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Exploring critical perspectives on labour market information through the lens of elite graduate recruitment

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Abstract

This article provides a critical discourse analysis of how career is discussed on elite graduate recruitment websites. Building on previous work from Handley (2018, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0950017016686031>) and Ingram and Allen (2019, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038026118790949>) this article draws attention to how career is constructed, first, as something which graduates consume and, second, as a 'liminal experience' which transforms the graduates' identities and allows them to gain access to a new authentic self, now able to progress towards their personal goals. This ideological reading of careers information is different to traditional understandings of careers information in Higher Education research which focuses on the objective nature of information which can be used to support the rational decision making. Focussing on the ideology of career draws attention to the need for careers delivery, in Higher Education and beyond, to engage with more critical pedagogical approaches.

Abstrakt

Im vorliegenden Artikel wird anhand einer kritischen Diskursanalyse untersucht, wie auf Online-Stellenportalen für Hochschulabsolvent/innen über Karriere gesprochen wird. In Anlehnung an die Arbeiten von Handley (2018) und Ingram und Allen (2019) wird gezeigt, wie Karriere als Etwas konstruiert wird, das erstens ein Konsumgut für Hochschulabsolvent/innen ist und zweitens eine 'liminal experience' – eine Grenzerfahrung – darstellt, die die Identität der Hochschulabsolvent/innen verändert und ihnen erlaubt, Zugang zu einem neuen authentischen Selbst zu finden, dass nun fähig ist persönliche Ziele

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anzustreben. Diese ideologische Lesart von Karriereinformationen unterscheidet sich von einem traditionellen Verständnis in der Hochschulbildungsforschung, das den Fokus auf die Objektivität von Informationen, die der rationalen Entscheidungsfindung dienen können, legt. Der Fokus auf Karriereideologie hingegen legt das Augenmerk auf die Notwendigkeit einer Auseinandersetzung mit kritischeren pädagogischen Ansätzen in der Karriereförderung – in der Hochschulbildung und darüber hinaus.

1 | INTRODUCTION

This article provides a critical discourse analysis (CDA) of how career is discussed on elite graduate recruitment websites. We will use this case-study to explore the labour market information (LMI) in a higher education careers context. Building on previous work from Handley (2018) and Ingram and Allen (2019), we will conduct a critical content analysis of how LMI is constructed by elite graduate recruiters. With this focus on graduate recruitment we will explore the processes through which graduate recruiters operate and understand the place of this in constructing information commonly accessed by university students and graduates as part of their career development. This discourse analysis will be set against the background of theoretical debates from the fields of career guidance and research into graduate recruitment. This will contribute to debates about how graduate careers are constructed and developed as well as informing wider conversations about the place of LMI in careers delivery. This paper will, therefore, set out address three research questions;

1. What insights can we develop by reading LMI from a more critical perspective?
2. What can we discover about the 'ideology of career' present in LMI?
3. How are these ideologies constructed specifically by elite recruiters?

2 | LITERATURE

LMI is defined by Esborgeo and Melo-Silva (2012) as 'data from the occupational world' which helps people with their career decisions. Contextualised inside HE careers development this might refer to information about entry-level roles or further study options alongside broader information about career pathways or job trends in particular sectors or geographical regions. LMI as a concept finds its basis in a long tradition of careers theory dating back to Parsons (1909), Holland (1973) and Watts (1977); that individuals' career development is composed in part by them understanding potential career opportunities in order to develop clear strategies in response. LMI sits in the interface between HE careers practice and the graduate labour market. It interacts with the twin realities of the way that the graduate labour market is communicated to students and how students come to learn about what their future careers might be.

In the wider career literature, LMI has most often been looked at through a rationalistic lens which prioritises the deployment of information of sufficient standard to support individuals decision making and career planning. This perspective ignores critiques which would look at the place of LMI in individuals' developing subjectivities and how these processes may become oppressive as well as potentially emancipatory. In response to this, this paper will set out to explore three questions which aim to move us towards reading LMI in HE, and specifically

graduate recruiters websites from a more critical perspective. First, what insights can we develop by reading LMI from a more critical perspective? Second, what can we discover about the 'ideology of career' present in LMI? Third, how are these ideologies constructed specifically by elite recruiters?

