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Higher education, graduate skills and the skills of graduates: the case of graduates as residential sales estate agents

Abstract

The UK labour market is subject to significant graduatisation. Yet in the context of an over-supply of graduates, little is known about the *demand* for and *deployment* of graduate skills in previously non-graduate jobs. Moreover, there is little examination of where these skills are *developed*, save an assumption in higher education. Using interview and questionnaire data from a study of British residential sales estate agents, this paper explores the demand, deployment and development of graduate skills in an occupation that is becoming graduatised. This data finds no evidence to support the view that the skills demanded and deployed are those solely developed within higher education. Instead what employers require is a wide array of predominantly soft skills developed in many different sites. These findings suggest that, in the case of estate agents, what matters are the 'skills of graduates' rather than putative 'graduate skills'.

Introduction

The expansion of higher education (HE) has led to increasing focus on graduate employability and skills as the route to finding suitable employment (Brooks et al. 2012; Davis et al 2013; Tholen, 2014). At the same time what constitutes a graduate job has become more ambiguous (Elias and Purcell, 2013). Alongside traditional graduate jobs, new graduate occupations have come into existence and a growing number of graduates are moving into occupations that were previously non-graduate. While there remains a tight match between graduate skills and the skill requirements of traditional professions (Elias and Purcell, 2004), and there also seems to be a new coupling of skill demand and supply in the new graduate occupations (Chillas, 2010), there is currently little empirical evidence on the skills needed to get jobs in previously non-graduate occupations that are graduatising. Moreover despite recent policy attention to skills utilisation – the deployment in work of the skills possessed by workers – there is little understanding of the skills required of graduates to do these jobs once employed (Keep and Mayhew 2010). As a consequence it is not clear if and if so which skills possessed by graduates have utility in the labour market and labour process of graduatising occupations. Providing this understanding is important

given the over-supply of graduates onto the labour market and government demands that higher education be better aligned to employers' skill needs (Vasagar 2011).

This article examines a graduatising occupation – UK residential sales estate agents. Using interview and questionnaire data with estate agents and employers, three separate yet related questions are explored. First, what skills do employers require of graduates at the point of hire for previously non-graduate jobs? Second, what skills are used by graduates in these jobs? Third, where are these skills acquired or formed? In other words, what skills are demanded of and deployed by those graduates in this occupation, and where these skills are developed. The next section outlines policy and academic debates about graduates' skills generally. The following section outlines the research methodology adopted to examine these skills empirically. The findings are presented, structured by the three questions and suggest that better understanding is enabled by focusing on the 'skills of graduates' rather than 'graduate skills'. The conclusion raises new questions about the concept of 'graduateness' and the role universities play in the formation of skills.

The debate about graduate skills

With the exception of the traditional professions such as law and medicine, the coupling of higher education (HE) and employment is looser in the UK than in some other European countries (Tholen, 2014). However 'graduate skills', regardless of discipline, are regarded as a distinct set of skills acquired through HE. This skills set has become explicit in recent years as part of the graduate employability debate. As Purcell and Elias (2015) note, 'employability' was first conceived in relation to providing youth with low educational achievement the basic skills to enable them to obtain and retain routine jobs. Graduate employability aims higher; to provide not basic skills but what the Scottish Executive (2004) termed 'thinking skills'. The Higher

Education Academy, working in conjunction with the Council for Industry and Higher Education, has created 53 student employability profiles. These profiles identify a 'remarkably homogenous' (Boden and Nedeva, 2010: 45) set of skills that students should acquire through their studies in HE regardless of subject studied: the capacity to analyse and reason, problem solve, organise and interpret information, and exercise critical judgement for example. This emphasis resonates with graduate employers. Accountancy firm Coopers & Lybrand,¹ for example, seek 'intellectual skills' amongst their graduate hire (cited in Boden and Nedeva, 2010).

The emphasis on thinking skills acquired through HE aligns with two developments argued to be occurring in the advanced economies: first a general shift to more complex tasks at work; second the development of knowledge-based economies. The two developments are intertwined, said to be part of a long-term economic shift from manual to mental labour. This trend was first articulated in the early 1900s (Machajski cited in Bell, 1960), restated with Peter Drucker's (1959) emergent 'knowledge workers' in the late 1950s, re-emerged with Daniel Bell's (1973) coming of post-industrialism, and became very influential again in the 1990s with Robert Reich's (1991) 'symbolic analysts'. All emphasize the importance of theoretical knowledge within the labour process. Only by leveraging this knowledge would the advanced economies survive and thrive in competition with low wage developing economies. Transmuted into the 'knowledge economy', Reich's thesis was readily adopted by governments in the advanced economies and continues to be a policy tenet with the economic downturn (Coughlin, 2011; Obama, 2011). The European Commission (2010), for example, continued to cite knowledge as a driver of future growth and the rhetoric of creating a high skill economy continued to infuse UK government policy proclamations post-crisis (Cable, 2012).

