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To cite this article: Nina Haltia & Ulpukka Isopahkala-Bouret (2023) A visit to another class? Working-class graduates entering university and the graduate labour market in Finland, *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, 45:2, 192-205, DOI: [10.1080/1360080X.2023.2180166](https://doi.org/10.1080/1360080X.2023.2180166)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1360080X.2023.2180166>



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Published online: 20 Feb 2023.



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A visit to another class? Working-class graduates entering university and the graduate labour market in Finland

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ABSTRACT

Working-class students often face more challenges in securing graduate-level jobs than their middle-class peers. This paper applies the concept of boundary crossing in studying the experience of Finnish business graduates from a working-class background ($n = 27$) and asks what types of boundaries they have faced and how they have managed them on their pathway through and after university studies. We identify three major boundaries: getting the actual study place, learning to be a student in university and graduating and getting a job in the graduate labour market. Our findings indicate that successful transitions are possible, as the Finnish higher education system enables them in many ways. However, successful boundary work demands socialising to the norms and values of the new social field as well as renewed relationships with one's social background. This paper discusses the implications of these findings for the development of inclusive policies and practices.



KEYWORDS

Graduate employment;
Finland; business education;
boundary crossing; equity
groups in higher education

Introduction

According to the literature, higher education graduates coming from working-class or non-traditional backgrounds do less well in gaining graduate employment compared to their middle-class peers (Carroll & Li, 2022; Hurst, 2018; Jacob, Gerth, & Weiss, 2018; Macmillan, Tyler, & Vignoles, 2015). This paper adopts the concept of boundary crossing (O'Shea, 2020) in studying the experiences of university graduates from a working-class background. Boundary crossing involves recognising and encountering the boundaries, as well as managing and navigating them through one's own agency (O'Shea, 2020). Experiences of transition are an important topic to study, to be able to develop higher education institutions (HEIs) to be more inclusive and supportive and enhance employability of students coming from equity groups.

We study the experiences of university graduates with working-class background ($n = 27$) in the Finnish context, especially in the field of business administration. This context

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This manuscript is offered for Special Issue for the Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management, 'Beyond equity and inclusion policy – student achievement at and after university'.

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offers a distinct environment for the study. Finnish higher education system aims at offering equal opportunities for all, the level of stratification is relatively low (Välismaa & Muhonen, 2018) and parents' educational background affects graduates' labour market entry only to a moderate degree (Haltia, Isopahkala-Bouret, & Mutanen, [under review](#); Isopahkala-Bouret & Nori, 2021). However, despite the claim of a 'classless' society, class position continues to determine the living conditions of individuals and families, with class being determined not only by income but also by power relations and autonomy in working life (Melin, 2020). Within the Finnish class structure, almost a half of both women and men can be placed in the groups of wage workers or other workers (Saarinen, Koivula, Koiranen, & Sivonen, 2018, p. 134).

With working-class background, we refer to students and graduates from low socio-economic backgrounds and who are first in family to attend higher education. The participants of our study share the similar family background, but the group is heterogeneous in terms of their age, gender, prior experience and entry path to university. The notions of boundary crossing and boundary work sensitise us to discovering the diversity and complexity of experiences and help understand the act of balancing that the students and graduates perform when they move to new social environments (O'Shea, 2020). We address the following research questions: What types of boundaries do graduates face and how do they manage them on their pathway through and after university studies?

Our findings indicate that high achievement and successful transitions from working class to professional middle-class positions are possible. However, we argue that boundary work demands socialising to the norms and values of the new social field as well as creating a new type of relationship to one's background. Boundary crossing, thus, involves a balancing act between the working-class 'home world' and the middle-class 'new world'. This paper discusses the implications of these findings for the development of inclusive pedagogical and institutional practices and policies in higher education.

