy frameworks for graduates in the United Kingdom. There could be wider policy implications regarding the higher education sector; yet, this section will focus on what could be done to improve policy support in the welfare-to-work context after graduation.

Firstly, it became quite apparent that current employment service provision is largely unused by graduates. There were varying explanations offered as to why: some graduates do not need to engage with it and others look for support elsewhere (such as the higher education sector). It could be argued that provision should simply be sought in the higher education sector. Yet, this thesis found that some graduate transitions involve extensive experiences of labour market insecurity, which in turn affects propensity to engage with Jobcentre Plus for both monetary and employment support. Therefore, policy frameworks in this regard should be improved to support such graduates. Furthermore, improvement of social policy frameworks ensures further support for graduates from socially disadvantaged backgrounds (Gordon, 2013). This is increasingly important as policy frameworks need to challenge the

inequalities within the graduate labour market, rather than simply reinforce them (Antonucci et al., 2014: 256-7). Such support could be even more important in the context of post-crisis graduate transitions when there are higher rates of labour market insecurity.

Secondly, the findings emphasised that aspects of provision can be improved in Jobcentre Plus in relation to graduates. Yet, there is a question as to how to achieve this. It may be the case that – because of a work-first activation approach – it is difficult for frontline advisors to engage with more ‘work-coaching’ approaches that may support graduates further. In their analysis of the ‘Youth Contract’, Cagliesi et al. (2015) finds “in this policy environment it is clear that to consider the Jobcentre Plus adviser as being in the position to provide careers education and support for the Youth Contract is at best naive and at worst misleading” (Cagliesi et al., 2015: 65). They suggest a solution to train Jobcentre Plus staff further as “career educators” in order to improve the quality of appointments, as well as a broader movement towards the professionalisation of Jobcentre Plus staff (Cagliesi et al., 2015: 67). A similar recommendation is made in this thesis, as it was found that impressions of staff are negative. It must also be stressed, however, that the prevalence of ‘work-first’ policy practice also needs to be challenged.

In examining the qualitative findings, some further improvements were identified regarding the potential of overall support. As mentioned in chapter four, support for graduates was also found in the higher education sector, and there were instances of Jobcentre Plus recommending that graduates engage with such services for more ‘specialised’ support (HigherYork, 2013), especially as it was found that graduates on ‘clear transitions to the knowledge-based economy’ use such provision in the higher education more regularly. There are questions, however, about this model of provision, as it may conflate overall responsibility regarding who should support graduates. For instance, the punitive nature of Jobcentre Plus may confine the extent to which graduates are able to engage with other forms of provision, particularly when service users must engage with increased mandatory job-search activity to claim Jobseeker’s Allowance. Furthermore, not all graduates have

access to university higher education career provision once graduated. A somewhat radical solution may be identified in the involvement of the providers through the welfare-to-work system. Wright (2014) emphasises a benefit of charitable providers in the 'Work Programme', involves the provision of more holistic support for long-term jobseekers. Perhaps there is scope for higher education career services to be similar providers for graduates, as such organisations might arguably be better placed to support graduates into the labour market.

Thirdly, Jobcentre Plus may need to forge a new relationship to the knowledge-based economy. There has been a substantial educational demographic shift in the last three decades regarding an increase in the numbers of people who have higher qualifications in the United Kingdom (ONS, 2013b: 1). It is also likely, despite increases in fees, that these numbers will continue to rise in the future, due to the prevalence of higher education in overall youth transitions (Roberts, 2013). Considering ways in which graduate employment opportunities can be facilitated in social policy frameworks in the future may become important.

Fourthly, there needs to be emphasis on strengthening social provision more broadly for all young people. In recent years, youth policy has faced substantial cuts (Wenham, 2015: 1). Emerging arguments from the political right often imply that welfare services should not be used by young people at all, and ideas are put forward of 'the dole' not providing sufficient 'aspiration', as argued by David Cameron at the 2013 Conservative conference:

There are still over a million young people not in education, employment, or training. Today it is still possible to leave school, sign on, find a flat, start claiming housing benefit and opt for a life on benefits. It's time for bold action here. We should ask, as we write our next manifesto, if that option should really exist at all. Instead we should give young people a clear, positive choice: Go to school. Go to college. Do an apprenticeship. Get a job. But just choose the dole? We've got to offer them something better than that. And let no one paint ideas like this as callous. Think about it: with your children, would you dream of just leaving them to their own devices, not getting a job, not training, nothing? No – you'd nag and push



and guide and do anything to get them on their way. And so must we. So this is what we want to see: everyone under 25 – earning or learning (Cameron, 2013).

