"Graduateness" – who cares? Graduate identity in small hospitality firms

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Introduction

Traditionally, graduate employment has taken place in large, rather than small organisations. Research on graduate employment has reflected this and the literature on graduate careers has been dominated by the large firm context. However, this tendency must be questioned, as small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) are increasingly becoming an important part of the UK economy. The traditional patterns in higher education are also changing and the proportion of young people entering higher education has increased substantially. In future, it is unlikely that graduates will follow traditional career paths in large firms.

This research focuses on hospitality graduates in small firms and attempts to illustrate that notions of graduate identity are useful in understanding graduate transition into small hospitality firms. The research embraces the view of Holmes (1999) when he maintains that neither employers’ expectations of what a graduate should be like, nor graduates’ understanding and aspirations of what it is like to be a graduate in employment are separately determining. Rather, the two sides of the dynamic process interact and affect each other. This article explores data on both the views of hospitality graduates and those of their employers. Utilising the concept of graduate identity the data suggest that hospitality graduates in small firms fail to develop a sense of graduate identity and that their managers lack understanding on how the employment of graduates "makes some difference". Nevertheless, it is affirmed that graduate identity offers a useful perspective for much-needed further research on the transition of graduates into SME employment.

Methodology

The original empirical work upon which we draw in this article was undertaken in 1998, funded by a small University grant. Elsewhere (Holden and Jameson, 1999) we have explained in some detail the methodological issues which structured our approach. In essence, this was qualitative in nature. We were influenced by two factors. First, the lack of existent research on hospitality graduates in
small firms. Second, the compelling arguments of authors such as Burrows and Curran (1989), Storey (1994) and Thomas (1998) that small firms are fundamentally different from large firms. A series of in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with graduates and their managers in six case study organisations. It was our deliberate intention at this exploratory stage of the research not to collect data within an existing conceptual or theoretical framework. Whilst we had no set of pre-determined questions which were asked to all respondents, all graduates were prompted to tell us about their academic and work experience prior to joining the unit, what it was like starting work at the unit and their subsequent experience to date. All managers were asked to tell us about how they initially and subsequently used the graduate and their assessment of the graduate’s performance.

For the purposes of this article, however, we revisit the data, informed by recently published research on graduate identity (Holmes et al., 1998; Holmes, 1999). Addressing our original data in this way, we suggest, adds value both to our initial findings (Holden and Jameson, 1999) and indeed to those of Holmes and colleagues.

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The expansion of graduate numbers leads to one inescapable conclusion: traditional graduate recruiters will not absorb this huge number of graduates.

Connor and Pollard (1996) propose that the notion of what constitutes a graduate job has broadened and the assumption that typically graduates go into a permanent, professional level employment is less tenable now than it ever was. They believe that fewer UK graduates are entering large firms and formal graduate training programmes. Pearson et al. (1997, p. 1) continue with this theme and argue that this will have an impact on how the graduate labour market is perceived they suggest that:

While vacancies among the major recruiters will remain significant . . . they will only provide a small minority of the jobs for graduates. They will, however, continue to dominate the debate about the nature of employment opportunities, and give rise to a distorted view of what has become an increasingly diverse labour market for graduates.

SMEs are increasingly becoming an important part of the UK economy and are now creating new jobs much faster than larger firms (Department for Education and Employment, 1996). The DfEE claims that the fastest growing employment sector is now small and medium sized companies.

Hawkins and Winter (1996) maintain that small and medium sized firms are the most likely growth areas for graduate employment, although they suggest that SMEs are still a fairly untapped labour market for graduates. They suggest that the SME sector has tended not to recruit graduates in the past. They believe that one reason for this is the fact that many entrepreneurs are themselves not graduates whom they perceive as high cost and risk. Hawkins and Winter (1996, p. 5) continue:

They are not sure what they will get and worry about retention and graduates’ commitment . . . SMEs find problems in identifying, recruiting and utilising graduates. They need graduates to make an immediate contribution to the business but generally have no formal induction programmes or structured training or development . . . While SMEs need to understand the benefits graduates can bring, graduates also need to understand the labour market. Their perceptions are currently skewed by the fact that the traditional graduate jobs are the most vigorously promoted.
At present, graduates are underrepresented in the SME sector. Williams and Owen (1997) estimate the number of graduates working in SMEs at 8 per cent of the workforce compared with 13 per cent elsewhere. However there is a lack of empirical data on job creation in SMEs (Association of Graduate Recruiters, 1995). Research in SMEs generally (Storey, 1994; Matlay, 1999) suggests a hugely complex sector in which many firms are micro-business (less than ten employees), where many have few aspirations for growth and where attitudes to training and development suggest that the market for graduate employment may be limited.

**Hospitality**

It has been well documented that future labour demand within the hospitality industry is predicted to grow; according to the Joint Hospitality Industry Congress (1989) the hospitality and leisure industries will be Britain’s largest growing and job creating industries in the twenty-first century. They will create one million new jobs between 1996 and 2006.

It has already been established by Purcell and Quinn (1995) that hospitality graduates do pursue careers in small firms. At the time of their survey it was estimated that 31 per cent of hospitality graduates worked in firms with less than 100 employees and if the EU definition of an SME which was current at that time is used, then 50 per cent of hospitality graduates were working in the SME sector.

Growth has also been predicted for the service sector and SMEs within it. As such, it is likely that a proportion of hospitality graduates will target small firms as career destinations. Even though the hospitality industry is dominated by small independent operators, research in the hospitality industry has been predominantly located in the context of large multinational enterprises (Jameson, 1996). The time is now right to examine some of the implications of the graduate presence in the small firms sector.

**Graduate identity**

Holmes et al. (1998) acknowledge the significance of the changing graduate labour market. They note in particular the rapid development of a mass higher education system which is resulting in a much larger supply of graduates, whilst the traditional route into graduate employment is becoming a relatively small part of graduate employment. Holmes et al. (1998) draw on Mason’s (1995) work which indicates that traditional recruiters of graduates increasingly employ graduates in other jobs, not previously treated as graduate jobs, and ask how employers’ understandings and expectations of graduates are changing. They suggest that the concept of graduate identity offers real potential for the study of graduates in small firms. An outline of the key arguments underpinning Holmes’ position follows and provides the basis for the revisitation and subsequent reflection on our data in the next section.

Holmes (1999) considers higher education as a process by which an individual may develop his/her identity as a graduate, as one who is highly educated. He suggests that it is important to use the term “identity” as it has come to be understood and used within the social sciences over recent years. The notion of identity as a “fixed” entity is rejected in favour of the idea of the process of identity formation and reformation. The process involves a dynamic relationship between the individual’s personal sense of self and the social processes which to a significant degree determine what count as the criteria for being ascribed a particular identity. According to Holmes, an identity cannot be decided on solely by an individual, as a personal act of choice and will, but must always be subject to affirmation (or dis-affirmation) by others.

Holmes et al. (1998) use what they describe as a “social process” or “relational” perspective on graduate identity and explain that a relational approach to identity is concerned with the processes by which individuals come to have their identities within society. They continue with this explanation and add that the relational approach does not treat such identities as “essences”, having objective existence either as the attribution by others (“social identity”) or as the self-concept of the individual person (“personal identity”). Rather, they argue, an identity is emergent from the dynamic interaction of the expression of identity aspirations on the part of the individual, and the identity attributions by society. They cite Jenkins who argues for a model of “the internal-external dialectic of identification” to
aid understanding of this process. Holmes et al. suggest that the term identification aptly describes this active, continuing process, whereby identity is determined neither externally (society) nor internally (the person). So as far as graduate identity is concerned, neither employers’ expectations of what a graduate should be like, nor graduates’ understanding and aspirations of what it is like to be a graduate in employment (as a graduate), are separately determining. Rather, they argue, these two sides of the dynamic process interact and affect each other.