Transition through university studies as a series of boundary crossings

The enhancement of graduate employability is a concern for HEIs. Accordingly, they have introduced various activities, including recruitment events, career guidance and mentoring services, work placement opportunities and integration of various employability skills into the curricula (Hartmann & Komljenovic, 2021). It is controversial how these actions have served various equity groups. It seems that the students who have better resources in the first place are more able to benefit from these practices (Paull, Lloyd, Male, & Clerke, 2019; Smith, Taylor-Smith, Bacon, & Mackinnon, 2019; Wright & Mulvey, 2021).

Considerable research on graduate employability has taken the perspective of 'forms of capitals' and how graduates are able to mobilise and convert them for labour market success (Bourdieu, 1984, 1986). Forms of capital are largely inherited from the childhood family. They are also accumulated in schooling and other experiences through life. Economic capital enables access to expensive degree programmes, unpaid internships and costly extra-curricular activities (Hurst, 2018), through which it is possible to cultivate cultural and social capital to reach the high-status labour market. Cultural capital provides an understanding of how to make the right choices and 'play the game' in the field of education and in transition from education to work (Bathmaker,

Ingram, & Waller, 2013; Burke, Scurry, & Blenkinsopp, 2020; Tomlinson, 2008). Social capital can be accumulated by one's own work, but those who have appropriate family networks have an advantage (Abrahams, 2017; Haltia, Isopahkala-Bouret, & Mutanen, [under review](#)).

The forms of capital influence employers' judgements about the job applicants (Clarke, 2018; Tomlinson, 2017). According to Tomlinson and Anderson (2021), employers evaluate that field-specific and other experience provide information about graduates' performance potential, initiative and responsiveness to challenges. However, the key element is cultural fit. This refers to a socio-cultural dimension that signals graduates' suitability for an organisation (Tomlinson & Anderson, 2021). Elite firms in their recruitment practices tend to exclude even bright applicants from working-class backgrounds, since they do not fit the organisational habitus of the firm (Ashley & Empson, 2017).

To gain jobs in upper-middle-class positions, working-class graduates need to socialise themselves to the values and norms of the organisations in which they aspire to be employed. Possession of capital enables successful transitions, whereas the lack of forms of capital can be an obstacle. The concept of boundary crossing (O'Shea, 2020) highlights the positional and processual characteristics of transition to, within and beyond higher education. It also acknowledges the dynamic nature of forms of capital. Instead of blocking, the boundaries are penetrable and traversable; they can be enacted and navigated through one's own agency (O'Shea, 2020).

Transition from a working-class background to a middle-class profession entails a series of boundary crossings, as the person moves first from a working-class home to higher education and, further, to the graduate labour market. Getting a study place is a concrete point where a person moves to a new status as a university student. The concrete barriers include student fees and selective admission criteria (McCowan, 2016). Cultural boundaries are more obscure in nature. For instance, the idea of becoming a university student might be distant when young, but through experience, it can be assimilated as part of one's own identity (Käyhkö, 2015).

O'Shea (2020) studied mature first-in-family students in university, for whom entry to university involved rethinking the predefined beliefs about oneself and reformulating the assumptions about what was possible. These assumptions were set by the learners themselves, or from outside, by significant family members, for instance. Once at university and pursuing their studies, the students actively managed the boundaries. They were conscious of the dissonance between the home and university spaces. To survive in a situation with opposing expectations, they developed various strategies. They kept the university world and home world apart, developed social networks with fellow students with similar backgrounds and performed self-censorship and flexibility in how they talked and behaved in different situations.

Similar findings have been indicated by other scholars as well (Crozier, Reay, & Clayton, 2019; Käyhkö, 2015; Lehmann, 2009, 2013, 2019; Reay, 2001, 2002). What seems to be characteristic of the experience of graduates from working-class backgrounds is the balancing act between the middle-class academic world and the working-class home world. Changes that occur due to educating oneself are perceived as positive, but at the same time, the relationship with the family and what it represents might become problematic (Lehmann, 2013). Even though one's own identity might change, it should

not change too much in order to maintain a relationship with the home world (Käyhkö, 2015). As Reay (2001) described, higher education students originating from the working class are balancing between realising one's potential and maintaining a sense of an authentic self.