There has been little explicit focus in the arena of HE careers research on LMI. Though there is significant literature looking at the pedagogy of careers education in HE and sociological perspectives looking at how students and graduates learn about the graduate labour market LMI itself has not been significantly developed. This said, Handley (2018) and Ingram and Allen (2019) have both studied how elite graduate recruiters represent the ideal graduate for their schemes. Ingram and Allen (2019) focus mainly on how 'pre-recruitment activities' reveal insights into how exclusion is constructed through a Bourdian analysis of the social capitals needed by how these websites construct the ideal graduate. Handley (2018), using a Foucauldian analysis, looks at how these 'pre-recruitment' activities are forms of socialisation interacting with individuals' subjectivities. Handley is less concerned with how certain individuals are privileged above others but rather how these 'pre-recruitment' activities represent neo-liberal discourses which interact with individual subjectivities. Through our focus on LMI we are instead going to look at how career as a construct is conceptualised on these sites. This builds on Handley's focus on subjectivity but focuses more explicitly on career and the wider ideology of these texts. Through doing so we hope to contribute to wider debates about what career is or has become in late-modern discourse.

In order to ground this study, we are going to start by reviewing how LMI has been discussed in the wider careers literature before seeing how this topic could be contextualised inside debates about graduate careers development.

2.1 | Careers theory and LMI

Careers theory has built strong foundations which support the place of LMI in careers education and careers development. McCash (2006) draws attention to the dominance of matching-based models of careers education. McCash argues for the historical significance of the emergence of careers education at the beginning of the C19th. Thinkers, as varied as Adam Smith, Darwin, Durkheim and Frances Galton, looked at the ways individuals (or other organisms) could be described as being 'matched' or 'fitted' into various environments. It is in this modernist context that Parsons (1909) first developed his conception of the core conditions of career development where individuals needed to (1) understand themselves, (2) understand opportunities and (3) be able to make rational decisions on the basis of the previous conceptions. Here, we see Parsons describing an individual to environment match employing similar intellectual architecture to Adams or Darwin. McCash (2006) goes on to argue the importance of Parsons and of matching theories more broadly for the development of Watts' (1977) DOTS (Decision making, Opportunity awareness, Transition planning and Self-awareness) model of careers education and in turn the dominance of DOTS in a wide range of models of careers education. The 'O' of the DOTS model of careers education refers to opportunity awareness. This draws into focus the importance of individuals exploring and understanding LMI as a route to developing their careers (Hayes, 1967; Mollerup, 1995).

The foundations which LMI has in the conception of opportunity awareness linked to matching theory has led to the development of careers theory linked to rationalism and logical positivism. Mollerup (1995), for example, argues for LMI needing various quality marks including being free from bias, current, accurate and comprehensive. This approach focuses on individual rationality, seeing LMI as something which needs to be of sufficient quality to support individual decision making. We see these ideas echoed in the work of Gati (1986) who, in his study on career indecision, described indecision in part being caused by a lack of information or low quality information. Similarly Germeijs and Verschueren (2007) have explored the need for decision making to be supported by broad research and in-depth exploration focussing on the need for sufficient coverage to support decision making. This rational decision making has clear links back to the matching models which McCash (2006) discusses and tends

to dominate the wider career literature. These articles tend to reduce career to something akin to a mathematical problem and does little to explore the wider ideology of work and career at play in modern society.

Where alternative conceptions of the link between career and decision making do exist they often ultimately have their foundations in a matching model. For example Flederman (2011), Doyle (2011) and Rai (2013) all make links to social justice as a frame for career. They describe how disadvantaged populations have their disadvantages compounded by a lack of access to career information. This makes links to the same rationalistic understanding of career but merely points out that some populations lack the tools to make rational decisions. This does not engage with critical traditions which draw on epistemological foundations of justice. Sultana (2014) sketches this approach out particular in relation to Derrida (1976) drawing attention to how our conceptions of reality often create boundaries around concepts which need to be enforced through 'necessary violence' (Derrida, 1976). Justice then involves considering how our conceptions of career may privilege some understandings over others. The rational matching approach we have discussed above tends to focus on how individuals can fit into an existing social structure which are often imagined as benign. As we will go on to discuss, they do not create space to consider how our conceptions of workplaces and career as a social category could be contested. This draws attention to the difference between career as a developmental practice focussed on individual advancement through life and to career or as a critical practice which supports individuals in understanding the world around them.

