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The role of emotional geography in graduate transitions from Higher Education in England

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Abstract

This paper presents the ways in which students from a Science, Technology Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) discipline at a Northern Urban English university narrate their decisions as they navigate their transition from degrees to their career futures. Contrary to the managerial expectations of universities and policy that students 'fill the STEM skills gap', the process through which students and graduates make decisions about their future trajectories includes responding to concerns brought about by personal and social factors of influence, one of which is place relating to their emotional relationship with past, present and future geographical location. This paper aims to make two inter-related arguments: Firstly, that geography can act as a determining, emotional factor of influence in the decision-making process of young people during the process of transitioning from their degrees. Secondly, the subsequent movement in spatial terms is an attempt to influence as well as construct their own futures, whether or not this is the 'right' decision. Employment futures of young people must take into account the ways in which this manifests to better understand the decision-making process.

Keywords: graduate employability, STEM skills gap, geographies of work; geographies of Higher Education; youth and employment in society; youth futures

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Introduction

In the UK, student geographies in relation to Higher Education (henceforth HE) has emerged as a growing body of research since the implementation of reforms to the sector since the 1990s. Initially, the focus was on the impact of these changes in demands and flows of people on areas in which people were found to concentrate. Smith (2009) referred to this phenomenon of the transformation of places as a result of people moving for HE as 'studentification'. Research of this nature has been critical of the move towards a commercialisation of such geographies for the purpose of endorsing a neoliberal market demand and raises questions on the resulting impact on the dynamics of local areas (Chatterton, 1999; Chatterton and Goddard, 2003). There have also been studies on the student experience in relation to this (Allen and Hollingworth, 2013; Holton and Riley, 2013; Patiniotis and Holdsworth, 2005). Yet a critical consideration of the role of geography seems to have not caught on in literature on employability and employment futures following a degree. This paper presents the ways in which students from a Science, Technology Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) discipline at a Northern Urban English university narrate their decisions as they navigate their transition from degrees to their career futures. In STEM education in particular, the notion of the skills gap or the shortage of workers for science-based jobs has been highlighted as a focus for HE policy (e.g. BIS, 2016). The extent to which this gap exists has been seriously challenged (E. Smith, 2010), however, and even if such a gap existed, we show that this seamless notion of going where the money goes – i.e. moving to wherever jobs are available to fill a skills gap – is problematic. It fails to critically consider the implications of such expectations by institutions, including policymakers and universities, as well as the subsequent actions of young people as they transition from a degree. Instead, this paper reflects on narratives by students as they become graduates regarding their decision-making about their future trajectories, while responding to concerns brought about by personal and social factors of influence, one of which is place.

Higher Education, employability and work

Under current discussions of HE in the UK, it is almost impossible to escape hearing the term 'employability'. The recent history has traced the Robbins Report (1963) as a key document that made explicit the relationship between HE, employment and the economy. In the 1980s and 1990s, HE saw a drastic change through neoliberalisation of the economy towards a Knowledge Economy. Science and Technology as an industry was made to dominate the landscape of employment, which needed more skilled labour.

As a result of large-scale redundancies in the commodities sector, and the need to re-skill labour to fuel a Knowledge Economy, people increasingly accessed Further Education (FE) and HE for qualifications (Ashton et al., 1990) to acquire employment available in the job market. Within this context, HE was seen as the key site at which knowledge capital could be developed to fuel the Knowledge Economy (Olssen and Peters, 2005). Increasing access to HE and skilled jobs has been a continuing agenda of subsequent governments in the UK. Between 1975 and 1998 the number of men with no qualifications, fell from 50.2% in 1975 to 18.9% in 1998. The figures for women with no qualifications, showed a similar trend of 58.3% with no qualifications in 1975 to 23.3% in 1998 (Machin and Vignoles, 2018, pp. 9–10). To manage the implications of further expansion, fee structures were introduced in 1998 and rapidly increased to their current levels. Thus began the marketisation of HE and as a result, the university system in the UK has been subject to international and national scrutiny and modification to satisfy market criteria (Mayhew et al., 2004). As a supplier to this economy, the university degree provision functions as a fetishised commodity as universities work in accordance with global market competition rather than as public service providers. HE has come under severe criticism for the sector's adoption of marketisation policies fuelled by neoliberalism (Lauder et al., 2012; Naidoo and Jamieson, 2005; Naidoo and Williams, 2015), particularly relating to employability (Brown et al., 2003).

