

# Making sense of the opportunities and constraints of vocational education pathways and transitions: Between Bourdieu and a better place

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# Overview

Working with and beyond Bourdieu

Why vocational education pathways matter

Vocational education pathways within the context of wider educational transitions

What do Bourdieu's tools contribute to understanding transitions?

Looking to a better place

The draw of capability theory

Hope and despair: From a better place back to Bourdieu





# Working with and beyond Bourdieu

## Key trends and issues in recent research

- an interest in individual agency  
(placing the individual and individual agency at the heart of research)
- the importance of the psychosocial, and how it contributes to understanding orientations, decisions and pathways in individuals' lives
- understanding the intersections and effects of different forms of disadvantage (social class, gender, race, disability and other forms of disadvantage depending on contextual conditions)
- a desire to look forward (Appadurai 2004) [with optimism], as well as taking account of 'sedimented history' (Bourdieu) [with pessimism]
- learning from and using ideas and theorisations associated with sustainable human development and human flourishing, usually from outside the global north and west, in particular Amartya Sen's capability theory, Appadurai's (2004) work on the capacity to aspire

# Does it make a difference that I start from a Bourdieusian perspective?

Can I move beyond 'bodenlose Niedergeschlagenheit' - the depths of despair - which often seems to be the overall conclusion in the face of persistent and enduring inequalities? What room is there for human agency in my interpretations of practice? Is an expansive view of 'capitals' a way of looking to how different and alternative capitals may count and be valued? How does the importance of psycho-social understandings of practice encourage a reframing of 'habitus'? Can I and do I look forward and consider the capacity to aspire, as Appadurai (2004) suggests, and to what end?



# Setting the scene: Do vocational education pathways and transitions matter? Normative principles in the face of current conditions

## **The challenges of economic austerity, the climate crisis, political instability and increasingly rapid technological change**

In a context of ever-growing **challenges to democracy and freedom**

- the rise of authoritarianizing conditions and regimes
- the influence of populist thinking, *proudly* disconnected from reality, which makes up and creates its own reality as it goes along

Salajan and Jules (2024) argue for **the importance of education for all**:

“the fundamental function of education in democratic societies as a vector for enlightenment fostering openness, freedom of thought, inquisitiveness, understanding, tolerance for diversity, civic involvement, and social cohesion.”  
(Florin D. Salajan and tavis d. Jules, 2024: 335-6)

**The climate crisis** means we urgently need **an expansive view of what Vocational Education and Training (VET) involves**:

“The growing acceptance of the climate crisis requires us also to address the ecological dimension of economic activity. [...] For skills development, this means adding in a political ecology dimension. [...] it is about a revisioning of what VET is and is for. [...] the skills debate cannot be separated off from considerations of how individuals change their everyday beliefs, consumption behaviours and modes of interaction in order to live more justly and sustainably.”  
(McGrath and Ramsarup, 2024).

# Why the opportunities of vocational pathways matter: offering a 'reasonable possibility' to become somebody

"I come out of school, I had nothing on me. And I thought I ain't really gonna get to be anybody and I wanted to be somebody."

(Sharaz, Level 1 Foundation GNVQ student)

# Vocational education pathways within the context of wider transitions



# Educational pathways in a 'global war for talent'

A 'global war for talent' amongst a highly educated elite : struggles on an international scale over the most prestigious forms of higher education (Brown, Lauder and Ashton, 2011)

What does this mean for the 90% who are not the highly educated elite?

Including the 50% and more who do not participate in higher education in countries such as England?

In 2012, the UK's Social Mobility Commission put forward the need for

- Routes for nurturing outstanding talent
- Provision 'for all' to reach their potential and gain higher level skills
- Schemes and qualifications aimed at breaking out from poverty of aspiration or a troubled background, and for recent migrants and refugees

In practice, evidence over time tells us that this looks like

- Risky, uncertain, less prestigious 'vocational' pathways
- Ever-changing schemes and initiatives for those who do not fit readily into established vocational routes.