2.2 | Links to HE careers research

So how is this discussion relevant for research into HE career development? Understandably a key element of this literature is exploring how to prepare students and graduates for the world of work. Though some models of employability mainly consider 'self-theories' (Knight & Yorke, 2003) which focus on employability as linked or individuals educational attainment, skills and personal attributes we can also detect a significant portion of literature that at least in part makes use of students' understanding of the world of work as part of their employability. These tend to link in with Parsons' (1909) and Watts' (1977) conceptions of opportunity awareness as a key aspect of individuals' career development. This focuses on understanding the world of work in individualistic terms focusses on personal progress rather than taking wider and richer sociological readings of work as part of the syllabus of HE careers provision.

Watts' DOTS model (1977) is explicitly made use of in a number of publications. Watts applies the DOTS model to HE careers work in his piece for the HEA (2006). In this piece Watts critiques the employability literature for its lack of attention to career development as a wider concept beyond how graduates access the first job outside university and is not sufficiently rooted in the wider career development literature. Watts then goes on to use DOTS to explore what career development learning could look like in HE. In regards to opportunity awareness Watts particularly stresses the need for students to understand broad labour market trends and the specific requirements of individual routes and recruiters. Kumar (2007) makes explicit links to Watts' DOTS model in the development of the SOAR model. Here, the 'O' of SOAR refers to 'opportunity awareness' and has a focus on students understanding the opportunities available to them, developing the information literacy needed to correctly understand these opportunities and making use of a variety of information sources, including formal careers information, as well as their support networks. The dominance of DOTS in conceptualising career learning and especially its importance in a HE context is seen in the prominence which Small et al. (2018) give to it in their review of employability literature. They particularly draw attention to its dominance in United Kingdom and Australian careers delivery and how it has been used more widely to analyse policy (Hillage & Pollard, 1998) and develop sector guidance (AGCAS, 2005).

Small et al. (2018) also note the international importance of DOTS for HE careers work with particular reference to Smith et al. (2014). This can further be strengthened by looking at the work of Pitan and Atiku (2017) who

have explored the importance of DOTS in a Nigerian HE context who particularly drew attention to the importance of DOTS focus on self and opportunity awareness. These studies though not conclusive begin to shed light on the importance of DOTS internationally for the construction employability.

We can see from the above review the important place which DOTS holds in the literature on HE employability. As we noted above, the 'O' of DOTS draws attention to the need of individuals to engage with careers information to make career decisions. This has the dual effect of underpinning the need for LMI in employability discourses as well as grounding LMI in the same terrain of logical positivism which DOTS itself exists inside.

We can see similar links being made in other articles which look at HE employability but do not explicitly mention DOTS. For example, Christie (2016) argues for the need to support students employability through (amongst other things) high quality careers information. Zondag and Brink (2017) encourage students to make use of a wide range of information in making decisions for their future careers, including the need to access quality formal careers information. Crişan et al. (2015) argue that students are held back in their careers by a lack of quality information or the literacies to make use of information in their career development. This focus on career information being of sufficient quality and availability to students is also argued for by Mowforth (2018) and Jackson and Wilton (2017).

By analysing this literature we can see a strong theme that identifies accessing and processing LMI as integral to these understandings of employability. Alongside this we can see a tradition in the literature which sees LMI as linked to logical positivism with particular focuses on rationalistic standards such accuracy and quality information and the belief that information can enable students to match themselves to future careers opportunities. Importantly this adopts a narrow view of information and what it means to understand opportunities as we will explore in more detail below.

