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Player, Purist, Pragmatist: a comparison of employability strategies in access to the solicitors' profession via alternative degree pathways

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ABSTRACT

Degree apprenticeships offer a new route to a degree in UK higher education, with policymakers emphasising their social mobility potential to widen access to graduate professions. In this context, this article compares the employability perceptions and strategies of aspiring solicitors on traditional university and degree apprenticeship routes in England. Following Bathmaker, Ingram, and Waller (2013), we adopt the analogy of 'playing the game' to explore how aspiring solicitors negotiate opportunities and barriers as they seek to succeed in higher education and progress into the legal profession. Drawing on interview data with 23 aspiring solicitors, we consider how participants developed and mobilised existing and acquired capitals to position themselves for success in their future career. A novel typology of employability strategies is presented, expanding on the work of Brown, Hesketh, and Williams (2004) and Hancock, Hughes, and Walsh (2017). The typology reveals distinct understandings of the role of higher education, meritocracy and social mobility; and divergent strategies for enhancing employability. As degree apprenticeship routes expand in UK higher education and beyond, the typology provides a useful framework to compare transitions through higher education and into other competitive and historically elite graduate professions.

Introduction

Degree apprenticeships (DA), recently introduced in England, offer a significant new pathway to professions that historically required a traditional university degree. In doing so, DAs have transformed the role of universities and employers, promising enhanced prospects for widening participation and social mobility (Fabian et al. 2022; Martin, Lord, and Warren-Smith 2020). The legal profession has been identified as a particular concern, due to a lack of social diversity and issues of social closure (Ashley and Empson 2017; Panel on Fair Access to the Professions 2009).

Following Bathmaker, Ingram, and Waller (2013), this article adopts the analogy of 'playing the game' to examine how aspiring solicitors negotiate university and DA pathways to the legal profession. The analysis considers how participants developed and mobilised their existing and acquired

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capitals to position themselves for their future employability to achieve an advantage in 'the game'. A novel typology of employability is presented, extending the work of Brown, Hesketh, and Williams (2004) and Hancock, Hughes, and Walsh (2017). The typology reveals contrasting understandings of higher education, meritocracy and social mobility; and distinct strategies for enhancing employability. As DA routes expand in higher education, the typology provides a useful framework to analyse transitions through higher education and access into elite professions across nations, disciplines and sectors (Brown, Lauder, and Ashton 2010).

The expansion of higher education and access to graduate professions

The global expansion of higher education has increased the participation of individuals from underrepresented backgrounds (Schofer and Meyer 2005; Trow 2007). A resulting oversupply of graduate labour has intensified the competition for graduate jobs, described as a 'war for talent' (Brown, Hesketh, and Williams 2004; Brown, Lauder, and Ashton 2010; Trow 2007). University students are increasingly expected to invest in their employability to facilitate access to high skill, high wage jobs through meritocratic competition (Brown, Hesketh, and Williams 2004). However, this narrative ignores the differential social distribution of educational achievement and its role in perpetuating unequal access to prestigious education and career opportunities (Breen and Goldthorpe 1997; Reay, David, and Ball 2005; Shavit and Blossfeld 1993). A crowded graduate labour market has resulted in increased credentialisation, with individuals seeking additional qualifications to 'run faster, for longer, just to stand still' (Brown, Hesketh, and Williams 2004, 228). In this context, 'standing out' typically comprises graduation from an elite university and the demonstration of other capitals valued by law firm recruiters (Ashley and Empson 2017). Thus, expansion has led to differentiated pathways where universities act as cultural sorters (Boliver 2011; 2013; 2017; Brint and Karabel 1989); diverting disadvantaged students into less-selective, lower-status institutions, with limited access to higher status jobs (Britton et al. 2016; Wakeling and Savage 2015).

University and degree apprenticeship pathways

By contrast, DAs promise 'the potential to disrupt traditional approaches to university degree study' and the connection between institutional stratification, unequal access and graduate outcomes (Fabian et al. 2022). Following the Wolf Report (2011) incentivising employers to invest in training and exercise control over standards, apprenticeships provide a model of vocational education and training (VET) which is, ostensibly, responsive to employer needs and helps 'young people develop the skills they need to do the high-paid, high-skilled jobs of the future' (Powel 2018, 27).