# The “wicked problem” of vocational education pathways and transitions for policy, practice and research

## **Reconfiguring the field(s) - the social spaces - of post-school education**

### **From school-to-work transitions to extended transitions into higher education**

- 1980s: expansion of participation in post-16 education and in higher education through new ‘vocationally-oriented’ and ‘non-university’ routes  
‘the new FE’ [further education] in England  
‘non-university’ institutions across countries with expanding tertiary systems
- 1990s-2000s: reconfigurations of the landscape (e.g. polytechnics become universities in England; dual sector institutions in Australia; duale Hochschulen in Germany)
- 2000s: permeability between vocational and general/academic education
- 2010s: highly stratified ‘high participation systems’ of higher education (HE). HE seen as a key component in industrial competitiveness strategies in knowledge economies, but a highly stratified system of different forms of HE
- 2020s: rediscovering vocational routes to high skills. Do policymakers want (to fund) high participation HE systems any more?

# Deepening divisions, fading solutions

- 'the influence of many hidden social advantages and disadvantages' in the processes and practices of educational transitions (p.x)
- 'Competitorisation' of the self in order to progress (p.2)
- 'Family circumstances become linked with specific levels of education/training and hence with occupational strata and sectors through the circulation of differential currencies of opportunity in the form of material conditions; domestic and emotional factors' cultural values; gender codes; social networks; geographical mobility' access to information and occupational cultures.' (p.11)
- 'what **are** the ways of working for more egalitarian, democratic and caring forms of social organization?' (p.12)



# What do Bourdieu's tools contribute here? Using and extending Bourdieu's conceptual tools to research transitions

Stretching, elaborating and building on Bourdieu's theoretical tools

# Field: a relational understanding of different pathways

Bourdieu's concept of field:

- focuses attention on the positioning of different fields or social spaces in relation to one another (1996)
- Focuses attention on the relative position of agents and institutions within a particular social space (1985; 1998)
- To grasp the nature and meaning of educational transitions and the practices involved, using the concept of field asks us to engage with how vocational education pathways are positioned relationally to academic (and other) pathways, whether as constituent parts of one social space/field, or different social spaces/fields that involve boundaries and boundary crossing from one space to another.
- BUT a field is not fixed, it is temporal, under constant production and reproduction (Thomson, 2005)

# The relational positioning of vocational pathways

- Catalonia Spain Tarabini and Jacovkis (2021)  
In their analysis of transitions in upper secondary education in Catalonia they emphasise that 'the tensions, conflicts and ambivalences generated in the field of upper secondary education are part of a struggle for meanings, opportunities and positions of the Baccalaureate in relation to VET and vice versa.' (Tarabini and Jacovkis 2021: 215).
- China (Geng Wang 2024)  
Vocational education in China has been positioned at the bottom of the educational hierarchy, absorbing the 'left-over' students with 'less good' academic records. (Geng Wang 2024: 179)
- Germany (Deissinger 2022)  
The dual system is losing attractiveness among school leavers. How can the the value which society associates with apprenticeships in Germany be maintained against the challenges the dual system is currently facing, such as academic drift and a preference for university-based higher education?



# The shifting and changing social space(s) of “tertiary education” through which transitions take place

One heteronomous tertiary (higher education) field?

- An increasingly **heteronomous higher education field of differentiated institutions**, with increasing control of the field from forces outside the field
- A global/globalised field, particularly in the high academic subfield (Shanghai rankings, Times Higher Education World University Rankings)
- A stratified field, which is increasingly stretched: Elite and mass institutions; recruiting and selecting universities; ‘open access’ providers
- But these binaries are not entirely straightforward. There are ‘ambiguous middle players’ (Marginson 2016: 423); there are specialist institutions; there are departments within institutions that have a particular reputation; there are degree apprenticeships linked to prestigious companies
- Within an overall field there are subfields which are differently positioned in terms of power

Different fields offering a diversity of forms of tertiary and higher education?

- A **diversified system** with a ‘second sector’ or a ‘non-university’ sector, specialising in sub-bachelor as well as bachelor level qualifications, vocational and technical qualifications, work-based routes.

Are these social spaces – ‘fields’ – more porous and fluid under current conditions?

Is HE provided by vocational colleges (such as HE in FE in England) – a different field to university HE? A sub-field of an overall HE/tertiary field? A hybrid in-between field overlapping traditionally more distinctive fields of further, vocational and higher education? A flaky borderland?

Does the way the ‘field’ is configured matter in relation to navigating educational pathways? I would argue that it affects the positioning of different institutions and qualifications; the capitals that count and carry value; the match or mismatch of the habitus to the field, and therefore who gets what and who goes where.

# Capitals and capital conversion

- Building on and moving beyond Bourdieu's concepts of economic, social and cultural capital - identifying **other forms of capital** and the work that they do
- Examining the practices involved in the **capital conversion process**, where the successful mobilisation of capitals can occur as if by magic.

