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‘Lacking’ subjects: challenging the construction of the ‘empowered’ graduate in museum, gallery and heritage studies

Abstract: This article challenges what is now a common assumption in Higher Education; that teaching for employability will result in enabled and empowered graduates. Drawing upon empirical data, and Foucault’s concept of subjectification, we argue that discourses of employability instead encouraged museum, gallery and heritage postgraduate students at one UK-based institution to perceive themselves as subjects ‘lacking’ the resources needed for work – an understanding of self that formed prior to study, which then permeated the entire learning and teaching experience. Moreover, we note that the trajectory from ‘lacking student’ to ‘employable graduate’ is often reliant upon an accrual of assets (e.g. work experience, skills) not openly available to all. As such, the article sounds a note of caution with regards the rhetoric of employability within Higher Education, while giving voice to students’ perspectives and anxieties around employability.

Keywords: employability; subjectification; Higher Education; museums studies; gallery studies; heritage studies

Introduction

There is no doubt that universities in the UK have lately come under pressure to ‘increase their share of the graduate employment market’ (Minocha et al. 2017: 237). This pressure, exemplified by changes in the standards by which universities are measured (as per the introduction of Teaching Excellence Frameworks and the ranking of individual courses according to graduate earnings), tends to be driven by stakeholder understandings of employability as a ‘good thing’ for all. For example, Advance HE calls for employability to be further ‘embedded’ into Higher Education in order to ‘enable graduates to make successful transitions [...] benefitting them, the economy and their communities’ (Norton and Tibby, 2020: 5). Similarly, it is frequently suggested that this kind of teaching will result in students and graduates who are ‘enabled’, ‘equipped’ (Norton and Tibby, 2020: 5) and even ‘empowered’ (Scott et al. 2017).

This article takes issue with such claims, and asks: how do discourses of employability shape students’ understandings of self? In what follows, we draw upon empirical, qualitative data

collected between 2018-2020, which tracked two cohorts of postgraduate students enrolled on either a museum, gallery or heritage studies programme at a university in the north of England, and Foucault's concept of subjectification (1972, 1997) - or understandings of the self that are, in our case, at least partly discursively constructed, informed and 'reconceived [...] through employability narratives and practices' (Dalrymple, 2021: 69). We argue that such discourses produce a powerful form of subjectification whereby students perceive themselves to be unfit for work, or 'lacking'. Indeed, it was often this sense of 'lack' that prompted many students to undertake a postgraduate qualification in the first place. More importantly, we demonstrate that students tended not to make the transition from 'lacking subject' to 'employable graduate' during their studies – despite employability provision being embedded into the curriculum in several different ways (including work-based and experiential learning, skill development and so forth). Rather, students continued to perceive themselves as deficient even in the face of more positive understandings and narratives (e.g. good grades, strong records of voluntary work etc.). As a result, students, and particularly those unable to access forms of privilege, reported feelings of anxiety, panic, and even hopelessness; feelings that stand in stark contrast to the more positive expectations invoked by Higher Education organisations, where employability related teaching is almost automatically considered to be an enhancement of students' experiences.

The article thus offers three contributions. 1. It offer a much-needed student-centred perspective to a debate where students' voices are largely absent, and where influential initiatives and policies, at both the national and institutional level, urge an ever more embedded approach to employability without addressing the anxieties and forms of subjectification experienced – and 'lived' - by students. 2. We argue for the 'lacking subject' as a way to understand what discourses of employability *do*; how they give meaning to, and shape, students' understandings of self. 3. We critically explore our findings in relation to a variety of contextual factors and structural conditions present in the museum, gallery and heritage sector, which we suggest work in combination to prevent students from actualising their employability, or matching up to the vision of the 'ideal graduate'.

Employability, students and subjectification

Employability is now widely considered to be a core part of the teaching and learning experience within Higher Education, with universities in the UK facing a raft of performance management audits (Christie, 2019) aimed at ensuring graduates are 'work-ready'.

Employability, in this sense, tends to be invoked as a ‘good thing’ for students and graduates. For example, organisations such as Advance HE proactively advocate for an ‘embedded’ approach to employability, where employability is defined as:

[...] opportunities to develop knowledge, skills, experiences, behaviours, attributes, achievements and attitudes that enable graduates to make successful transitions, benefitting them, the economy and their communities. (Norton and Tibby, 2020: 5)

Norton and Tibby (2020: 5) are further explicit about the benefits of such provision for students, indicating it ‘supports’ or ‘enables’ students in these transitions, helping them to ‘manage their careers’, and ‘enhancing [...] long-term prospects’. Similarly, Scott et al. (2017) describe students benefiting from such provision as ‘empowered’, while individual universities in the UK commonly draw upon employability statistics in their marketing in order to appeal to prospective students (Bennett et al., 2017; Divan et al. 2019: 491).