The concerns we have had thus far with existing literature on employability is its favouritism shown towards policy, employers and university staff notions of youth futures. Not only does it assume

that young people will take paths expected of them by broader structures, such framing paradoxically places the onus of responding to these economic situations on the individuals, which is often misunderstood as 'choice'. For example, the White Paper, *Success as a Knowledge Economy* (BIS, 2016), continued to recommend an increase in funding for science subjects to fill a STEM skills gap. A second, perhaps more glaring example of this assumption is through the use of Destination of Leavers from Higher Education (DLHE - now Graduate Outcomes) statistics to act as a proxy for 'employability'. Clearly, decision-making is mistaken for the idea of 'choosing' between options assumed by broader structures of policy, employers and HE institutes.

Understanding decision-making

In order to understand the process through which young people make decisions about their futures, we draw on the works of Margaret Archer (2003, 2007, 2012), adopting the metaphilosophy of Critical Realism. Here, decision-making is proposed as a dialectical process, to consider young people's transitions as qualitative, micro-level processes of negotiations. Critical Realists aim to foster an understanding of social behaviour by balancing the position of objectivity and subjectivity, of structure and agency through the use of a realist ontology and subjectivist epistemology (Archer et al. 2016). Through a morphogenic approach, social behaviour can be understood as processual (Archer, 2010). In an attempt to further analyse this interplay, Archer (2003, 2007, 2012) uses the notion of Internal Conversations to understand decision-making in a way that firstly balances the role of structure and agency, seeing it as a reflexive negotiation of the social world, and secondly is processual. A highly contested phenomenon of study, Archer (2003) suggests that the Internal Conversation itself cannot be known as they take place within the private mind space of the individual. Instead, attempts to make sense of it are possible by observing the process as it manifests through speaking about it in terms of 'Concerns → Projects → Practices'. The theory suggests that there are 4 modes of reflexivity, or processes of mediation between structure and agency, developed in terms of those practicing them:

- Communicative Reflexives

- Autonomous Reflexives
- Meta-Reflexives
- Fractured Reflexives

The modes of reflexivity give us an understanding of the process of socialisation under late modernity. Archer developed this theory through the analysis of people's trajectories through life, and subsequently aimed to qualify it through research on decision-making by students as they select and go through university. Drawing on the findings of the research, each mode is considered in relation to an interaction between the 'family relational goods or evils', and either a high or low level of selectivity in making decisions. This variation emerges based on the differing extents to which these factors are incorporated into the decision-making process.

The theory proposes that currently people tend towards an autonomous mode of reflexivity, and suggests that society will slowly move towards a predominantly meta-reflexive mode in decision-making as the social world continues to grow in complexity, particularly as a result of scientific advancement and increasing access to information (Archer, 2012).

This perspective helps critique the notion of a straightforward transition to filling a job market gap, which Lauder (2012) takes issue with, in relation to employability, as it focuses on the economic exchange of a degree in the Knowledge Economy, upholding a Skill Bias theory. After procuring a degree, students make decisions to take their newly fashioned post-graduate selves forward, but with a path that they define. Therefore, we treat the transitioning from a degree as processual and a reflexive journey of decision-making rather than 'choosing' and arriving at a pre-determined or expected end point. It must be stated that a glaring limitation of the theoretical framework is the lack of a consideration of geography within the main theory. Yet, it was possible to draw out geography as a factor of influence through the use of this framework. Two further limitations are, firstly, the focus on the Global North, which Archer (2012) explicitly notes is relevant to the 'developed' world; and secondly, the difficulty in judging modes of reflexivity, especially when it appears that two modes function simultaneously (Baker, 2019). The former is somewhat irrelevant

to this present work as this research was based in the UK, and the latter was addressed through this research by focusing on career futures in particular.

Within decision-making, the study revealed that one such key aspect of influence, or concern within the process of Internal Conversation, was geography. Moving for education is not new. Right from histories of scholars travelling to the courts of royalty in different kingdoms to learn about and study different practices, geographical mobility has been integral to scholarship and knowledge. Scholars would return to their respective places of origin (of their journey) to continue their work. Universities as centres for knowledge existed in a number of ancient contexts. Fast-forward to the present, and the number of universities has increased exponentially. In the UK, extending degree-awarding capacities to former polytechnics in 1992 (now called post-1992 Universities), and further education colleges more recently, not only increased the number of degrees awarded but also the number of institutes that qualified as universities. This expansion has continued to encourage movement to attend university, which also implied transformation of the places where these universities were (Holdsworth, 2009; Patiniotis and Holdsworth, 2005; D. P. Smith, 2009). What we have highlighted here are two aspects of the same situation:

(1) People moving for HE has created a relationship between geographical mobility and learning have gone hand-in-hand (migration from home to university);
(2) The university as a located, social institution has become more widespread and thus has transformed and transforms in turn the places in which they exist.

