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

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

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

Abstract

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

Introduction

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

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3 supply of graduates onto the labour market and government demands that higher
4 education be better aligned to employers' skill needs (Vasagar 2011).
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7 This article examines a graduatising occupation – UK residential sales estate
8 agents. Using interview and questionnaire data with estate agents and employers,
9 three separate yet related questions are explored. First, what skills do employers
10 require of graduates at the point of hire for previously non-graduate jobs? Second,
11 what skills are used by graduates in these jobs? Third, where are these skills acquired
12 or formed? In other words, what skills are demanded of and deployed by those
13 graduates in this occupation, and where these skills are developed. The next section
14 outlines policy and academic debates about graduates' skills generally. The following
15 section outlines the research methodology adopted to examine these skills
16 empirically. The findings are presented, structured by the three questions and suggest
17 that better understanding is enabled by focusing on the 'skills of graduates' rather
18 than 'graduate skills'. The conclusion raises new questions about the concept of
19 'graduateness' and the role universities play in the formation of skills.
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36 **The debate about graduate skills**

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40 With the exception of the traditional professions such as law and medicine, the
41 coupling of higher education (HE) and employment is looser in the UK than in some
42 other European countries (Author A, 2014). However 'graduate skills', regardless of
43 discipline, are regarded as a distinct set of skills acquired through HE. This skills set
44 has become explicit in recent years as part of the graduate employability debate. As
45 Purcell and Elias (2015) note, 'employability' was first conceived in relation to
46 providing youth with low educational achievement the basic skills to enable them to
47 obtain and retain routine jobs. Graduate employability aims higher; to provide not
48 basic skills but what the Scottish Executive (2004) termed 'thinking skills'. The Higher
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3 Education Academy, working in conjunction with the Council for Industry and Higher
4 Education, has created 53 student employability profiles. These profiles identify a
5 'remarkably homogenous' (Boden and Nedeva, 2010: 45) set of skills that students
6 should acquire through their studies in HE regardless of subject studied: the capacity
7 to analyse and reason, problem solve, organise and interpret information, and
8 exercise critical judgement for example.. This emphasis resonates with graduate
9 employers. Accountancy firm Coopers & Lybrand,¹ for example, seek 'intellectual
10 skills' amongst their graduate hire (cited in Boden and Nedeva, 2010).

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20 The emphasis on thinking skills acquired through HE aligns with two
21 developments argued to be occurring in the advanced economies: first a general shift
22 to more complex tasks at work; second the development of knowledge-based
23 economies. The two developments are intertwined, said to be part of a long-term
24 economic shift from manual to mental labour. This trend was first articulated in the
25 early 1900s (Machajski cited in Bell, 1960), restated with Peter Drucker's (1959)
26 emergent 'knowledge workers' in the late 1950s, re-emerged with Daniel Bell's
27 (1973) coming of post-industrialism, and became very influential again in the 1990s
28 with Robert Reich's (1991) 'symbolic analysts'. All emphasize the importance of
29 theoretical knowledge within the labour process. Only by leveraging this knowledge
30 would the advanced economies survive and thrive in competition with low wage
31 developing economies. Transmuted into the 'knowledge economy', Reich's thesis was
32 readily taken up by governments in the advanced economies and continues to be a
33 policy tenet despite the economic downturn (Coughlin, 2011; Obama, 2011). The
34 European Commission, for example, continues to place knowledge as a driver of
35 future growth (EC, 2010) and the rhetoric of creating a high skill economy still infuses
36 UK government policy proclamations (Cable, 2012).

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

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3 2006). The assumption is that an increased supply of workers with degree
4 qualifications is needed to meet as well as stimulate the increasing demand for high
5 skilled labour (Brown and Lauder, 2001). The policy response has been to intervene
6 in and boost the supply-side of the labour market by expanding HE, creating more
7 universities and more graduates. Assessing UK's skill needs, for example, the Leitch
8 Review of Skills (2006) called for action to achieve '50 per cent of young people
9 participating in HE' (p.67). The Review equates skills with qualifications so that
10 universities serve as the main provider of the high skills needed, justifying the shift
11 from elite to mass HE in the UK (BIS, 2009). Possession of a degree is evidence of the
12 acquisition of these skills, and explains why a headcount of graduates has become a
13 proxy amongst some advanced economies' governments for measuring development
14 towards becoming a knowledge-based economy (Author C, 2006). At the workplace
15 level, the employment of graduates has become a measure of the demand for graduate
16 labour amongst employers; the assumption being that more graduates being
17 employed demonstrates that more graduates and their skills are needed by employers
18 (DfES, 2003).

