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Karen Handley & Birgit den Outer

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Learning to signal graduate employability: an exploratory study of UK students' experiences of online recruitment processes

Karen Handley and Birgit den Outer

Oxford Brookes Business School, Headington, UK

ABSTRACT

Graduate employment programmes offer university students the prospect of a reasonable salary and development opportunities. For employers, such programmes offer a talent pipeline and a means to identify future leaders. The psychological contract which develops during recruitment processes creates high expectations on both sides of the employment bargain. A corollary is that graduate programmes usually entail highly competitive, multi-stage selection processes, in which applicants must repeatedly demonstrate their employability in online psychometric tests and computerised activities before progressing to the final selection stage. Drawing on Foucauldian theories of governmentality, this study uses interviews (n = 17) and focus groups (n = 2) to explore how final-year students at a post-1992 English university navigate graduate recruitment processes, and learn to signal what they believe is employability. The article shows how students' understanding of employability is formed not only through traditional channels such as university careers services or employer communications, but increasingly through third-party (and often commercial) 'helper' apps offering online test-practice sessions, templated careers advice, and other methods for gaming the recruitment process. These helper apps can have distorting effects, producing graduates focused on the performance rather than the substance of employability.

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Introduction

For many graduating students, getting a job is not just an economic imperative; it is a transitional rite-of-passage that embodies expectations about adulthood, employment, and self-development through work (Tansley and Tietze 2013). For some, the goal is a graduate development programme. Typically, such programmes offer students an appealing combination of good salary alongside structured development opportunities and careful mentoring as part of an organisational talent management strategy. These programmes differ from short-term internships in that they last for an average of two or three years[1], after which time the graduate might expect new employment opportunities

CONTACT Karen Handley khandley@brookes.ac.uk Oxford Brookes Business School, Headington, Oxford OX3 0BP, UK

at the same organisation or elsewhere in the labour market (De Vos, De Stobbeleir, and Meganck 2009; Clarke and Scurry 2020). The anticipatory psychological contract that develops during the recruitment process tends to create high expectations on both sides of the employment bargain (Blancero and Kreiner 2000; Clarke and Scurry 2020).

A corollary is that recruitment is often a long, multi-stage and highly competitive process, in which job applicants must repeatedly demonstrate that they are 'good enough' to progress to the next stage before finally being selected. In contemporary, digitally-mediated recruitment processes, reaching the final stage such as a face-to-face interview or assessment centre often requires successful completion of online tasks such as recorded Skype[2] or Zoom[3] interviews, computerised tests, and – more recently – gamified activities (Stone et al. 2015; Tansley, Hafermalz, and Dery 2016; Georgiou and Nikolaou 2020; Jack 2020). Whilst recruitment is usually controlled by the employing organisation (e.g. see Tims 2010, on the ground-breaking L'Oréal *Reveal* game), an array of third-parties are entering the recruitment space. Increasingly, applicants are preparing for the recruitment process using 'helper' technologies such as smartphone apps or interactive websites offering practice exercises, hints-and-tips guidance, and talent-matching/profiler services. Thus, the preparatory work before engaging in recruitment processes is becoming mediated by commercial organisations such as independent psychometric testers, or match sites such as *Indeed*[4] or *Debut*.[5]

Given the proliferation of these helper technologies, it is important to ask how they influence graduates' assumptions about what it means to demonstrate 'employability' or to position oneself as a good candidate. How are the technologies shaping graduates' subjectivities and sense of worth as (potentially) employable workers? To what extent are they encouraging users to adopt appropriate 'self-determining dispositions' (Anderson 2018, 463) in order to project a self-image of the ideal employable graduate (for fear of not getting a job), even before the moulding effects of organisational HRM practices such as performance appraisal mechanisms have begun to operate (Townley 1994; Legge 2005). On the other hand, do students resist or reject a graduate-employability discourse?

This article examines these questions by exploring how final-year students talk about employability and their experience of navigating graduate recruitment processes. The investigation involved interviews (n = 17) and two focus groups (n = 7) with final-year students from an English university, many of whom expect to transition to a good graduate job. The UK context in which these students are studying is such that unemployment amongst graduates has been consistently lower than for the labour force as a whole, with an average unemployment rate for graduates of 3% in the period 2017–2020 compared with the total average rate of 4.2% (ONS 2021). However, the number of graduates has been steadily increasing in the UK. In 2017, 42% of the labour force aged 21–64 were graduates (ONS 2017), and there is evidence that early career graduates are finding it increasingly difficult in a competitive marketplace to find 'graduate-level' employment (McGuinness 2006; see also Baert, Cockx, and Verhaest 2013), making the first stepping stone of a graduate development programme particularly attractive. It is importance to recognise, however, that graduates or young workers seeking employment in other regional contexts may face different employability norms and processes, and different labour market contexts (e.g. see Mgaiwa 2021; Dejaeghere, Morris, and Bamattre 2020)

The study is located theoretically in the literature inspired by Foucault (1977, 1978a, 1982) and developed by Rose and Miller (1992) and Rose (1999) concerned with how

individual subjectivity is shaped by discourse and practices of governance. The empirical focus is how final-year students talk about how they navigate recruitment processes, and interpret the messaging in graduate employability materials encountered when looking for jobs. The article contributes to theoretical debates about processes of socialisation and resistance, and the nature of 'struggles' (Deetz 2008) experienced by students as their identity transitions from university student to employable graduate.