If work is becoming more complex and knowledge-intensive, more and better educated workers are needed (OECD, 1996; World Bank, 2003; Brinkley and Lee,

2006). The assumption is that an increased supply of workers with degree qualifications is needed to meet as well as stimulate the increasing demand for high skilled labour (Brown and Lauder, 2001). The policy response has been to intervene in and boost the supply-side of the labour market by expanding HE, creating more universities and more graduates. Assessing UK's skill needs, for example, the Leitch Review of Skills (2006) called for action to achieve '50 per cent of young people participating in HE' (p.67). The Review equates skills with qualifications so that universities serve as the main provider of the high skills needed, justifying the shift from elite to mass HE in the UK (BIS, 2009). Possession of a degree is evidence of the acquisition of these skills, and explains why a headcount of graduates has become a proxy amongst some advanced economies' governments for measuring development towards becoming a knowledge-based economy (Warhurst and Thompson, 2006). At the workplace level, the employment of graduates has become a measure of the demand for graduate labour amongst employers; the assumption being that more graduates being employed demonstrates that more graduates and their skills are needed by employers (DfES, 2003).

Certainly graduates have started to substitute non-graduate labour, with an assumption that, with this entryism, graduates would 'grow' their jobs, either permanently or temporarily 'upgrading' them to be more complex (Mason, 2002). Hence it mattered little if graduates entered previously non-graduate jobs, graduate skills were still needed and being used. The attention shifted from graduate jobs to the jobs that graduates do, and a new typology developed that mapped a standard classification of graduate occupations – the SOC(HE) (Elias and Purcell, 2004) – and which has been adopted by the relevant government agency in the UK to classify graduates' job destinations (e.g. ONS 2103). In this typology there are traditional graduate jobs such as the professional occupations of medicine and law and also 'new' graduate occupations such as physiotherapists and sales managers and 'niche'

graduate occupations such as nurses and hotel managers.² The logic underpinning this typology was awareness that with mass HE more graduates are in the labour market and not all are entering the traditional professions. Indeed only a quarter of graduates now work in traditional graduate jobs (HESA, 2010) and the proportion of recent graduates in previously non-graduate jobs has increased significantly from 38 per cent in 2008 to 47 per cent in 2013 (ONS, 2013).

This entryism would seem to confirm that graduates are needed by employers: more are employed and across more occupations. However 'demand' can be too bluntly conceived; it is important to disentangle two types of employer skill demand: that at the point of hire and that at the point of work: more prosaically, the skills workers need to both *get* and *do* the job (Warhurst and Findlay, 2012). In this respect, there is now a lively debate about whether or not there is an over-qualification of the UK workforce (Brynin, 2002; Felstead and Green, 2013) and that the hire of more graduates simply represents credential inflation. Employers might simply be adhering to the belief underpinning human capital theory (Becker, 1964) that more skilled workers are more productive workers and then, quite rationally, hiring the better skilled workers over other, less skilled workers if the two are to be paid the same wage. UK evidence indicates that the level of qualification needed to get a job has risen (Felstead et al., 2007). As Warhurst and Findlay (2012: 4) state: 'Many employers, faced with a more qualified pool of applicants, select workers with better qualifications, seeing the possession of qualifications as a signal of capability. However the effect is that the qualification levels to obtain jobs spiral: jobs that were non-graduate yesterday are graduate jobs today.' In other words, possessing graduate skills has become necessary to get a job regardless of whether or not these skills relate to doing the job.