The role of geography in HE provision has included a consideration of movement away from home for university, which Holdsworth (2009) argues is a ‘traditional’ route, with young people opting to move away from home citing freedom and independence as appealing rather than only the degree content. The university ‘experience’ is an influencer not only cited by students, but also actively promoted through HE recruitment (Holdsworth, 2009, p. 1861).

There has also been research on university spaces such as accommodation, use of campus space for learning, socialising and career development such as careers services, and some relation to people and social networks existing within all mentioned geographies (Holton, 2017; Holton and Riley, 2013). There have also been theoretical developments on how the movement of students has a strong impact on geographical demographical composition through what is termed 'studentification' (Duke-Williams, 2009; Nakazawa, 2017; Sage et al., 2012; D. P. Smith, 2009) and impact on the local area economics, to the extent that Faggian and McCann (2009) refer to university locations as agglomerations, through which humans and their associated (knowledge) capital flows. Such spaces become exclusive, as forewarned by Chatterton (1999, 2010), drastically changing the physical built environment as well as the human relations within it as a result of the playing out of student cultures. However, Chatterton (2010) also highlights how a partnership can be created between local populations, local area governance structures and universities. Barring this, a majority of the wider literature on student geographies, mobility and geographies of transition relate to international student flows (Beech, 2018; Prazeres, 2013). All this shows that geography is important and formative in how students perceive the world and themselves within it (Donnelly and Evans, 2016; Patiniotis and Holdsworth, 2005).

While such work admits to the role of geography in this decision-making in relation to going to university, in literature about employability and trajectories following a degree, the student's position is ignored or blamed collectively for the situation of not 'filling the gap', rather than the wider policy, industry and employers, and university system (Sin & Neave, 2014). The suggestion that there is a right decision that the individual must make based on a consideration of the impact of current actions on future (employment) is flawed. This deterministic approach assumes that students are bound to a fate defined by their initial situation. However, the student does in fact have some agency and can actively make decisions about their own futures, despite constraints and enablements (D'Silva and Pugh, 2020). We therefore consider one of the major and often overlooked factors in the decision making of students in their transition from university life to

(graduate) employment as a process and with an attempt to view the impact of structure and agency with some balance. The broader research of which this is a part relates to the process of navigating HE provision to transition to future careers.

The Study Methodology

This paper draws on data collected as part of the lead author's doctorate, which focused on the decision-making processes of young people as they transitioned from a physics degree. It explored the paradoxical way in which employability is said to be developed by the individual, transferring the burden onto them, yet also expecting individual adherence to employability agendas created by universities and influenced by policy and employer demands. A longitudinal case study approach alongside narrative inquiry analysis was used to respond to a lack of qualitative research in this vein. Following a brief introduction to the project, students were invited to participate, should they be interested, in a questionnaire during a compulsory final year module at a Northern Urban University (called here Yorkshire Urban). The questionnaire concluded with a request for participants for in-depth longitudinal interviews, which were conducted with 8 Final Year STEM undergraduate students who expressed interest. The first interview was done in the first semester of their final year following-up with three more interviews over the course of 14 months twice as they moved through their final year of their degree, once immediately after graduating and finally between six and eight months into their graduate lives (with a drop-out of one for the last interview owing to lack of access to stable means of communication). There are some limitation in using just one institution including the lack of generalisability, however, the differing ways in which HE institutions approach employability (see Farenga, and Quinlan, 2016) would have made this qualitative study difficult as it would add another dimension to analysis (i.e. employability strategy) while the focus was on decision-making in relation to employability provision. The final decision was dictated by limitations relating to individual projects. This research was part of a PhD, with research falling onto one person, with limited resources and within a fixed duration. As such, a broader study was not possible. The questions related to choices and decisions made by the

individuals as they prepared for their futures including the world of work, further study, or any other path. It took into account their personal form of preparation, engagement with formal employability development provision (such as career advice, compulsory and optional modules), and informal ways in which they made their way through the degree and beyond. The research was ethically approved by the University of Leeds's Ethics Committee on 02.JUN.2016, under the code MEEC 15-040 with one subsequent Amendment.

