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The social construction of competition for graduate jobs: A comparison between Great Britain and the Netherlands

Abstract

This article examines how Dutch and British students socially construct the positional competition for jobs within their educational and labour market contexts. The findings illustrate two contrasting approaches to employability. The competition for jobs as understood by the Dutch students is based on absolute performance, an unclear relationship between skills and the labour market and the development of human capital in areas of experiences, skills and abilities. For the British students it is based on relative performance, ranking of candidates and the importance of signals. The study also shows that these principles are aligned to national labour market and educational contexts. These results highlight the importance of the institutional context in how the positional competition for graduate jobs is played out.

Key words: competition, cross-national comparison, education, graduate employability, labour market, skills.

Introduction

How scarce goods such as educational credentials and jobs are distributed within society is a major sociological issue. In the last two decades, increasing attention has been placed on the opportunities and rewards for university graduates in finding high skilled well-paid employment in the knowledge economy. Few, however, have empirically investigated how students understand the competition for these jobs. Even less research has focused on the similarities and differences of students' understanding of the competition between countries.

This article is based on a comparative study on graduate employability in Great Britain and the Netherlands. The key questions this paper attempts to answer are: How do students understand the competition for graduate jobs within these two different national contexts? To what extent is the 'positional' competition (Hirsch, 1976) – which relates to how one stands relative to others within an implicit or explicit hierarchy (Brown, 2000, p. 633) – judged to be fair or fixed in the interests of the powerful and privileged? The extent to which the competition for jobs is seen to be meritocratic will have a significant impact on how graduate employability is played out in the labour market.

Previous attempts to conceptualise the competition for jobs within the labour market have neglected to address how institutional context shapes the competition for graduate jobs. These attempts have assumed universality in how those in the graduate labour market approach the competition for graduate jobs. More importantly, previous efforts to understand the competition for graduate jobs have either claimed that it has become more meritocratic because of economic development, or alternatively claimed that an unequal battle for elite positions reproduces a credentialist system. Very few have given sufficient attention to how specific institutional and social contexts shape the competition for jobs. The analysis presented below shows that Dutch students use a meritocratic interpretive framework in order to make sense of the competition, whereas the British students

interpret the labour market as conflictual, often in a credentialist manner. Previous universalistic approaches fail to acknowledge this heterogeneity in the competition for graduate jobs.

The article is organised as follows. First it outlines two views on how the previous literature has understood competition between labour market participants. Then it will explain the methodology of the research. After this, the students' views on the competition for jobs will be described and analysed. Here, three defining characteristics for each country will be given. In the discussion, the contrasting theoretical approaches will be evaluated.

The literature

From the literature we can distinguish two different views on how the competition for jobs functions. Each of them has distinct assumptions on how the labour market functions and how labour market participants are able to compete for jobs. The first view is referred to as the 'conventional' view and the second the 'alternative' view.

The conventional view

To the majority of academics, commentators and policy-makers, barriers to labour market opportunity have been or are in the process of being removed.¹ Similar opportunities are now available to all those willing to invest in education and skills. Following Bell (1973) it is believed that we find ourselves in a 'post-industrial society': moving from a producer of goods (manufacturing) to a service economy where theoretical knowledge, technology, and information have become the major modes of commodity. In a labour market where the demand for technical, scientific and professional workers is increasing and the proportion of semi-skilled and unskilled jobs continues to decline, more individuals will be able to choose to upgrade their skills and compete for skilled jobs. Education is the pathway to labour market success and thus individual prosperity.

Closely related is the assumption that inequality in labour market opportunities is declining. There are very few barriers left for individuals to access jobs. With the emergence of the knowledge-based economy, opportunity has increased as skills and human capital have become the main driver of economic advantage. To discriminate on the basis of any other factor than skills and ability would be counterproductive as it is human capital which creates competitive advantage for companies. In other words, employers cannot ignore the skills and abilities of the individual worker whatever their gender, ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, religion or age.

The *meritocratic* promise – a division of labour based on ability and effort – is therefore especially highlighted in the conventional view. Because of this the labour market is also seen as becoming fairer. The conventional view does not deny that there are contrasting opportunities in the knowledge-based economy; however, economic change is leading to higher efficiency and increasing justice for all. The conventional view has very little attention for 'stakes' fairness (the rewards to winners and losers in the competition). As equality of opportunity has become more important, equality of outcomes has been thought to be unnecessary or unrealistic.