The article begins by presenting the theoretical framing for this research and then reviews relevant literature on discourses of graduate employability. The research study is then introduced, followed by presentation and discussion of findings. Finally, implications are discussed in relation to debates about the changing advisory landscape for students seeking to understand and project their employability.

Theoretical framing

The research is framed by a governmentality perspective. Although this theoretical framing originated in studies of how the state directly and indirectly governed its population (as introduced below), we contend that this perspective can be useful for exploring how non-state actors and processes shape the early socialisation of graduate employees.

Governmentality studies, and especially those inspired by Foucault (e.g. 1978a, 1982), originally examined governance from the perspective of the state, asking how the state comes to know, categorise and manage its population 'either directly through large-scale campaigns, or indirectly through … tactics and techniques' or what we might now call 'practices' (Foucault 1978a, 241–242). The theoretical premise is that governance is enabled by techniques that encourage individuals to *understand themselves* in ways which lead to self-identification with particular identity positions (e.g. an 'active citizen'), and conformity to behavioural norms associated with those positions (Dean 2010, 43). Governance in its broadest sense is thus the 'conduct of conduct' – techniques to encourage (i.e. to 'conduct') people to conduct *themselves* in a particular manner (Foucault 1982). In the context of neo-liberal capitalism, this process has been called 'steering at a distance' (Ikonen and Nikunen 2019, 824).

Foucault's ideas about governance have been extended beyond the state to instances where individuals or groups seek to shape the conduct of themselves or others within families, organisations and labour markets (Walters 2012, 11). In *Governing the Soul* (1999), for example, Rose argues that the human resource management movement of the early-mid twentieth century challenged the nineteenth century discourse of the 'good' worker. The ideal worker became constructed by managers as not only productive, but also emotionally committed – someone who identified with the values and mission of his or her employer (for an example at Google, see Mautz 2018). The internal logic of this discourse is that individuals who identify with their employer are more likely to give discretionary effort, and more of their 'authentic self' (see Brannen, Parsons, and Priola 2011, for critiques of this view).

Within governmentality studies, a core interest is in the mechanisms that encourage individuals to self-identify (or not) with particular positions within dominant discourses, such as the 'enterprising worker' (Grey 1994) within neoliberal discourse. In Foucault's theorisation, mechanisms operate through a combination of two things: discourse and practice (Foucault 1978b, 248). The interplay between them can be summarised as an

interplay between the *ideas* embedded in the discourse, and the *practices* of training, development, advice, mentoring and other ways to shape conduct. The former are implicit in the latter: particular practices encourage individuals to accept an associated discourse as normal, including the assumptions, logics and identities articulated in that discourse. Previous research has demonstrated how particular practices reinforce associated identities. Examples include the ideal organisational worker (created through performance appraisal practices, Townley 1994), the employable job seeker (created through advisory job centre practices, Boland 2016), and the 'good student' (created through 'standardisation tendencies' imposed by universities, Llamas 2006, 666).

The governmentality lens is, of course, just one of many possible theoretical perspectives for employability research. Theoretical lenses are only ever partial and provisional; they are useful for analysing some questions but not all. We contend that the value of this lens is its focus on relations between discourse, practices/technologies for shaping conduct, and the people whose conduct is potentially being shaped (such as students aiming for graduate jobs).

However, we make two important qualifications at this point. The first is that Foucault's ideas have attracted legitimate criticism from scholars challenging the structural determinism which Foucault attributed to discourse (e.g. see Deveaux 1994). They argue that although Foucault recognised that individuals might *resist* a dominant discourse, his work neglected other possible responses, such as reinterpretation, distortion, or even intentional exploitation for instrumental ends. This apparent neglect of the individual prompted a revived scholarly interest in personal *agency*, as seen for example in the work of Archer (2007), another critic of Foucault's determinism. Archer argues that everyone has some degree of reflexive agency. This enables individuals – to some extent – to recognise the socialising forces which structure their horizon of apparently-available choices and identities, and to negotiate them rather than being fully 'determined' by them. The study of employability by Brown and Hesketh (2004, 9) provides an illustration of the agency of graduates whom they labelled 'players': these individuals knowingly played-the-game of the graduate labour market by '*decod[ing] the winning formula … and learning to be competent at being competent*', but without necessarily being personally transformed in the process.