Analysis included considering each individual as a case study through narrative. The case study in its presented form is referred to as a 'case story' to suggest them being storied rather than only analysed and presented. The points of contact were temporally defined to account for potential changes along the way and was analysed in order of their occurrence with reflection on previous responses. The analysis was done by coding transcripts by hand rather than using specialist software. The responses were summarised, reflecting the 'coding' technique, however this was to help link responses through the course of the interview to establish if there was a flow of a story, rather than being a thematic analysis.

The theoretical framing by Margret Archer (2003, 2007, 2012) presented previously regarding understanding Internal Conversations was used. Thus, concerns, followed by projects and finally practice were identified in their processual nature (Archer, 2003). This included decisions that were seen through to completion to understand contributing factors and other paths considered. Therefore, although research questions were used to focus the research, analysis incorporated other factors based on their prominence in the discussion (i.e. if participants were explicit in identifying it as having a severe impact on their decisions). For each point in time, previous decisions were recounted in relation to the theme, and new concerns were added. In addition, the field notes made following the interviews were consulted to check if there were any additional points for consideration. The case stories were sent to participants for comments, as was approved ethically. The stories relied heavily on quotations and the option to ask for the transcript alongside was offered to participants to ensure that they were content with the way in which their stories were

analysed and presented. Feedback was received from three participants, all positive regarding how their story was presented, but one requested that fillers in their speech were removed.

Results and Discussion

The discussion will focus on two inter-related aspects of geography – mobility across place as a physical movement, and the relationship between decisions and place. It is important to assert once again that geography was one of other factors of influence when young people chose their future trajectory. The reason why geography was so important was precisely because it 'emerged' as a theme and varied in its nature when incorporated into decision-making. Here, we provide findings from the research, first with an overview of decisions made in relation to university and work, and then by presenting three case stories to emphasise the nature of considering geography in decision-making. In this latter section, it is important to also pay attention to the temporal aspect of decision-making, i.e. its processual nature (or as presented previously, what Margaret Archer called morphogenic).

Geography and movement of graduates

The mobility narrative began with a reflection on moving to undertake a degree. When asked about this, most participants saw this as the 'obvious' route. All had moved from home to university, sharing no common geographical reality prior to university. When stating where they were from or where they considered home, none identified Yorkshire Urban (see Table 1). They were all in the same situation of 'belonging' outside of the geography. This complies with the suggestion by Holdsworth (2009) that students continue to 'go away' to university. When asked why they moved to this location, participants generally referred to their method of selecting a university. This reflects a range of ways of selecting a university based on:

(1) University Ranking and reputation of selected institution (Christie, 2017; discussed in Millot, 2015);

(2) Whether the subject was offered in the way the student hoped to learn it – for example one participant wanted to undertake a joint honours programme, and this institution was the only one that offered it in a comprehensive and structured way;

(3) It not being a (former) *polytechnic* (term expressed by participants themselves) – as the participants asserted that they were more interested in theoretical aspects. However, this could also relate to (class and regional) biases against post-1992 Universities, or former polytechnics (Moreau and Leathwood, 2006);

(4) Geography of the institution including location, structure of campus – some campuses spread across cities – and facilities offered on campus and in the department (Hopkins and Hopkins, 2018);

(5) An aim to seek enjoyment and revelry, creating what Chatterton (1999) called "exclusive geographies" structured to cater to the large number of students moving to study (Duke-Williams, 2009; Sage et al., 2012).

In so far as movement to university is concerned, the findings are consistent with the broader literature presented previously about some students choosing universities and moving for the same.