Apprenticeships have become an alternative route into many professional occupations including accountancy, banking, business consulting – and, since 2016, the solicitors' profession. Apprentices are considered employees rather than students and work alongside more experienced colleagues; learning on-the-job for four days each week, receiving off-the-job training by an approved training provider one day per week over a six-year period, which is comparable to the time-span for qualification through the university pathway (see Casey and Wakeling 2022 for a comparison of the costs and features of both pathways).

The university pathway typically involves three years of undergraduate study (and an additional year for those converting from a non-Law degree), followed by one year of post-graduate training, and two years of practical experience under a training contract. The training contract stage is extremely competitive and financially risky (see Casey and Wakeling 2022). For instance, as of October 2021, on the Solicitors Regulation Authority website the number of UK-domiciled students accepted onto a Law degree at a university in England and Wales was 20,905 in 2020, with 6,344 training contract registrations for the period 2019/20 (the most recent available data). The over-supply of potential solicitors early in the pipeline is clear.

Conceptual framework

This article draws on Bathmaker, Ingram, and Waller's (2013) analysis, informed by the work of Bourdieu. A Bourdieusian framing exposes the dynamics of historically based and reproduced social division, domination and exclusion. Bourdieu's concepts of habitus, field (or fields of power) and capital – where habitus is the predisposition to act in a particular way, patterns of behaviour being structured according to a set of tacit rules, rather than specific intentions (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977). The concept of field can be defined as a structured social space, for example, a workplace or particular occupation, with relationships defined by inequality and domination by those seen as legitimate (Lin and Erickson 2008). Success in the 'field', being accepted as an insider, is dependent upon achieving specific forms of 'capital', recognised as legitimate by others in the field and includes: economic capital, in the form of financial, wealth, income and assets; cultural capital – high culture such as attending the opera or ballet, embodied (manners, dress, speech, accent) and objectified or institutionalised (formal education, university attended); social capital, in the form of socially useful networks of people, social connections; symbolic capital – recognised differences in prestige, authority and lifestyle (Bourdieu and Wacquant 2013).

Bathmaker, Ingram, and Waller (2013) explored how university students from different class backgrounds respond to the increasingly competitive graduate labour market. Their study explored the effect of attending an elite versus a non-elite university on students' movement through and progression beyond higher education. Students were observed to be positioned differently in the competition for graduate jobs; advantaging those from middle-class backgrounds with privileged access to capitals valued by employers, including high grades, attending a prestigious university, relevant work experience, and knowledge of the 'rules of the game' (Bathmaker, Ingram, and Waller 2013). Similarly, this study explores how aspiring solicitors develop a 'feel for the game' and strategise for professional success, examining 'processes of capital mobilisation and acquisition by students and their families' (Bathmaker, Ingram, and Waller 2013, 724).

Brown, Lauder, and Ashton's (2010, 135) concept of the 'opportunity trap' refers to the increased intensity of tactics by students to get ahead and stand out in the competition for graduate jobs, for instance attending an elite university, volunteering and other extracurricular activities. Brown, Lauder, and Ashton (2010) note that such tactics only work if adopted by just a few as, otherwise, they become unremarkable. Bathmaker, Ingram, and Waller (2013) found that middle-class students adopted strategies of capital accumulation to enhance their future positioning through knowing how to package their various capitals and combine cultural capital with social capital in ways that working-class students were not able to. Brown et al. similarly argue that the massification of higher education and the graduate labour market has led to 'the very social congestion that individuals and families are trying to avoid' (2010, 135). This makes the 'transition from university to a well-paid graduate job uncertain' (Bathmaker, Ingram, and Waller 2013, 723).

Data and methods

This article draws on a wider qualitative study of 23 aspiring solicitors in England. The sample comprised two main groups: solicitor apprentices on the DA pathway and the university pathway (university graduates working as trainee solicitors and undergraduate Law students aspiring to become solicitors). The sample was further divided by institutional prestige (see Table 1). For instance, law

Table 1. Summary of participants.

Pathway	Elite	Non-Elite
Apprenticeship	6	3
Graduate	2	3
Student	4	5
Total (*n*)	12	11

firms were assigned elite/non-elite status based on law firm profiles identified by Aulakh et al. (2017, 34): Large Corporate, Regional Mid-tier, City/Boutique, Regional Niche, as well as the 'Legal 500' website (an unofficial benchmarking directory of law firms). Universities were broadly categorised based on membership of the research-intensive Russell Group (elite) or post-1992 universities (non-elite). Following ethical approval from the First Author's institution, participants were recruited using purposive sampling. Calls for participation were shared on social media, including Twitter and LinkedIn, and by email to contacts to share with their networks. All participants gave voluntary informed consent before the interviews.