Working-class graduates might also see their backgrounds as a source of strength. In Lehmann's (2009) study, working-class students described their strong work ethic as being rooted in their own work experience as well as the discipline learned at home. The model of hard work helped to build a mature, independent and responsible attitude towards study. Being in between two worlds itself can also be seen as an asset, because it enables seeing the world in a more well-rounded way (Käyhkö, 2015).

The thematic of balancing and crossing boundaries has been prominent in studying experiences at university. Less research has been done concerning the transition to working life after university. This paper combines both the Finnish working-class graduates' transition through university studies and their entry to the graduate labour market.

The context: business graduates in Finland

Since graduate employability is a context-dependent phenomenon, it is important to obtain insights from different national settings. Different national systems have different levels of participation in higher education, selectivity and institutional stratification. In addition, the connections between higher education and the labour market vary.

Finland is a Nordic welfare state in which differences between social classes do exist but where these differences are not very steep (Melin, 2020). This can be attributed to welfare and labour market policies, as well as education (Isopahkala-Bouret & Nori, 2021). Education policy has emphasised equal opportunities and the right to pursue educational goals regardless of parental background, family wealth, age or previous educational path. First, Finland has a comprehensive basic education. Second, even after division into general and vocational upper secondary education, all students have eligibility to apply for higher education. Third, higher education is tuition-fee free, various admission routes to university exist and students are involved in a universal study allowance system. Furthermore, once accepted as a degree student, all students can participate in the same degree programmes regardless of their age or entry route (Haltia, Isopahkala-Bouret, & Jauhiainen, 2022). There is no preparatory programmes or admission procedures aimed at equity groups or explicit status of a part-time student, for example.

The Finnish system of higher education has a dual model that comprises 13 research universities and 22 universities of applied sciences (UASs). Research universities concentrate on scientific research and have a disciplinary oriented curriculum, whereas UASs have applied and work-oriented curriculum and carry out research and development (R&D), which promotes local and regional economic development. Furthermore, the Finnish systems is following the Bologna process (which aimed to harmonise European HE) with a two-tiered degree structure throughout both higher education sectors. Overall, the Finnish higher education system has a relatively low level of institutional stratification (Välilä & Muhonen, 2018).

Access to higher education is competitive in both sectors, but the most competitive fields are in universities. In addition, the social background of university students is higher than that of UAS students (Nori, Juusola, Kohtamäki, Lyytinen, & Kivistö, 2021). We selected as our exemplary case the business studies at Finnish university sector. Business administration and economics is one of the competitive, high-status disciplines, typically leading to well-paid job positions (Isopahkala-Bouret & Nori, 2021; Kosunen, Haltia, Saari, Jokila, & Halmkrona, 2020). It is also a generalist field that prepares graduates for a multitude of career options. Furthermore, among the elite firms in the field, specific cultural capital is expected from the business graduates (Ashley & Empson, 2017; Tomlinson & Anderson, 2021).

The study

This study is part of a larger research project, 'Higher education graduates' employability and social positioning in the labour market' (HighEmploy, 2018–2022). We interviewed 77 business graduates from universities and UAS institutions in 2019–2020. We focused on 27 business graduates from university (i.e., excluding the UAS graduates) who we identified as coming from a working-class background (Table 1). Operationalising the class background of individual participants is complex, and as indicated by Bathmaker, Ingram, and Waller (2013), it requires certain simplifications. We mainly looked at the educational and occupational levels of both parents, as well as participants' experiences of social background. The parents had no university education and worked mainly in blue-collar or lower-middle-class occupations. When comparing themselves to their peers at university, the participants identified themselves as coming from a 'lower' background in terms of familial resources.

The interviewees ranged in age from 23 to 45 years. Of the interviewees, 15 were female and 12 were male. The majority of them had recently graduated with a master's degree, and a few were still finalising their studies. The younger graduates had mainly entered university through the main admission route. In universities, most students are accepted into both bachelor's degree and master's degree programmes simultaneously, with the assumption that the master's degree is the entry requirement into the labour market. The older graduates had often used alternative entrance routes to university (Haltia, 2018). Some had originally pursued a bachelor-level degree in a UAS institution and, only after that, entered through a specific master's programme admission route to university. All our interviewees had started building their careers while pursuing the master's programme. Almost all of them had a job that corresponded to their education at the time of obtaining the degree (Table 1).