2.3 | Critiquing DOTS

Having sketched out the dominance of DOTS it is now helpful to turn aside to alternatives which can provide different theoretical tools to explore our topic with. McCash (2006) has argued that one of the products of DOTS is '... there is a risk of exposing students to an emasculated version of career development that is shorn of controversy and intellectual complexity'. (p. 435) McCash is drawing attention to the potentially impoverished approach that DOTS becoming the dominant model for career learning can have, especially in that it leads to intellectual origins, as presented by McCash, of social Darwinism and scientific managerialism becoming unchallenged. Gee (2016) builds on McCash's work by proposing that central to a more critical project is to engage with how career itself is presented and experienced. Gee argues that traditional definitions of career focus on career as progressive, linked to the metaphor of the career ladder. Gee argues this view is intellectually suspect and morally difficult due to the way it excludes individual experiences of career which do not progress or understandings of career where progression is not aimed at. Gee particularly makes use of the work of Ernst Gellner in his analysis. Gellner (1972) criticises how the enlightenment has led to the dominance of a 'world growth myth' in which individuals in western society assume societies ongoing improvement and view their lives in the same vein, with an assumption that life with dominated by an 'upward swing' in terms of wealth and career position if not both. Gellner goes on to argue that such conceptions of career are bourgeois and middle-class in nature linked to particular classed and cultural understandings of life and so by extension career. By analysing DOTS through the tools developed by McCash (2006), Gee (2016) and Gellner (1972) we can see its attraction partly stems from its promise to enable the sort of progression and agency that is often prioritised by policy makes and HE managers. DOTS, unsurprisingly focuses on action and progression over developing critical insight and exposing the under-theorised claims which it is supported by.

2.4 | Implications for study

Linking our study with DOTS would encourage us to ask questions about LMI's ability to enable the sort of progressive self-management that Gellner (1972) describes. Alternatively, approaches influenced by Gee's (2016) focus on interrogating how career is defined would want to ask about the hidden assumptions and ideological positions which LMI takes up and how this influences notions of career and personal advancement. This sort of tradition draws on ideas such as Herman and Chomsky's (1988) theorising how information may organise content and create system supporting functions. Similarly we will look at Laclau and Mouffet's (1985) use of Gramscian ideas about hegemony to describe how social structures are supported through unchallenged assumptions which are propagated in society. Finally we will make use of Jameson's (1981) theory of the political unconscious which draws attention to how all texts (such as LMI) have ideological and historical basis in them. The potential of these theories is to analyse LMI not against rational standards but instead consider how LMI can be read as a text with an ideological basis which is part of a system which develops and privileges certain understandings of career.

3 | METHODS

As we stated above, our research aims to address three key questions;

1. What insights can we develop by reading LMI from a more critical perspective?
2. What can we discover about the 'ideology of career' present in LMI?
3. How are these ideologies constructed specifically by elite recruiters?

As we have said before there is a degree of similarity between our study and the work of Handley (2018) and Ingram and Allen (2019) who have also studied the recruitment materials of elite graduate schemes. Similar to both, we have conducted an CDA of the information produced by elite graduate schemes through their 'pre-recruitment activities'. We have based the selection of these schemes on the Times' top 100 graduate recruiters 2019–2020 publication which listed the following scheme as their top 10; the Civil Service, PwC, Aldi, Google, NHS, KPMG, Deloitte, Teach First, BBC and J. P. Morgan.

From this list we decided to focus on the following four schemes; Civil Service, Aldi, NHS and KPMG. The main reason for selecting these four was to avoid the schemes that Ingram and Allen (2019) discussed recently (Google and PWC), Handley's analysis is from 2013 so the crossover with our work conducted in 2019/2020 is less significant. Also, this produced four schemes from organisations which are broadly speaking well known in society but which operate in different sectors of the economy.

3.1 | Critical discourse analysis

Discourse analysis, according to Lupton (1992), can range from micro analysis of particular texts to the 'historiophilosophical' approach taken by Foucault. Glynos et al. (2009) in their review of discourse analysis draw attention to three axis which discourse analysis approaches are organised on; a micro/macro textual reading axis, linguistic/non-linguistic material axis and a explanatory/critical axis. Using Glynos et al.'s (2009) typology we moved towards discursive approaches which incorporated reading at a micro-level and incorporating textual and non-textual elements (in our case specific websites which included images). Our studies focus on the links between texts and wider political ideologies and structures moved us towards CDA as opposed to interpretive policy analysis or rhetorical political analysis (RHA). While RHA was in particular considered CDA was settled on due to its focus on wider social structures and ideologies while RHA tends to focus more on specific discourses.