The second qualification is that it is doubtful that there is currently one hegemonic discourse of employability. As we highlight next, graduate employability is debated in a crowded discursive space by stakeholders likely to have competing interests, such as the state, employers, universities and students. It is precisely in such situations of definitional ambiguity – with regular media debate about different understandings of employability – that students are likely to become anxious about how they *ought* to be, and how they should signal and project their employability to employers. In a search for certainty, 'helper apps' that promise to guide, advise and inform may be particularly attractive to students.

Discourses of employability

Discourses of employability have changed across time and socio-political contexts (for reviews, see Gazier 1999; McQuaid and Lindsay 2005; and Anderson 2018). This is unsurprising given the multiplicity of stakeholders whose competing interests crowd the

discursive space. Indeed, Suleman (2018) contends that consensus on an empirical identification of [employability] skills is an *impossible* endeavour'(263, emphasis added); and this is despite extensive work to explore what it is that generates employability (e.g. see O'Leary 2021; Advance HE 2017).

Debates about what employability 'is' ontologically have recently attracted more attention, perhaps as a result of this empirical stalemate. The ontological question is fundamental because the answer drives the focus of empirical research: whether, for example, we should seek out a combination of *traits* that predict employability, or *technical skills*, or *career management skills*, or other factors. This question is embedded in debates about whether employability is about possession, positionality or process (e.g. see Holmes 2013; Williams et al. 2016; Okay-Somerville and Scholarios 2017). Is graduate employability better understood in terms of individually-possessed human (and other forms of) capital, as a function of social positioning vis-à-vis others (Brown and Hesketh 2004), or a function of processes such as career management, self-assessment and the ability to signal employability potential to others (Bridgstock 2009; Okay-Somerville and Scholarios 2017)? These different conceptualisations are likely to generate very different recommendations for policy-makers, practitioners and students.

One perspective that has received relatively little attention is that of university students. Important contributions in this area have highlighted the difficulty students have in articulating what employability means to them (e.g. Tymon 2013), their concerns around the utility of their higher education credentials (Tomlinson 2008, 58; see also Tomlinson 2012), and how to navigate the recruitment process (Bradley et al. 2021a, 2021b). In a review of university students' perspective on employability, Tymon (2013, 851–852) points to contradictory findings on beliefs about what enhances employability, and argues for more research in this area to unpick these variations.

Research on students' meaning-making indicate that they struggle to make judgements about the value of advice offered by institutional sources. In a study on the related topic of careers, Greenbank found that students 'preferred to make decisions using informally-absorbed information and their intuition' rather than 'rational approaches' promoted by policymakers and others (Greenbank 2014, 177). 'Experts' are not necessarily recognised as such, which suggests that giving *yet more* detailed information may be counter-productive if informal word-of-mouth is a preferred heuristic. Indeed, undergraduate students tend to have negative attitudes towards the value of careers services, or lack awareness of events provided (Greenbank 2011; Andrews and Russell 2012; Bradley et al. 2021b). In the study by Donald, Ashleigh, and Baruch (2018), although students recognised that 'the degree is not enough' in a competitive graduate labour market, only half of the participants had made use of the careers services, citing 'laziness, lack of time, lack of awareness or lack of tailored support' as reasons (529). It is also possible, of course, that what needs attention are the strategies for delivering student services, rather than additional kinds of service.

Students' indifference is perhaps unsurprising given that none of the core employability approaches practiced by universities (embedded, bolt-on, parallel – see Cranmer 2006) is uniformly effective in helping students get post-graduate work. Indeed, in their review of institutional employability approaches for psychology students, Bradley et al. (2021b) identified that the most efficacious initiatives are employer involvement in course design,

and skills-development on '*how to navigate* the graduate job market (such as writing applications and passing psychometric tests)' (p 3, emphasis added).

Research study

To explore how students navigate employability discourse, this interpretivist study used semi-structured interviews and focus groups to encourage students to talk about a number of employability topics. Questions were designed to be sufficiently open to discussion on (1) 'what employability means to me', (2) how students read and respond to online graduate recruitment materials shown during interviews, and (3 – interviews only) how individual students navigate graduate recruitment processes. In practice, section 2 occupied only about 15% of the individual interview time and 30% of the focus group time, as most of the conversation revolved around students' understanding of employability and their experiences of searching for and applying for work.

The organisations whose graduate recruitment materials were shown were: Aldi, GlaxoSmithKleine, Jaguar Land Rover, PricewaterhouseCoopers, and the British Army. These organisations are regularly listed in the UK's *Times Top 100 Graduate Employers*[6], and were chosen for purposes of variation rather than as intrinsic case studies. The materials were online recruitment pages which show photos of graduates in the workplace doing 'typical' activities, accompanied by textual information on the culture of the organisation, qualities expected of graduate employees, a typical day-at-work, etc. Interview and focus group protocols both covered topics (1) and (2), with the focus groups dwelling longer (about 30% of time) on responses to recruitment materials. For the focus groups, topics (1) and (2) also opened discussions on shared or unique experiences of graduate recruitment processes. Step (3) of the interview protocol invited the final-year students to elaborate on their experiences of finding and applying for graduate jobs, in a manner that encouraged reflection on what influenced their recruitment decisions and actions. Through these conversations about graduate recruitment journeys, we sought to understand what influenced students' evaluations of themselves as employable workers, and what students felt they needed to do to signal 'employability'.