Student participants came from two northern elite universities and three non-elite universities in the Midlands and the North of England. Apprentices and trainee solicitors came from three elite law firms, based in London, the Midlands, and the North of England; and two non-elite law firms, both in the North of England.

In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted between January 2017 and May 2018, and explored participants' experiences, motivations and perceptions of their pathway, for instance through work experience opportunities whilst at school or through university, careers seminars, applications for law firm vacation schemes, training contracts or apprenticeships, or prior knowledge through personal networks. Interviews lasted between 30 min and one-hour and were conducted either in person or via telephone. All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim, and pseudonyms were assigned to each participant. The anonymised transcripts were uploaded to NVivo 12 qualitative data analysis software package.

Data collection and analysis occurred simultaneously and was ongoing throughout the data collection period. After the initial preparation and exploration of the data, the analysis adopted an open approach to coding chunks of text, following an iterative back and forth process between coding, interpretation and verification of codes (Denscombe 2007). Categories and themes emerged inductively, before moving to a more deductive approach in making connections between the data and the literature. This approach is similar to a constructivist grounded theory approach (Charmaz 2006, 1990), resulting in abductive reasoning, with the overall aim being to understand the perceptions and actions of participants through interpretation, rather than seeking causality.

We do not claim that our sample is representative of the population of aspiring solicitors. Rather, we have prioritised information rich cases which provide meaningful insights and which enhance the credibility of the research by 'seeking out insights that illuminate both variation and common patterns' (Patton 1990; cited by Emmel 2013, 39).

The self-selecting sample presents limitations and the study may miss the experience and perspectives of individuals from groups typically underrepresented in the solicitors profession, for example, based on race. However, future research can seek to include a more diverse sample.

Findings

A typology of employability approaches

In this section, aspiring solicitors' strategies for negotiating their pathway are analysed through a novel typology of employability, which combines and expands on Brown, Hesketh, and Williams's (2004) 'Player/Purist' typology and Hancock, Hughes, and Walsh's (2017) 'Purist/Pragmatist' typology. The characteristics of each type are summarised in Table 2.

The typology enables the exploration of participants' approaches to negotiating the opportunities and barriers of their pathway; however, it is not intended to quantify or categorise individuals into any one type. As noted by Brown et al. (2004, 125), many participants related views and behaviours which cut across these positions or changed over time. The typology nevertheless enables participants' strategies to be considered against the ideal types of 'player', 'purist', or 'pragmatist' behaviour and allows for consideration of how strategies vary by the route pursued and social background.

Table 2. A typology of employability.

Player	Purist	Pragmatist
View employability as a positional game and market themselves according to the requirements of employers – drawing on notions of elite HE, decoding the winning formula from careers information, relevant social contacts and workshops. Typically advantaged students on a traditional university pathway.	View the competition as a meritocratic race over which HE has a significant influence, and focus on finding employment that offers the right fit with their knowledge, skills, and aspirations – finding the right opportunity is a technical puzzle. Typically less-advantaged students on a traditional university pathway.	Less attached to specific goals and more proactive in exploring other potential opportunities. A diverse subset of participants but degree apprenticeships most typically represented here.

The analysis reveals that participants from different backgrounds had varying reserves of social and cultural capital, and adopted different strategies towards 'the game'. The 'player' strategy was typically adopted by those from advantaged backgrounds following the traditional university pathway. In contrast, those from less advantaged backgrounds following the university pathway were initially more likely to adopt a 'purist' strategy. While the 'pragmatist' strategy featured across both pathways and all backgrounds, it was more frequently deployed on the DA pathway. Furthermore, in response to perceptions of the dynamic and evolving nature of 'the rules of the game' some participants switched strategy in order to secure a perceived advantage – moving, for example, from 'purist' to 'player'.

In what follows, each position is presented with example data and analysis. Strategies for approaching the game, accessing work experience, and accessing mentors are examined. The latter two aspects are significant in this context, since although work experience is not required for entry onto a law degree or DA; participants sought these in order to consolidate their cultural capital and progress further on their pathway towards the profession.