CDA is also used by Handley (2018) and Ingram and Allen (2019) in their work and echoes the theoretical tools from Herman and Chomsky's (1988), Laclau and Mouffet's (1985) and Jameson's (1981) which we had explored before.

CDA, builds on a Foucauldian analysis of society that individual texts reveal wider power structures and ideologies at play in society (Lupton, 1992). Similarly, Chouliaraki and Fairclough (1999) describe how CDA sits between social theory and linguistic theory. It is by its very nature interdisciplinary and gains its strength from its ability to combine different theoretical tools from both traditions (Weiss & Wodak, 2003). This creates both challenges and opportunities for researchers to investigate. Weiss and Wodak (2003) go on to argue that there is less of a need to establish a grand theory as there is a need to select tools relevant for the particular problems and contexts which we face. But beyond this what is unique about CDA is that 'CDA takes a particular interest in the relationship between language and Power' (Weiss & Wodak, 2003, p. 12). That is that language is both a product of systems of power that exist in society and also a means by which these systems are created and changed. Fairclough and Wodak (1997) see discourse as a 'social practice' that both sustains and transforms social relationships. They go on to link these practices as having 'ideological effects that is, they can help produce and reproduce unequal power relations.. through the ways in which they represent things and position people'. (p. 258) To contextualise this we are going to approach materials created by graduate recruiters as a social practice with ideological implications. This will have three main consequences;

1. We will approach these texts as socially consequential in that they are both a product of social situations and create and sustain these situations. In regard to this we will particularly focus on social situations linked to career.
2. Because we are taking a textual approach we will focus not just on the way meaning is constructed in these texts but also the manner in which arguments are constructed. This means focussing on the use of language and rhetoric in the construction of meaning.
3. We will particularly approach career as a concept infused by power relationships (between students and educators, graduates and recruiters, employers and employees) and consider how the ideologies of career presented in these discourses contribute to these tendencies.

3.2 | Methods in practice

Having highlighted these methodological concerns we will also give an account about how we will use these tools in practice. We decided to focus on the websites of all four graduate recruitment schemes.

To analyse these texts we used a process developed from Jäger (2004) and Schneider (2013) which we developed into a five-step process;

1. Establish the context
2. Code your material
3. Collect and examine key discursive fragments
4. Identify linguistic and rhetorical mechanisms
5. Interpret the data

First, then Schneider (2013) encourages us to establish the overall context of the texts we are looking at. In our case we are analysing web pages aimed at students by graduate recruiters with the aim of attracting suitable students to apply for their graduate scheme. Second, coding material. We decided to take an emergent approach to developing a list of codes but focussing particularly on how concepts such as career, employability and employment were made use of as well as linked ideas and metaphors. Because we were handling a webpage the decision was made to code images and tables as well as individual statements. The coding process took an iterative approach

where a set of codes were established from the first page. These were then made use of for subsequent pages but also added to were necessary. Then once this was complete all webpages were re-coded with the completed code book. The webpages were all coded using Nvivo. Third, once this was finished we collected key fragments, both textual and images. This involved collecting all of the fragments which had a particular code attached to them and analysing them to see what meaning they relayed in relation to these codes. In this section we focussed on commonalities across all of the different recruiters we looked at in order to develop unifying concepts. Fourth, we analysed how these meanings were developed on the level of language. Schneider (2013) argues for the importance of this in relation to discourse analysis and suggests a number of different strategies to consider including paying attention to word groups, rhetorical devices and literary figures. Finally we will return to consider how this analysis produces results in relation to the research objectives we considered at the top of this methods section.