# The possibilities of alternative capitals

- **Ethnic capital or cultural-social capital Modood (2004)**

Social capital in combination with ethnicity rather than simply cultural capital is of better use in explaining the trajectories of educationally successful 'second generation' migrants in the UK. The 'motor' of the British South Asian and Chinese overcoming of disadvantage lies in migrant parents getting their children to internalize high educational ambitions and to enforce appropriate behaviour. What ethnic capital comprises will vary across ethnic groups, not just in degree but also in kind.

- **Cultural wealth model Yosso (2005)**

In her community cultural wealth model Yosso identifies a whole range of 'cultural capitals' that students of color bring to education: aspirational, navigational, social, linguistic, familial and resistant capital. She argues that these forms of capital draw on the knowledges Students of Color bring with them from their homes and communities into education, and can serve as a resource for progress.

- **Viewing economic, social and cultural capital through the lens of critical race theory Adewumi (2019)**

Combines Bourdieu's concepts of economic, social and cultural capital with theories about race (critical race theory) to look at schooling and the strategies of middle-class parents in the London area to instil aspirations for their children.

- **Local capital Holly Henderson (2021)**

'a rich embeddedness in place that opens future possibilities and opportunities in that place  
Local capital embraces the value of staying in place, such as local job experience, knowledge about firms and organizations locally, and living with parents, alongside the capacity to achieve a desired future based on a belief in future job opportunities locally and satisfaction with social life in the local area, as well as valuing home life and the emotional attachments of the local.

- **Graduate capital Tomlinson (2017)**

Tomlinson's model seeks to make visible, develop and combine different capitals (Human, social, cultural, identity, psychological, personal) to help achieve effective graduate employability.



# The capital conversion process

- **Knowing and playing the game**

In the move from university to graduate employment, the capital conversion process can operate through confidence, aspiration and the performance of competence; capacity for risk taking and entrepreneurialism; and cultural fit.

In the Paired Peers project, which followed students through their undergraduate career into employment, one of the middle-class students at the high-ranking University of Bristol explained:

“The thing about this company is they hire ... they don’t hire, sort of, anyone who’s proficient in IT; they hire graduates who have, like, intelligent, sort of, personas and grades. So, it’s people from Oxford ... or Russell [group universities].” (Luke, middle-class, University of Bristol)

- **Trying to work out what is going on in the capital conversion process**

In a project following vocational students in the 1990s, here is one student trying to work out how capitals get mobilised:

A good student is a person, like, he’s in our class. He can chill out, he can mess about but he’ll still get a distinction grade assignment. I don’t know how. That’s his secret, he won’t tell us. I think he’s got mates from outside who go “yea mate you do it like this”. And then he just gets a book, copies it, or does his own words and they tell him how to lay it out. I think it’s that, because he knows a lot of people, like he works in the Royal Mail, he wears all the designer wear and he’s not that bad-looking. [...] and I think the girls and the boys, his mates, help him out. (Waqas, Advanced Level GNVQ)

# Modifying the concept of habitus

- habitus 'designates a way of being, a habitual state (especially of the body) and, in particular, a **predisposition, tendency, propensity or inclination**' (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 562).
- Habitus 'incorporates both the **subjective, personal dispositions** and the **collective, structural pre-dispositions** shaped by class, race and gender that are combined in each individual.' (Colley et al, 2003: 287)

# Vocational habitus

- Helen Colley and colleagues (2003) developed the idea of vocational habitus, building on the work of Inge Bates (1991, 1994), when looking at vocational training routes for young people in England
- Vocational habitus involves a process of orientation to a particular identity, a sense of what is required to be 'the right person for the job'. Such 'sense' is an apparently natural – but always socially constructed – sense of the 'right way' to be and to behave in the workplace.
- [It] involves developing not only a 'sense' of how to be, but also 'sensibility': requisite feelings and morals. (Colley et al 2003: 471)
- Agency plays its part, since vocational habitus – and the wider vocational culture – is relational and dynamic, co-constructed partly by the dispositions of the students themselves as they construct their own identities. The vocational habitus must be a 'choosable' identity for the individual, one that falls within their 'horizons for action'. Students must have social and family backgrounds, individual preferences and life experiences that predispose them to orientate to the vocational habitus and become 'right for the job'. (Colley et al 2003: 488)