Table 1 Employment and geographical changes

Participant	Home and movement prior to university	Movement from university	Activity/employment on graduating	Status 6 months post-graduation
Tony	East Anglia (Rural)	Home	Got a job via friend's father's friend through happenchance meeting at a tea house	Working on said job – big data SME
Isaac	North England	Greater Manchester	6-week research placement at Yorkshire Urban University	Graduate scheme accepted in early semester 2
Alice	East England	Home	Temp accounting work at local council to save up: job via mother	Ski season trip, after which she would travel abroad, then return home to work in London
Jane	South Coast	Home	Temp. Summer Administration job at local pool	Temporary cleaning support work at hospital; looking into health-related Masters course
Ash	Southern Europe; East Yorkshire (rural); Yorkshire Urban; return to East Yorkshire (rural)	London	Travel, moved to London, began graduate scheme	Graduate scheme accepted in early semester 2
George	East Midlands	Scotland	Masters, thinking of PhD applications	Masters, applying for PhDs, but eventually does not do one as it does not work out

Louise	East London	Home	Applied for jobs via recruitment agency: working at an SME	Changing jobs to a bigger company for improved growth
Zachery	North Africa; Middle East	Greater Manchester	Could not do internship b/c visa. Delay in visa for Masters	Masters, applying for defence engineering & finance graduate schemes

Research on HE student geographies associated with those moving – or not (Donnelly and Evans, 2016; Holton, 2015) – for the duration of the programme is well established and has been previously presented. There is also some work on the experience while at university, including criticisms of elitism (Reay et al., 2010). This literature has primarily emerged from the discipline of Human Geography and more recently Sociology. However, there continues to be little to nothing about the role of geography in decision-making when transitioning out of a degree, despite the broader literature on mobility in contemporary social behaviour (Robertson et al., 2018; Sheller and Urry, 2006). This shortcoming persists in relation to employment trajectories in that it is constructed along the lines of a spatial-flexible decision of going where opportunities might take one. For example, activities such as the Year Abroad might assume this. It also assumes a cost that the student is willing to bear. As previously discussed, it is evident that the movement of people for the purpose of HE transforms the individual, society and the built environment. Therefore, while there is a lot of work and focus on outcomes in relation to employment status after leaving a degree – thanks to the DLHE statistics and its replacement 'Graduate Outcomes' – there is little to nothing on how those decisions are arrived at, and this research being presented shows that geographical location clearly has such an impact.

It is also worth noting that although universities are equipped with employability information and careers support, none of the participants in this study availed of such facilities. Instead, they narrated their employability in a way that alluded that it was embedded in their university life and not explicitly as preparing for their career future. On completing their study, most students needed to scramble to the next step. This included travelling briefly on holiday before starting their graduate scheme, such as in the case of Tony and Ash; a return home temporarily to then be able to move to their new location should they be continuing as a student, such as in the case of George and

Zachery; or they may take up any job they get as in the case of Isaac, Alice, Jane and Louise. Of these latter four, Isaac had a graduate job and, although he did go on vacation for a week with his family, he still needed a job for the six week interim period to maintain financial stability; Alice took a job at the local council which she got with through a personal contact; Jane took an entry-level summer job; and, Louise took a job she got via an agency focusing on investment banking to begin her career. Saving money became a priority once Louise and Tony each returned home; both mentioned thinking about eventually putting a deposit down on their first house. Alice was looking to save money to fund her international travel, an objective Vigurs et al. (2018) call the 'Graduate Gap Year' which is a shift from the traditional 'Gap Year', or a year out of study, following A-levels. Saving money was not a priority for Jane. Instead, her priority was to move home and recover from the impact of her degree on her mental health. The individuals made decisions about what to do immediately after graduating based on personal motivators and financial situations, rather than merely a career focus.

Graduate Employability is constructed on the premise that students must confront their future employment potential and thus go about their time at university (and often before this too) to influence it through the accumulation of relevant experience to enhance the CV. This is often seen as something developed – suggesting a process of exchange: the student trades their current time for different experiences that will amount to future opportunities. It also assumes that the activities at university must somehow relate to the future, resulting in a situation wherein it is assumed that one's future is condemned to the decisions made prior to adulthood and in the first few years into adulthood, and that the trajectories laid out must be those undertaken by the individual.

As seems to be the case through these young people's lives, the factors that influence these 'destinations' are varied and respond to their personal needs. Failing to understand this, policy and other expectations about graduate employability constructs employment following a degree as a linear, simple pathway that one can prepare for through expectations of people essentially going where a discipline-related job would take them. Clearly, this is not the case. Failure to realise this

has resulted in creating what Holdsworth (2017) called a 'cult of experience' wherein this accumulation of experience not only does not relate to graduate work futures but is also harmful.