For the conventional view, positional competition is organised through *consensus* as the economy has allegedly provided labour market opportunity for anyone who is willing and able to invest in human capital. The distribution of jobs is ultimately decided by a meritocratic selection process because it is human capital that determines an individual's position in the labour market.

Although the individualisation of labour market competition can be linked to the meritocratic principle, it is also tied to a neoliberal conceptualisation of labour markets. It is through free and open market competition that the best possible labour

market outcomes are established. Likewise the market principle optimally aligns labour market signal and labour market payoffs for individuals. Often this is accompanied by a normative assumption that an open contest will optimise performance, as individuals are financially rewarded for their effort, talent and investment in education, skills and experience. This free labour market is a fair one as it links performance to rewards.

The labour market is, like any other market, ultimately a place where an individual buyer (employer) and seller (worker) come together consensually to make a transaction. Markets are alleged to provide the best available means of maximising economic benefits. Both parties in a transaction 'benefit from it, provided the transaction is bilaterally voluntary and informed' (Friedman, 1962, p.13). This atomic and transactional understanding of the worker is often referred to as *market individualism*. The route to labour market success becomes more aligned to individual accomplishment than the limits of the national economy. The graduate labour market is seen as an open and fair competition where individuals themselves largely determine their labour market success.

This individualised and consensual understanding of the positional competition is strongly exemplified in human capital theory (e.g. Becker, 1964; Schultz, 1971; and Nerdum 1998). It assumes that individuals make choices regarding investment in human capital based on benefits and cost. Training and education are considered to be an important investment inasmuch as there are benefits over a long period of time. According to the information they receive and their individual preferences, individuals will rationally invest in education, experience or acquisition of skills. Likewise employers will rationally hire the employee who is expected to show the highest productivity. Human capital theory emphasises that education provides knowledge and skills that have a direct influence on the productivity of workers. Employers will therefore prefer a highly educated candidate to less educated workers, and/or are willing to pay higher wages to highly educated workers because of this differential in productivity.

The labour market is presented as a meritocratic mechanism that connects employers, seeking the most productive candidate, with job seekers seeking optimal use and reward of their skills and abilities. The latter try to improve their position in the labour market by investing in their skills and ability, or match them with a suitable job. The conventional view tends to be very supply-focused, proposing that there is a close match between qualifications, skills, jobs, productivity and rewards.

The alternative view

Whereas the conventional view regards finding employment as a matter of individual attributes, the alternative accounts consider the labour market to be an arena where individuals and groups are struggling to obtain advantage over others, using means that do not necessarily relate to skill, ability or work-related capacity. This view is becoming more dominant especially amongst social scientists.

Those holding the conventional view regard the competition for jobs as consensual rather than positional. Human capital theory (including its sociological allies in functionalist modernisation theories) starts from the idea that selection and allocation on the basis of qualifications is beneficial for the productivity and efficiency of the organisation. Their critics (advocates of the alternative view) would argue that this ignores the positional power that groups and individuals derive from mobilising material, cultural and social capital to stay ahead in the race, seeking to change the rules of the game. These theories include Collins' credentialism (1974, 1979) and cultural reproduction theory (e.g. Bourdieu, 1972, 1984; Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977; Halsey et al., 1980) but also positional conflict theory (Brown, 2000) and the correspondence principle of Bowles and Gintis (1976, 2002).

Despite some differences, those with these perspectives share the view that skills obtained in schools are not always relevant in relation to productivity. In addition they put emphasis on formal qualifications as prerequisites to enter superior (or high status) jobs, as closure is mostly legitimately accomplished through the use of credentials. Education has established certain workers as members of a morally superior status group that deserves not only to be in power but also to enjoy greater rewards (Berg, 1970; Collins, 1971, 1979; Bourdieu, 1977). The relationship between jobs and people is seen by the alternative view not as consensual but a result of numerous groups and/or individuals strategising ways to create advantage over others. The labour market is by nature *conflictual*. Where the conventional view focuses on the supply-side, the alternative view concentrates on the demand-side, describing the social factors that decide who gets which job

Following Weberian sociology, conflict and domination are inescapable in the labour market. Different social groups aim to dominate each other for wealth, status or power as scarcity remains a vital condition of the economic system. Fred Hirsch (1977) writes that whereas material goods are (arguably) limitless, it is social or 'positional' goods that will become scarce. The key characteristic of positional goods is that we cannot produce more of them for everyone who wants them. Positional goods, which include top jobs, may not be expanded so easily. In the case of the graduate labour market it means that not everyone can occupy elite positions.