Although our focus in this article is the particular set of ideas on identity, developed by Holmes, it is worth noting the contribution by Harre (1983). His concept of “identity project” may be useful when considering the process of becoming a graduate. As far as Harre is concerned an “identity project” is the continuing process by which a person seeks to attain and maintain uniqueness and individuality (personal being) whilst also being socially recognised (social being). This involves the “appropriation” by the individual of the characteristics of socially and culturally (and therefore discursively) legitimated identities. From this follows a stage of “transformation”, making personal experience of the socially acquired understanding in terms of personal experience. The “publication” of the actor’s claim to the identity, the public expression of the characteristics associated with the identity leads, if successful, to “conventionalization” into the personal biography and social order. Holmes (1999) uses the work of Goffman (1968), who argues that “the moral career” of the graduate is one achieved by means of transition through a set of hazards, leading to esteem, reputation and self-worth or loss of this ‘spoiled identity’ (Goffman, 1968). Holmes (1999) argues that in this way we can reframe the educational and assessment process, or more properly, the education assessment-selection process as that of an identity project of becoming a graduate, someone who is highly educated.

Holmes et al. (1998) propose that “being a graduate” has social significance and that it serves to differentiate between people in ways that are consequential. In their study, they narrow differentiation and consequences down to the occupational arena and suggest that being a graduate makes a difference in terms of employment opportunity and outcome. They explain that by “graduate identity” they mean something more than just the fact that someone has a degree, that they have simply graduated. They maintain that unless employers have some understanding of how the employment of graduates makes some difference, “being a graduate” will have little social significance. Holmes et al. elaborate on this view and suggest that such understanding forms expectations. They maintain that graduates will have to engage with such understanding in order to benefit from what employers are prepared to offer because of the difference they expect will be made by graduates.

Finally in this section, we note Holmes et al.’s (1998) suggestion that where an individual graduate gains entry to a job as a graduate, their graduate identity is being affirmed. They give the example of the traditional route of recruitment to a graduate-training scheme with a large employer that would constitute affirmation. They also give the example of an individual graduate not succeeding in obtaining a job (they deem) suitable for a graduate, then graduate identity is disaffirmed.

Reflections on the data
We look now to our data which, as noted above, were obtained through in-depth interviews with both graduates and their managers. We focus on two issues in particular. First, the recollections of graduates in relation to future employment as they approached the completion of their degree and their views and thoughts in relation to the job that they occupied at the time of the interviews. Second, the views of their employers in relation to their decision to recruit a graduate.

The graduates
We begin by suggesting that the notion of graduate identity and “graduateness” can be useful in understanding how graduates view the future when in their final year.

Comments from graduates included the following:

Q. What sort of career aspirations did you have in your final year in terms of subsequent career?
A. I didn’t have any idea. My main concentration was on getting that piece of paper at the end of
the day – which was the same situation for a lot of people.

And:
Q. What, in your final year, were your intentions or hopes in terms of jobs or career?
A. Basically just to get a job in the industry at the end. Anything really.

These graduates did not appear to be particularly well organised in terms of taking a proactive approach to their careers. The second graduate does not even appear to be concerned about the type or level of job.

It is not unusual for undergraduates to "neglect" their careers in the final year of their degrees. The pressure is on and often they are preoccupied with examinations and coursework deadlines. It could be argued that this scenario is even worse now that graduates are also working to provide income to support their studies. As such, to a certain extent, these comments from graduates may not be all that surprising. What is surprising, is the hospitality graduates’ approach to their first “graduate” job. The main themes to occur in almost all of the graduate interviews is one of haphazardness, or a reaction to particular circumstances or accidentally almost “falling into” their first job. The graduates' stories of how they came to be in their first job include the following:

It was just how it happened. I was never entirely sure what I was going to do. The vacancy came up here. I thought that might be the ideal opportunity – when I was working here trying to pay my rent, I was having to work here and do my degree and didn’t have any time to sort of think what will I do at the end of the year. I just panicked and thought what do I know. So I got a job out of the local paper as a second chef. Then the manager Andrew phoned me up because I’d worked with him before – he was getting a new team together so he gave me a bell and that’s what happened. I wasn’t looking for a graduate job – I was just looking for a job in Manchester – I just happened to be living round the corner and did the odd shift of part time work. They hadn’t any full time staff at the time and they said we like you and want to create a role for you. It was getting towards the end of summer and I hadn’t really sorted anything out . . . I had no money and I had to get something as a stopgap, so I put my CV around a few jobs locally . . . I came to see Andrew here and it really grabbed me because it was a very new business and he was putting his team together and it sounded quite exciting . . .