4 | ANALYSIS

4.1 | Context

Schneider (2013) encourages us to consider the context of the materials and their purpose. We found that there was a dual function to the websites. First, websites existed to inform students on how to apply for the graduate schemes which the corporations were advertising. This involved information about application processes, requirements and timetables. Handley (2018) and Ingram and Allen (2019) focussed their studies on the way these hiring processes are represented. Second, the websites also functioned as a form of advertising aiming to attract graduates to the corporations scheme. This second theme links to the 'war for talent' (Michaels et al., 2001) and sees these websites as a form of advertising designed at this end. All the websites attempted to position themselves as products in the market. Aldi for example referred to their recognition confidently stating 'You've probably heard a lot about the Area Manager Programme by now' whilst both the NHS and The Civil Service referred to their 'award winning programs'. This creates an interesting tension, Handley (2018) argues these pre-recruitment processes try to convert graduate subjectivities into something which is manageable and subject to discipline. But this process is conducted through rhetoric which positions the student as the customer and encourages them to choose a scheme on the basis of its value. We observe work becoming commodified (Polanyi, 1957) but this is done in part by attempts to persuade graduates that their central identity is not of a worker but as a consumer. This is important for us in considering how career is being constructed around this duplicity between a graduate scheme as a form of labour or as a product.

4.2 | Concepts

Having produced a preliminary analysis of the context of our materials we proceeded to go through the websites and code key statements. An emergent code book was used. This led to ten overarching codes which were used throughout the materials. Codes were focussed on which appeared across all of the corporation's websites, a list of four of these themes were identified. These were; diversity, benevolence, personal progress and social belonging.

4.3 | Diversity

All of the schemes made use of the language of diversity and particularly of images which represented diversity. As a strategy all of the websites made significant use of pictures of individuals and photos and videos of graduates

in the workplace to represent their schemes. It appears that the selection of individuals has been influenced by concerns to represent the schemes as places of diversity. All of the schemes used even distributions between male and female graduates, and made significant efforts to represent BAME graduates on their websites. On most of the webpages the first person you saw was BAME with the Civil Service in particular featuring a significant majority of BAME graduates on their website. The Civil Service also has an explicit focus on diversity stating that their scheme develops people ‘... from a wide range of backgrounds who have the potential to become our future senior leaders’ and that ‘there is no typical Fast Streamer. We are seeking people from all backgrounds to become our future leaders’. Elsewhere in the website they mention wanting to offer opportunities to individuals who are BAME, from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and who have disabilities.

On one level this can be seen as recruiters wanting to engage with a historic level of lower levels of BAME graduates in elite professions (Henehan & Rose, 2018). There is no particular reason to be suspicious about this intention but if we analyse this at a textual level we can see other interpretations at play. The use of these figures has the effect of signalling that these corporations are diverse and progressive places of work which could function as a value signal to socially liberal graduates. Bhattacharya et al. (2008) argue that firms increasingly make use of social values as a means of ‘winning the war for talent’. This has the effect of painting a picture of the graduate scheme as a diverse and socially liberal place which fits the perceived social liberalism of university graduates.

4.4 | Benevolence

We see all of the schemes taking on the language of the personal and authenticity to describe their schemes as benevolent. The schemes all described their commitment to the individuals who were applying to them. The NHS website states that ‘we take your future seriously’ which is a notable lead in to describing a competitive application process. KPMG goes a step further stating that ‘we know how busy you are, and when you are studying or working the last thing you need is a long and stressful application process’. This language has almost therapeutic undertones at play, it paints the scheme as caring and focussed on the applicant (when one might assume that these websites would call the applicant to focus on the scheme).

This use of language which portrays personal care and an applicant centred approach is enhanced by a focus on authenticity. Rhetoric is introduced which implies that because the scheme cares applicants can be themselves and will be able to be themselves on the scheme. Aldi has a prominent quote from a successful candidate proclaiming that ‘I’m still me but the most confident, all conquering version of me’. The Civil Service states that ‘we value who you are as you join us ... We provide a working culture that enables you to be yourself ...’ and elsewhere ‘there is no typical Fast Streamer’. KPMG makes similar use of this advice to be authentic, ‘Be yourself! Our online assessments are designed to identify your strengths and potential, and determine if you are suitable for the role you have applied to. It is therefore important that you are honest and true to yourself’.

The combination of these ideas of being personal and applicant centred with these descriptions of enabled authenticity serves to create an impression of a certain sort of benevolence. These schemes, and the career possibilities contained inside them, are seen to care for the individual and make use of rhetorical devices to imply that their care is centred around allowing individuals to be themselves.