The growth of mass higher education in combination with only a moderate growth of graduate jobs leads to a positional competition by other means than just merit. Individuals and groups actively try to secure advantage over other members in the labour market. Advantages are not always based on merit but can also play out in relation to class, ethnicity or gender. The competition is not a win-win scenario for all those willing to invest and develop their human capital. The conventional view is therefore flawed and naïve in thinking that in the knowledge-based economy positional competition will develop along consensual and meritocratic lines. The competition is fought out between individuals and groups, and has real and distinct effects.

One of the effects of the positional nature of the competition for jobs is credentialism. For Weber (1945) the purpose of credentials is to provide a legitimate means of *closure* in the labour market. For closure theorists like Weber, and later Randall Collins (1979) and Frank Parkin (1979), this closure is 'the process of mobilising power in order to enhance or defend a group's share of rewards or resources' (Murphy, 1984, p.548). Groups use credentials as a way of regulating access to scarce labour market positions through accreditation, certification or licensing.

For both Berg (1970) and Collins (1979) education is not even correlated with productive abilities or overall productivity. The kind of educational credentials demanded in the labour market fully depend on the preferences of employers and the groups that attempt to control certain credentials. Educational credentialism to them is therefore a game of social exclusion where status groups accumulate the desired cultural capital (e.g. Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977; Dimaggio, 1982) to maintain or create an advantage over other groups in the labour market.

Advocates of the alternative view argue that the consequence of the increasingly competitive labour market is that people compete in an ever more vicious rat race. Meritocracy gave economic inequality its philosophical justification, as it was portrayed as fair and the best stimulus for advancing the living conditions of all. It is no longer functioning, as neither those who managed to 'win', nor those who lost, necessarily deserved to do so. In recently Brown and Lauder (2011) have argued that globalisation is also changing the competition for graduates jobs. The global economy has allowed emerging economies such as India and China to create a high skilled low-waged labour reserve. Graduates in Western nations face a dwindling

supply of good jobs. This coerces the middle classes to even devote more time, money, and effort to distinguish themselves in an already unequal competition.

Rather than adopting one of the two views, this study evaluates whether the views of the students actually reflect either of them. By empirically testing the students' perception of positional competition it can also provide new insights into the way that institutional context relates to how positional competition is socially constructed.

The study

The study adopted a dual approach consisting of a micro analysis and a contextual analysis. The contextual analysis aims to uncover the institutional framework that students experience during their education and beyond. The study examines two important institutions that are known from the literature to have a close relationship with employability: education system and labour market. A wide array of secondary data on higher education and graduate labour market in each country were examined in order to contextualise the positional competition for graduate jobs.

The micro analysis investigated how students subjectively experience and perceive employability and the competition for jobs. It chooses a qualitative rather than a quantitative approach as there are very few qualitative studies that examine graduate employability at the level of the individual. Most of them rely on surveys and questionnaires. This study, however, aimed to provide an alternative approach by Delving into how students experience and relate to the world of work and education.

The qualitative fieldwork for the micro analysis took place from January to June 2008. Over that period thirty final year students in each country were interviewed (sixty in total). The students were selected from one university in each country. The study never aimed to use a representative selection of universities; therefore, it was thought to be sufficient, especially under the constraints of time and resources. Both universities are internationally established institutions and can be considered relatively equal in status. The selected British university is a large redbrick university established in the nineteenth century. The selected Dutch university is slightly smaller than the British university. Both universities are established institutions involved in education and research in a wide variety of academic areas. The limited sample has some problematic aspects. Despite that the study aimed to match the universities in terms of size, academic areas and institutional ranking, there is still a risk that there might have been an institutional effect on the type of students or the student mix which consequently could have an influence on the views of the students.