I was still very unsure at the time as to what exactly I wanted to do . . . and the move to Manchester was a haphazard one for me. I came up here with no job at all . . . I just had friends up here . . . I moved into a house and got a job. I saw a little ad in the paper for this restaurant . . . for chefs . . . I phoned up and said I am applying for the job in the paper for the chef's position . . . I'll have a go at anything. I started doing it part-time and I’ve never looked back.

Q. So it was by chance then?
A. Very much by chance . . . I just sort of fell into this job.

The employers

As Holmes (1999) suggests, the employers’ perception of the graduate is very important in understanding the concept of graduate identity. In our research, the overwhelming view from employers and managers in small hospitality firms was that, in the words of one respondent:

I don’t mind whether they’re graduates or not really.

And:

I wouldn’t necessarily have any preconceived preferences to install a graduate at the end of the day as far as I look at it; I’m not bothered if a person is a graduate or not.

Other managers and employers elaborated on this, as follows:

I honestly don’t expect to get too much out of them (i.e. graduates) . . . I haven’t got very high expectations, my expectations are of them as people and just because they’ve got a degree I don’t necessarily expect them to produce anything. It’s the fact they’ve got grades, they’ve got talent, they’ve got sense . . . it’s almost as if you know they’re going to be all right with customers, you know they’ve got a level of . . .

Q. You are saying that you trust them?
A. Yes, but I wouldn’t expect anything great from them in terms of you know, they suddenly produce something.

Some managers and employers focused specifically on the realities of working in a small business:

To be perfectly honest I think that people who come out with a catering degree, in many respects are a hindrance for the first 6 months, not in terms of sort of their determination and their enthusiasm, but so far as kind of what they actually think should happen, is kind of misplaced.

Q. Can you illustrate that?
A. Phil was a graduate from a Northern University and he worked part-time with us throughout his degree . . . then we got him full time . . . and it was like well at college it says that . . . and . . . I’m interested in theoretical applications, but that has to be seen in the confines of what a business our size actually does . . . there was a kind of . . .
learnt this at college and it must be right, whether I’m working for a large hotel chain or a relatively small enterprise.

Another employer said:

Some small businesses, managers of small businesses, owners of small businesses are worried that a graduate will not fit in. I think there is a criticism that comes from employers generally that says, we’ve got to teach these graduates all sorts of things that we think perhaps they could well learn at university, whether it be handling customers, interpersonal skills . . . but a graduate doesn’t come very well equipped to do a job. They might be bright. They might know an awful lot about history or art, or whatever subject they studied, but they don’t know very much about working, and what it’s like to work and how to do a good job of work. That takes quite a lot of time for them to shift.

And:

...they’ve got a certain level of intelligence, they’ve reached a certain maturity and they’ve got a bit of background knowledge, what worries me with graduates is how much of that knowledge they ever get to apply in something like this, for the Nick’s of this world we’re just a stepping stone and nothing else . . . and then he can move on fairly quickly and I have to accept that because there isn’t really enough in here to keep her and Nick for too long. So I would recruit a graduate and say OK you’ll come to me and what you’ll do you’ll learn hands on for 18 months – two years and you’ll be hands on but you’ll leave here and you’ll be ready to be an assistant manager at whatever level because to a large extent what a graduate misses is the hands on bit but it’s also the gaining of the common sense and understanding.