Yet while students and graduates are a much-lauded beneficiary of employability-related teaching, student or graduate-centred understandings of employability largely remain ‘missing’ (Tymon, 2011: 849) from debate. For example, research into the skill sets or personal attributes deemed desirable by employers (e.g. Bridgstock, 2009; Hinchliffe and Jolly, 2010), tends to position students as ‘gap fillers’ for the labour market, while policy frameworks, such as the white paper *Success as a Knowledge Economy: Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility and Student Choice* (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2016: 8) frame students as ‘exports’ of a university system, ‘consumers’ of an educational experience, and little more than a wealth driving educated mass. Similarly, in their review of employability literature between 2016-2021, Dalrymple et al. (2021: 43) note the routine ‘positioning of students as novices [...] and/or consumers’, rather than key stakeholders, in discussions of employability provision. In this sense, employability almost always remains a conversation *about* students and graduates, rather than a conversation *with* students and graduates (key exceptions here include studies that explore student understandings of the term ‘employability’ (Gedye and Beaumont, 2018), their perceptions of success (Rothwell et al., 2009), the ‘perceived connections between international experience and graduate employability’ (Crossman and Clarke 2010: 599), and the pressure students feel to ‘stand out’ Tholen (2014: 14) or ‘add value’ (Tomlinson 2008, 2016) to their degrees). For

our purposes, it is worth noting that none of the above literature focuses, or even explicitly includes, students enrolled on museum, gallery or heritage postgraduate programmes.

Another line of interest concerns identity-formation and/or more discursive approaches to employability, such as Holmes (2001: 115) on the ‘interactionist’ concept of graduate identity, where identity claims might be affirmed (or otherwise) by ‘significant others’, or more Foucauldian approaches to employability that understand this central concept to be discursively constructed (e.g. Boden and Nedeva, 2010). Here, we note with interest Handley’s (2018: 240) work on the construction of the ‘employable graduate’ via the texts found on employers’ graduate careers webpages, where such websites ‘encourage self-assessment against an idealization of the graduate worker’ even before students are employed. Thus, Handley, drawing upon the work of Foucault, argues that students come to know and conduct themselves in line with ‘particular subject positions and the subjectivities associated with them’ (see also Rose 1999), where recognition of the ‘employable graduate’ - a subject that both carries the responsibility for self-improvement and acts rationally in relation to set norms and targets – actively shapes students’ understandings of self (Hanley 2018: 253). Allen et al. (2013), Banks (2017), Skeggs (2004), Ashton (2016), and McRobbie (2015) have likewise all explored how understandings of self are produced in relation to neoliberal discourses and practices, where, for example, work placements, and the ‘implicitly classed, raced and gendered’ ideals that implicitly operate within them, act as a governing technology to ‘filter’ certain Higher Education students *out* of work (Allen et al. 2013: 421), and where even the desire to ‘be creative’ can enable exploitative working conditions and practices (McRobbie, 2015). Similarly, Weiskopf and Loacker are eloquent on the ways by which discourses encourage people to ‘make the aims of the government their own’; where the languages of empowerment and self-responsibility allows for those who transgress to be stigmatised as ‘irresponsible’ (2006: 409-410).

In this article, we draw upon, and extend, the above by exploring the forms of subjectification experienced by students enrolled on museum, gallery and heritage studies postgraduate programmes. This focus allows us to a) explore student accounts in depth, and b) to further unpack key findings in relation to the factors, logics and contexts that animate ‘professionalisation degrees’ (Dubuc, 2011: 499) of this kind. We posit that this sector-specific detail is crucial for any study that seeks to understand students’ employability.