4.5 | Personal progress

The schemes all focused on their workplaces as enabling personal progress. They did not just describe a job with a financial reward attached to it in exchange for labour but focussed on their schemes as allowing individuals to

move forward and progress as individuals. The NHS described their scheme as the 'beginning of your life defining journey' and elsewhere challenged clients to 'make your career life defining'. Aldi described their scheme as 'a year like no other' and that 'it could be just the start of an exciting career full of amazing opportunities'. This language of journey and opportunity was echoed by KPMG who described their scheme as starting a 'KPMG journey' while the Civil Service talked about 'offers unlimited career potential'. All of this presents the schemes as instigating a journey, moving towards individual potential and allowing the graduate to progress and become.

These sorts of metaphors of career as journeys, adventure and experiences of becoming are noted by Inkson (2004) as common ways of describing career. But while Inkson sees the journey metaphor as involving both mobility and immobility these schemes just describe mobility and particularly progress. This links in significantly with Gee (2016) and Gellner's (1972) analysis of how progress has become a central construct in western thought and by extension in career. We see schemes using the language of progress and development to argue for the schemes as places where individuals experience becoming and completeness.

4.6 | Social belonging

Finally we see all the schemes using rhetoric to link their schemes to enabling wider social engagement and participation. Through various means we see the websites implying that the schemes will enable wider social engagement. This first comes through discourses of 'work-life balance'. All of the schemes talked about preserving or enhancing work-life balance. The NHS's website was (maybe unsurprisingly) particularly focussed on this stating that

We're equally committed to taking care of our people within the NHS, and no one is doing more to lead the achievement of a healthy work/life balance for the benefit of all. As one of our trainees, your health and wellbeing is important to us, and we'll ensure that you're fully supported.

Similarly Aldi talked about creating 'excellent work-life balance' and KPMG talked about 'keeping work-life balance'. This serves to re-emphasises the benevolence discussed before whilst adding in the idea that career enables life to happen around it.

Second, we see this being articulated through a commitment to the scheme enabling social participation itself. The schemes all discussed rewards that included health and lifestyle benefits and supported candidates interests outside of work. This rhetoric of social participation was particularly seen through describing the nature of work relationships. The NHS describes the scheme as developing 'lifelong relationships with people you work with'. KPMG picks up on similar language about relationships in the workplace which are more than just collegiate, describing the workplace as a 'vibrant community' where 'collaboration is a way of life. One where your contribution can make a real difference to our colleagues, clients and communities'. This draws on the social both as a way that the organisation operates and as the benefits and outcomes of career. The Civil Service uses very similar language describing it's scheme as a 'vibrant community of professionals, who have one goal in common: to give back to the communities they serve'.

In various ways the schemes draw on the language of social participation either through work-life balance discourses, describing social contribution or the quality of the wider social relationships formed in the workplace.

5 | DISCUSSION

We set out to look at how career as a construct is conceptualised on the sites of elite graduate recruiters. Our aim was to understand how seeing these sites as forms of LMI allows us to open critical perspectives on how career can be understood on these sites especially through the rhetorics and discourses which are made use of by them.

Our analysis of these sites pointed to four themes we identified as significant rhetorical patterns across all sites. These were; diversity, benevolence, personal progress and social belonging. One initial response to this data would be to criticise these sites on rationalistic grounds. You could argue that these themes reveal these websites as mainly operating as advertising vehicles rather than giving clear and accurate information about their schemes. Some aspects that are traditionally focused on by the careers literature, such as skills required and duties undertaken are notably hard to find on these sites. In contrast to this we noted earlier how these websites are part of a wider 'war for talent'. This notes how these websites are used by recruiters to attract students. Focussing on these sites as advertising vehicles allows us to explore how these sites have adopted aspects similar to what Hackley et al. (2019) describe as 'liminoid advertising'. This is when brands use advertising to imply that their products can act 'as a doorway into a new identity, and hence, a new and more satisfying life' (2019, p. 1). Rationalistic theories of career would critique these strategies as inaccurate or unhelpful which though they have their place misses the ideological significance of these rhetorics. It is hard to argue that these websites will not form an important source of LMI for students and graduates so it is significant to use our findings to consider the ideological significance of their use of rhetorics of liminoid experience. This builds on but also cuts across Handley (2018) and Ingram and Allen (2019) work which saw these same sites as disciplining students subjectivities. What we can see here is that this process is done through students being treated as consumers. This liminal experience we have been discussing is seen in this context as rhetoric employed by recruiters to communicate to students. This positions career in consumptive terms which explains why the language employed takes on similar focus as contemporary advertising does, focussing on issues of self (Hackley et al., 2019) and transformation.