# Not reading habitus as determining individual practices

- Habitus is 'primarily a dynamic concept, a rich interlacing of past and present, individual and collective interiorized and permeating both body and psyche [...] always in the process of completion. There is no finality or finished identity. (Reay, 1998: 521)
- Habitus can be internally contradictory and fragmented, but also creative and generative
- The 'chameleon habitus' or 'cleft habitus' (Abrahams and Ingram 2013) is not always negative and can be a resource for some in their attempts to negotiate new fields.
- Franziska Lessy (2025) uses the concept of the conduct of everyday life alongside Bourdieu's concepts including habitus to draw attention to intersections of different factors and how the dynamic interplay of various life spheres plays out for different individuals. She says:

"different forms of arrangements may emerge from 'objectively' similar living situations. Such a perspective can help to gain a deeper understanding of the heterogeneity within the student population, the variety of realities of students' lives and the diverse needs of students."

# Psycho-social aspects of habitus

- There is a growing sociological interest in psycho-social aspect of habitus.
- Diane Reay (2005; 2025) talks about the psychic and emotional landscape of social class (Reay 2005; 2025)
- Editing a recent special issue, Nobile and Tarabini (2025) highlight the importance of emotions and affect in understanding educational experience and inequalities:  
Rather than viewing emotions as isolated, individual phenomena that exist solely within a person, this perspective emphasises how emotions are shaped by interactions, social contexts and cultural norms. (2-3)

# Institutional habitus and affect

- Reay (1998) and Thomas (2002) talk of institutional habitus, and consider how this affects decision-making and transitions into higher education in England:

Institutional habitus constitutes 'a complex amalgam of agency and structure and could be understood as the impact of a cultural group or social class on an individual's behaviour as it is mediated through an organisation (McDonough 1996). Institutional habituses, no less than individual habituses, have a history and have been established over time. They are therefore capable of change but by dint of their collective nature are less fluid than individual habitus.' (Reay, David and Ball 2001: 1.3)

- Stich (2012) develops this further in the notion of 'reputational affect':  
Reputational affects are the deeply felt, socially constructed components of everyday life – they are the more sticky residues left behind by constancy of reputation than reputation itself – the stuff that leaves a lasting mark and won't wash clean or easily shake free. (Stich, 2012: 30)

Affects contribute to shaping students' dispositions



## **Reputational affect in the Paired Peers project, looking at class and participation in HE at the 2 universities of Bristol**

In 2012, during the research we found this T shirt on sale for University of Bristol students.  
"Poly" here is a play on "polyester" (an artificial fibre) and "polytechnic".