Ten students from three different degree courses – history, business studies and applied sciences (engineering, applied physics, technical engineering, industrial engineering and management) – at each university were interviewed. Students from multiple courses were chosen to insert heterogeneity into the sample. The differences between the types of student are not covered within the scope of this article. There is a roughly equal distribution in gender between the Dutch and British students (14 Dutch and 16 British women). The majority of the students were a few months away from entering the labour market or entering a post-graduate course.

Construction of the competition for graduate jobs

Despite the wide variety of views put forward by both British and Dutch students, there are for each group shared assumptions on the competition for jobs that underpin their approach towards the labour market. These assumptions are generic in nature but of great importance as they structure the students' thoughts about how the labour market functions and how to succeed in it. This section discusses what the interviews reveal about the social construction of the competition for jobs. The first part will focus on the Netherlands, the second part on Great Britain.

The Netherlands

The competition for jobs as understood by the Dutch students is based on three general principles: absolute performance, independency of employability and the importance of skills.

1. Absolute performance

Jobs, according to the Dutch students, are allocated on the match between requirements of the job and candidates. Increasing one's chances in the labour market is therefore linked to increasing one's capacity, skills or experience towards the desired type of job. Dutch students feel that their degree and the skills that come with it are pointed towards a specific place in the labour market. This is the place where they often feel they *belong*. To find your own trajectory with a 'fitting' labour market area is not always easy. Rather than competing with a general graduate competitor, individuals create their own position in the labour market. Graduates must aim to find their own niche, trajectory or individual project. The Dutch students often believed that participants in the labour market will ultimately gain experience, skills and abilities that will lead them into an area of employability. From an early age, individuals experience an educational system that is segmented via academic differentiation.

Contextual analysis shows that the Netherlands has high differentiation in function, low differentiation in status between higher education institutions, relatively equal distribution of funds and low selectivity in terms of access.² Access to higher education is based on institutional stratification within secondary education, not primarily on individual performance.

Although university-level education is less functionally segmented than professional education, students see the relationship between job market and education themselves in pathways or trajectories. These pathways are most notably guided by a student's degree and the skills and abilities associated with it. This in itself can be linked to the professionalised nature of the Dutch graduate labour market where the practical knowledge and experience are of great value. The characteristics of the Dutch labour market can be described as follows:

- entry through occupational skills
- high occupational segmentation³
- a strong relationship between training and jobs ⁴
- relative low variation in rewards

As both the education and labour market landscape are segmented, the positional competition is played out within segments of graduates. There also seems to be a close link between higher education and the graduate labour market. Both of them are based on segmentation, coordination and personal development. As a result, the positional competition becomes based on the importance of trajectory and the use of particular skills. Advancement lies in linking skills, qualifications or experience with labour market opportunity.

The institutional parameters described above are echoed in the perceptions of the Dutch students, who emphasise the importance of absolute performance; jobs are thought to be allocated on the match between requirements of the job and candidates. Dutch students interpret their opportunities in the labour market in terms of the correspondence of their capacity, skills and experience with desired job-type or with job market area. Competing means developing human capital in order to enter the desired area of employment.

The following quote demonstrates the segmentation of the graduate labour market. Kim, who studies industrial engineering and management, talks about how well equipped she is to start working in the labour market:

I think I'm not less equipped in terms of typical starter jobs. Because I've looked around a fair bit at what entrance jobs are and those are either technical marketing, promoting products, market research etc. [...] but there is not a starter position that really connects in a logical sense with my degree, which means I'm not really well prepared, you could say. For a pure technical position you don't have enough technical depth and the same goes for a business-related post as you don't know much about it. The only thing my course prepares you for is consultancy because you need a much broader view for that. So that is really the most logical outcome after my course. I could say that, talking about consultancy I still miss a bit of focus on presentational skills, to have done a separate module or something, like that's what I lack.

Kim, 22, applied sciences

In the quote we can see that there is a teleological aspect in the way her education leads to employment but also that ultimately it will be her skills that decide her position in the labour market. The assumption that the labour market rewards absolute performance is central in most of the Dutch students' ways thinking about the competition for jobs.