This idea of a liminal experience being linked to identity transformation comes through in the way career is discussed in our data. Graduate schemes are discussed as progressive, enabling personal and career advancement but it also comes through in how the schemes represented themselves as benevolent schemes which enabled authentic identities. Also, we see through our data the idea of moving into a satisfying life. This is implied by the constructs of progress and authenticity which we noted before but also in the descriptions of becoming part of a diverse organisation which develops socially meaningful relationships and is socially engaged in the world around it. These descriptions of the scheme can be seen to have a liminal quality; moving the graduate participant into a new world where they can inhabit a new authentic identity and engage in socially meaningful activities.

We see these firms presenting graduate schemes as a liminal experience which offers liberal goals of diversity, inclusion, authenticity, progress and social significance to university graduates. Though we may question to what extent these represent a genuine experience of working for this firm our central point is that they represent rhetorical strategies which are presented to students and graduates.

This draws to attention the way that LMI operates as ideology and particularly an ideology that frames career in a certain manner. The link between these liberal values and the 'liminal experience' which we see the rhetoric being developed into chimes with ideas we saw Gee (2016) of 'career' becoming a construct linked to personal progress and becoming. We have seen that this LMI can be seen as carrying significant ideological weight. This LMI does not just neutrally inform about an opportunity but confronts the reader with a particular construction of career and a career's power and potential for the individual. This underlines the significance of considering LMI from an ideological point of view and seeing it as a text with ideological properties. This has two main effects, first to normalise certain ideological constructs linked to the liberal life such as personal progress, authenticity and sociability or uncontested norms. Second, we see work and career being argued for as central to individuals achieving the liminal experience we have been discussing here. These discourses represent career as central to individuals personal becoming and underpinning their contribution to society. This sort of ideology contributes towards the creation of Gramscian hegemony in how we understand and explore career and highlights the importance of contesting and challenging the dominance of this liminal understanding of career.

5.1 | Recommendations for practice

Before concluding let us sketch out a few implications for HE practice. Recognising the ideological nature of various forms of LMI allows us to critique the notion that supporting progress (as per the DOTS model) should be the predominant form of careers support in a HE context. Rather students should also be encouraged to develop critical insights into the world of work which they are stepping into. This echoes calls from McCash (2006) and Gee (2016) to consider the pedagogical approach that career guidance in HE takes. How we understand the graduate labour market is key to envisioning HE careers work. Rather than just encouraging students to calibrate themselves to various careers opportunities we also see the need for students to critically engage with the world of work and understand the ideologies and structures that it makes up. This is not a merely academic exercise but opens up important for students to develop new ways of understanding what the graduate jobs market offers to them and on what terms they should enter it. Similarly it also creates space to contest how central work should be to the value of a degree and what alternative ways graduates might develop meaningful lives for themselves and contribute to society without the assumption that these goals have to be achieved through career. Importantly, this is the exact idea which is cut against by the schemes we discussed, that career is the central place to achieve these goals.

6 | CONCLUSION

There are a number of limitations to this study which point in the direction of future work. We have just looked at elite graduate schemes for this study but further work could be done to explore the pre-recruitment materials of other forms of recruitment aimed at university students as well as materials used to encourage graduates pursuing self-employment or further study. Similarly, LMI encompasses more than just pre-recruitment materials, also covering job and sector information produced by careers bodies, government, charities or other third-parties. Considering how to analyse the discourses involved in these materials could prove a fruitful avenue for future research.

Through this paper we have begun exploring how we can understand LMI as linked to ideological constructs. We have particularly looked at how the graduate schemes we have explored look at participating in a 'graduate career' as a liminal experience linked to personal becoming and a life shot through with liberal progress. This is important for us understanding how LMI operates in a HE context and for seeing its place in creating hegemonic understanding around what career is and what careers are worthwhile.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that supports the findings of this study is available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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