Unfortunately, despite the new policy emphasis on skills utilisation (e.g. UKCES 2010), the skills needed to be deployed to do the job is under-researched

generally (Buchanan et al., 2010) and particularly in relation to graduate labour (Keep and Mayhew, 2010). What is known from survey data is that employer demand for skills generally appears to be weak, with little evidence of improved use of the higher skills available amongst the workforce (Felstead and Green, 2013) and that workers' educational levels now outstrip the skills needed in jobs (Green and Zhu, 2010). What is also emerging is appreciation that employment in previously non-graduate jobs is a source of dissatisfaction for graduates, offering them inferior job quality in terms of skills utilisation (Okay-Somerville and Scholarios, 2013). Moreover opportunities for job upgrading are limited, with 'large numbers' of graduate-infused non-graduate jobs unchanged (Mason, 2002: 454). Indeed graduates who do progress to make better use of their skills are more likely to do so by quitting these jobs (Okay-Somerville and Scholarios, 2013).

In a twist of logic, the UK Government blames universities for this skills mismatch. Clinging to the mantra of a high skill, knowledge-based economy, it argues that the mismatch is an outcome of HE not supplying the skills that employers demand. It cites curriculum weaknesses rather than admit that the labour force is over-qualified for the jobs offered by employers. Former UK Minister for Universities and Science, David Willets, for example, stressed that there is a gap between the skills employers want and the skills universities develop in their courses (Vasagar, 2011). To address this perceived problem the call is for better alignment between education and employment, with Willett's solution being for universities to be more attuned to skill gaps and change their courses accordingly. Whether coming from government or academics there is a clear set of assumptions about graduate skills. First, distinctly graduate skills are assumed to be demanded and therefore needed by employers; second, the skills deployed in work are of a specific type – 'thinking skills'; and third, these skills are, not surprisingly, uniquely acquired in university.

The veracity of these three assumptions is the focus of this paper and explored through an examination of graduate labour in residential sales estate agents. Despite its public prominence, it is an occupation that is under-researched (for exceptions see Clarke et al., 1994; Poon et al., 2011; Poon, 2012). The occupation of estate agent represents an interesting case given that it is regarded as a non-graduate job (Elias and Purcell, 2013) that is increasingly graduatising (ONS 2013), with the nature and consequences of this graduation remaining unknown given the paucity of research on the occupation.

Research design

The study adopted a mixed method approach, utilising organizational case studies, an industry-wide survey and interviews with key industry stakeholders. The case studies used a comparative strategy with regard to countries' market segments and ownership structure. Case study agencies were selected in different market segments to test the hypothesis that different product markets and ownership, for example cost and quality, might have different labour demands. The segments selected for analysis align with those commonly used within the industry – upper-market (properties above £500,000) and mid-market segments (properties of less than £500,000). Given that organizational size can also impact labour demand (Cully et al., 1999), the research incorporated corporate and independent ownership – the former being larger and the latter being smaller organisations.

The study involved 24 estate agencies: half were located in the Southeast of England, the other half in the Central Belt in Scotland. These two countries – England and Scotland – were chosen because they have different legal governance systems affecting the industry and provide contrast in terms of graduates. The occupation of real estate agent is not licensed in England, and is

traditionally a non-graduate occupation, not involved with any of the legal aspects of buying or selling a house. In Scotland estate agencies tend to be law firms registered with and regulated by the Law Society of Scotland. . Where it is a law firm, traditionally lawyers sell the real estate such that it has,, historically, been a graduate occupation. However in recent decades English-style estate agency has penetrated the Scottish market so that there are now also non-law firm estate agents (Clarke et al., 1994).. In both countries the job of the estate agent mostly consists of valuing properties, taking instructions, viewings, associated marketing, sales negotiations and sales progressions. Table 1 below summarises the case study strategy.

[Table 1 here]

At each estate agency, face-to-face semi-structured interviews were conducted with the manager or owner, a new or most recent recruit, and a more experienced agent, culminating in 72 estate agent interviews. The fieldwork took place from late 2011 to early 2012. The case studies explored a range of topics around skill development, supply, demand and deployment within the industry. To extend and deepen this analysis, a dozen interviews were conducted with key industry stakeholders. Representatives of HE institutions responsible for relevant university course design and delivery, and non-HE industry training providers were interviewed. Interviews were also conducted with industry representative bodies: Asset Skills (the Sector Skills Council for this industry), the National Federation of Property Professionals (NFOPP), the National Association of Estate Agents (NAEA), the Solicitors Property Centre and property recruiters. Data from these interviewees also provided contextual information on industry developments and issues. The themes covered in these interviews were similar to the ones covered in the interviews with estate agents although tailored to the type of interviewee. Interview lengths

varied between 40-100 minutes and all were transcribed and subsequently analysed using NVivo, utilising a thematic data analysis approach.