2. The independent project of employability

According to the students, not until one gets to the final stage of the job allocating process does a sense of competition emerge. The competition for jobs is either non-existent or too ambiguous to say anything meaningful about. Some students did not seem to understand how competition would be able to arise before the actual job interview. In other words, the competition for jobs was not seen as 'positional'; dependent on the behaviour of others. The students knew that there would be other competitors once they start applying for jobs. But until then, looking at what other students are doing doesn't make sense as you don't know where the others are heading. The following extract exemplifies the ambiguity of how the competition is structured:

I think you have to make choices in your life. Everyone has done that and it lives on and on. That's what you are. So on one hand people present themselves for the same job, of course you look at it. What I do think is that you can't compare people. There are so many different courses and different backgrounds. Which are not necessarily better or worse. The one has strong

characteristics in a certain area and the other... I think there is nothing much I can do. I am who I am. I have made certain choices, because I support them, so eventually I do my best during a job interview and if I fit with the company and they want to have me then this is really nice. But if they don't want me I assume that would not have been on the right spot. So I'm not like, oh, oh. I compare myself to others, they are better, they are worse. Because there are always people worse or better, I tend to take myself as a starting point. Something that comes along during those years, something like this I like to do, this is what I want.

Karel, 23, business

In the quote we can see the importance of fit between labour market persona (the assemblage of skills, ability and personality) and a job. As it is unclear what others in the labour market might do, it is best to focus on one's own plan and interests. This view eschews market competition as a guiding principle in the employability strategies (unlike the British students). Rather than investing in what can distinguish oneself from other competitors, Dutch students seem to increase the likeliness of a match between specific human capital and jobs and this drives the positional competition.

Skills, knowledge and experience are developed during the students' university years, through schooling and their academic experiences. These students perceive employability to be a very personal choice, as within the structure of education and labour market, different individuals use different types of human capital to progress within the labour market according to their own 'plan' or choice.

3. The importance of skills

For the Dutch students, skills have a very *direct* relationship with the labour market, even though employers are often not able to fully appreciate or interpret what skills a candidate possesses. The investment in skills that are developed during a student's degree course shapes their labour market position. Again, we see that the competition is supply-driven in the minds of the students. Students see themselves segmented and structured by their skill-driven choices (i.e. educational course). The following quote demonstrates the subdivision within the labour market in relation to skill:

G: What is it that employers want from graduates nowadays?

I: Well, apparently jobs have become so specific that only a certain group of people can do [them] according to these people [employers]. I don't think that only those people can do those but I do think that companies and government just have these really specific jobs that because of it you'll be completely blinded by them. For that specific job you have to have that particular degree. Although a thing like communicative skills could also be very important and could very valuable I think while performing that job. Well, I don't know.

Iris, 24, history

These kind of specific reflections of how skills are linked to degrees were common among the Dutch students interviewed. Dutch students were much more clear and

outspoken about how they have developed over the years in terms of their skills. To the Dutch students, the conceptual gap between skills they have acquired and skills possibly needed in a future job was much narrower than for British students. When British students would reflect on the skills they thought were developed into their course of choice, they usually phrased this in a very generic way (such as ‘working independently’) or in educational terms (such as ‘writing essays’).

The narratives of choice and individual pathways of Dutch students are mediated through interaction with an educational and labour market context that distinguishes levels and areas of competition. Both higher education and the graduate labour market are segmented in function and level. The students seem to incorporate the professional nature of the labour market by linking their opportunities to a distinct part of it. The students’ reflexivity is constrained and enabled by this segmented nature of the labour market. In particular forms of discourse on the relationship between education, skills and jobs, certain narratives make ‘sense’ while others do not. For Dutch students, competing for generic ‘scarce’ pieces of human capital would not make sense as it might not be in line with their own project of employability. Their employability is not improved *per se* by obtaining generic credentials. It would make sense for Dutch students to obtain credentials to develop in their desired area of expertise or profession. The conceptualisation of the labour market as highly segmented also changes students’ outlook of the future. Whatever pathways they choose, they will have to make sure they develop their skills, abilities and interests to achieve a coherent profile.

Great Britain

The interpretation of the competition for jobs by the British students is based on three general principles: relative performance, ranking of candidates and, the importance of signals.