Decisions and emotional geographies

The first part of the internal conversation proposed by Archer (2003) is the identification of concerns. While 'location' was a key concern, it related primarily to the emotional relationship each participant held with a certain geography – whether a positive view or a negative one – and subsequently influenced how they eventually arrived at a decision regarding their future. This included practical reasons such as living in or close to London and knowing it had more job options as in the case of Louise and Alice, and calculated decisions of not returning home but staying North as in the cases of Isaac and George. An aspect relating to geography that will be presented here is the regional divides brought about by historical, socioeconomic geographic differences. A way to view this was through the idea of 'rural', which had a different reaction from Tony in the South of England and Ash in the North of England. Tony was eager to return home, having had enough of living in a city. He preferred the countryside in the South East.

> *Tony: … 'Cause I'm from the countryside really so I've never spent, I've never really lived in a city, so... I don't know, it's a lot more busy there's a lot more going on. There's always somewhere you can go out and go do something and people are always going out and being busy. […] It's interesting just having all those options available for things to do. But then it is quite… I don't know. I enjoy the quiet. I don't know if that's because I've been brought up in the countryside but I do enjoy peace and quiet which you don't get here.*
>
> *Me: Has it had an impact on how you see things?*
>
> *Tony: I've decided I don't want to live in a city after my degree. I'm enjoying living in it now, but I don't think I can see myself spending my life somewhere in the main city like this or at least living in the middle of it. [Interview 1]*

Tony narrated himself as being working class, living in a middle-class conservative area, which enabled him to find a suitable job close to home. The ease with which he found this opportunity, narrating that the owners of the company (it was a SME) were looking for a “local lad”, left Tony somewhat confused by the serendipitous way in which he got this offer. Ignoring the gendered expression, the network that Tony had was primarily related to the region in which he lived.

Tony: I did tell you how I got the job right, about meeting in the tearoom so yeah. It was that meeting in the tearoom I think, I sent them 2 e-mails, had a skype call and a phone call, and they sent me a contract, that was all it was, before they even knew the result of my degree [laughs] it's a bit weird. But. I was not going to complain.

[…]

Me: Were you expecting this to happen at all?

Tony: No! [laughing] No! I don't- I mean every step of it is a bit weird […] it's all a bit sort of- I don't think I could have expected or predicted any of it. [laughs] No. It's all a bit, it's great but I couldn't have- I didn't expect it. (Interview 3)

Meanwhile, Ash did not want to return to the countryside in the North East, which he felt lacked ambition, despite his family primarily living there. Speaking about his experience at university and reason for going to university, Ash reflected on his background.

Ash: As an 18 year old, coming from a small town in East Yorkshire, you don't have the opportunity to be in a group of loads of people from different backgrounds and you know, people that have different ideas and ways of thinking, and different personalities, and just being able to meet new people. Something that was a major factor. And then obviously the career prospects that came from it. So I knew that I didn't want to go into anything manual labour based, because I've worked with [my dad] for 5 or 6 years before university, since I was young. So I was like, "[under-breath] alright no, [normal-] I hate doing this", […] I wanted to get out of working for my dad and workin' the manual labour. I didn't wanna be

stuck in that rut. […] Cause I was- there weren't many people from my 6th form that went to university, there was only about 12 of us that went. Um, quite a lot of people at my 6th form failed first year of 6th form so they were held back a year, so our second year was quite small. So it wasn't like loads of us were going off to Uni, it was only a few, so that was a bit- it was only a few close friends as well maybe 4 or 5, um so that was kind of a bit daunting, but I was never not going to go because other people weren't. (Interview 1)

For Ash, going home would symbolise taking a step backward due to the lack of opportunities, and so he preferred to make the move to London. His description of rural, however, is vastly different from how Tony saw 'the rural', which in the latter case was more greenery, quietness and so on. On moving to London for work, Ash narrated his experience with a sense of awe and fulfilment.

Ash: You know, people [working in London] know about the world, they know about things, they know about their work, so they're passionate, you know, and energetic as well. They like to do what they're doing, whereas sometimes you get the feeling that's not the case with everyone back home or at university even. […]

Me: What would have been different if you were back home?