To complement the qualitative data, an online survey was administered to estate agents within Great Britain in late 2011. Using a large database of UK estate agencies provided by the Property Ombudsman, over 10,000 agents were approached via email seeking their participation. The survey targeted both employees and employers within estate agencies and provided personal background data, details about their current employment and their views of their occupation and the industry. There were a number of difficulties with the database. First, some tranches of the target population had gatekeepers through whom the survey had to be administered. Control over survey timing and targeting was therefore constrained in some cases. Second, a number of the email addresses were returned as invalid (i.e. no longer in operation). Third, the data collection period was during the economic downturn and estate agents reported having little downtime to undertake the survey – or complete it in full – because of cutbacks and competitive pressures. In total, 239 useable employee and 220 useable employer responses were analysed. In this paper the survey data is used as a supplement to the qualitative data. The survey questionnaire focused on the same topics as the interviews. Although small, the response for both employees and employers was representative of the overall estate agency population by location, ownership and sex.

Notwithstanding the low survey response, taken together the data provides the most comprehensive analysis of the work and employment of estate agents to date in the UK (cf. Clarke et al., 1994). It allows opportunity to analyse in both breadth and depth skills in a graduating occupation. That it is a graduating occupation was confirmed by the interviews and survey: 16 out of the 40 (40%) estate agents interviewed had completed a university degree and 22 per cent of estate agent employee survey respondents were graduates. Yet what their graduate skills

mean within the occupation of estate agent is not straightforward or without ambiguity as the findings revealed.

Findings

The first two sub-sections of the findings follow the distinction of Type 1 employer demand – the skills employers demand of workers at the point of hire, and Type 2 – the skills demanded of workers to at the point of work; that is skill deployment or utilisation. The third sub-section examines the sites of development or formation of these skills.

What skills are required (or demanded by employers) at the point of hire?

Recruiting the ‘right’ person is paramount according to employers hiring real estate agents. However HE was not seen as imperative in any of the product markets or ownership segments. Most of the estate agents interviewed thought that A-levels or GCSE level qualifications were sufficient for the job and this finding was confirmed by the survey. Eighty-eight per cent and 91 per cent of employees and employers thought a university degree was ‘not at all necessary’.³ Indeed in Scotland and the upper-market English segment, private secondary schooling carried as much weight in the decision to hire applicants.

Nevertheless in a growing pool of applicants, employers wanted a sifting mechanism and applicants’ qualifications provided that mechanism. Whilst employers did not demand graduates per se, many spoke about ‘graduateness’, believing that having a degree signalled the possession of particular characteristics, skills and abilities. In other words, graduates were being recruited because of the signal sent by HE participation (cf. Becker, 1964):

I think a degree is always useful, not necessarily for the subject it is in but for the things that it will teach you in terms of working on your own, your independence, your ability sort of to use your initiative. That sort of thing, rather than actually thinking about the process of estate agency and the management and that sort of side of things.

Experienced agent (upper-market corporate, England)

The emphasis however was on soft skills and not thinking skills or even subject knowledge. Moss and Tilly (1996, p. 253) define soft skills as 'skills, abilities and traits that pertain to personality, attitude and behaviour rather than to formal or technical knowledge'. These authors usefully distinguish between *motivational* soft skills (e.g. enthusiasm, positive work attitude, commitment, dependability, willingness to learn) and *interactional* soft skills (e.g. friendliness, teamwork, ability to fit in and appropriate grooming and attire). For estate agent applicants both types are required. In terms of the first type, one interviewee explained:

The skill sets that they're looking for are much more about human beings ... things that are actually quite difficult to measure. Things like their attitude, their commitment, their drive, their energy, their enthusiasm. All of these things are what they're looking for because you can teach them the job quite quickly and so they'd much rather have somebody ... with the right attitude than somebody with all the ability in the world.

Property sector recruitment specialist
(England)

As for the second type, estate agents need to be able to interact with employers, co-workers and customers which means communicating clearly and getting on with others. For most employers, the value of HE for estate agents was linked to

participating in social activities at university. It was also thought that HE provides an environment with a wide social mix that helps individuals develop an ability to interact with different types of people; a skill deemed very important for estate agents. For example, one senior estate agent commented that being an “estate agent is all about being smart and presentable” (experienced, mid-market, England). Another estate agent explained that “you need to be presentable. You need to have a pride in your appearance and you need to be able to portray that to people and be confident” (experienced, mid-market, England). A manager at an upmarket establishment (England) stressed that for country houses “you need to be able to speak properly, you need to be able to know how to behave, have good manners and dress smartly”.