Methodology

This study is concerned with the impact of discourses of employability upon students' experiences of Higher Education, and the forms of subjectification those discourses give rise to. As such, it employs a Foucauldian lens (1972, 1997) to explore how individuals construct and (re)negotiate understandings of self in relation (or reaction) to discourses, where discourses are understood to 'have prescriptive and codifying effects' (Handley 2018: 241) including the construction of particular types of subjects, and the behavioural norms attached to such subjects. The project thus took a meso level approach (Tomlinson, 2017: 10) to employability, exploring the ways in which students' individual experiences were mediated via macro-level discourses of employability (as found in policy frameworks, educational systems, job specifications and so forth), whilst leaving room for personal, localised, and non-standardised accounts (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2000: 1144).

The qualitative data set is taken from phase one (2018-20) of an on-going project, and comprises 15 semi-structured interviews and 18 responses to an online questionnaire, conducted with postgraduate students enrolled on Museum Studies, Gallery Studies, or Heritage Studies MA programmes at one university in the north of England. This small sample restricts findings (see the later discussion) but enables the kind of fine grained analysis of qualitative data, in relation to the specific structural forces at play in the sector, required to answer the research question. Ethical approval was granted prior to the commencement of study, and students are referred to below by a codename to support anonymity (e.g. MS F4 2018-19 indicates a female (F) Museum Studies (MS) interview respondent from the 2018-19 cohort, QR indicates a questionnaire respondent). Identifying data has been removed or redacted. Students were recruited via an open call issued by programme leaders and received a consent form and information sheet before taking part in the study which clearly set out their right to withdraw.

Interviews lasted between 30-45 minutes and covered students' motivations for study, their experiences of employability provision, and their hopes, fears, and ambitions for the future. Online questionnaires used a mixture of closed and open questions to cover the same ground, and in both instances, questions were developed in relation to an initial literature review. For the 2018-19 students, interviews took place in Semester 2, just before the start of their placements and independent research projects. For the 2019-20 cohort, whose studies were interrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic, interviews took place four months after the

completion of their courses, between January and February 2021, and questionnaires between November 2020 – January 2021. Nine interviewees were registered on the Museum Studies course, with a further four from Gallery Studies and two from Heritage Studies. 73% of those interviewed identified as female (students were able to select trans/non-binary options) and 33% were international students. These figures are broadly reflective of the programme sizes and admissions data held for the programmes. Questionnaire responses were broadly similar in terms of the breakdown of students, with 55% of respondents registered on the Museum Studies programme, and the rest split evenly between Heritage and Gallery Studies.

Full transcripts and questionnaire data were coded inductively, where multiple categories were flexibly developed between the research team through regular, detailed group discussion as the project unfolded. From these categories, key themes, understood as recurring patterns, were identified and reviewed (e.g. through re-reading) until we arrived at the central organising concept of the ‘lacking subject’ (as per reflective thematic analysis set out by Terry et al. (2017: 20). As such, we acknowledge that identified themes did not (and, indeed, could not, ever) naturally ‘emerge’ from the data set, but rather were identified and shaped by the research team, their research interests and backgrounds, as they engaged with the data. Similarly, we acknowledge that students were, at the very least, aware of the members of staff conducting the study, and had often been taught directly by them. There is a power imbalance here that will have undoubtedly shaped students’ responses.

Research Findings

In what follows, we present data in relation to three key themes: 1. students’ motivations to undertake further study; 2. the value attached to ‘practical experience’, and; 3. positional competition. In each case, we argue that students positioned and understood themselves as subjects ‘lacking’ the capacities and assets required for employment. As we argue below, the identification of this (persistent) subject-position is important, because it refutes any simplistic account of subjectification, whereby students might simply ‘become’ the figure of the employable graduate in order to stand out in a competitive job market. In the final discussion, we further draw out these findings to suggest that the students in our study did not actively resist calls to subjectification, but were instead caught between high employer expectations, individualised discourses of employability, and structural inequalities that prevented them from ‘matching up’ to any ideal construction of the employable graduate.

As stated above, we concentrate upon postgraduate students from Museum, Gallery and Heritage Studies programmes only, to allow for this kind of fine-grained discussion. For those unfamiliar with such programmes; the first Museum Studies MA in the UK was launched in the 1960s and they are now relatively widespread. It is expected that graduates will go on to seek work in the sector, although there is some debate as to whether such courses are ‘providers of professional development’ or ‘pre-entry training’ (Jennings, 2016: 3), or both. It should also be noted that in recent years, the impact of austerity (Museums Association, 2015) and now COVID-19 (O’Brien et al., 2020) has greatly reduced the numbers of entry-level jobs available.