The sample was drawn from students at a 'post-1992'[7] university located in south-east England, which has a higher proportion of privately-educated undergraduates than many other UK universities (HESA 2020). The claims from our study are therefore delimited by that sampling frame. Participants were recruited after first obtaining approval from our University's Research Ethics Committee. Recruitment was by open invitation using posters distributed across the University campus, and offering a £15 Amazon voucher as a small incentive. We invited all final-year undergraduate students to take part in an interview and/or focus group to discuss their views on graduate employability. Of the 17 participants, 8 were male, and 9 female. Disciplines included science (n = 6), business (n = 9) and humanities (n = 2). Seven of the participants took part in focus groups as well as interviews. As with many self-selection studies, it is likely that those who volunteered feel they had something to contribute (such as negative or positive views on employability development). When asked, two participants said they wanted experience of research interviewing to gain insights to help with their own dissertation.

Interviews and focus groups lasted between 40 and 70 minutes, and were audio recorded and fully transcribed. Transcripts, first-order coding and analytical memos

were managed with the support of proprietary software, MAXQDA.[8] As is usually the case in qualitative exploratory research, a key feature of our analytical approach was its iterative nature (Locke, Feldman, and Golden-Biddle 2022). As a research team, we spent time reading transcripts, coding, writing analytical memos (Corbin and Strauss 2008), and discussing our interpretations. In our 'first reading', we looked in particular at points of similarity and difference in how students expressed their understanding of employability, and how they responded to the online recruitment materials. Our 'second reading' looked more closely at how students talked of employability and recruitment processes, as well as apparent tensions and contradictions (Clarke 2005). We noticed how much time was spent talking about how to 'signal' and *project* employability, even in cases where students had earlier given only a rudimentary definition of employability. We pick up this point later in the findings section. In our second reading, we also looked for practices of governance operating in the domain of graduate recruitment. We had originally anticipated governance practices to be operating through employers, and the way employers presented employability to their online audiences. However, when talking to students it became evident that governance also operated indirectly through third-parties, and in ways we had not expected. This point is discussed towards the end of our findings section.

Findings

What does employability mean?

The students in our sample expressed a range of views, in ways that hinted at their struggles to pin down this rather ambiguous concept. Morley calls employability a 'socially decontextualised signifier' (2001, 131): a concept that cannot be sensibly reduced to a short definition because its meaning is always context-specific. When asked what employability meant to them, many students responded with synonyms heard in public discourse, such as 'skills' or 'attributes', or used phrases which tied employability to 'getting a job'. Some recognised that employability is not a straightforward function of *possessing* skills, knowledge and attributes, because what mattered was 'fit' with what the employer wanted. The notion of *cultural* fit was talked about more often than *competence* fit, pointing to the perceived importance of cultural capital and personal dispositions (such as 'willingness to give all your efforts' [Sapta, Psychology[9]]). This suggests that many students recognise that recruitment involves an element of 'cultural gatekeeping into occupational communities' (Hora 2020, 307), and that the notion of fit may be exclusionary if it leads to employee cloning (Blackmore and Rahimi 2019). The need for a 2:1 degree classification as a basic credential was mentioned by many. Some listed extra-curricular activities undertaken to distinguish themselves from other graduates, such as volunteering. Michael had worked in 3-month American summer camps specifically advertised to students like him as opportunities that look 'good on your CV'. The content of the degree programme was seldom mentioned unless prompted. One business student [Jess] listed courses such as *Ethics in Business* which she felt enhanced her employability, but in general business students tended to treat the degree curriculum as a plain vanilla baseline. Science students recognised that particular degrees opened doors to roles such as biomedical clinician. The degree-as-baseline was a common

refrain, perhaps because employability has become associated with transferable, generic skills. Here, a student compares generic and specific skills:

> For me, employability is about being able to do all these base tasks – like working in a team, taking responsibility for your tasks, prioritising workload – to enable you to *go to the next stage* and perform the specifics of your job. [Mina, Marketing]

This future-oriented comment contrasted with others that questioned the value of the degree in terms of its employability currency. A worry about having enough 'experience' on your CV was mentioned by many students, who wanted to know 'how to distinguish yourself' from everyone else with a degree qualification. One student talked of a 50/50 balance between work experience and education on her CV. She explained:

> What I've read on the internet, is that employers want to have lots of other skills, extra activity, extra work, even unpaid work.
>
> They want more experience. [Emily, Marketing]