Players

Approach to the game

Consistent with Brown, Hesketh, and Williams (2004), the player approach 'depended on good preparation and tailoring one's experiences to the requirements of employers' (128). From the start, players demonstrated an awareness of institutional status and admission requirements. For example, Tammy demonstrated detailed knowledge of the requirements of distinct universities, and reported a selective application strategy to mitigate the risk of potentially failing the Law National Aptitude Test (LNAT[1]):

> Initially I was going to put Nottingham and Bristol down, and then when I was reflecting on it, I realised Cambridge was always going to be a bit of a pipe dream and that Durham, Bristol and Nottingham all required me to sit the LNAT. If I messed up the LNAT then that could be pretty much all of my options off of the table. In a bit of a last-minute panic, I swapped in [Northern elite university] and Warwick instead of Bristol and Nottingham. (Tammy, A*AA, state school, elite graduate, working-class, female)

Though players and purists are each willing 'to make an effort' (Brown, Hesketh, and Williams 2004, 125), Tammy followed a careful approach to engaging with extracurricular activities, in order to tailor her experiences to the requirements of desired employers:

> From first year I was always thinking about it, I was going along to all the milk round events that law firms hold on campus … At the end of my first year of university I became Careers Secretary of the student Law Society, because I knew that was a good way of making connections with graduate recruitment of different law firms. Generally everyone that's applying for a training contract, has got, or is on track for, a 2.1 degree … It's all of those other outside interests that can really make you stand out. (Tammy, A*AA, state school, elite graduate, working-class, female)

The above extract illustrates Tammy's awareness of the intense competition for training contracts, and the importance of achieving distinction in her employability strategy. This involved attending an elite university and engaging in certain extra-curricular activities, and is characteristic of the 'opportunity trap' (Brown, Lauder, and Ashton 2010). Despite originating from a working-class background, Tammy's behaviour was typical of the player category on the elite university route, which has previously been more associated with the middle classes (Brown, Hesketh, and Williams 2004). While Brown, Lauder, and Ashton (2010) note that such player tactics lose their effectiveness in terms of 'standing out' if everyone in the competition engages in the same tactics, Tammy's strategy proved successful in securing a training contract at a large corporate law firm.

Access to work experience

Players recognised that work experience was essential for generating knowledge of different pathways into the solicitors' profession, offering valuable employability capital, and providing a 'feel for the game'. For some, legal work experience began at school:

> Having a good careers service at school (because it was a fee-paying school) meant that I could go away and do several work experience opportunities and know about them, apply for them and get through them in a way that a number of students, I'm sure, at several state schools may not have got the chance to do. (John, Private school, elite student, middle-class, male)

John was clearly aware of his privileged position, which provided him with a means of generating cultural capital in the form of knowledge and developing a 'feel for the game' (Bourdieu 1990). He explained:

> I did several 'Futurewise' courses – How to get a career in the City in Law, and another one in Finance that were arranged by the school for me. For Law, I met two very prominent Human Rights Barristers and a Solicitor and a Legal Executive and spent the day doing workshops and several things with them, understanding how to get a career in Law in different areas. (John, Private school, elite student, middle-class, male)

This early 'feel for the game' bestowed John with an advantage in negotiating future opportunities and barriers on his pathway. Attending such workshops is a typical 'player' tactic, and the opportunities facilitated by fee-paying schools clearly advantage those from higher socio-economic backgrounds.

Across the interviewees, access to the most lucrative opportunities for work experience were largely the preserve of those from middle-class backgrounds who were firmly embedded in professional, family, and social networks that could help them. For example, Vic's aunt was a solicitor and his dad belonged to a cognate professional and social network:

> Law can be … a male, ego-driven environment but I had been exposed to that quite a lot through my dad because I'd often go out with him and meet his colleagues and the people he was working with – and also I knew a lot of them through the rugby club. (Vic, Private school, elite university, middle-class, male)

Access to such networks from a young age helped Vic by smoothing the way to work experience, and giving him crucial early insight into the types of cultural displays – such as dress, manner, topics of conversation – that operate within those networks. Once at university, however, less advantaged students quickly became aware of the importance of accessing relevant work experience. Issac shared his experience of applying for a vacation scheme:

> I tried my best to get it and I managed to – it was really a lot of hard work … As any Law student will tell you, the courses can be hard enough at times and then applying for jobs is like another module on top of that, like another class you have to do and obviously a very difficult one. (Isaac, CCC, state school, non-elite graduate, working-class, male)

Access to mentors

All players understood the importance of mentors in their pathway to a legal career, but individuals had varying access to mentors on the basis of their social background. Many participants in the study

made the most of any slight connection they had with the legal profession. Those without the relevant social capital or parental professional networks were disadvantaged in having no informal access to potential mentors. Some students reported that they themselves mentored more junior students, for example sharing knowledge of the application process for vac schemes. Although mentoring others may ostensibly appear to be an altruistic act, John's account reveals how mentoring served his own player strategy. John admitted to cautioning non-Russell Group students against applications to larger law firms:

> […] there are a group of firms that I would advise not applying to if you come from a non-Russell Group university. Simply because it's so competitive to get a training contract nowadays … (John, Private school, Elite Student, middle-class, male)

John's advice may support some students in finding the points of least resistance in access to the legal profession, anticipating the type of cultural matching, premised on confidence, dress and polish, that law firm recruiters would be seeking (Ashley and Empson 2017; Rivera 2012; Ashley and Empson 2013). However, in bringing together his knowledge and 'feel for the game', John also demonstrated player tactics in clearing the field of potential competitors. This is reminiscent of the argument made by Friedman and Macmillan (2017), whereby the middle classes, through processes of social closure and opportunity hoarding, protect themselves from downward social mobility by preserving the most lucrative opportunities for themselves.

Purists

Approach to the game

The 'purist' category was less common across both pathways but most evident among working-class students pursuing the university route. For high achievers, schools presented the university route as the only option. This was particularly true of working-class students with no family experience of higher study:

> I wanted to go to university because I wanted to do Law, but it was on me to find out what universities I went to. So, at that time I was literally looking through universities and found that the Russell Group were the best universities in the country. So, then I was, like, these are the ones that I want to go to. (Laura, A*A*AA, state school, elite graduate, working-class, female)

> I went to a few open days. I went to Sheffield but I found … the students weren't really that confident … They were supposed to be Law students but they were very awkward. Then I went to [Northern Elite university] … and everyone was really confident. (Ulrika, ABB, state school, elite student, working-class, female)

Laura and Ulrika's reflections convey the extent to which they selected and chose which university to apply to, in the absence of any parental guidance. Ulrika is additionally guided by her notion of the ideal law student. For both, high academic achievement appears to have given them the confidence to apply to elite universities. Barg, Benham-Clarke, and Mountford-Zimdars (2020) discuss the notions of self-efficacy and locus of control relating to advantaged and disadvantaged students, whereby disadvantaged students had a belief in their ability to achieve success through their own efforts.

Access to work experience

Participants from less privileged backgrounds had to work harder to develop their 'feel for the game'. Laura found a work placement with a small, local, law firm while still at school, having approached several law firms directly to ask for work experience: 'I basically got out the Yellow Pages and just started phoning people' (Laura, A*A*AA, state school, elite graduate, working-class, female). Adopting a similar strategy, however, proved unsuccessful for Ulrika, who took the only placement she could find – in a school – which was unconnected to her law-related ambitions.

One participant, Gavin (BTEC Distinction, CC, state school, non-elite university, working-class, male), started developing his 'feel for the game' at university, and spent between six and eight hours per vac scheme application. Reflecting on the intensity of this demand, however, and the competition for places, Gavin acknowledged the prospect of completing his degree without securing a training contract: 'I might work as a paralegal for a year or something like that to try and get some funds behind me'.

Purists held a strong belief in meritocracy, and focused on prioritising their degree work above everything else, in the hope that hard work and academic achievement would show future employers that they were employable on 'merit'. Consistent to Brown, Hesketh, and Williams's (2004) observations, this strategy is akin to 'hoping for the best' on the basis of academic attainment. Ulrika recognised that her university provided many opportunities to network with potential employers, but her admission was typical of the purist position:

> Interviewer: Do you go on any of [the networking events]?
>
> Not yet, I'm focusing on the basics of the Law degree and then, I think, next year I'll put more effort into … or even over the summer. (Ulrika, ABB, state school, elite student, working-class, female)

In contrast, for purists who did secure work experience, this led to the development of self-belief in their capability to succeed in their career goals and a commitment to finding work that aligned with their skills, knowledge and aspirations. As Issac recounted:

> I decided that I was going to do the GDL [Graduate Diploma in Law] … I did the LPC [Legal Practise Course] and I did well academically. I found that, at least on the academic side, for some reason, it suited me, at least grade-wise, I've done well. (Isaac, CCC, state school, non-elite graduate, working-class, male)

Issac's sense of control is typical of the purist faith in meritocracy, and corresponds to the findings of Barg et al., whereby students from disadvantaged backgrounds believed that 'success is determined by oneself and not by external events and conditions' (2020, 12).