1. The ‘lacking subject’ as motivation for further study

One of the clearest indications of students understanding themselves as ‘lacking’ was identified in relation to their motivations to undertake a further qualification in the first place. For example, we found that students demonstrated a strong awareness of employer expectations, particularly around the need to obtain ‘practical experience’, even before they started the degree, and that this held for students with experience of work in the sector as well as those without. Thus, students who had worked or volunteered in the sector before tended to describe the degree, and the opportunities for practical work included therein, as an opportunity to gain “more experience” (GS, F4, 2019-20) or “more practical knowledge to [...] bolster me for a future job” (MS, F3, 2019-20). Similarly, those without any prior experience of the cultural sector tended to articulate the decision to undertake the degree on the basis that such degrees were a more “sellable and practical” (MS, M2, 2019-20) option than, for example, art history.

Students were also acutely aware that they were attempting to enter a highly competitive sector. They spoke, for example, of a general awareness of the “competition for jobs” (HS, F1, 2019-20), and across all interviewees there were perceptions that finding work would be “challenging” (HS, F1, 2019-20), if not “extremely difficult” (GS, F3, 2019-20) – again, sentiments common even amongst those who had no prior sectoral experience. Indeed, those few students unaware of the nature of the sector described learning about this competitiveness as a ‘stark’ (MS, M2, 2019-20) moment in their courses, which for some came as a ‘knock [to] my confidence’ (MS, F1, 2019-20).

Indeed, most of the students involved in the study had attempted to locate work prior to commencing their studies, but had either been unsuccessful or perceived their chances to be so slim as to be unrealistic. For example, students spoke of their “struggles in the past” (GS, F2, 2019-20) to find work, of internal roles lost to other candidates (MS, F2, 2019-20), and even dream jobs that were perceived to be so competitive that they were too “scary” to apply for (GS, F3, 2019-20). This sense of the impossibility of locating paid work was, at times, compounded by senior figures in the sector who advised students that “volunteering on its own isn’t enough”, and that ‘it would probably be in my best interests to do a Masters’ (HS, F1, 2019-20), or where a Masters was recommended as a way to transition from volunteering or front of house roles to something ‘more behind the scenes’ (GS, F4, 2019-20).

In this sense, the degree was roundly considered to be a ‘positional good’ or asset (Tomlinson, 2008) obtained for the purpose of ‘finding employment’ (HS, F2, 2018-19) or which would ‘gain me entry to higher level jobs than working up through an organisation’ (HS, M1, 2018-19). This is interesting, as it both departs from a previous study (where only 15.5% of similar graduates chose ‘gainful employment’ or ‘career advancement’ as a reason for taking up their studies (Duff et al., 2010: 368)) and because post-graduate qualifications actually hold something of an ambivalent status amongst employers and industry leads in the sector (e.g. Davies, 2007; Duff et al. 2010); a dissonance that may well be ascribed to the historical tension that has existed between the new museology of Museum Studies, and the museum world (Macleod, 2001; Teather, 1991), further amplified by what Jennings (2016: 3) observes as a recent ‘explosion in the number of museum studies courses’, resulting in ‘more graduates than there are jobs available’.

What we would stress, in addition to the above, is that the majority of students reported being unable, or perceived themselves as unable, to find work in the sector and thus, at the point they commenced their studies, commonly perceived themselves to be *lacking* – whether this concerned the lack of a qualification suggested by sector professionals to be a prerequisite, or a lack of practical experience, or confidence and so forth, and regardless of whether this lack was experienced or perceived. This understanding of the self as lacking, we argue, suggests a form of subjectification, and one that was indicated to carry an emotional weight (as per the unsuccessful job interviews, or the anxieties students expressed at the sheer number of candidates for entry-level positions). Indeed, understandings of the self as lacking appeared

to directly prompt a period of further study – as students hoped to forge a new, potentially more empowered, self through a period of self-improvement.

2. Resolving the ‘lacking self’; the pressure to acquire practical experience

What was immediately noticeable in our data set, however, was that students were largely unable to negotiate or construct a more positive or ‘work-ready’ sense of self through their studies. Nowhere was this more starkly illustrated than via the pressure for the ‘ideal graduate’ to have obtained practical experience – an asset that is prized by employers over postgraduate qualifications in the museum, gallery and heritage sector (Jennings, 2016).