Ash: Oh my. That is not a good thing to think about. Well there's nothing in my hometown so [laughs] I wouldn't have been able to get a very good job. I wouldn't have, yeah, I'd have just been probably quite demotivated and I don't know, not particularly enjoying work. Oh, I probably wouldn't have been looking forward to the next six months if that makes sense. [Interview 3]

Ash's narration of a relationship with the area in which he grew up in the rural setting of his hometown reveals his dislike of the place. It is important to reiterate that Ash's experience also included manual labour in the fields, and the area from which he hails is considered deprived. However, once he moved to the capital, he perceived life as one of abundance and the focus on a positive future by those around him. It is not difficult to see that Ash's ideas neatly align with the image of a certain ideal of hard work, passion and glaring confidence in work – things stressed upon

by the employability agenda. It contributes to his internalising of an existing disparity. This reflects the wider social and geopolitical reality of a North-South divide in England (González, 2011). The primary way in which inequalities appeared vocally through this research was this North-South divide in the UK, bearing in mind that the British participants (seven of eight) were white and of them five described themselves as working class and the remaining two as middle-class, both hailing from the South.

It is also worth considering the experience of Isaac from Northern England speaking about place, with the added reflection on the experience at a Northern university. Here, there is a certain subtlety in terms of how location influences decision-making in the long-run.

> *Isaac: Obviously this is a nice university. And there are a lot of people here from very nice backgrounds. I'm a bit of a- I would consider myself a bit of a hybrid. When I was younger my mum and my dad weren't very well off, as a child. But then my mum has remarried and we're a lot better off now for the last 8 or 9 years. So not a short amount of time, so I wouldn't consider myself to be very deprived or anything like that. But I am aware of that sort of background, and that's the sort of place I come from. It's a far cry from Surrey and Hampshire and places like that. Um... I don't think it has much of an affect. I think people who come here, you tend to be agreeable because you have to do interviews and you have to have some sort of good aspect of your character […] people are exposed to a lot of different types of other people. But having said that, I tend to find that the friends I've made are from similar types of places to me. I don't know a lot of people from the South of England, for example. Most of my friends are from places like Yorkshire, Teesside, even like Newcastle and Manchester and Liverpool and places like that. So… (Interview 2)*

But moving to London and the South was not important to Isaac who was apprehensive of living in the capital. It is also important to note that Isaac maintained his Northern accent in speech, whereas although Ash did sometimes trail off into a Yorkshire accent, he generally spoke in a more audibly Southernised (often called ‘neutralised’) one.

Me: Had you thought of looking at London?

Isaac: No.

Me: No.

Isaac: No.

Me: Had you looked more at the types of jobs and types of careers?

Isaac: Um, yeah, I don't think I particularly avoided it. It's just they don't do a lot of, obviously the big warehouse-y type engineering things I've applied to tend to be in the middle of less… brought up areas? But also, I'm not sure that I would like living in London, because my step-dad lived in London a few years ago, and we used to come visit him. It's very expensive and it's very busy and such. (Interview 3)

There is a subtlety in terms of the way in which Isaac has been influenced away from going to London or possibly the South, even though there were in fact options he eventually found through a secondment while at work.

It is interesting to note that those whose home locations were in the Midlands (George) and the North (Isaac and Ash) did not return home, while the others returned home to the South of England to either work in their county (Tony, Alice, Jane), or were able to commute to London for their jobs (Louise, and Alice would follow in the future). Zachery also did not return home, but opted to do a Masters programme in Greater Manchester before applying for graduate schemes in the UK. He felt his status, as a foreign national, needed him to prove his capacity beyond that which the others did. It is possible to see that the differences in geographical location and the emotional associations and relationships people have with the same effect decision-making.

These young people narrated the role of geography in their process of transitioning from a degree to their future selves, considering their emotional relationship with it in relation to their expectations for themselves. Though it was included in follow-up interviews in a more subtle way, such as asking participants why they picked a certain place and their thoughts of a future place, it was not

possible to explore this experience of geography better as the focus of the research was on career trajectories in relation to STEM education. However, it could be important for future work to consider on geography in a committed manner. This process of transitioning was not just about finding the right job, but a consideration of the optimum place for the same was also important. These cases reflect some of the ways in which young people may incorporate their experiences of and in geographies into their decision-making processes. This range amongst a small group that volunteered to support the research tells of the wider impact of the same.

The use of Margaret Archer's theses offered a departure from the more commonly used theoretical frameworks, in that it altered the way in which social action of the participants could be understood. Alongside constraints and enablements, people present themselves as having a high amount of selectivity in terms of the options presented to them, i.e. they did not merely 'choose' but decided on things. This implies two key things: 1. Modes of reflexivity changing over time indicates that the nature of decision-making changes and can be sporadic. 2. Simultaneously, even in instances where family and other aspects (like class, gender and race) influence decision-making, the young person is still enacting a selective form of reflexivity. Yet it is possible that where they do not, they are more constrained with reference to their future. Therefore universities need to move away from functioning as 'bubbles' and work as structures that enable interaction with wider populations (Reay et al. 2010; Holton, 2005).