These soft skills are more aligned to an applicant’s personality (Grugulis et al., 2004) than anything learnt formally at university. It is not surprising therefore that the type of HE institution, and the analytical skills and the subject knowledge acquired during university were regarded as irrelevant to employers. Employer attitudes were neatly summarized by this manager, himself a graduate:

My philosophy on recruitment is quite straightforward. If they were sitting in my sitting room, would I instruct them to sell my house and do they have the enthusiasm of the spaniel? We can provide the rest of the skills but enthusiasm, excitement, interest, drive and determination, that’s what you need. I haven’t used any of my degree qualifications. Have they helped me? Of course they have because it rounds you as a person ... but it’s that drive and enthusiasm and determination and dealing with people that’s important.

Manager (upper-market corporate, England)

At the point of hire therefore, employers had a mixed attitude to HE. They did not demand the thinking skills claimed to be imperative in and exclusive to graduates.

They did however use participation in HE as a signal of applicants' possession of the skills that they did demand – soft skills. This demand existed across the different types of estate agencies and the two countries' governance systems.

What skills are needed to be deployed (or utilised) in work?

Soft skills were needed when it came to doing the job. The motivational soft skills estate agents cited included confidence, commitment and determination, and also patience and focus. Interactional soft skills cited included empathy, being liked, charm, assertiveness, manners, presenting skills and calmness. There was a consensus that these interactional soft skills were crucial to be effective in the job:

... highly attuned ability to read people, they need strong negotiating skills, they need very good presentational skills, person skills, spin-doctoring skills, if you like, because in some ways, if you're trying to sell a house or a flat, you need to be able to analyse the market, you need to be able to come up with a profile of the person who is likely to do that, you need to understand how to help the seller present it properly and you need to be a really good negotiator.

Professor of Real Estate

Being successful in the job, meant being able to successfully interact with a wide variety of clients; understanding these clients' needs and reasoning. Here there was some variation between the different market and ownership segments. For instance, to sell houses in the upper-market segment, estate agents needed to be attuned to the cultural capital of the particular buyers in this market segment. In affecting a cultural 'fit' (c.f. Moss and Tilly 1996), the ability to listen was thus important as was having fine-tuned self-presentational skills.

The importance of these soft skills was confirmed by the survey results. Respectively 98 per cent and 95 per cent of employees and employers thought that 'social and interpersonal skills' were either essential or very important to do the job. The ability to talk to people effectively was also deemed highly important. Ninety-six per cent of employees and 86 per cent of employers thought 'oral communication skills' were either essential or very important in order to be an estate agent.⁴ Eighty-six per cent of employers and 91 per cent of employees thought that 'self-presentation skills' were also essential or very important.

As with the requirements to get the job, having a university degree was not deemed necessary to do the job. Likewise the subject knowledge gained through HE was not needed. It was recognized that some knowledge is needed but this knowledge was industry specific, such as familiarity with the Money Laundering Act and the Property Misdescription Act; however, this knowledge was provided by employers through training. The other knowledge needed to do the job effectively was location-specific knowledge such as having awareness of local schools and transport networks. However, even here, the general consensus was that, 'If you know just a little more than them [the public], than that's probably sufficient' (manager, upper-market independent, England).

The work tasks of graduates and non-graduate agents were identical: no distinction was made in terms of which type of employee undertook which tasks, and graduates were not deemed to necessarily perform better than non-graduates in these tasks. Graduates did, however, bring capacities to the job that were believed to be useful. Graduate estate agents explained that their university experience helped them to develop their confidence and life experience. Interestingly, none of the graduates interviewed felt that they were over-qualified for the job. Indeed they stated that they used the majority of their skills, in particular their soft skills:

I don't feel that anybody is [over-qualified]. I think if you turn around and say you're over-qualified for a job in this day and age you're really being far too big for your boots. ... you know you're lucky to have a job, and I don't believe that I'm either above this or beneath this, I'm very lucky I work with a wide range of people with a wide range of skills and I'm lucky to have a job. ... I think I use pretty much what I've got, you make of it what it is; if you want to be a little bit geeky about things you can be geeky about things, it only enhances what you've done anyway, but yeah, I don't feel I'm overqualified per se.

newest recruit (mid-market corporate,
England)

However the survey revealed a more mixed perception on this point. Forty-two per cent of estate agents felt that they possessed more knowledge and skills than needed to do the job. A few (3%) felt that they had less knowledge and skills than needed and 55 per cent felt it was about right. Interestingly, there was no significant difference here between graduates and non-graduates, suggesting that over skilling is not just an issue for those with higher-level qualifications. The key point, however, is that soft skills are again needed, this time for deployment in the labour process.