The students in our study, perhaps unsurprisingly then, identified the embedded opportunities for work-based learning - or the ‘vocational aspects of the course’ (QR1) - as provided via two placement modules, as “a big factor” (MS, F1, 2019-20) in the decision to return to study, or even “one of the reasons why I chose [that university]” (GS, F4, 2019-20). It was common, for example, for students to talk of “the experience I needed” (MS, F1, 2019-20). This was the case even for students with considerable voluntary experience, such as the participant below, who had “done quite a lot of volunteering in different organisations and institutions” before embarking upon the degree, but still felt compelled to amass more:

One of the reasons why I studied the MA was so that I had some extra kind of grounding to be able to get my foot through the door as it were when that time came for job applications (GS, F4, 2019-20)

Interestingly, the pressure to obtain practical experience was largely synonymous, in student accounts, with opportunities to obtain a placement *and no other teaching method*. This was despite an embedded programme of employability-related teaching, including opportunities to curate a public exhibition and events programme, a module dedicated to the practical aspects of caring for collections, as well as a variety of practical skills including budgeting, label writing, audience engagement, critical thinking, and an independent research project. As a result, when the placements for the 2019-20 cohort were cancelled or cut short owing to COVID-19, students were palpably disappointed, noting that the placement “was the reason that I wanted to come” (MS, F4, 2019-20) or remarking that the “experience I’d been wanting [...] I didn’t end up getting” (MS, F1, 2019-20). Other students, reflecting just after the

completion of their programmes, made a direct connection between the cancelled placement and their current employment status, citing their lack of “hands-on experience” as “the reason” they were turned down for a paid position (HS, F1, 2019-20) or stressing that it made “applying for jobs quite difficult” (MS, F4, 2019-20).

Clearly, the experience of the 2019-20 cohort was exceptional, and it may be that other cohorts, able to access placements as usual, were more readily able to use this experience to reconceive a sense of self closer to that of the ‘employable graduate’. What we would suggest, however, is that the impact of COVID-19, and the dismay expressed by students, gives purchase on the pressure students felt to be ‘work-ready’. Moreover, we note with concern that students indicated that no amount of work experience was ever ‘enough’, and, as a result, even advantageously positioned students routinely perceived themselves to be lacking; requiring, as GS F4 2019-20 remarked above, yet more “extra [...] grounding” to get their feet “through the door”. In this sense, students appeared to be caught between high employer expectations and the practical opportunities offered (or not) to them on the ground, where any form of disadvantage (or even simply a perpetual need for ‘more experience’) acted to prolong understandings of lack.

3. ‘Lacking’ as ranking; positional competition

The final theme identified in the data set concerned students’ tendency to self-rank within their cohort, and, for the most part, to rank themselves ‘behind’ their peers. This tendency was largely expressed in academic terms, when students spoke of peers who ‘always knew a lot more than me’ (MS, F1, 2019-20), or identified themselves as having ‘very little confidence in my abilities’ (QR5), or needing more time to acclimatise to ‘being in an academic environment’ (QR11). In our study, every student interviewed expressed a sense of ‘positional competition’ (Tomlinson, 2008: 54) when asked about their employability.

Interestingly, students further positioned themselves, in relative terms, to graduates from other universities and even cohorts of graduates that would come later in time. For example, MS, M1, 2019-20 spoke of being “hyper aware [of] the sheer volume of new graduates all competing for stuff”, while others were similarly “aware that there is a graduating class that will be coming up this year as well, who will be looking for job opportunities” (HS, F1, 2019-20). Some students went further, summoning ‘a generalised other, a fellow competitor’

(Tholen, 2015: 774) ascribed with a seemingly inexhaustible list of qualities, skills and experiences, including possession of a ‘driving license’ (QR4), a ‘more consistent’ work history (HS, F1, 2018-19), a ‘more varied sort of volunteering’ history (MS, M1, 2019-20) or, simply being, that ‘one person who [...] click[s] slightly more with the interviewer’ (MS, F4, 2019-20). In each case, these were assets that the students felt they did not have, the absence of which caused them significant anxiety. Only one interviewee (HS, F1, 2018-19) ever referred to themselves as a “good” candidate. The vast majority thus continued to perceive themselves as ‘lacking’ – at least in some respect - right into the period immediately post-graduation and even when there was an abundance of positive evidence that they might have concentrated on instead (e.g. strong records of volunteer experience, high grades, positive feedback from tutors, the acquisition of new skills and so forth).