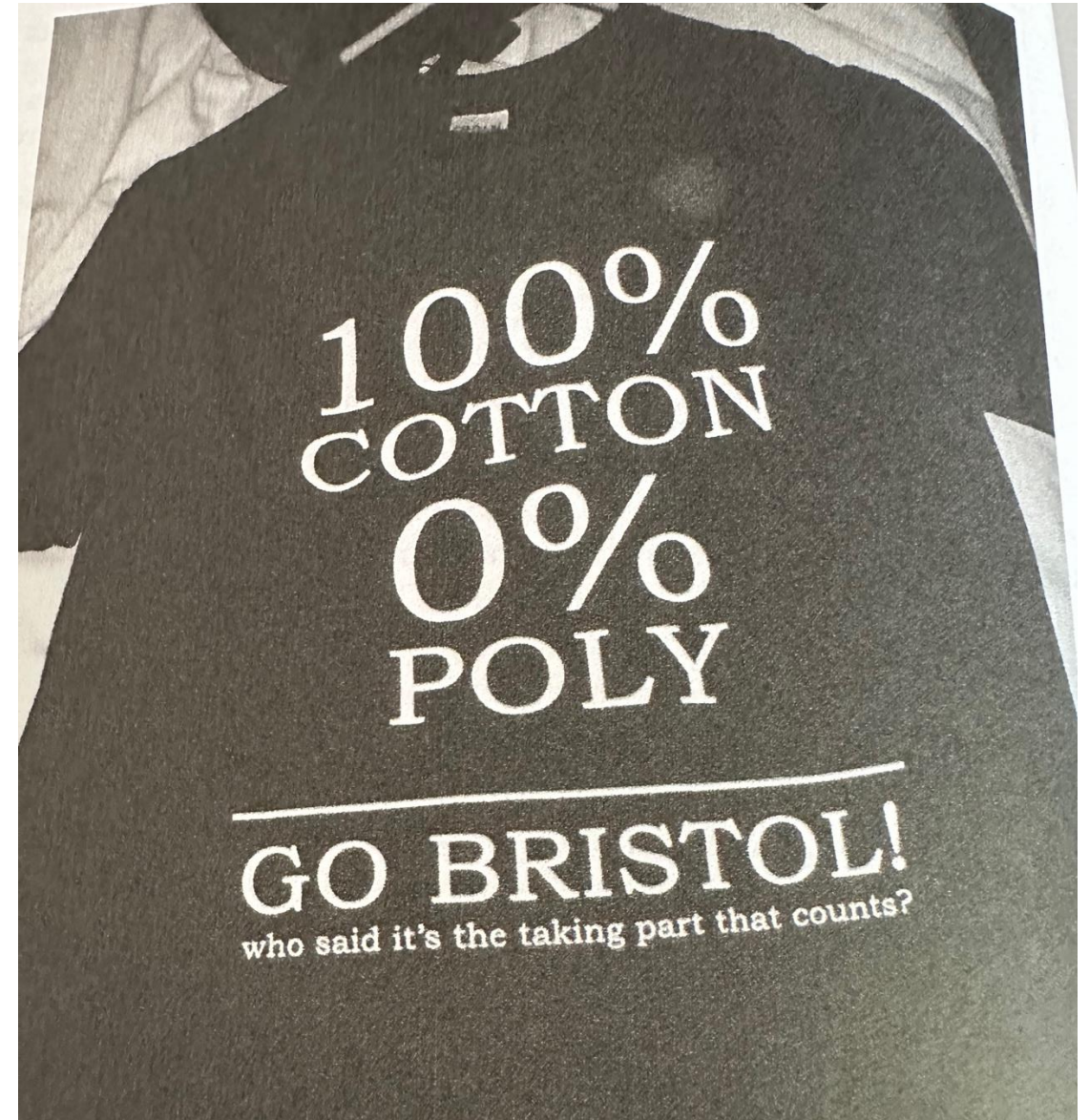
Institutional history:

UWE = former polytechnic (pre-1992)

Bristol = "old" Russell group university

Recognition of reputational affect:

"who said it's the taking part that counts?"



# How reputational affect gets embodied

*Zoe, working-class, studying at the high status University of Bristol, trying to explain why she feels out of place*

"To be honest the vast majority of UWE students I've met I get on better with, maybe I'd fit in better there anyway. Like the girls are, you know, they're normal girls. Like they'll dress up when they're out, they wear heels, they sort of have a laugh and a joke and a giggle and they seem to be sort of normal and nice in a way, more rounded as people, not entitled and arrogant. The girls in Bristol they won't wear heels, so I go out and everyone looks at me like "who is this slut?" Do you know what I mean?"

(Bathmaker et al 2016: 48)

# Looking to a better place

O'Shea and colleagues' (2024) strengths based approach

- Building on the work of Sen and Yosso, O'Shea and colleagues propose a 'strengths-based approach'.
- This approach aims to validate the capabilities and cultural knowledge and skills of diverse populations, including those disadvantaged in formal education systems, and they argue that this approach could be 'transformative on both a personal and public level', by leading to a more comprehensive transformation of HE to better address new equity and widening participation agendas.

# Looking to a better place

Tomlinson (2017) Graduate capital model

- Identifies 5 forms of capital: Human Capital, Social Capital, Cultural Capital, Psychological Capital and Identity Capital.

“key resources that potentially empower graduates and equip them for managing the transition from HE to the labour market.”

- Used by the Careers, Employability and Student Enterprise service at the University of Southampton

# Looking to a better place

Gewirtz et al (2025): 'Local learning ecologies'

'Local learning ecologies' are the physical, economic, social, cultural, educational and labour market spaces that young people traverse. Local learning ecologies 'can be more or less affluent; more or less organised and mediated by professionals and wider stakeholders; [and] offer more or fewer opportunities ... for participation in ... employment or further study' (Hodgson and Spours 2015, 29). Hodgson and Spours (2013) conceptualise learning ecologies as located on a continuum ranging from 'low' to **'high' opportunity ecosystems;** the latter **constituting nurturing, opportunity-rich environments that enable young people to develop more expansive horizons for action.** A learning ecologies perspective enables us to pay attention to, and compare across localities, how local opportunity structures and young people's horizons for action are shaped by processes occurring at multiple intersecting levels.