Access to mentors

Interestingly, purists who gained access to mentors began to demonstrate a shift to more player type behaviour. It therefore appears that mentoring is a highly effective means of exposing the 'rules of game', and may inspire a change in strategy.

Isaac, who received two training contract offers, received support from the Aspiring Solicitors Group, an organisation which provides mentoring support for law students:

> It's like out of every thousand applicants only fifteen are taken through. So, crikey, you really have to stand out. I was not great when I started doing application forms, and I got a lot better at it because again I realised it was like another class – another game. (Isaac, CCC, state school, non-elite graduate, working-class, male)

Attending workshops about how to succeed in the application process is characteristic of 'player' tactics (Brown, Hesketh, and Williams 2004); and Issac's own references to a 'game' indicate his turn away from an exclusively purist stance.

Pragmatists

Approach to the game

In contrast to players and purists, pragmatists are characterised by a more flexible approach to career planning. Hancock, Hughes, and Walsh (2017) distinguished between weak and strong pragmatists, reflecting different approaches to career planning. While 'weak' pragmatists tended to 'hope for the best', in terms of their career planning, 'strong' pragmatists 'prepared for the worst', and were 'considerably more proactive in exploring other professional opportunities' (Hancock, Hughes, and Walsh 2017, 8). As Hancock et al. found in their study of doctoral scientists, pragmatism was often adopted

by those who had re-evaluated their career expectations. Patrick, for example, reflecting on the lack of response to his vac scheme applications, was clear that he would consider other careers:

> I'd probably go into government – government organisations. I mean you can still work in law as a government person, but I think that a lot of people pigeonhole themselves into law. (Patrick, ABD, State school, non-elite university, Middle-class, Male)

Patrick's approach remained fluid and his strategy for securing a government role was unarticulated. As Brown et al. discuss, some 'purists' learn to adopt 'player' behaviour as they try to secure tough-entry jobs (2004, 126). Hancock et al. similarly found that some individuals transition from 'weak' to 'strong' pragmatism, owing to the 'low-self-confidence or disengagement' (2017, 9), which can result from persistent rejection in the recruitment process.

Access to work experience

Pragmatists often began with 'purist' type thinking in respect of their employability before developing pragmatist characteristics. For example, Edith left university after the first year and took a job to earn money and volunteered at a local law firm to find out whether she wanted to pursue a career in law:

> It was through someone who used to be my Rainbow Leader … she just offered – if you want to get some experience, she said I can work there … I did a year in a Financial Advisors firm, for the first six months I worked Monday to Thursday. Then I used to go into our local Solicitors and do work experience for [Friday]. I had realised by working in the financial advisors, I had picked up a lot from just working, and I think it just suited me better to work in that way. (Edith, A*A*A*, state school, elite apprenticeship, middle-class, female)

Through existing social capital, Edith was able to access informal work experience and more fully explore her pathway options. Indicative of pragmatist type behaviour, in rejecting the more familiar university route, Edith was flexible in the means of achieving her career goals.

Several participants in the study did not have such social capital. Steve adopted a 'pragmatist' approach to the opportunities that he encountered. Coming from a disadvantaged background, Steve was not typical of the type of candidate sought by the corporate law firms who provide most vac scheme placements and training contracts. Steve aspired to qualify as a barrister due to his personal experience in the criminal court. He switched his attention to the solicitors' profession, however, following the encouragement of those he encountered. He explained:

> The solicitors' firm that represented me took me on as a police station representative – the police officer who arrested me told me I should do that because everyone was so impressed. (Steve, state school, non-elite graduate, working-class, male)

Steve capitalised on his personal experience by turning it into a training contract. His employability strategy was shaped through actual real-world experience, rather than work experience or extracurricular activities. In switching his goal of becoming a barrister to a solicitor, Steve demonstrated 'pragmatist' characteristics.