The interviews lasted approximately one to two hours. The interview schedule followed the interviewees' life histories and included questions pertaining to family background, application to and experiences of university studies, experiences related to job searches, entering the labour market and future career prospects. The interviews were transcribed verbatim and pseudonymised, and the interview quotes were translated from Finnish to English by a professional.

The narrative interviews offer rich data and enable an in-depth analysis of the experiences of graduates. We used the concept of boundary crossing as a sensitising lens to perform a thematic analysis of the data. In analysing the data, we focussed on how

Table 1. Participants of the study.

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Current work	Entry route
Alex	29	M	Procurement specialist	Main admission
Alma	36	F	Assistant manager	Master's programme after bachelor's degree in UAS
Andrei	30	M	Marketing director, partner	Master's programme after bachelor's degree in UAS
Anita	25	F	Assistant controller	Main admission
Birgitta	26	F	Controller	Main admission
Ellen	33	F	Procurement lawyer	
Emil	26	M	Customer operation specialist	Main admission
Emilia	44	F	Sales coordinator	Master's programme after bachelor's degree in UAS
Enni	45	F	Controller	Master's programme after bachelor's degree in UAS
Frans	27	M	Former teacher, current full-time student, graduating soon; about to enter a networking programme	Main admission
Helmi	45	F	Service manager	Master's programme after bachelor's degree in UAS
Henry	41	M	Former finance director, currently full-time student	Master's programme after bachelor's degree in another university
Irene	38	F	Financial management specialist	Master's programme after bachelor's degree in UAS
Jenny	23	F	Project manager	Main admission
Joel	35	M	Former accountant; about to start in financial services	Open university gateway
Juulia	28	F	Former campaign specialist, current full-time student finalising her studies	Main admission
Kasper	30	M	Financial manager	
Maria	27	F	Business consultant	Main admission
Meeri	26	F	Full-time student finalising her studies	Main admission
Nico	33	M	Product manager	Open university gateway
Rebecca	26	F	Campaign specialist	Main admission
Robert	25	M	Full-time student finalising his studies	Main admission
Sakari	29	M	Consultant	Main admission
Sebastian	26	M	Consultant trainee	Main admission
Sofia	44	F	University teacher	Open university gateway
Tea	27	F	Financial management specialist	Main admission
Tobias	33	M	Development manager	Master's programme after bachelor's degree in UAS

the interviewees talked about their family background and its effects on their educational choices, early career trajectories and experience in working life.

Findings

As a result of our analysis, we identified three major boundaries that the graduates faced on their trajectories: (1) getting the actual study place at university, (2) learning to be a student in university and (3) graduating and getting a job in the graduate labour market. Together, these form a series of boundary crossings that entail a gradual transition from a working-class background to a middle-class position in society.

Getting the study place at university

Many of the younger graduates in our data had gained entry to university straight after upper secondary school or with a gap of one or two years. For these participants, parents had mainly been supportive, but they rarely had any specific resources to help the participants with their choices. This made the young graduates feel that they needed to find out about the study opportunities by themselves and to put effort into the decision-making and thinking about different options. However, many of them expressed gratitude for not being pressured by their parents and being able to make their own decisions regarding their schooling. Juulia was one of those who felt that the choices had to be made independently.

my parents — still don't understand what a Bachelor or a Master's thesis is and what you actually do at University — It's quite superficial what we've talked about regarding education with the parents — (Juulia, 28, formerly Campaign Specialist, currently full-time student finalising her studies)

For the young graduates, what had enabled them and empowered them in their aims towards higher education was their high achievement in prior schooling. The good grades not only gave them the concrete advantage of competitive student admission but also helped them construct a belief in themselves that they had the skills and a real opportunity to study in university. Young women, in particular, gave such meanings for their school years. Birgitta was one of them:

I was always pretty good at school, so for me, basic education and upper secondary school were pretty easy, so then I wanted to go to university to study and then I always liked math a lot, so I thought accounting and finance fit that pretty well. (Birgitta, 26, Controller)

For the mature graduates, the paths to higher education and to university had been longer and more diverse. They also varied in their age, and thus, had different amounts of work experience and education prior to their studies in university. In addition, the parental background was sometimes less supportive for those who were older. Enni, whose parents had opposed university studies, described how she had followed her parents' expectations earlier, but later on, detached herself from her working-class background.