Signalling employability

The undergraduate degree as 'merely a starting point [for a job]' was a narrative articulated by many students. This narrative was also present in some graduate recruitment sites that devalue a degree in comparison to the professional experience and qualifications that an employer provides (Handley, 2018). None of the study participants chose to counter the narrative with reference to their university's wider educational and cultural purposes, but instead, they became much more expressive when talking about how they *signalled* their employability to others. The function of job market signalling was theorised in Spence's seminal article in which he outlined how employers rely on signals (i.e. indicators) of workers' potential productivity since the latter cannot be directly observed during the recruitment process (Spence 1973). Job markets are characterised by information asymmetry, and job seekers are assumed to select appropriate signals to enhance the likelihood of getting a good job whilst minimising signalling 'costs' (358). Doing so has become particularly important in an overcrowded graduate job market where employers are looking for signals of 'standout employability' (Anderson and Tomlinson 2021, 675).

In our study, several examples of signalling were given. Many students had adopted mnemonics like S.T.A.R.[10] which were promoted by careers advisers as thinking frameworks signalling analytical rigour and competence when applied in online situational tests. Jenny (Business) gave an illustration of one such test – *'in 200 words demonstrate how you've shown great customer service – and then you have to answer it with S.T.A.R.'* Whilst some expressed confidence in signalling their employability, others were anxious. Nevertheless, most students had an opinion on what they ought to do. When asked how they assume organisations assess the employability of graduates, one student replied that it was from signals such as the 'kind of things you've done' and the decisions made. She elaborated with extra-curricular examples: working for a certain employer meant you could explain why you chose to work there or why you left, or why you volunteered ('showing you care') [Jess, Marketing]. This acceptance of the task of crafting a CV to showcase particular aspects of employability was especially prevalent among students studying business or marketing. To some extent, one can

interpret this signalling as instrumental action, an example of agency akin to impression management (Goffman 1959). Students had learnt that employability had to be signalled, and some even recognised that the job market was a 'signalling game' (Spence 1973, 356) which required skill in deducing which categories of signals were most powerful, and then crafting ways to perform those signals. We use the term 'performance agency' to acknowledge that students were more-or-less agentic in how they performed employability signals. In the following quotation – longer than usual to indicate a line-of-thinking from 'players' (Brown and Hesketh 2004) who recognise that signalling is a game – a business student explains how he will perform employability, and indicates how he is learning to create the right story.

> I think most employers are looking for a diverse CV, showing a balance between education and social life and sports and networking. So it's a big combination of everything … so they can see you're diverse and you're open to everything, you're willing to change. You show your character as well. That you're a team player, you're people oriented, that you include people or you're cooperative. And again it's about change, so they see that you're not just fixed on one location the whole time, but you're willing to go somewhere else, you're willing to go the extra mile. When I ask my dad, '*What do you think, how should I grow my CV?*' he says, '*Make sure you just get work.*' But when I asked *Oracle*[11] [his previous internship employer] they said to me, '*Well, if I look at your CV now it's best for you to do maybe some charity work because it shows that you're giving something back to society and you've got a story there to tell.*' [Jack, Business, emphasis added]

Reading graduate recruitment websites

The quotation from Jack juxtaposes his father's and previous employer's advice about how to project employability. Other students mentioned the influence of lecturers who spoke of their industry experience, and of alumni. In this study, we were also interested in the potential influence of graduate recruitment webpages as a site where students would 'read' – literally and symbolically – what the idealised graduate worker is supposed to be. Our tentative hypothesis was that recruitment websites might have a governance effect by encouraging students – in their role as website audience – to discern the visual and descriptive characteristics of the ideal graduate worker, to self-evaluate against that idealisation, and then potentially try to *become* that idealisation or else actively *resist* it. A Foucauldian explanation for the 'becoming or resisting' response would be that individuals have internalised a particular way of categorising workers, and are now evaluating themselves against that idealisation as they engage with recruitment materials.

In our study, participants talked in a variety of patterned ways about their interactions with the graduate recruitment websites, sometimes in apparently contradictory ways depending on the conversational context. Four discursive repertoires (Potter and Wetherell 1987) were identified among study participants: reading for 'fit'; reading instrumentally; distancing; and benign cynicism.

A small proportion of students talked of searching the websites for information on the desirable characteristics of graduate workers. We call this repertoire *reading for fit*. For example, Jenny talked of searching for 'the list':

> Employability is about the skills needed. Does the person fit? So, usually I look at the job description, and it has '*you need to be creative and analytical thinking*'. It has a list, so I look

> at that. Employability is really whether you just fit what they're looking for. (Jenny, Business, emphasis added)

Jenny wanted details about what graduates would be doing. She particularly liked how Aldi presented numerous photographs representing people at work in their first day, week and month because photographs portray what the job might require, and who might fit.

> You can imagine yourself working there, by looking at the pictures. So I *actually know* that this is gonna be a hard job, because of the pictures, because of how detailed it is. They really do explain everything. (emphasis added).