1. Relative performance

For the British students the labour market has distinct rules. In order to be employable one has to keep in mind what the employer wants. The students seem to be very responsive to the demands of the labour market. They see the competition as demand driven. What employers want may vary but they will ultimately provide jobs for those who have the best human capital package to offer. However, as students understand it, the competition is not initially fought between employers aiming to get the most capable (in a traditional sense) candidates or individuals, but instead as a relative contest between the candidates themselves. One’s opportunity fundamentally depends on how well one compares to others. This brings us to the first general characteristic of the positional competition: *relative performance*.

The following quote demonstrates the relative component of positional competition. The student talks about her feelings of competition within higher education. She emphasises the central role of comparison in assessing her chances in the labour market:

When the results, assignments, or things come out. If I hear people saying that they got a first I do not get jealous in any way but envious really that’s,

'Ah, they've got first. I've only got 2.1.' Even though 2.1 is a very good grade to have. Yeah, you do compare yourself to other students because at the end of the day, they're all competition. When we leave, we might be applying for the same job. So yeah, they are definitely competition.

Amy, 21, business

Throughout students' academic trajectories, there is an implicit relative comparison of academic performance between students. Although not all students who were interviewed were watching what other students were doing, most of them were nonetheless fully aware that relative academic performance is directly linked with labour market opportunities.

Contextual analysis shows that the British educational system only shows a loose coupling between education and employment. Generic credentials rather than occupation-specific credentials regulate the allocation of workers to jobs. Higher education has low differentiation in function, high differentiation in status between higher education institutes, and relatively unequal distribution of funds and high selectivity. Access to higher education is dependent on individual performance.

The high differentiation in status of British higher education is demonstrated through the narratives of the students who feel that the competition for graduate jobs is a relative competition. The use of degrees, educational institutions and grades as a basis for exclusivity is thought to be a defining feature of the competition for jobs. The education system functions similarly. British higher education institutions signal the quality of their graduates in a manner that is not strictly based on 'serving' the skill needs of the labour market. The result is that there is very little coordination between labour market demands and the skills provided. This relationship between skill investment and skill demand becomes somewhat blurred as the aim to outsmart other students in the competition becomes the main goal for students. The generic competition hinders the development or investment in specific skills or credentials.

The characteristics of the British labour market can be described as follows:

- flexible external entry⁵
- low occupational segmentation⁶
- a loose relationship between training and jobs⁷
- high variations in rewards.

The lack of coordination between education and labour market and the growing inequality in the types of jobs provided for graduates (in wages, skill level and appropriate subjects) make the British graduate labour market significantly distinct from the Dutch labour market. Employment trajectories are less dependent on specific skills and credentials than in the Netherlands. Relatively large groups of university students compete for a limited number of prized jobs. As a result the positional competition is played out between individual graduates; the labour market competition is understood to be ordered hierarchically. Students must compete to distinguish themselves from other competitors.

2. Rankings of candidates

This second characteristic is closely related to the first. The emphasis on relative performance in the British students' understanding forms a particular conceptualisation of the labour market competition; ranking the competition for a graduate job is seen as positional in the form of a ladder. One's chances in the labour

market depend on one's relative position of that ladder. The aim is to climb up as high as possible:

G: And do you think that you are well prepared for the labour market?

S: Not really, I think that there are a lot of people who have got more to offer than what I have and that scares me.

[...]

G: And do you think that is enough or do you think, how would you estimate your chances then?

S: I think that maybe like average to the middle, I think with some people, because like my housemates haven't done anything, they haven't had like any work experience and they have just got their degree although some people are the extreme and they have done like loads of stuff and they are a member of every society.

Selma, 20, business

Students often describe the way in which their performance compares with others as a distinct ranking. Here, again, the analogy of a ladder comes to mind. There are individuals below and above one depending on their abilities or credentials. One can enhance one's position on the ladder by providing extra signalling devices like work experience, degrees or proven qualities. As the people at the top have the greatest employability one needs to make sure to climb as high up the ladder as possible. Labour market entrants can be fitted in hierarchy of employability. The difference with the Dutch students is subtle but significant. In the Dutch segmented labour market, students invest in human capital that is in alignment with, and would carry weight in, a specialized labour market area. Ranking does not make sense as they don't consider their labour market chances to depend on distinction within a wide student population. The British students often lack much focus in their employability views and centre their energy on the aforementioned relative competition.