It's come through a very negative route and I'm so happy that, at forty I've been able to shed these family values and ways of thinking and, despite that, start studying and getting an education (Enni, 45, Controller)

Enni, like many others, had constructed her path to university through several steps. She first went to a vocational education institute and then to the university of applied sciences, and only after that, she applied for a graduate study at university. For Enni, graduating the master's degree was a long-term dream-come-true. For some, the idea of being a university graduate had been very distant earlier, but through their experience, they had gradually grown to think of higher education as an option for them. Nico, who had gained entry through an alternative university admission gateway, described how he had learned to trust in his abilities as a student while pursuing the courses.

Noticing that I can do it probably mattered. — probably somewhere at the end of basic education or something like that I wouldn't have really thought that I'll someday go to university to study. It was somehow a completely different world and the people who end up there are totally different.
(Nico, 33, Procurement Lawyer)

Some of the mature students had actively sought for alternative opportunities where they could enter with the prior qualification and benefit from the accreditation of prior learning. Some had discovered the opportunity by chance. The Finnish education system, with its different options, had enabled entry to university for the mature working-class graduates, who valued the alternative access routes available to them.

Learning to be a student in university, especially in the field of business studies

Our interviewees were a selected group as all of them had crossed the boundary of the university entrance, university studies and entry to the labour market. The graduates reflected on their pathways, evaluating their skills and capacities as students. The overall experience was that study in university had been the right choice. Many reported, however, having faced certain difficulties. Some said the hardest time was at the beginning of the studies. The young students who had been high achievers at the secondary school paradoxically felt that they needed to develop a new kind of attitude towards educational achievement. The participants had negotiated between two opposing ideals: meeting the academic standards and developing a relaxed, not too serious outlook on studies. Involvement in student life and extracurricular activities was an important part of learning the dominant culture and kinds of style, preferences and behaviour that were highly valued in the community of business students (Isopahkala-Bouret, Siivonen, & Haltia, 2023).

What seemed to be vital in the field of business studies, particularly, was to develop a proactive attitude towards networking as future job opportunities were dependent on social capital accumulated during the study. Passing the courses with excellent grades was no longer what mattered the most. Jenny, for example, had internalised this idea:

... because I was active in student organisations and realised that maybe it isn't really through the books where you get work, or through good grades, but it's ... who you know and where.
(Jenny, 23, Project Manager)

Some of the working-class students, however, excluded themselves from these activities and were unwilling to adapt oneself to the idea of networking. Especially, the mature students had family responsibilities and they often worked full-time. Some simply had no interest in these activities. An alternative strategy was to keep their private life and studies separate and to limit interaction with other students to study-related matters. In courses, however, students from different backgrounds encountered each other, as Enni described from the perspective of a mature student:

And then I also loved sometimes being on courses where there were people 20 years younger, same age as, almost the same age as my children, and I thought they were such smart young folk. And that that I never felt that I was — discriminated because of my age or anything but I was fully equal with them in the groups. (Q: Did you, like, feel that you belonged there?) Well, in the sense of doing the exercises, yeah, but of course I didn't spend my free time with them.
(Enni, 45, Controller)

The mature students recognised that their life situations differ from those of the young. While most of them insisted that their differing position was voluntary, there were a few who felt socially excluded, like Robert. He recognised that non-participation to student events may have had an impact on his career. Mutual deals in business life are often made between people who know each other and like to party together.