What mattered to the employer was inferred by the viewer from the visual choices on the recruitment pages. For example, Jess (Marketing) noted that Jaguar Land Rover foregrounded the car and the brand, whereas Aldi focused on people and their typical day-to-day work activities. For her, JLR was more elitist and selective: 'It says 'if you're good enough, then you can apply', whereas Aldi and GlaxoSmithKleine emphasise 'how you'll fit in''.

Some students searched for 'day-in-the-life' YouTube videos for an insight into the organisation, the facilities, and the interactions between workers [Michael-Biomedicine]. Others talked of reading websites for information on 'values and ethics' – either to discern person-organisation fit, or for instrumental reasons to be able to reflect back the same phrases during recruitment interviews. The following quotation illustrates a repertoire we call *reading instrumentally.* This repertoire has similarities to *reading for fit*, but carries a flavour of action done instrumentally so as to inform the subsequent signalling of employability.

> I prepared for the assessment centre by trying to memorise what they had said about their values and their ethics, and then saying that *I completely agreed with the ethics and their values and I'm the right man for this kind of thing because … I believe we believe in the same things*. Stuff like that. [Andy, English Literature, emphasis added]

Reading the websites sometimes provoked a discursive repertoire of *distancing:* students talked of how the working environment was explicitly *not* a place they wanted to inhabit, or they talked of dis-identifying with the type of worker portrayed. When reading the Aldi website, Mina (Marketing) responded quite differently to Jenny. Noting its structured portrayal of typical work activities, she inferred that Aldi probably wanted someone analytical, hardworking, and 'fitting their structure', and then added after a short pause 'Not me!' The possibility of *distancing* may be what Aldi intends, since governance can work by creating categorisations which people use to recognise whether they belong or even want to belong, and whether the job is likely to be accessible by 'someone like me'.

A frequently-articulated repertoire was that of *benign cynicism*: a recognition that organisations will want to sell their employer brand by tactically projecting a particular impression, for example 'selling not quite a lifestyle but a commitment to you' (Lottie, Marketing, talking about Aldi). Adam, a Business student, said his first impression of the Goldman Sachs site was 'it's all very CSR[12]', and he later commented that it is so easy for the major companies to 'put on this façade of who they want people to think they are'. Branding was seen as a norm of contemporary life. Some students were quick to interpret what they assumed was the intended meaning of particular image or word

choices. Emma (Anthropology), for example, noted an image of a man and two women on the Jaguar Land Rover site, and then commented:

> Motor engineering is typically considered a male dominated field, and it's showing that '*we have women too*', and they're also quite attractive, so it's sort of saying look at how successful and attractive and inclusive this company is.

'Getting to the face-to-face interview'

During students' talk of recruitment processes, what became apparent was the emergence of other 'helper' mechanisms that shape students' understanding of how they ought to behave and who they should be in order to appear suitable for a graduate job. These are discussed in the next section. What also became apparent was the depth of anxiety experienced by some students, particularly those already engaged in recruitment and selection processes. Their anxiety was partly anticipatory, having heard tales of arduous recruitment processes from others. The anxiety deepened with direct experience of the long trajectory of online tests, automated skype interviews, and other hurdles that had to be passed before getting to an assessment centre or real-person interview. One student talked of having to project a desirable image in early recruitment stages before being able to 'be herself' at a final interview.

> It's not so much that you force yourself to be someone else but you do have to show or emphasise *their* values. Maybe they don't quite match, or you don't quite feel as strongly about them, but you have to demonstrate it to get to the next stage. *It's about getting to the face-to-face*, to meeting people – getting rid of all the online things – *then* you can be yourself. But you're always having to push and, *become the company*, to get to that bit. [Lottie, Marketing, emphasis added]

The seduction of 'helper' technologies

Stories from some interviewees indicate that students are being increasingly drawn towards new technologies to learn how to signal employability. These technologies are mediated by algorithmic processes, and instantiated in psychometric tests, gamification apps, talent-spotting apps, and a variety of online and often-automated applications which offer coaching, practice runs for the psych testing, and hints-and-tips – perhaps to beat 'the system' and reach the holy grail of a final interview. Only one-quarter of our sample had direct experience of applying for graduate programme recruitment, and all from that group had tales of the online tests or de-personalised or online video interviews. Jack (Business) recounted applying for Google: 'I had to do three online tests first, and then I finally got three Skype conferences and then they said on the fourth, 'we don't need you, you're under-qualified'.