In examining the data presented in this thesis, however, it becomes more likely that by removing the ‘benefits’ component of support, many graduates who have just left higher education may not engage with Jobcentre Plus at all. It is also worth noting that young people aged between 18 and 25 in receipt of both housing benefit and Jobseeker’s Allowance amount to a total of 1% in current social security expenditure (Adam et al., 2015: 212). What is perhaps concerning here is that this will lead to further groups of young people being overlooked from future policy frameworks.

## **7.6 Limitations**

This thesis has several limitations. It explores several different areas and the challenges in doing so are significant. The overall rationale involves three questions that can be examined through the adoption of various methodological approaches. This thesis has attempted to cast a wide empirical net in order to ensure that there is sufficient data for such a wide-ranging analysis. In doing so, it has captured data on graduate understandings of the labour market. It attempted a holistic approach that could yield understandings regarding the experiences of graduate trajectories in ‘clear’ transitions to the knowledge-based economy, as well as ‘missing middle’ graduate transitions, such as unemployment or underemployment. Yet, in comparison to FutureTrack (Purcell et al., 2012), it is a much smaller study. Indeed, due to the relatively small size of the qualitative sample, there is a limitation in terms of how far the meanings and policy implications of this thesis can be taken. In order to place the thesis in an appropriate context, it has a total of 26 interviews in the qualitative research, while 51 Labour Force Survey waves have been quantitatively analysed.

There are also methodological limitations that must be considered in relation to the qualitative data. From the outset, there was an aim to engage with frontline bureaucrats from Jobcentre Plus and recent graduates. This would help in further understanding different approaches of frontline staff in relation to graduate service users. The Department for Work

and Pensions was approached and while it identified the value of the research rationale, they were not able to respond to the research request, which unfortunately meant that such interviews were not possible. Furthermore, the sample framework employed in the qualitative research, which focusses on codes at institutional rather than individual levels, may have meant that there is some risk of homogenous assumptions being made regarding graduate experiences. The thesis has attempted to move past this issue through the adoption of a sample framework that has sought to capture variance in graduate experiences, relating to perspectives on the issues that occur upon leaving higher education to find employment.

Lastly, the graduate labour market is not particularly static (Gordon, 2013). Much of the qualitative data is representative of an adverse labour market and, thus, these findings have the potential to lose some relevance when the overriding conditions of the labour market change. Currently, the graduate labour market is much improved in comparison to previous few years (DBIS, 2015b: 1). Therefore, there is a need to ensure that any readings of this thesis take into account the appropriate labour market context in which it was written.

## **7.7 New Research Questions?**

The thesis raises some intriguing questions regarding future research. This section will focus on some areas that could be explored further. It will, however, firstly reflect on certain developments regarding the potential of some current data sources and, secondly, move onto examining which questions and research agendas should be developed next.

There is a need for improved longitudinal data that could support an examination of graduate transitions further, especially if researchers intend to examine background factors, such as social class, and how these might impact graduate trajectories. The Destination of Leavers of Higher Education has recently trialled some questions about social class that could be examined in this regard (Gordon, 2013: 227). Indeed, the government has added a 'higher education' variable to some Office of National Statistics datasets (Willets, 2012). Subsequent analysis could examine some of the variations in the transitions to employment in much more detail.

More specifically, the next step is to build a more specific research framework in order to examine the nature of labour market insecurities in relation to graduate transitions in the United Kingdom. There is a need to disaggregate further the types of pathways that graduates undertake through their transitions. This could take into account intersectional factors including social class, ethnicity, disability and gender. In this regard, some quantitative and longitudinal analysis would be helpful, such as the ‘Census’ or ‘Understanding Society’ datasets series. This would help not only map out the prevalence of labour market insecurity in relation to graduates, but also identify specific types of graduate transition that are precarious. Another question that could be explored relates to how graduate transitions may ‘settle’ into occupations and roles associated with adulthood, using a life-course approach (Irwin, 2009), particularly since the search for ‘success’ in the graduate labour market proves to be somewhat elusive (MacDonald, 2011). An interesting question arises in relation to how divergent graduate transitions may affect ‘longer tracked’ routes into adulthood.