# And so to capability theory in the context of vocational education pathways and transitions

“the struggles or competitions of the social field are not merely for power and advantage but are also about how to live; they are partly driven by the search for the good.”

(Andrew Sayer, 2005: 96, in his discussion of Bourdieu's ideas)

# Capability approach grounded in human development

The human development approach is about **expanding the richness of human life, rather than simply the richness of the economy** in which human beings live. It is an approach that is focused on creating fair opportunities and choices for all people. (The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP 2020))

The capabilities approach provides **a normative framework** for evaluating, assessing and providing the conditions for individual well-being and social arrangements (Wheelahan and Moodie 2016)



# Agency and structure

A key strength of the approach is the foregrounding human agency, focusing on 'people's freedom to be and do what they value' (Walker et al 2022: 17), but this also means that individualism is at the heart of Sen's ideas on capability (McGrath et al 2022). Developments in the literature that builds on Sen's work have sought to move beyond this individualism according to McGrath et al and to use the capability approach to focus on human agency, while linking this to a stronger and more structural reading of contexts.

# Capability approach and vocational pathways

Tikly (2013: 20) argues that the capabilities approach “allows for an expanded view of the purpose of TVET as supporting the development of human capabilities and functionings that individuals, communities and society at large have reason to value”.

# Productive capabilities in vocational education

We apply human capabilities to vocational education by considering what people are able to 'be and do' at work and through work to realise themselves and their goals. We understand productive capabilities to refer to the resources and arrangements of work and the broad knowledge, skills and attributes that individuals need to be productive at work, to progress in their careers, and to participate in decision-making about work (Moodie, Wheelahan, Fredman and Bexley, 2015: 19). Vocational education students need to understand how their field of practice fits within their communities and societies, and they require the capacity to be 'citizens' within their field, so they can help shape its future. (Wheelahan and Moodie 2016: 61)

# Critical capabilities account of vocational education and training

- Amongst researchers whose work focuses outside of the global north and west, the use of the capabilities approach has developed out of a crucial concern for how VET can be transformed in order to contribute to a wider transformation agenda around sustainable human development.
- A focus on flourishing and the centrality of aspirations: Amartya Sen's key question 'equality of what' moves the VET debate away from equality in terms of parity of esteem of knowledge or qualifications towards considerations of equality in terms of human freedoms and flourishings. (McGrath et al 2022 577)
- The approach places young people's voices at its centre and seeks to listen carefully to their stories of where they have come from before VET, often including accounts of marginalisation and disempowerment; their hopes for and experiences of VET; and their aspirations for their future lives. (McGrath et al 2022 579)

# CCA-VET

not just identifying injustice in the interplay of structure and agency but looking at how individual aspirations, valued capabilities and collective action can bring about radical changes in lives. (McGrath et al 2022: 577)

# Hope and despair From a better place back to Bourdieu

Revisiting my research into (vocational) education pathways

# Learning that academic routes are not for “a person like me”

Students on a vocationally-related pathway post-16 in the 1990s in England

## **School as a critical turning point**

Forms of learning embodied in academic qualifications and end-of-course exams seen as too difficult and to be avoided

- “Boring”
- “It was just madness. They just used to shout at us.”
- “They didn’t really respect us”
- “Everything was going too fast”

## **“Choosing” a vocational route**

- “They don’t put pressure on you”
- “I’m not an examination person”
- Doing practical work as well as theory “gives your brain more time to understand”



# Vocational routes: negotiating a chance for success

## Teachers “help” with college work, students “help” back

The give and take of “helping” could be understood as the way the habitus of students and teachers is attuned to the necessities of the ‘vocational’ field

- Compared to teachers in schools, the right sort of lecturers in college “give you more help with the work, tell you about the work when you’re doing it, stuff like that, so it helps us out. And it helps them out because we complete the work on time you see.” (Chris, Foundation GNVQ)
- “A good teacher helps you a lot, helps you if you need help. Or if you need to give in assignments a bit late, she says “yeah alright”. Those sort of things. Like backing you all the way.” (Kaesar, Intermediate GNVQ)

So there is the risk of the wrong sort of lecturer, who is not attuned to the field:

- “I think next year they are going to get some of the A-level teachers to teach us and they don’t know anything about GNVQ. They don’t know nothing about GNVQ like proper teachers, and I’m concerned because it’s my life here and they’re not going to teach us properly and we’re not going to be able to get our grades, and that’s why I’m sort of scared of that.” (Saira, Advanced GNVQ)