Where are the skills needed to get and do the job developed?

English estate agents do not receive any formal job-specific training. As lawyers, their Scottish counterparts have legal training. Regardless of country most estate agents agreed that a certain type of personality was a requirement to become a successful estate agent. The skills emanating from this personality (cf. Grugulis et al. 2004) might be innate or socialised, as one estate agent explained:

I think it's a bit of nature and nurture, sometimes you are just what you are, you're a certain type of person just from your kind of make-up but also I am sure it's to do with how you interact with your siblings at a young age or at school and all the other things.

Newest recruit (upper-market corporate, Scotland)

If these skills are developed through socialization, the institutional loci of their development can be varied. They can be acquired through a number of institutions such as the family, school and even through interaction with friends:

You can certainly refine them and you can improve them and you can develop those sort of skills, but I think it does take a certain sort of person to be able to, you'd have to have some kind of background, so it is through their development, whether that's family, schools or a natural aptitude, you know, it's, it's probably a blend of those sorts of skills,

Manager (mid-market independent, England)

However HE was the not the primary source of these skills' development. The survey asked estate agents and employers where they thought various types of skills were acquired. Soft skills were thought to be developed in a variety of places. Seventy-three per cent of estate agents and 61 per cent of employers thought that 'social and interpersonal skills' are learnt within the family context. Sixty-five per cent of estate agents (55% of employers) thought these skills were learnt in school, 41 per cent (33%) thought they were learnt in college and 61 per cent (51%) thought that these were learnt in the workplace (more than one answer could be registered in the survey). Only 37 per cent of estate agents and 33 per cent of employers thought that these skills were acquired through HE. Results were similar on the acquisition of 'self-presentation' skills. Seventy per cent of estate agents and 61 per cent of employers

thought these skills were developed in the family. Fifty-five per cent (48%), 31 per cent (27%) and 49 per cent (44%) of estate agents (employers) thought that they were learnt in school, college and the workplace. For 28 per cent of estate agents and 26 per cent of employers these skills were thought to be acquired through HE.⁵

Thus whilst soft skills needed to *get* and *do* the job could be developed at university, they are not specific to HE, respondents acknowledged. Rather, there was a consensus that they are typically acquired elsewhere, often before university as well as after it, in the workplace. Referring specifically to the latter occurrence, given the lack of formal in-work training for estate agents, this finding suggests that soft skill development is organisationally-mediated in the form of socialisation, with new entrants work alongside more experienced peers and superiors.

Nevertheless some respondents thought that there was some added value to be derived from HE in that existing soft skills could be honed and augmented, which could work to graduates' advantage:

I never went to university so I'm not sure what skills they actually learn. I think there is the potential for them to be slightly more rounded individuals for having that sort of whole university experience, rather than someone who's just come from school or maybe had a few part-time jobs, hasn't really seen the world much and then just comes into our business. So I'm generalising an awful lot but I think they, there is the potential for them to be slightly rounded individuals. But that's, that's about it, they've also proven that they have a capacity to learn. They can focus on certain things and just get things done.

Manager (mid-market independent, England)

Many estate agents and their employers share this ambiguous understanding of what graduates bring to the labour market. A factor at play here might be that many people

currently working in estate agency have not attended HE or have much experience of hiring or working with graduates. However their perceptions seem to be confirmed by graduates now entering estate agency:

I think I've definitely been more confident compared to [non-graduate] team members when it comes to you know presenting in a group situation ... I detected that there was definitely a reluctance and a lack of confidence from certain individuals that were definitely not keen on it as, I think well, you know, I've probably been doing it for a few years at school and then did it for the four years at uni as well. So it kind of, you know, it almost feels, once you're happy with your content it is second nature to deliver that to a group.