The persistence of the ‘lacking subject’

In the above, we have presented some of the ways in which students on postgraduate museums, galleries and heritage studies programmes exhibited understandings of self-hood that were, at least in part, discursively constructed, informed and ‘reconceived [...] through employability narratives and practices’ (Dalrymple, 2021: 69). We identify three key themes here: that students ‘arrived’ at postgraduate programmes keenly aware of themselves as lacking the assets and resources needed for paid work in the sector; the importance attached to embedded work experience as a means by which to (potentially) resolve this ‘lack’, and; students’ continued ranking of themselves as somehow ‘behind’ their peers. We argue that these themes together indicate a powerful form of subjectification that requires urgent attention, for while students indicated that the degree was part of a strategy of self-improvement that they hoped would help them ‘present’ as (more) employable, the understanding of self as lacking *persisted*. No student suggested a trajectory from ‘lacking student’ to ‘employable graduate’, despite having access to an embedded programme of employability-related teaching. Indeed, every student involved in the study spoke highly of the quality of teaching and learning they had experienced.

One possibility here is that students identified, and actively resisted, the construction of the ‘employable graduate’ and the norms associated with this construction (i.e. they purposively declined to ‘maximise’ their employability via the means available to them). However, given the widespread articulation of concern - even panic and hopelessness - over their employability, and a generally stated desire to ‘become’ work-ready, we do not think this is

the case. Rather, we posit that the figure of the ‘employable graduate’ actually necessitates a ‘lacking subject’ who accepts and is responsible for their own improvement. This understanding is reinforced, in our case, both by universities (as they ‘sell’ the benefits of postgraduate study) and within the sector (where many entry level posts require an MA).

It is at this point that the students in our study deviate from the suggested trajectory however, as the ‘lacking subject’ persists in the face of all the provision designed to reconfigure it into something closer to the empowered and employable graduate. Or, in a Foucauldian sense, we note here the failure of employability discourse to ‘form the object’ of which it speaks (Foucault 1972: 49). In the final discussion below, we further unpack this with regards the specific context and logics of the museum, gallery and heritage sector.

The failure to ‘match up’: context, structure and unequal opportunity

That the students in our study at times seemed unable to reconfigure themselves as ‘work-ready’ is an obvious concern for the authors, as teaching members of staff, and we suggest that several factors are at play. The first concerns the unique experience of the 2019-20 cohort, who experienced a great deal of disruption in their studies owing to COVID-19, including placements that were either cut short or cancelled outright. Doubtless, this fed into a narrative of ‘lack’ that persisted into the period post-graduation. A second possible factor concerns a failure on the part of the employability provision offered, where the teaching methods employed did not adequately support students to construct more positive understandings of self, or to see value in ‘experience’ beyond the placement.

These are urgent questions that we do not wish to shy away from. However, we would add other factors to the mix, including individualised discourses of employability (that encourage students to compete and self-rank), high employer expectations coupled with small numbers of entry-level jobs, and existing structural conditions and disadvantages that prevented some students from actualising their employability, or ‘matching up’ to the vision of the ‘ideal graduate’. Again, the specific context of the museum, gallery and heritage sector, and its relationship with Higher Education, is important here, for students were likely to perceive the programmes as ‘professionalisation degrees’ (Dubuc, 2011: 499), required, in some instances, for work in the sector. Students were also acutely aware of the impact of austerity (Museums Association, 2015) and then COVID-19 (O’Brien et al., 2020) in intensifying competition for an ever-decreasing number of entry level roles. In this sense, students seemed

to be caught between discourses of employability, the forms of subjectification they gave rise to, and the opportunities presented (or not) to them on the ground.

This was particularly the case for students who faced structural disadvantages (i.e. mature students, international students, students from working class backgrounds, and those who self-identified as female and/or black) who often struggled to ‘stand apart’ (Tholen, 2014: 14) from their peers, and thus to ‘play the game’ of employability (Brown et al, 2003). The most common barrier here concerned the students’ inability to partake in internships, volunteering or other forms of unpaid work that would ‘add value’ (as per Tomlinson, 2008) to their degrees, often on account of their financial situation, lack of industry connections, or the “geographical barrier” (QR13) of being located in the north of England. One student, for example, remarked “I’ve not had the background of knowing you need to do all this to then work in museums”, while another expressed her anxiety about the period post-graduation, noting:

I can’t afford to go back and be an intern again, or go back and [...] volunteer again and work my way up [...] I kind of need to [...] get a job, like a real job [...] unfortunately if that does not happen within a reasonable amount of time then I’m not really sure what is going to happen (HS, F1, 2018-19).