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

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

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

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55 Unfortunately, despite the new policy emphasis on skills utilisation (e.g.
56 UKCES 2010), the skills needed to be deployed to do the job is under-researched
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3 generally (Buchanan et al., 2010) and particularly in relation to graduate labour (Keep
4 and Mayhew, 2010). What is known is that employer demand for skills generally
5 appears to be weak, with little evidence of improved use of the higher skills available
6 amongst the workforce (Felstead and Green, 2013) and that workers' educational
7 levels now outstrip the skills needed in jobs (Green and Zhu, 2010). What is also
8 emerging is appreciation that employment in previously non-graduate jobs is a source
9 of dissatisfaction for graduates, offering them inferior job quality in terms of skills
10 utilisation (Okay-Somerville and Scholarios, 2013). Moreover opportunities for job
11 upgrading are limited, with 'large numbers' of graduate-infused non-graduate jobs
12 unchanged (Mason, 2002: 454). Indeed graduates who do progress to make better use
13 of their skills are more likely to do so by quitting these jobs. (Okay-Somerville and
14 Scholarios, 2013).

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28 In a twist of logic, the UK Government blames universities for this skills
29 mismatch. Clinging to the mantra of a high skill, knowledge-based economy, it argues
30 that the mismatch is an outcome of HE not supplying the skills that employers
31 demand. It cites curriculum weaknesses rather than admit that the labour force is
32 over-qualified for the jobs offered by employers. Former UK Minister for Universities
33 and Science, David Willets, for example, stressed that there is a gap between the skills
34 employers want and the skills universities develop in their courses (Vasagar, 2011).
35 To address this perceived problem the call is for better alignment between education
36 and employment, with Willett's solution being for universities to be more attuned to
37 skill gaps and change their courses accordingly. And whether coming from
38 government or academics there is a clear set of assumptions about graduate skills.
39 First, distinctly graduate skills are assumed to be demanded and therefore needed by
40 employers; second, the skills deployed in work are of a specific type – 'thinking skills';
41 and third, these skills are, not surprisingly, uniquely acquired in university.
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3 The veracity of these three assumptions is the focus of this paper and explored
4 through an examination of graduate labour in residential sales estate agents. Despite
5 its public prominence, it is an occupation that is under-researched (for exceptions see
6 Clarke et al., 1994; Poon et al., 2011; Poon, 2012). The occupation of estate agent
7 represents an interesting case given that it is regarded as a non-graduate job (Elias
8 and Purcell, 2013) that is increasingly graduatising (ONS 2013), with the nature and
9 consequences of this graduatisation remaining unknown given the paucity of research
10 on the occupation.
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21 **Research design**