Most of them (business school students) appear to be party people. Like, I have thought about it, like ‘Well, do I want to be involved with people like that?’ if I have been quite reserved and negative towards it (drinking), my stance, so—I do feel this certain injustice, too. But in a way, you kind of just accept it. (Robert, 25, full-time student finalising his studies)

Working-class students, despite their age or previous experience, actively managed the boundaries and were able to find various roles that suited them in the new social environment. For example, mature students compared their skills to their younger peers and noticed that they had quite good learning skills, an understanding of working life and a more insightful attitude towards the study (see also: Isopahkala-Bouret, 2015). Prior work experience allowed high achievement in practical course assignments. Irene was one of those who noted this:

... with the work experience you could pass certain exams just like that, so even if you hadn’t even glimpsed at any of the books to see what they were, you could, with earlier knowledge answer the questions. (Irene, 30, Financial Management Specialist)

Graduating and getting a job

Most of our interviewees had a job that they perceived as corresponding to their field and level of education. Some of the participants, however, struggled with the transition from higher education to work. Getting the first proper job from the business field was experienced as a breaking point they felt pressure on achieving. Sebastian described how he had struggled with finding the first graduate-level job.

I had the feeling that it was difficult to break, getting from customer service jobs to my own field. At some point, it felt like a high threshold-. — But well, like I had wanted something more challenging then already. But that was the most difficult thing for me in my opinion. (Sebastian, 26, Consultant Trainee)

Graduates’ unequal resources to gain the most sought-after jobs were being manifest at this point. Working-class students were in a disadvantaged position compared to their middle-class peers whose parents or other relatives were working in the field of business and could help at the entry to the labour market (Haltia, Isopahkala-Bouret, & Mutanen, [under review](#)).

The working-class graduates perceived their versatile work experience as an asset that enabled them to cross the boundaries from higher education to graduate labour market. Good achievements in summer jobs and internships paved the way for better job offers after graduation. These graduates constructed their success as due to their own effort and hard work. They also expressed pride in their own well-deserved achievements. Because of their background, they had developed valuable attitudes and morals required in

working life. Juulia, for example, had accumulated her work experience since a young age:

from that [work experience] I've surely got the most praise and, the kind of mature work attitude and things like that, so I feel that you can see my high work morale no matter the job.

(Juulia, 28, formerly Campaign Specialist, currently full-time student finalising her studies)

For the mature, working-class graduates, the transition to working life was different. Many had a UAS bachelor's degree, relevant work experience and existing networks prior to their university access. They could also connect their master's degree studies to their current job. Some admitted that they simply needed 'the paper' to get the legitimate position in their current job, but many also had an urge to get to the next step in their career (c.f., credentialism; Isopahkala-Bouret, 2015).

Moving on to the graduate-level job as a master's degree holder meant additionally moving to a new social class. University had exposed them to a view to another type of social world and social identity. It had 'made it possible to get into a totally different everyday working life', said Maria (27, Business Consultant). Or, as Helmi (45, Service Manager) put it, 'I wouldn't be the person I am if I hadn't been able to follow this work and education path'. The participants gave accounts of being between two worlds. On one hand, they valued what they had achieved prior to their new degree. On the other hand, they constructed a changing relationship with their home worlds and families.

Graduates with working-class background shared the experience that it was difficult to talk to parents about their current work, since parents did not understand the world of business that the participants were entering. Alma was one of those who actively reflected on this position between the two worlds. At work, she was surrounded by highly educated people, but among her relatives, there was no one with university education. She constructed the idea of keeping these two worlds separate:

I've had these colleagues with master's degrees, they also often have parents that have higher education. So, I don't feel ashamed that my parents don't have it, but I also don't just say that hey, my mom only has basic education and so. So, maybe you just don't bring it up in the same way.

(Alma, 36, Assistant Manager)

Kasper put this idea of being in between two worlds as follows:

No, it doesn't feel like such a visit to another social class or something like that anymore, but, maybe that I in a way belong there. — I'd however like to think of myself as a working-class person but it's not — I also don't feel like an outsider even there, so I guess I have friends in all socioeconomic classes

(Kasper, 30, Financial Manager)

As Kasper described, successful transition meant that it was possible to operate in both worlds. Our participants felt that they could communicate with different types of people, and even though they recognised having 'left' their home world, they could hold contact with the old social context as well.