# Creating and uncreating pathways into higher level vocational education

- Two colleges in the FurtherHigher project in the 2000s
- Different forms of dual sector institutions, offering both further and higher education
- How positioning in social space may be used strategically and as a result create and uncreate clear educational pathways by means of 'seamlessness' and 'separation'

# Repositioning themselves: seeking prestige through separation of FE and HE at East Heath College

From a college offering further and higher education to two formally separated institutions:

The strategic repositioning of HE delivery into a separate HE institution aiming to operate on a par with universities and redefining itself away from current perceptions of 'the Civic College' - a mixed-economy institution offering lower quality HE than institutions which focus solely on HE delivery

- Teaching and management staff no longer work on both FE and HE courses
- Limited communication between staff working in FE and those working in HE in the same subject area
- Poor match between the content of Level 3 courses in the FE college and the degree course in the HE institution
- Events advertised as 'only for HE students'

Constructing two distinct and different cultures or institutional habituses: one of FE, and one of HE study. Positioning in the more prestigious HE field is reinforced by physical separation of teaching and administration spaces, and a lack of clear strategic commitment to promoting internal student progression.

# Adjusting the rules of the game: working the 'dual sector' subfield in Citygate College

Constructing a seamless progression route from occupational NVQ (National Vocational Qualification) to Bachelor degree study by:

- Offering internal progression within one subject department (culinary education) of a 'dual sector' institution of further and higher education
- Bypassing the requirements of the HE application system for applications to be submitted nearly 1 year in advance of commencing study
- Allowing delayed decision-making by students and negotiating late applications on their behalf
- Providing the capitals to make this possible through staff working across further and higher education provision

Redefining cultures and practices in a subfield of HE

"It's now become part of, almost the culture, that there is this opportunity to move on if you feel it's appropriate." Vivienne, programme co-ordinator

# Can individuals make alternative forms of capital work to their advantage?

The Paired Peers project followed young people from middle-class and working-class backgrounds at the two universities in Bristol in England (UWE Bristol and the University of Bristol) from when they started as undergraduates (2010) (Paired Peers 1) to four years after graduation (2017) (Paired Peers 2).

# Making ‘local capital’ work to realise a career future

Ruby (working-class, white, graduate in English)

Decided on a career early on at secondary school and then pursued a clearly structured pathway:

- “I want to teach ... it’s something that I’ve always wanted to do actually, go to university. I knew what I wanted to do from about the age of 13.” Teaching would allow Ruby to find graduate work in her home place where she wanted to live, but where graduate opportunities and secure employment were limited.
- She deliberately invested in capitals that would enhance her chances, such as work experience placements in a number of different schools during university vacations.
- With a habitus attuned to what would work for her, she looked to mobilise and build on ‘local capital’. She strategically applied for a post-graduate teaching programme at universities near to home in order to improve her chances of securing future employment locally.
- She mobilised immediate social networks when making job applications, including her partner and a close friend:  
“One of them works for the NHS [National health Service] and she’s always dealing with applications, so I sent it [my application] to her as well because I thought you always need that different viewpoint of what your application sounds like. ... And then [my partner] would proofread it for me because he’s so good at that.”  
Ruby’s mobilisation of local capital worked: she got her desired local teaching job.

# Time and resources to mobilise diverse forms of capital to achieve a career of choice

Elliot (middle-class, white, graduate in English)

Had 'ideas' for the future at university, either journalism or an academic career, but kept his plans open.

- At university, involved in activities that would contribute to these future goals, writing film reviews for the university newspaper and by the final year running the film and TV section of the paper.
- Mobilised social capital connections at his local cricket club to secure summer work experience at the Belfast office of a major UK red- top newspaper.
- Mobilized and built on stocks of social and cultural capital, working part- time for a finance magazine published by a cousin, where he developed journalism skills. His cousin asked: 'Do you want to write?', and I said, 'Yes, absolutely'. Because it is difficult to find people who, you know, who know about hedge funds who aren't really expensive. He got me doing five interviews.... These hedge- fund service providers. ...I think they were all a bit bemused by this 20- year- old or 21- year- old coming into their offices in a badly fitting suit and asking about the financial situation over the last year. [...But ] even if you're out of control in the interview, you can salvage ...even if it's a stupid question, you can write it into something that sounds impressive.
- After graduation, diverse short-term activities, but all building stocks of capital for the future: masters degree, temporary contracts on magazines, government volunteering scheme in Ghana, internship with Financial Times.
- Finally a permanent job as the economics reporter for a newspaper in London where he had to "self- train in economics" and said it was "a baptism of fire".