Access to mentors

For pragmatists, access to a role model appeared more influential than mentoring. Wendy resisted pressure from her school to go to university and took a gap year in which she worked as a lower-level legal apprentice, from which she later progressed to the solicitor apprenticeship:

> Because my brother, he did a legal apprenticeship and now he's a legal exec. I sort of saw how he progressed in his career without doing a degree, so that kind of made me think 'Oh well. I could probably do that instead' [of going to university]. (Wendy, A*AA, state school, elite apprentice, working-class, female)

Wendy was confident in her academic ability but was unsure of the university pathway due to barriers that she felt were beyond her control – for instance, access to the next stage of legal

qualification. In adopting a pragmatist strategy and pursuing the DA route, Wendy felt confident in her ability to progress through her own abilities.

Others following the DA route were able to access the professional network of parents to find out more about professional pathways. Ben's dad was an accountant which provided an opportunity for Ben to find out more about different pathway options: 'I had a few chats with some of my dad's contacts who gave me an insight into the profession, what to expect' (Ben, AAB, state school, elite apprenticeship, middle-class, male). Ben was not particularly committed to law and had applied for several apprenticeships across accountancy, banking and IT. Although he eventually settled on law, a strong pragmatist approach underpinned this.

Discussion and conclusion

This article has compared the employability perceptions, experiences and behaviours of aspiring solicitors on traditional university and DA routes in England. Following Bathmaker, Ingram, and Waller's (2013) adoption of 'playing the game', it explored how aspiring solicitors negotiate opportunities and barriers as they attempt to secure access to the profession. A novel typology of employability illustrates the distinct ways in which aspiring solicitors develop a 'feel for the game' and navigate the beginnings of a legal career, combining education, training, work experience, mentors and role models.

After many years of increasing higher education participation among those from disadvantaged backgrounds, university remained the most familiar route for working-class individuals, particularly females and those with high prior attainment aligning to a purist disposition. High-achievers Laura and Tammy were not put off from applying to elite institutions, and were not constrained by notions of cultural matching (Rivera 2012) or occupational sorting (Friedman and Laurison 2019). Although faith in the meritocratic potential of higher education remains high, it is clear from the narratives of these students that for high-status occupations such as law, equality of opportunity is no longer assured by the university pathway. To varying extents, all participants recognised that success in the legal game required the deployment of a sophisticated employability strategy, which also involved the acquisition of work experience and mentors. For 'purists', high prior attainment, attendance at an elite university and access to legal work experience appeared to support success in achieving career goals. This is consistent with findings from Barg, Benham-Clarke, and Mountford-Zimdars (2020) where high-attaining university students had an internal locus of control and a high level of self-efficacy. For purists, the university route was relied upon as a tried and trusted route to achieve career goals.

The expansion of higher education has increased competition for graduate jobs, including training contracts for entry to the solicitors' profession (Brown, Hesketh, and Williams 2004). The DA pathway provides an alternative means of manoeuvring for distinction and position in this crowded labour market. Participants on the DA pathway expressed some recognition of the risks in getting caught up in the 'opportunity trap' (Brown, Lauder, and Ashton 2010), and engaging in employability enhancing activities and the 'commodification of the self' (Brown, Hesketh, and Williams 2004, 228). For some, there was also a recognition of a shift in the 'rules of the game', with DAs presenting a new opportunity to get ahead. This flexibility is consistent with 'pragmatist' strategising, with many DA participants positioned here.

As DAs expand in UK higher education and beyond, the typology provides a useful framework to analyse transitions through higher education and access into elite professions across nations, disciplines and sectors (Brown, Lauder, and Ashton 2010). There are, of course, caveats to this. Even within the brief timeframe of this study, there was evidence of individual approaches evolving over time. Participants were not always consistent in their strategy; sometimes reporting decisions and behaviour contrary to their career objectives. Further empirical research to refine and elaborate the typology is needed, including following aspiring solicitors' trajectories through a longitudinal research design and exploring its resonance to other competitive

professions and contexts where DAs have recently been introduced (Jones, Christie, and Brophy 2022; Mulkeen et al. 2019).

Note

1. The Law National Aptitude Test is mandatory at some (not all) universities for admission to the Law degree.

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