In the face of multi-stage preliminary tests, students seemed most open to helper technologies that offer a promise of a helping hand. Lottie talked of the *Debut* smartphone application:

> You can build your own profile on the [*Debut*] app and then you get talent spots, so it's like, '*Oh, congratulations, you have been talent spotted by BT*[13]' and you get first slot to register for the BT video talking about their graduate scheme. You can be fast-tracked. If they're trying

> new innovative ways to engage a new audience, I like that. I appreciate it. And you connect with them better because *it gives you hints and tips* about the application process. [Lottie, Marketing, emphasis added]

Online games were also mentioned, such as one on the Ernst & Young website that tested for logic, memory, and perception reaction, and awarded John Lewis vouchers or summer internships to those people with the highest score. Students who had encountered these helper technologies were positive about them. All assumed that the help gave them an advantage over others, but one surmised that her longstanding business interests were surely more authentic 'than comments just picked up from a job site' [Mina, Marketing].

Whilst some students felt they could instrumentally draw out useful advice and tips from these interventions, a few expressed frustration and growing anxiety about how to master the recruitment process and how to obtain the best advice. Jessica felt she was doing all the right things, but her failure so far to get a graduate job was making her increasingly vulnerable to the seductive promise from yet another – maybe better – source of advice. Jessica exhibited a dependence on advice, and illustrates what Archer calls fractured reflexivity (2012), where the internal conversations are overwhelmed by choices and advice to the detriment of agentic decision-making.

> I go to university, and yet I can't even get a job at Tesco, so what is it they want? … It's frustrating. I work so hard for [the online assessments], but if you can't get past that –. I'm hard-working and I like a challenge – I think that should make me employable. *You can tell what they want you to mention*. I've done so much research. I get all of those books, and I'm looking for the type of person they want. You know, in Careers, they have the books like TARGETjobs, and there will be a page about how to update your CV, so I'll read those and I'll make notes and then I'll go back to my CV … I don't want it to look like 'oh, she's copied that' [Jenny, Business, emphasis added]

Discussion

For many final-year students, looking for a graduate job is part of a wider rite-of-passage marking the transition from university student to employable worker. In the face of long, competitive recruitment and selection processes, many students value insights about how they should present themselves as employable candidates. This article contends that students situated in this transitional space are likely to be open to the influence of socialisation mechanisms that shape their assumptions about what graduate employability looks like – mechanisms which Foucault, Rose and other have called discourses and practices of governance (e.g. Foucault 1978a, 1982; Rose 1999).

This study used interviews and focus groups to explore how students talk about employability and graduate recruitment processes. We used elicitation materials from graduate programme recruitment websites, and provided space for topics introduced by participants such as their use of talent-matching smartphone applications ('apps'). Unlike large-scale surveys, the study did not aim for generalisability to business and science students in a post-1992 UK university. Instead, our aim was to shine a light on recruitment-related practices which seem to be socialising the way students understand and then seek to signal employability.

Our analysis of student conceptualisations of employability resonates with previous research highlighting students' apparent familiarity with the terminology of skills and

personal character (e.g. Tymon 2013). Many students recited qualities of graduate employability such as flexibility, commitment, team-working skills, and problem-solving skills. A superficial familiarity seemed accompanied by an acceptance that these labels reflect who employable graduates *are or should be*. This implies an acceptance of the employability discourse in terms of its substantive content.

However, the reciting of employability qualities tended to be followed by a longer conversation about how particular qualities can be signalled, and the choices available in signalling employability; for example, how a 'caring nature' can be implied by adding schools-volunteering to one's CV. There were indications that students are learning to become what Brown and Hesketh termed 'players' (2004) in a 'signalling game' (Spence 1973, 356), instrumentally discerning how to signal their potential as an attractive employee. In our exploratory study, over half of students used player language. This suggests that student agency is more prevalent in their choices of how to perform employability, i.e. employability as *process*, rather than in their choices about how to substantively develop their capabilities, i.e. employability as *possession* (Holmes 2013). We have called this performance agency.

We initially assumed that students learned what employability 'really means' by reading online graduate recruitment materials and observing how organisations present themselves, what their values and culture are, and therefore whether there might be a fit with themselves. However, of the four discursive repertoires identified in our exploratory study – *reading for 'fit'; reading instrumentally; distancing;* and *benign cynicism* – only the first partially resonates with what Brown and Hesketh (2004) call a 'purist' position on becoming employable. 'Purists' believe that the recruitment process is objective, and that all one has to do is try hard, be true to oneself, and locate an organisation whose espoused culture would create a person-organisation fit. Few students used the *reading for fit* repertoire. By contrast, the majority of students used another repertoire, that of *benign cynicism*. They assumed and accepted that organisations were trying to project a positive employer brand – whether grounded in reality or not. This seemed to propel students towards greater reliance on other sources such as personal contacts and advice networks to find out what an organisation's culture was like, and how to project employability.