Furthermore, in relation to youth transitions research, it may be advantageous to examine the experiences of the ‘missing middle’, who have ‘ordinary’, non-graduate transitions (Roberts, 2011; Roberts, 2013) in a study with ‘missing middle’ graduate transitions. Although these groups should be recognised as distinct, they may share some common experiences. This includes a limited policy framework (Roberts, 2011) and an increasingly adverse labour market. There is an interesting question as to how both find routes out of ‘adverse’ occupations, whilst moving towards more positive, sustainable forms of employment. This can broaden our knowledge base and provide recommendations to improve existing policy frameworks. It would also be interesting to examine how strategies of resistance are formulated in such transitions.

In terms of Jobcentre Plus, some specific evaluations of the current social policy framework provision would be advantageous in finding examples of good practice. Furthermore, current web-based sources, such as the ‘Graduate Talent Pool’ (Bourne, 2011), need to be re-

evaluated. How young people engage with current policy frameworks is important. Purcell's study (forthcoming) will provide an overview of the divergent education-to-employment transitions, encompassing a range of young people. This will also examine the varying ways in which Jobcentre Plus supports these groups.

Lastly, a cross-national perspective could add value, especially by focusing on countries where graduate transitions have become more precarious in recent years. Poorly functioning graduate labour markets in much of southern Europe have raised debates regarding graduate transitions and the efficacy of social policy frameworks there (Cairns et al., 2015; Antonucci et al., 2014). There may be potential to examine labour market insecurities in the context of comparative social policy analysis, with questions focusing on the efficacy of welfare regimes and their effectiveness in supporting young people through new forms of labour market insecurity.

## **7.8 Conclusion – A Social Policy Framework in Graduate Transitions**

This research has found that recent graduates experience a range of different circumstances in attempting their graduate transitions. It proposed some new questions regarding the nature of graduate transitions and the social policy framework that can support these transitions further. The choice to acquire undergraduate degrees will continue to be a feature in future youth biographies. Such qualifications are increasingly being understood as requirements to access employment opportunities in the labour market (Tomlinson, 2007; Brooks et al., 2009). Furthermore, some empirical research has indicated that there are more employment opportunities for those with degree-level qualifications, than for those who have no qualifications (Felstead et al., 2012). Therefore, examining how graduates settle into the labour market in the long-term is important. Savage et al. (2015) examine the Great British Class Survey – the largest survey of its kind in the United Kingdom – and found that the 'élite' professions in the United Kingdom are dominated by graduates. Further, it was also found that the formulation of individual socioeconomic positions is linked to the type of university that an individual has attended, particularly in regards to whether they have attended a Russell Group institution or not (Savage et al., 2015: 237). It may be the case that

further study of initial graduate transitions can explain how such inequalities may develop and, thus, a concerted effort can be made to narrow them.

Yet, in order to do so, graduate transitions must be supported better than current social policy frameworks allow, as although acquiring an undergraduate degree provides a range of individual benefits, it cannot protect young people from labour market insecurities, especially since labour markets have become increasingly more 'flexible' (Shildrick et al., 2012: 200). Further, there is a concern that policy may not be able to engage with the substantial levels of labour market insecurity that young people currently face and may do so in the future (Gregg et al. 2015). The current policy reality is more at risk of undermining graduates on 'missing middle' transitions rather than support them. If the welfare state is to survive an era of "permanent austerity" (Myles et al., 2001: 312), it must find ways of appealing to young people to a greater extent as a progressive and protective institution, especially at a time when labour market risks become more entrenched and when stable transitions to sustainable employment are harder to obtain. Failure to do so, will risk perceptions that welfare services are a burdensome extra, with little to offer to future generations of young people, even at a time when they may most need such provision.