As seen from the case studies presented, factors that fall outside of the university provision contribute to the decisions made by individuals about their career futures. Therefore, although arguments to embed employability in the curriculum (Knight and Yorke, 2002) or through other activities (Cranmer, 2006) enables graduates to learn their subject better, this cannot be seen as defining job-acquisition. It draws attention to the purpose of the employability agenda in HE, which continues to reveal a flawed link between policy, education and employment (Brown et al., 2003) which continues to ignore social aspects of being in society, and any potential for developing the individual as an informed citizen. In the event that they do, this turns out to be patronising and

paternalistic (Brooks, 2018). That is, rather than focusing on critical thinking from the perspective of contributing to an active citizenry, the employability agenda assumes that people will continue to passively reproduce expectations of employers and the economy, and that degrees equip them solely for the purpose of work. Such a flawed outlook surely weighs negatively on any decision relating to Universities and HE, right from individual aspects like employability and improving knowledge, to bigger aspects like local area planning, council requirements and so on. What is evident is that young people continue to resist imposed expectations, be it knowingly, in part, or unknowingly.

Conclusion

This research aimed to understand the processual nature of young people navigating university and onward to their career futures, assessing the way in which the employability agenda features in the same. The multi-faceted nature of decision-making is often forgotten amidst the complexity of the HE system as policy. In attempts to seek a straightforward response through metrics of the success of HE in enabling students to get a job, there is a failure to recognise the everyday lived realities of individuals. Through the consideration of empirical evidence, the intersection of mobility, emotional relationship with spaces and a personal sense of graduate self, a spatialised process of decision-making was highlighted as a practice of young people. The experience of mobility weighed heavily on decision-making before arrival to university but equally so on departing from it. The latter is rarely considered in academic work and policymaking. As presented, the assumption that people will go to any geographical location where there is a potential degree-related graduate opportunity is flawed.

There have been two key points raised through this article. Firstly, that mobility includes going to university, the engagement within it and the next location including choice of moving to a new place or the return home to work in relation to transitions from a degree. The last process is particularly overlooked when it is in fact crucial to decision-making regarding career futures. Relatedly, this mobility following university is poorly understood in literature on career and youth trajectories, and as a result, rather than see decision-making as a process which may incorporate

factors of influence like experience of geography, understanding these futures are primarily reliant on an economic assumption of people's trajectories. Meanwhile, the cases make clear that geography is important and formative in the ways that people make decisions.

Through suggesting the importance of geography we hope that future research can be taken in order to further this line of enquiry that sat outside of the scope and reach of this research. Research on transitions as processual needs to be extended to understand place-relations in other ways. We thus suggest two key needs for future work. First, the present study is limited because of its focus on the context of the UK including the site of research and literature engaged with, but international or cross-country research can provide more insight into global trends in this regard. The project EuroStudents (Brooks et al, 2020) offers a starting point from Europe. This can be extended to understand how other contexts function. A shift to a global understanding is important while ensuring that the particularities of the local are still incorporated. This would also require a different theoretical perspective, one more critical of global dynamics which Margaret Archer's theories lacks – a limitation admitted by Archer (2012). The second suggestion within the UK itself (though relevant elsewhere) is a consideration of a longer-term impact of geography throughout the career trajectory. The research by Crilly (2018) offers invaluable insights from reflective accounts of graduates from Physics regarding their career trajectory. This can be extended with the inclusion of the role of geography. Cutting across these foci suggested above, some aspects highlighted through this research need to be incorporated in such work including regional inequalities, a critical reflection on cultural aspects in relation to geography, opportunities available, sense of place and so on.

It is because of the potential impact it has on how HE functions and its transformation that the argument is made for a better positioning of geography as a factor of influence in the process of decision-making as young people transition from a degree. Once again, the focus on the economy by national and university policies and practices is shown to be a weak explanation for the context of graduate employment. While policymaking continues to focus on the role of employers, with HE

institutes often following suit, the decision-making process by those who actually transition from degrees continues to stand in contrast to the former's expectations. These decisions are a manifestation of individual agential capacity, and they do not always correspond to the assumptions of determinism or conditioning. This demands an increased collaboration between university populations and the general population, and what it means to be citizens in both student spaces and in new locations after graduation.

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