Clearly then, there are students who do not have ‘access to the same starting point’ (Skeggs, 2004: 75) and inequalities based on race, gender and class continue to inform just how ‘employable’ graduates might be (see also Allen et al. 2013, Budd, 2017, Morely, 2001), as do the ‘economic structures and conditions’ Phillipov (2021: 6) of the sector. Moreover, such realisations seemed to shape students’ ‘inner dialogues’ (Tomlinson, 2017: 6) and their expectations for the future. Thus, it was common for students who identified their own disadvantage to place themselves, “right at the bottom” (MS, F1, 2019-20) of their cohort, or to describe themselves as “distinctly unemployable” (MS, M1 2019-20)— regardless, again, of available evidence to the contrary (e.g. strong performance on the degree programme). Students’ very awareness of the structural disadvantages they faced - or they precise ways in which they understood themselves to be lacking – thus compounded the issue; reinforcing the challenges that lay ahead.

The role of unpaid work in the museum, gallery and heritage sector has attracted much critical attention, with Fair Museum Jobs (2018) arguing that it discriminates ‘against those from poorer backgrounds’. Similarly, in the cultural and creative industries more broadly, as well as within employability literature, there is increased understanding that employability is dependent on graduates’ ability to ‘negotiate access to the labour market and its opportunity structures’ (Tomlinson and Jackson, 2021: 886), that structural inequalities are embedded into the hiring and promotions processes (O’Brien et al. 2016, Oakley et al. 2017; Saha 2017; Taylor and O’Brien 2017, Banks 2017), and that unpaid work experience is often an ‘unaffordable luxury’ for those from working class backgrounds (Brook et al. 2020: 21).

What we would draw out here, in addition, is the impact of structural disadvantage and/or the lack of opportunity to obtain key assets (such as an inability to gain work experience because students cannot afford to work for free, or because placements are disrupted etc.) that might otherwise enable students to renegotiate their sense of self to something more akin to that of the ‘employable graduate’. Whether students *should* attempt to live up to this subject-position, given the individualisation involved, is a matter we leave to one side for the moment. Indeed, it may be that constructions of the empowered graduate are, in a deeply competitive field, now so idealized as to be unobtainable (i.e. see the list of factors students felt they lacked above). What remains, for the authors, is the pressing need to explore students’ understandings of their employability, their hopes, anxieties and fears, and – in this article - their enduring sense of not being ‘good enough’ for paid work in the sector.

Conclusion

The data in this study was drawn from museum, gallery and heritage studies postgraduate students at one university. We recognise the limitations here in terms of the sample size and institutional boundary, and make no claims for other subject areas within the cultural and creative industries, or for undergraduate students (who are likely to have less experience of work in the sector prior to study). Likewise, we note that the timing of data collection (a few months post-graduation for the 2019-20 cohort), and the considerable disruption caused by COVID-19, in terms of the availability of employability-related teaching as well as in reducing the number of (paid and unpaid) positions in the sector, is likely to have heightened feelings of unease amongst the students involved in our study.

Nevertheless, we believe that the research findings outlined above: 1) constitute a much-needed student perspective on employability that explores the anxieties and forms of subjectification experienced – and ‘lived’ - by students, 2) identify a particular form of subjectification – the ‘lacking subject’ – as a means by which to understand how discourses of employability shape students’ understandings of self, and 3) further considers the specific contextual and structural factors that reinforce, prompt or limit subject positions within a given sector. Indeed, while the impact of COVID-19 is, we hope, not to be repeated, we note the impact that similar interrupting factors may have upon students’ understandings of self – whether those ‘shocks’ be global events, sector-wide issues, or more personal in nature (e.g. a family illness or bereavement that prevents students from undertaking a placement).

For the authors, as teaching staff in Higher Education, these findings raise urgent questions about how we engage postgraduate students with employability-related teaching, bearing in mind the emotional anxieties and framings that students are likely to bring to these sessions. We must do more to understand their experiences if we are to support students in the development of professional, even empowered, understandings of self. It is therefore vital that students are brought ‘in’ to the employability debate, and are treated as full partners and collaborators, rather than ‘novices’ (Dalrymple et al. 2021: 43), if we are to understand how discourses of employability works, for whom, and how we might teach in the face of those pressures.

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