## Appendices

### Appendix A: Qualitative Methods: Sampling Tables

**Table 8: Final Sample - Yorkshire Region of University Institutions (CUG)**

CUG 2012	CUG 2011	University	Entry Standards	Student Satisfaction	Research Assessment	Graduate Prospects	Overall Score
12	10	York	437	4.07	2.78	68.2	790
26	25	Sheffield	426	3.98	2.72	73.6	729
32	27	Leeds	408	3.87	2.72	65.8	702
58	67	Hudders- field	273	3.94	2.10	69.5	548
62	56	Hull	309	4.00	2.37	64.6	534
62	68	Sheffield Hallam	289	3.82	2.05	61.8	534
73	61	Bradford	268	3.87	2.34	69.4	513
95	85	Leeds Beckett	267	3.78	2.05	55.5	460

**Table 9: 0 - 20 University Institutions 2012 (CUG)**

CUG 2012	CUG 2011	University Name	Entry Standards	Student Satisfaction	Research Assessment	Graduate Prospects	Overall Score
1	2	Cam- bridge	559	4.15	2.98	85.5	1000
2	1	Oxford	536	4.18	2.96	85.0	992

3	3	Imperial College London	519	3.84	2.94	86.7	940
4	5	London School of Economic s	513	3.86	2.96	84.1	928
5	4	Durham	487	4.02	2.72	80.4	890
6	6	St Andrews	485	4.14	2.72	76.3	854
7	9	University College London	477	3.96	2.84	81.1	842
8	7	Warwick	480	3.98	2.80	72.5	822
9	8	Lancaster	407	3.97	2.71	71.8	820
10	12	Bath	459	4.01	2.71	77.9	800
11	16	Bristol	467	3.90	2.72	77.7	794
12	10	York	437	4.07	2.78	68.2	790
13	11	Edinburgh	442	3.83	2.75	72.4	782
14	14	Southamp ton	427	3.90	2.72	70.8	779
15	24	Exeter	439	4.12	2.62	70.3	768

16	13	King's College London	447	3.90	2.69	82.6	758
17	18	Nottingha m	428	3.95	2.67	77.9	753
18	15	SOAS	423	3.85	2.60	68.7	751
19	21	Lough- borough	390	4.13	2.62	69.2	749
19	19	Sussex	380	4.10	2.61	69.3	749

**Table 10: Table 10: 80 - 100 University Institutions 2012 (CUG)**

CUG 2012	CUG 2011	University Name	Entry Standards	Student Satisfaction	Research Assessment	Graduate Prospects	Overall Score
80	81	Chester	273	3.89	1.74	63.4	489
81	65	De Montfort	259	3.92	2.32	52.8	488
81	89	Portsmouth	283	3.94	2.24	56.7	488
83	86	Glamorgan	279	3.88	2.04	54.3	485
84	74	Edinburgh Napier	296	3.83	1.83	69.3	484
85	83	Bath Spa	293	3.85	1.89	46.5	481
86	81	Cumbria	263	3.75	1.23	66.2	474
87	77	Queen Margaret	309	3.90	1.37	61.8	469
88	84	Kingston	243	3.82	2.04	52.3	468



89	89	University of Wales, Newport	252	3.88	2.42	54.5	467
90	105	Teesside	271	3.96	1.99	61.9	466
91	93	Sunderland	246	3.89	1.86	54.8	465
92	-	Trinity Saint David	251	3.93	2.11	59.7	463
93	89	Manchester Met	271	3.74	2.16	57.1	462
93	95	West London	220	3.68	1.67	52.8	462
95	98	Abertay Dundee	252	3.90	1.83	57.7	460
95	85	Leeds Beckett	267	3.78	2.05	55.5	460
97	96	Salford	280	3.82	2.36	55.1	459
98	88	Edge Hill	260	3.97	1.50	63.2	453
99	80	Staffordshir e	241	3.90	1.62	60.7	452
100	106	Canterbury Christ Church	247	3.82	1.79	63.3	447

## **Appendix B: Research Participant Ethics Form**

### **The Transition from Education to the Labour Market: an Analysis of graduate pathways to employment in relation to usage of Public Employment Services**

This form is called 'informed consent'. Its purpose is to ensure that all research participants are made aware of the details of the research study. Each research participant will receive a copy of this form whilst the researcher keeps another. Once you have completed this form, you need to send back this form in the self-addressed envelope provided.

Thank you for taking part in my study.

My name is Adam Formby.