If Holmes’ (1999) view is accepted that higher education is a process by which an individual develops their identity as a graduate, “as one who is highly educated”, then it can be seen that as far as the graduates in the case studies are concerned, they are highly educated, but appear to be failing to develop their identity as graduates. Although Holmes is clear that identity is not fixed, and is formed over time, there is no evidence to suggest that these graduates have begun to tread on the path of developing graduate identity. Harre’s (1983) work is also useful in this context as none of these graduates appears to be seeking to attain and maintain uniqueness and individuality as far as the graduate labour market is concerned. At best, they seem to be underselling themselves; at worst they are almost rejecting any notion of graduate identity.

It would be crude and naive at this point to suggest that these graduates exhibited “spoiled identity” (Goffman, 1968). However, at this stage of the research, questions must be asked about the graduate’s perceptions of actually “being a graduate” and in Holmes’ terms if this has social significance (Holmes, 1999). Holmes et al.’s (1998) suggestion that being a graduate “makes a difference” in terms of employment opportunity and outcome does not appear to influence some of the graduates’ decisions on first destination employment. As illustrated above, one even claimed that they were not looking for a graduate job. Holmes et al. (1998) propose that unless employers have some understanding of how the employment of graduates makes some difference, being a graduate will have little social significance. It is apparent from these cases that some employers in small hospitality firms do not have an understanding of how the employment of graduates makes some difference. Although the employers in the cases do not actively reject graduates as employees, they appear not to feel that employing graduates is any different from non-graduates. They certainly do not seem to actively seek or appoint graduates.

When graduates apply for positions in these small firms, employers say they are “not bothered” and “don’t mind” whether the person is a graduate or not. So as far as recruitment and selection is concerned, employers in these small firms do not appear to differentiate between graduates and non-graduates.

Once the graduate starts work in the firm, it seems to be the case that the employers’ expectations of them do not appear to be too high. This is at variance with Holmes et al.’s claim that employers expect graduates “to make a difference”. We accept the notion that the two sides of the dynamic process (employers’ expectations of what a graduate should be like and the graduates’ understanding of what it is like to be a graduate in employment) interact and affect each other. However, in this sample of firms, it does not seem to make any difference to either side of the employment relationship whether a person is a graduate or not. It would seem to be the case that in Holmes’ terms, graduate identity is dis-affirmed by both the hospitality graduate and their managers.
In this sample of small hospitality firms, it can be seen that “being a graduate” has not made a difference in terms of employment opportunity and outcome. On the employer’s side, it can be seen that the employers in the sample do not have an understanding of how the employment of graduates makes some difference. In addition to this employers in the sample also do not appear to expect graduates to “make a difference” to the organisation. As such, it is suggested that in this particular sample, in the specific context of graduates in small hospitality firms, being a graduate has little social significance.

Conclusion

This article has discussed the results from the “second phase” of an ongoing research project on hospitality graduates in small firms. It has revisited data collected to explore graduate transition into small firms. The concept of graduate identity has been used to attempt to make more sense of the data. Reflections on the data show that the graduates in the sample, and their managers, portray a complex relationship with the notion of graduate identity. The evidence suggests that graduate identity plays very little importance in the quest for jobs or the selection and utilisation of graduates in these small firms. It may be the case, of course, that graduate identity takes a different form in different small firms. We know that within this sector there are a range of different sizes of firms and that small firms are also part of different sectors. A small hospitality firm may well be a fundamentally different graduate employment context from a small microelectronics firm. We are also aware that some small firms have no desire to grow and some are in different stages of growth. Other variables include structural features and the background of the owner/manager and whether they themselves are graduates. Nevertheless, within the inevitable limitations of one research project, the approach proved useful and raises uncertainty about the strength of any graduate identity in SME employment. The graduate labour market is changing and the traditional graduate job in a large firm appears unlikely to be the “typical” pattern for graduate employment in the future. Initiatives and efforts taken by various agencies (DfEE, HE Careers Services, Business Link, etc.) to enhance the SME graduate labour market are based firmly on assumptions that “graduateness” makes a difference. However, if being a graduate actually makes little difference in many SME contexts challenging questions are raised about how best to influence and develop this aspect of the graduate labour market.

We really do need to complement this glimpse of graduate employment in small hospitality firms with more substantive and robust research exploring “graduateness” elsewhere in the SME graduate labour market.

References