# Using Bourdieu's tools: problematising the terrain

Bourdieu's tools provide a way of analysing how advantage is maintained and inequalities persist, and the ways in which this affects students' experience in education and progression to future lives. The theoretical tools of field, capitals and habitus problematise the terrain and provide a lens for questioning practice, identifying opportunities, and highlighting constraints.

Bourdieu's tools insist that there are no straightforward answers, but they are a means of identifying the spaces for change:

- School education can act to reinforce predispositions in the habitus that mean some courses of action are excluded from a person's "plausibility structures" as "unthinkable" and undesirable (see Skeggs, 2004; Allen and Hollingworth, 2013: 500). BUT habitus is also a generative structure - it can be understood as '*predisposing* rather than *predetermining* individuals towards certain ways of behaving' (Allen and Hollingworth, 2013: 501. My emphasis).
- In some cases students following vocational and alternative educational routes in England may be positioned and be able to take up positions that allow them greater power and success in a field defined separately as further and vocational education, than in a field defined as academic and higher education. But in the changing field of higher/tertiary education there are difficult questions concerning how diversity may on the one hand be about the democratisation of HE, but on the other may be about the diversion of certain students in order to preserve elite, prestigious forms of HE for a select minority.
- Working-class students and others facing disadvantage can make university work for them and lead to futures they value.
- Dominant groups may be doomed to succeed, but dominated groups are not simply doomed to fail, even though the route to a desired future may be more risky and more of a struggle compared to those in positions of advantage.

# Concluding comments

- I started out with the sense in some research for a desire to move beyond accounts that are perceived as focusing too much on structural conditions to a better place, where individual agency can enable fulfilling futures and where in Sen's terms people have the freedom to lead the kind of life 'they have reason to value' (Sen 1999, 18).
- But I was also nervous that this could flip into paying less attention to structural conditions that affect equality of outcomes and opportunity and involve a less critical focus on the value of recognising diversity and differentiation (Webb et al 2017).
- In working through the ideas presented here I see starting with Bourdieu's conceptual tools as providing a means of surfacing 'everyday' processes and practices that serve to maintain patterns of inequalities.
- But working with ideas and other theories that extend beyond Bourdieu troubles the relationship between structure and agency, and agency and structure, under present conditions, and demands that we look to identify and work to find ways forward.
- I see these developments as working in the spirit of Bourdieu's view of a theory of practice, that involves 'scientific rigour' but not 'scientific rigidity' (Bourdieu 1992, 227).

# Making sense of the opportunities and constraints of vocational education pathways and transitions: Between Bourdieu and a better place

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## **Abstract**

This presentation considers my own work on vocational pathways and locates this work in the context of how researchers in different countries have sought to understand the opportunities and constraints of vocational routes in their own contexts. There is increasing interest in the role that vocational education pathways play in expanded education systems in countries across the globe. Policymakers see vocational pathways as solving high skills shortages in the context of knowledge economies, and at the same time offering pathways for disadvantaged learners (students from working-class origins; ethnic minorities; indigenous learners; migrants and refugees). Yet in a 'global war for talent' amongst a highly educated elite, what do vocational pathways offer in the shadow of struggles on an international scale over the most prestigious forms of education (Brown, Lauder and Ashton, 2011)? I consider the ways in which navigating transitions have been theorised, in particular the interplay between Bourdieu's conceptual tools, which insist that we recognise how advantage is maintained and inequalities persist, and ideas that build on and move beyond Bourdieu: seeking out possibilities for a better place.

# Empirical sources used in this presentation

1. Post-16 students' and teachers' constructions of full-time GNVQ in a college of further education in England (1990s)  
PhD project
2. The FurtherHigher project (2000s)  
Economic and Social Research Council (Award Reference RES-139-25-0245)  
Research team: Ann-Marie Bathmaker, Greg Brooks, Diane Burns, David Dale, Cate Goodlad, Liz Halford, Karen Kitchen, Gareth Parry, Andy Roberts, David Smith, Will Thomas, Sammy Rashid, Anne Thompson, Val Thompson
3. The Paired Peers project (2010s)