I am a PhD student at the University of York in the Department of Social Policy and Social Work.

Questions can be directed to me at,

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Please be aware that:

- Taking part is entirely your choice
- You are free to refuse to answer any question without saying why
- You are free to withdraw at any time without saying why
- Whether you take part or not, services you receive will not be affected.

The interview will be recorded using phone/skype recording technology. If this is unsuitable you may withdraw at any point.

All data collated in this study will be kept confidential using identification codes. There will be no means of identification in this research. Data will also only be available to be seen by myself, as the principle research investigator. The words and ideas expressed will be used in the final PhD thesis. If you wish to withdraw at any point, you may do so. Also, all collated data will be destroyed on completion of the PhD.

Please tick to show that:-

- The project has been explained to you and you have received a copy of the Project Information Sheet
- You have had the opportunity to ask questions and these questions have been answered to your satisfaction
- You are aware that you may withdraw from the study at any time without giving reason and have been assured that if you do withdraw all data provided by you will be destroyed
- You are happy to be involved with the research

Signed – participant \_\_\_\_\_

Printed – participant \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

Signed – researcher \_\_\_\_\_

Printed – researcher \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix C: Research Participation Information Sheet



### **The Transition from Education to the Labour Market: an Analysis of Graduate Pathways to employment in relation to usage of Public Employment Services**

Dear university alumni,

I am a PhD student at the University of York.

I am writing to you today in regards to taking part in a study which details the transition from leaving higher education to the labour market. The project is titled:

The Transition from Education to the Labour Market: an Analysis of  
Graduate pathways to employment in relation to usage of Public  
Employment Services

The purpose of the study is to look into the particular under-researched area of social policy to deal with graduate unemployment and underemployment. The study is contacting graduates that have attended higher education institutions in the Yorkshire area to try and ascertain their directions after graduation. The study will involve,

- A 30-40 minute phone/skype interview with any recent graduates that have entered into the labour market from 2008 onwards. These interviews will be recorded, and will be organised to fit the best time that would suit you.
- The questions will primarily revolve around participants providing a short biographical account of this transition period – exploring how periods of unemployment and underemployment might have been negotiated.
- I am particularly interested in those that have experience of using Jobcentre Plus, as well as the more general job-search strategies employed by graduates to find work. Another part of the study will involve interviews with jobcentre staff to understand how graduates are using public employment services.

In terms of the types of interviewees, the study will benefit hugely from as wider range of graduate experience as possible. Individual characteristics such as age, degree type or class are not important. The study is attempting to ascertain how different types of graduates might alter their own personal strategies to obtain employment.

All information within this study will be kept strictly confidential; all names will be anonymised, with findings only presented in the final thesis. The study has also undergone ethical consideration by University of York's Humanities and Social Sciences Ethics Committee, and has been found to be appropriate.

Thank you for your time. If you are interested in taking part, please do not hesitate to get in touch.

Yours sincerely,

Adam Formby,  
2<sup>nd</sup> year PhD Student,  
Post-Graduate Doctoral Unit,  
Alcuin Research Resource Centre,  
Department of Social Policy and Social Work,  
The University of York,  
Heslington;  
YO10 5DD  
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Tel: 01904 321261

## **Appendix D: Letter to Department of Work and Pensions**

**The Transition from Education to the Labour Market: an Analysis of Graduate pathways to employment in relation to usage of Public Employment Services**

Dear sir/madam,

I am a PhD student at the University of York.

I am writing to you today in regards to taking part in a study which details the transition from leaving higher education to the labour market. The project is titled:

The Transition from Education to the Labour Market: an Analysis of  
Graduate pathways to employment in relation to usage of Public  
Employment Services

The purpose of the study is to look into the particular under-researched area of social policy that attempts to deal with rising instances of graduate unemployment and underemployment. As well as understanding general job-search behaviour, this study will attempt to ascertain how graduates are engaging with public employment services such as Jobcentre Plus.

- Contacting graduates and Jobcentre Plus frontline staff focussed upon the interactions between graduates and front-line Jobcentre Plus staff
- A 30-40 minute phone/skype interview with any front-line Jobcentre Plus staff member. These interviews will be recorded, and will be organised to fit the best time that would suit you.
- The questions will be focussed your experiences, of how graduates are using jobcentre Plus to negotiate periods of unemployment and underemployment, as well the strategies employment in attempting to engage with this particular customer group.