Discussion

Here, we studied what types of boundary crossings (O'Shea, 2020) working-class graduates have faced and how they have managed their way through and after university. As

a result of our analysis, we identified three major boundaries. The first was to be successful in competitive student admissions or to find alternative pathways to university. The second was learning to be a student in university: this involves academic learning skills and attachment to studies, but also more widely getting involved in the student community. Third was graduating and getting a professional job, together with entry to a middle-class position in society.

These series of boundary crossings to, within and beyond higher education can be conceptualised as a step-by-step process towards socialising to the values of the student community and to the professional society in a particular field. Working-class students negotiated their relationship with academia and the student community. Some adapted to the culture while others kept their 'old world' apart from the new academic and business life.

The breaking point in the transition from higher education to work was to get the first graduate-level job. This was also the point where the differences in the forms of capitals (Bourdieu, 1984) became more evident among the students. For our study participants, internships were not a mandatory part of their studies, but they built their capacities through other types of work experiences. One option to develop further opportunities to working-class students and graduates could be to provide paid internship opportunities for all students. Universities could offer internship vouchers to students to cover the salary during the internship. This would enable students from equity groups to develop their professional skills, cultural capital and accumulate networks in business life.

When analysing transition through university, the participants at many points emphasised their own efforts in managing the boundaries. This can be understood as a strong sense of agency (O'Shea, 2020). However, they also recognised structural and class-related inequalities in relation to familial capitals, such as the importance of social networks (Bathmaker, Ingram, & Waller, 2013; Haltia, Isopahkala-Bouret, & Mutanen, *under review*). Institutional structures and practices should be developed to support graduates in successful boundary crossing. For example, different mentoring programmes and career counselling for graduates would help those who did not have social capital from home. However, in order to channel the benefits of these actions to working-class students, an effort needs to be made to encourage students and graduates to utilise these opportunities.

Conclusion

Deploying the concept of boundary crossing in the Finnish context contributes to the theoretical as well as empirical understanding of the social inequalities in graduate careers. First, our study emphasises the importance of the enabling social structures. The Finnish society and higher education system, with its absence of tuition fees, availability of welfare support, and low level of social stratification enhanced working-class graduates' agency to overcome boundaries (Haltia, Isopahkala-Bouret, & Mutanen, *under review*). Even though working-class students had less capitals than their peers from more affluent backgrounds, they could attain a study place at university and successfully accumulate forms of capitals during study.

Second, our findings demonstrate the importance of being able to see the working-class background and earlier life experience as a moral asset and strength in the

professional career (see also: Lehmann, 2009; Reay, 2001, 2002). The Finnish working-class graduates constructed boundary crossing as a flexible process that entails a balancing act between the 'old' and 'new'. Our participants developed an identity which enabled them to navigate between the working-class world and the academic, middle-class professional world (Käyhkö, 2015; Lehmann, 2009, 2013, 2019). These two worlds might be separate, but the graduates could act in both worlds and appreciate them simultaneously.

At university, student diversity should be considered a valuable and enriching matter. Especially, for mature, working-class students, the alternative admission routes and flexibility of the education system is important and should be further developed. The different backgrounds and experiences of students can also be used as a resource in organising the teaching. Valuing the life experience of working-class students would help them to feel more empowered and self-confident in their studies and later on in the working life. This would eventually transform HEIs to become more inclusive and sustainable institutions.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank our research team for conducting the research interviews together with us. We would like to thank the anonymous reviewers for their feedback. We are also thankful for the Academy of Finland for the research funding (Grant 315797).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Funding

This work was supported by the Academy of Finland under Grant 315797

Ethical approval

The ethical approval for the study was obtained from the University of Eastern Finland Committee on Research Ethics (Statement 10/2019, received 3.6.2019).

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