Newest recruit (mid-market corporate, Scotland)

At the same time it was recognized that, because skills that are needed are learnt, and can be acquired in multiple institutions, then non-HE learning should not be undervalued: 'I think for employers somebody who's shown a commitment to achieving something in terms of qualifications sometimes unfairly shuts out people who would, could quite happily learn on the job as it were' (newest recruit, upper-market corporate, Scotland).

Discussion and conclusion

There are a number of assumptions about graduates and their skills: because work is now said to be more complex, it requires higher-level graduate skills; graduates are thus a key source of economic competitiveness; and these 'graduate skills', uniquely acquired in HE, centre on 'thinking skills' (e.g. respectively, Brinkely and Lee 2006; Boden and Nedeva 2010). Even employers offering non-graduate jobs can benefit from these skills because graduates entering such jobs use them to upgrade their jobs,

thereby enhancing employers' competitiveness (UKCES 2014). As such it is believed that this employer demand for graduates needs to be matched with supply, with HE expanded accordingly.

Deliberately focused on a graduatising occupation – residential sales estate agents – our research findings cast doubt on these assumptions. In this research we make a distinction between employer demand for graduate skills at the point of hire and the point of use in work. Although graduates were being hired for non-graduate jobs in estate agency, few employers had a strong preference for graduate applicants and, at the point of hire, graduate thinking skills were not in demand. Once employed, graduates in estate agency do not deploy their thinking skills in their work. Instead, to both get and do these jobs, graduates, as all employees in estate agency, primarily need soft skills. Parking what will be a key debate of the future – whether, as the number of type of institutions classified as universities expands, all universities instil thinking skills in their students (see Arum and Roksa 2011) – these thinking skills seem to be of little concern to employers in estate agency, regardless of country location or market segment.

Significantly these soft skills are recognized by employers and employees to be developed in a broad spectrum of situ, including but not confined to universities. At best, it was felt that HE honed the soft skills that individuals already possessed before going to university through their families and/or schools. It might thus be said that HE was perceived as a kind of finishing school, fine-tuning graduates existing soft skills. The answers to our research questions are therefore that whilst graduates are being employed in non-graduate jobs, employers require soft skills, not graduate skills at the point of hire; the same is true in terms of the skills used by graduates in these jobs, and that these soft skills are developed to some extent in HE but mainly elsewhere, in other institutions.

These new empirical findings have important conceptual implications. First, that the current focus on graduates skills acquired through HE is too narrow. The emphasis on soft rather than thinking skills indicates that what employers expect of graduates' skill set is much wider than traditionally understood as 'graduate skills'. The emphasis on thinking skills acquired in HE downplays the range of other skills, particularly soft skills. Understanding of the skills possessed by graduates needs therefore to be more inclusive, concerned less with 'graduate skills' and more with the 'skills of graduates'. That is, recognising the skills possessed by students at the point of graduation but not necessarily acquired in higher education. In order to discern the value added by HE to graduates' employability, such a shift would mean that future research would need to be cognizant of the skills possessed by students at the point of entry to HE and, thereafter, their augmentation and/or supplement during HE to the point of exit – graduation. Some research has already adopted this format but is centred on measuring thinking skills, for example critical thinking (Arum and Roksa, 2011). The same approach should be adopted for soft skills.⁶

Second, the findings suggest that current conceptual understanding of 'graduateness' is also weak. The term graduateness is used to capture positive personal qualities associated with HE: 'a set of qualities consequent upon the university experience' (Glover et al. 2002: 294). It is not a new term. Nevertheless, despite the expansion of HE and the codification of the skill set of graduates centred on thinking skills, graduateness remains unspecified and often tautological in characterisation: 'something experienced and attained as a set of qualities consequent upon the university experience' state Glover et al. (2002: 294) for example. Some employers in our study used this term but, again, for them, graduateness was manifest in soft skills. This employer position is not unique to our study. A number of employer surveys indicate that employers want a broad spectrum of soft skills and attributes from employees, such as interpersonal and communication skills, self-

management, integrity and confidence (e.g. Archer and Davidson 2008; Hinchcliffe and Jolly 2011). The issue, of course, is whether these skills are acquired or developed uniquely through HE and if so how – informally or formally for example.