Our study indicates that the advisory space is rapidly moving from University careers services towards online platforms or mobile apps such as *Indeed* or *Debut*, mediated by algorithmic decisioning and funded by third party commercial organisations who have little direct connection with the employers or universities themselves. This means that the mechanisms by which students are becoming socialised to understand employability are increasingly out of the control of universities, graduate employers, or the state. Indeed, this trend seems to reflect a commercialisation of advice. The advice is, in Foucault's terminology, a practice or 'technology' of governance – a way in which individuals become socialised and learn to self-evaluate themselves in particular ways. Therefore the commercialisation of this kind of advice is of concern. Furthermore, although the changing landscape is not necessarily relevant for all students or all employment sectors, the trend towards online third-party advice and away from university careers services is likely to grow, for a number of reasons.

One reason is the rapid growth of information technologies such as machine learning to inform recruitment and selection decisioning (Stone et al. 2015). Part of that trend is the

gamification of recruitment, especially for young workers (Tansley, Hafermalz, and Dery 2016; Georgiou and Nikolaou 2020). As recruitment moves online, and CVs and personal data are shared with third-party apps such as *Debut*, recruitment becomes digitised and potentially monetised by commercial platforms in a process fuelled by surveillance capitalism and the value of aggregated personal data (Zuboff 2019). It is plausible that recruitment advice platforms are operating on a business model whereby interactions with students are free because their data (e.g. uploaded CVs, and responses to online tests linked to personal data) are highly valuable to the data aggregator. Such online developments are likely to increase in a post-COVID, more online society. A second reason relates to what some argue is the rise of the 'therapeutic society' (Wright 2011; Ecclestone 2009) whereby individual increasingly seek out advice, mentoring and coaching. We contend that these social trends, enabled by digitalisation, influence the way students come to understand employability and how they ought to be and/or project themselves to find a desirable graduate job.

Conceptually, our study was inspired by the research of Foucault, Rose and others who examine the shaping of identities and the 'conduct[ing] of conduct' from a governance perspective (e.g. Townley 1994; Llamas 2006; Boland 2016). Classic studies have demonstrated the power of advisory and related 'helper' practices to guide people as they navigate the choices and anticipated futures available to them. Examples include Townley's (1994) study of career governance in HR performance appraisal processes, and Foucault's (1978c) research on Catholic confessional practices as practices for shaping the confessors' understanding of themselves. Foucault's theorisation of governance emphasises the interplay between discourse and practices to shape conduct. Critiques of Foucault's work note its neglect of individual agency, except for occasional reference to resistance. Our research contributes to the theorisation of governance by highlighting how agency can lie in how individuals choose to perform and signal desired identities, whether such performances are knowingly instrumental or not, and whether or not the performances authentically reflect the capabilities of the performer. Among students in our study, this form of performance agency was more prominent than an alternative form of agency that questions and challenges the substantive meaning of employability and the discourse that sustains it. Performance agency might be viewed as superficial and a mere reinforcement of the status quo. However, such a view risks imposing normative judgements on individuals about what their agency 'should' entail. Performance agency can instead be viewed as a practical accomplishment – a way of negotiating institutions such as the labour market, and learning to play the signalling game using whatever tools (such as helper apps) seem to have utility.

The problem, we argue, is that although the helper apps may seem an easy 'quick win' route, and may be used in good faith by job-seekers, the owners of those apps may be more interested in obtaining marketable data than in offering tailored, relevant tests and advice. This new direction in graduate recruitment has important implications for young adults if their employment trajectories are shaped less by experienced university careers advisers and trusted personal contacts, and more by third-party platforms with commercial motivations. The more that employability is constructed as a process of signalling and projecting one's potential – and as a process that can be developed through intermediaries such as advisory apps – the less apparent is the value of substantive knowledge and academic backbone of a university degree.

The small size of our study is a limitation common to exploratory studies, and our aim is not to generalise to all university students or young people but to contribute to debates about how graduates try to become and project employability. Not all of our student participants had experience of helper technologies, but most who were applying for graduate programmes had, and there are signs that this form of governance is becoming increasingly prevalent. Our study indicates a shifting dynamic of influence between educational, labour market and commercial institutions which warrants further research, so that appropriate policy interventions can be developed.

Notes

1. Graduate development programmes are varied in their structure and content. Illustrations of such programmes in the UK can be found here: https://www.top100graduateemployers.com/
2. www.skype.com
3. https://zoom.us/
4. https://www.indeed.co.uk/
5. https://debut.careers/
6. https://www.top100graduateemployers.com/
7. Post-1992 Universities were former Polytechnics that gained university status following UK legislation in 1992. They tend to offer degrees in traditional disciplines as well as applied subjects.
8. https://www.maxqda.com/
9. Pseudonyms are used throughout this article
10. Situation, Task, Action, Result
11. www.sap.com
12. Corporate Social Responsibility
13. British Telecom

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Declaration of contribution of authors

KH and BdO contributed to the grant application, undertook fieldwork, and developed the analysis. KH wrote the first draft, and BdO commented on and contributed to successive drafts. Both authors approved the final version of the paper.

Statement of ethical approval

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ORCID

Karen Handley http://orcid.org/0000-0003-4232-6570

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