3. The importance of signals

According to many of the British students interviewed, one needs to be able to signal one's human capital to employers in order to be successful in the labour market. The competition seems to be a struggle between individuals, each with his or her unique package of human capital. The content of this package is not arbitrary. For the British students there is a need to demonstrate *measurable marks of achievement*; one needs to be able to signal one's worth. Many students will therefore attempt to find the right thing to do to get ahead, providing the right signals to the employer. Knowing what skills, abilities or credentials the employers want is crucial for many of the students, as shown in the next quote:

G: And does competition reward effort, generally?

L: Target's better, if you put the effort in the work place, the thing is with effort I mean you can put effort into cleaning your shoes but they are not going to look at your shoes, you know what I mean. It's whether you put the

work in the right areas; it is judging what they are going to base like everything on.

G: So it seems that knowing what they want is very important?

L: Yes knowing the criteria or being assessed against it is always, I mean whenever you are doing a job after your university degree you are assessed, the criteria they are assessing against is a key element in what you are doing. You can save yourself a huge amount of time and a hell of a lot of waffle by knowing what they want to know and how they want to know it sort of thing.

Liz, 20, history

The student indicates that in order to apply for a job, students need to change the narrative about their human capital towards the perceived demands of the labour market. The competition for graduate jobs is decided by how well one can shape oneself to fit the desires of the employer.

The labour market and education contexts signal the importance of exclusivity and generic human capital that one can use to distinguish oneself from fellow competitors. Here the relative performance is an important feature. Distinction from others is what creates advantage, not absolute performance. This need for distinction is clearly reflected in the students' views. For the students, so called 'signalised carriers of employability'⁸ establish one's worth in the labour market.

The competition is above all demand driven; students shape their own credentials, experiences and abilities toward the demands of employers. What these demands are thought to be differs from student to student, but is often perceived to be clear and intelligible by the students, who aim to answer to the 'objectified' demands of a generic graduate labour market. The labour market context of individual competition that is relatively unrelated to the education system is in line with the approach of the students who align themselves with the demands of the labour market.

Discussion

The research has shown a clear fit between the perceivable structural features and the individual approaches and experiences towards employability and labour market strategies. The competition for graduate jobs is played out within a particular (national) social context that shapes understanding of the competition. These contexts cannot be purely placed outside the individual as behaviour is not structured from outside but individuals together mediate and co-create an intersubjective framework in which their views are, or become, meaningful. The social constructions of the competition for jobs are social in nature and rely on a common stock of knowledge about the world. This shared understanding should be interpreted as being intersubjective, as shared cognition of the relationship between education and labour market is essential in the shaping of their ideas and relations of/towards the competition for work. There are no clear prescriptive rules or precise information on how to get ahead in the labour market. Rather, interaction and interpretation shape this shared understanding. The students in this study find themselves in different *intersubjective* spaces where the construction of what success in the labour market means and how to achieve it, needs to be negotiated and interpreted. As shown, within the narratives of the students certain 'rules' of competition can be found.

Here, the social context undoubtedly frames their ideas as the logic in their thinking is so distinct between countries.⁹

The students' narratives in this study are drawn from personal, cultural but also institutional imperatives. The institutions investigated in this study were the structure of higher education and the national labour market for graduates, but potentially could also include legal frameworks, migration pathways or transnational labour regimes. Material and cultural conditions of the labour market and education structures are interwoven with how these narratives of choice and trajectory come in to existence. The structural conditions of labour market and higher education presented to, and interpreted by, students provide an interpretive framework of what is significant and of value in the competition for jobs. It guides, though never decides, how the decisions are made in terms of education, labour market trajectory and skill formation. In interacting with these structures students find meaningful ways to deal with the future labour market.

What the study also showed is that neither conventional view nor alternative view captures how the competition for jobs seems to be experienced. Neither of the views relate universally to all contexts. The conventional view seems to be more applicable to the Dutch graduate labour market judged on the views of the Dutch students. Their focus on absolute performance seems to fit with the idea that ultimately the skills and abilities of the individual decide their labour market position. The British seem to possess a more relational demand-sided view, as demonstrated in the alternative view. It seems one cannot completely deny or discard the individualistic conventional approach or the inherently social alternative approach. To reduce the social context to a set of conditions or an aggregate of individuals is not satisfactory. At the same time to talk about *social* systems of employability in the absence of a strong notion of individual subjects makes little sense either. The relations individuals have with each other are intertwined with how people understand themselves. Context should be the arena of social relations in which the individual is embedded.