This issue suggests that the findings also have important policy implications. First, despite there already being too few traditional graduate jobs for graduates coming onto the labour market, a record number of applicants were admitted into UK universities in 2015 (Adams and Weale 2015). To be able to offer students ‘employability’, how HE ensures that the skills of graduates align to employer skills’ demands, as former UK Minister for Universities and Science, David Willetts, insisted that it should (Vasagar 2011), comes into focus. If HE curricula are to be fashioned to this demand then clearly much HE is currently lacking. UK HE tends to be generalist rather than specialist (Estervez-Abe et al. 2001). There is a tight knowledge education-employment coupling for some occupations such as law and medicine. However the percentage of graduates entering these professions, what Elias and Purcell (2004) call ‘traditional’ graduate jobs, is now around 11% (Purcell et al 2013: 16). If Chillas (2010) is right about some of what Elias and Purcell term as ‘new’ graduate jobs, a further 16% of the jobs of graduates involve a similar tight coupling of HE and employment. Beyond these sets of graduates no such coupling exists: graduates’ acquired subject knowledge is unused post graduation. Instead soft skills are what these other graduates need to get and do their jobs. To reform HE in the way Willetts wanted, for many graduates, acquired subject knowledge would become irrelevant, and the task of universities would be to instead develop (and assess) soft skills – thereby institutionalising their finishing school role. However in pursuing this new role, universities would have to demonstrate that they are capable of developing individuals’ soft skills – which would require academic staff trained in transmitting and assessing such skills, and it is a moot point if universities’ current academic staff are capable (or willing) to adopt this function. Even if they can, if soft skills

development becomes the explicit function of universities, then many would-be students might question the financial investment in HE in terms of the fees and costs of living now required of them in the UK.

Already there is indication that some graduates are questioning this investment as the percentage of recent graduates (less than five years after graduation) working in jobs deemed non-graduate has risen to almost half (47%) (ONS, 2013). Robust research is needed but, according to a survey conducted by the website notgoingtouni.co.uk, 31 per cent of respondents believed that their degree was 'completely irrelevant' to their current job. More than half wished that they had opted for further education rather than HE, with 61 per cent believing that in doing so they would have gained a better job (Parr 2013). Similarly in a survey of employed and unemployed graduates conducted by Citizens Advice Scotland (McLister 2012), many respondents lamented the lack of career advice about alternatives to attending university: 'Other options were brushed aside,' said one respondent (p.15). Respondents also noted a lack of focus in universities on employability skills and the lack of exploration of the skills students do acquire in university.

One question is whether this disillusionment is temporary; an outcome of the economic downturn experienced by the UK from 2008 or is part of wider structural problems with HE, most obviously over-capacity. The downturn has had an impact, as Elias and Purcell's (2013) recent analysis shows, but also reveals that over-supply is structural rather than cyclical and, as their previous analysis highlighted, the graduates of mass HE were already cascading down into non-graduate jobs long before the downturn (Elias and Purcell 2004). In this downward cascade, an interesting issue is whether graduates displace non-graduates, pushing them out of these traditionally non-graduate occupations. In the case of estate agents, hybridity is occurring as graduates and non-graduates work alongside each other doing the same job under the same terms and conditions. The value of a degree for those graduates

that want to enter the occupation is minimal to modest, and mainly resides in HE advancing students' already existing soft skills. A second policy implication therefore is the need for policy-makers to evaluate the function of HE in the UK. This evaluation should not just focus on 'evaluating instructor effectiveness' (Wyness and Murphy 2015: XX) but, our research implies, should encompass a more inclusive understanding of the skills of graduates and how these skills relate to employer demand in the labour market, how these skills are deployed in the labour process and the ranges of potential situs in which these skills can be developed. It is a debate that has emerged, albeit contested, with HEFCE's new *Learning Gain* initiative that seeks to identify and measure the skills demonstrated by students at the point of entry to and exit from HE (Atkins 2015). As Wyness and Murphy note, such 'added-value' assessments exist already for schools but would be problematic to implement in HE. However, if implemented to include soft, not just thinking skills (cf. Arum and Roksa, 2011), they would provide better understanding of the skills acquired in and/or augmented by HE and demonstrate not just the quality of HE provision but its relevance in the current broadening of the labour market for graduates.

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Endnotes

¹ Now PricewaterhouseCoopers.

² The other two categories Purcell and Elias (2004) use are 'modern graduate jobs' and 'non-graduate jobs'.

³ N= 239 for employees, N=220 for employers.

⁴ N= 239 for employees, N=220 for employers.

⁵ N= 239 for employees, N=220 for employers.

⁶ Possibly also technical skills, for example computing skills; again not necessarily taught as part of most university courses but which students acquire during their study often informally through independent learning or with peer assistance.