All information within this study will be kept strictly confidential; all names will be anonymised, with findings only presented in the final thesis. The study has also

undergone ethical consideration by University of York's Humanities and Social Sciences Ethics Committee, and has been found to be appropriate.

Thank you for your time. If you are interested in taking part, please do not hesitate to get in touch.

Yours sincerely,

Adam Formby,  
2<sup>nd</sup> year PhD Student,  
Post-Graduate Doctoral Unit,  
Alcuin Research Resource Centre,  
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## Appendix E: Interview Schedule

### Basic information

- What University? Degree? Class? Educational background? Age? A-level results? In work – hours? Wages?

### 1) To what extent is graduate unemployment and underemployment an issue of concern for social policy?

#### ‘Knowledge-based economy’

- Do you think it is good for society/economy to have a highly educated workforce?
- What kind of employment opportunities/aspirations do you have? And what have you actually found?
- What are your opinions of the ‘knowledge economy?’ Has/will your degree give you specialist knowledge in terms of your employment desires and outcomes?
- Why did you decide to get a degree? For job prospects or for the sake of learning?
- What degree did you do?
- Is there an ‘over-supply’ of graduates or do you think we need more?

#### Labour market

- Do you feel the degree in the modern British economy is enough?
- Do you think it has equipped you with the appropriate skills to meet challenges in the future?
- Do you think you need a degree now to compete? Is a degree now just one of the things you need to be ‘employable?’
- What kind of skills would you say your degree has given you? Distinction between ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ skill sets?
- Graduate employability? Are there too many graduates?
- What kind of jobs have you found? Are these ‘Knowledge-intensive?’
- Is having a degree now a requirement?

#### Social Mobility

- In your opinion, is higher education a good way of levelling the playing field of opportunity?
  - Upon leaving higher education would you say there are disparities of opportunity in regards to employment and internships?
  - Along what kind of distinctions would these lines be drawn?
- In your experience, would you say that poorer graduates (from non-traditional graduate backgrounds) are more likely to experience difficulties in the labour market?
- Do you think that you need a degree more generally now?

## **2) How do graduates/degree holders interact with key public employment services, particularly jobcentre Plus?**

- How long have you been looking for work? How long does it take for graduates to find their career paths?
- How many jobs have you applied for?
- What type of jobs have you been looking for?
- How would you look for employment?
- Did you engage with careers advice at university? How did you find them?
- If graduate career paths evolve slowly, do you think that graduates need support in that time of making important career choices? In the form of jobcentre Plus?

### Jobcentre Plus

- Have you used Jobcentre Plus? If not, why have you used it?
- Have you used private employment services – why?
- How did you find the service?
- What were your impressions of the staff?
- What kind of jobs was available?
- What kind of training was available?
- Do you have experience of any direct schemes such as the ‘work program’ or the ‘youth contract?’

## **3) How do graduates cope with being unemployed/underemployed?**

- Are issues such as graduate unemployment and underemployment more likely temporary or long-term in your experience?
- In regards to graduates experiencing unemployment and underemployment, do you ‘there is a high they climb, the harder they might fall’ hypothesis?
- Is there an expectation gap?
- What kind of resources do you think graduates might have that other unemployed groups in the labour market might have?

- What role do you think the family might play in supporting graduates? Might mean that people do not need to engage with public employment services?
- Do these types of experience effect job-search effort?

### Unemployment

- Have you been unemployed? How would you describe the experience of being unemployed, as a graduate?
- How long have you been looking for work? How long does it take for graduates to find their career paths?
- Are there financial consequences? Psychological consequences? Motivational consequences? Effect on optimism?
- Do you think having a degree has helped in regards to coping with unemployment? For example, managing time and having awareness of other alternatives to work such as volunteering?
- Should the government be concerned in regards to graduate unemployment?

### Underemployment

- Since leaving university have you found employment? Has this employment been at the skill or wage level you expected upon graduation? Would you consider yourself to be underemployed?
- Did you find employment in line with a career plan?
- If no, how did/do you find working in an area that was not your first choice?
- Do you think that there might be lasting effects upon career development in regards to experiencing unemployment and underemployment?

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