To understand the competition for jobs is *also* to examine how individuals explore, experience and understand their educational and labour market conditions (among other factors). A renewed focus on this dynamic relation between graduates, labour market and education will enhance our understanding of labour market competition as well as the issue of graduate employability.

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¹ It must be acknowledged that a growing number of social scientists and policymakers do not adhere to the conventional view anymore and are more aligned to the alternative view. Yet the most influential publications still do (e.g. Leitch, 2006; BIS 2011).

² Due to limitations in space, this article does not present any empirical evidence to substantiate these claims. This can, however, be found elsewhere (Tholen, 2010).

³ Occupational segmentation occurs when workers possess different skills, jobs require different skills, and the workers are not very substitutable. The Dutch labour market is traditionally regarded as an *occupational* labour market (for example by Allmendinger, 1989). Occupational market systems provide an alternative mechanism for channelling applicants into job positions. Graduate positions are available to the external market, yet competition for them is restricted to workers with the appropriate occupational skills. Employers link jobs to candidates with specific types of experience and educational credentials. Recruitment for graduate positions takes place in specific occupational sub-markets. Only

applicants with specific credentials will apply and thus the competition is fought out between those who have had a similar education. It excludes individuals without the appropriate credentials. So competition for jobs in the Dutch labour market is based on applicants' specific credentials rather than their generic credentials (as in the British labour market). Depending on the occupation, the rules for competition are established. Graduates are therefore pre-allocated into segments of the labour market (according to their experience and degree). Education and training in occupational labour markets are often designed to provide occupationally specific certified skills, recognised by employers. This strict channelling of individuals into positions by education means that there is a close match between qualifications and labour market positions. This high 'occupationalisation' of labour markets is what makes occupational labour markets so specific, as it provides its own labour market entry mechanism. Furthermore, the Dutch labour market in particular relies on a tight coupling between education, training system and employer (Smyth et al., 2001). Employers are involved in the provision of skills, which results in an increased coordination between demand and supply of skills and work experience.

4 This means coordination between employers and higher education.

5 The emphasis on free markets as the mode of organisation and for allocation of jobs helps create a labour market that is highly flexible and uncoordinated.

6 The competition for graduate jobs in Great Britain is not set in an occupational labour market framework, nor is it based on experience and tenure as it occurs in an internal labour market. The liberalisation of labour markets has opened graduate jobs up for competition. The competition does not depend (or no longer depends) on structuring mechanisms like occupational or internal firm recruitment. Despite categorising the UK as an internal labour market, Gangl (2000) emphasises that in the UK 'available educational credentials provide little guidance in allocating individuals and occupational tasks due to their lack of occupational specificity' (p.4), but they are of importance as a signalling device. The latter is strongly confirmed by the findings of Brown and Hesketh (2004). Their investigation into the recruitment process of large UK employers showed that as mass higher education produces a growing number of graduates in the labour market, a university degree by itself does not guarantee a graduate a good, well-paid graduate job. Credentials have become of less value in the competition for these tough-entry jobs. As more and more applicants have similar educational credentials, other assets become more important than degrees in securing employment. In particular, candidates have to demonstrate how their personal and social skills, abilities and experiences relate to the benchmarks companies have set for their elite jobs. The reputation of higher education institutions does still matter as a signal to emphasise distinction from other applicants. It seems the relationship between higher education and the graduate labour market is increasingly defined by market rules. This means that the free market mechanism coordinates the channelling of workers into jobs, the competition for graduate jobs and the rewards linked to these jobs, without institutional interference.

7 Graduates with different degree backgrounds compete for the same jobs.

8 Signalised carriers of employability are assemblages of human capital, seen by students as valued by employers and able to signal in order to create advantage over other competitors.

9 Students from the same country also show some variety between them in their understanding of the competition for jobs. For example field of study has an impact on students' employability strategies. These differences are however not within the scope of this article.

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