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26 The study adopted a mixed method approach, utilising organizational case studies, an
27 industry-wide survey and interviews with key industry stakeholders. The case studies
28 used a comparative strategy with regard to countries' market segments and
29 ownership structure. The two countries – England and Scotland – were chosen
30 because they have different legal governance systems affecting the industry: in
31 England estate agency is a non-graduate occupation; in Scotland real estate has
32 traditionally been sold by solicitors who are graduates, though in recent decades
33 English-style estate agency has penetrated the Scottish market (Clarke et al., 1994).
34 Case study agencies were selected in different market segments to test the hypothesis
35 that different product markets and ownership, for example costs and quality, might
36 have different labour demands. The segments selected for analysis align with those
37 commonly used within the industry – upper market (properties above £500,000) and
38 mid-market segments (properties of less than £500,000). Given that organizational
39 size can also impact labour demand (Cully et al., 1999), the research also incorporated
40 corporate and independent ownership – the former being larger and the latter being
41 smaller organisations. Table 1 below summarises the case study strategy.
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3 The study involved 24 estate agencies: half were located in the
4 Southeast of England, the other half in the Central Belt in Scotland. These two
5 countries provide contrast in terms of graduates. The occupation of real estate agent
6 is not licensed in England, and is traditionally a non-graduate occupation, not
7 involved with any of the legal aspects of buying or selling a house. In Scotland estate
8 agencies can be either law firms or non-law firm estate agents and where it is a law
9 firm, traditionally lawyers sell the real estate; if it is a law firm, it is registered with
10 and regulated by the Law Society of Scotland. In both countries the job of the estate
11 agent mostly consists of valuing properties, taking instructions, viewings, associated
12 marketing, sales negotiations and sales progressions.
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26 *Table 1*
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30 At each estate agency, face-to-face interviews were conducted with the
31 manager or owner, a new or most recent recruit, and a more experienced agent,
32 culminating in 72 estate agent interviews. The fieldwork took place from late 2011 to
33 early 2012. The case studies explored a range of topics around skill demand,
34 deployment and development within the industry. Alongside the interviews with
35 estate agents, a dozen interviews were held with key industry stakeholders. These
36 stakeholders were part of Asset Skills – the Sector Skills Council for this industry, the
37 National Federation of Property Professionals (NFOPP), the National Association of
38 Estate Agents (NAEA), the Solicitors Property Centre, HE institutions, Non-HE
39 industry training providers or were property recruiters. Data provided contextual
40 information on industry developments and issues. The themes covered in the
41 interviews were similar to the ones covered in the interviews with estate agents but
42 often tailored to the interviewee. Interview lengths varied between 40-100 minutes
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3 and all were transcribed and subsequently analysed using NVivo, utilising a thematic
4 data analysis approach.
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7 To complement the qualitative data, an online survey was administered to
8 estate agents within Great Britain in late 2011. Using a large database of UK estate
9 agencies provided by the Property Ombudsman, over 10,000 agents were approached
10 via email seeking their participation. The survey targeted both employees and
11 employers within estate agencies and provided personal background data, details
12 about their current employment and their views of their occupation and the industry.
13 There were a number of difficulties with the database. First, some tranches of the
14 target population had gatekeepers through whom the survey had to be administered.
15 Control over survey timing and targeting was therefore constrained in some cases.
16 Second, a number of the email addresses were returned as invalid (i.e. no longer in
17 operation). Third, from the database it was not clear if the addressee was the most
18 appropriate recipient for the survey, for example a company secretary who may or
19 may not have passed the survey request on to the company's human resources
20 manager or individual agent. Fourth, the data collection period was during the
21 economic downturn and estate agents reported having little downtime to undertake
22 the survey – or complete it in full – because of cutbacks and competitive pressures. In
23 total, 239 useable employee and 220 useable employer responses were analysed. In
24 this paper the survey data is used as a supplement to the qualitative data. The survey
25 questionnaire focused on the same topics as the interviews. Although small, the
26 response for both employees and employers and was representative of the overall
27 estate agency population by location, ownership and sex.
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50 Notwithstanding the low survey response, taken together the data
51 provides the most comprehensive analysis of the work and employment of estate
52 agents to date in the UK (cf. Clarke et al., 1994). It allows opportunity to analyse in
53 both breadth and depth the nature of and demand for skills in a graduatising
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3 occupation. As might be expected in a graduatising occupation, the interviews and
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5 survey revealed that many graduates now work in estate agencies as agents or
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7 negotiators. Sixteen out of the 40 (40%) estate agents interviewed had completed a
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9 university degree and 22 per cent of estate agent employee survey respondents were
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11 graduates. Yet what their graduate skills mean within the occupation of estate agent is
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13 not straightforward or without ambiguity as the findings revealed.
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16 17 **Findings**

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19 The first two sub-sections of the findings follow the distinction of Type 1 employer
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21 demand – the skills employers demand of workers at the point of hire, and Type 2 –
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23 the skills demanded of workers to at the point of work; that is skill deployment or
24
25 utilisation. The third sub-section examines the sites of development or formation of
26
27 these skills.
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30 31 *What skills are required (or demanded by employers) at the point of hire?*

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33 Recruiting the ‘right’ person is paramount according to employers hiring real estate
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35 agents. However HE was not seen as imperative in any of the product markets or
36
37 ownership segments. Eighty-eight per cent and 91 per cent of employees and
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39 employers thought a university degree was ‘not at all necessary’.³ Most of the estate
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41 agents interviewed thought that A-levels or GSCE level qualifications were sufficient
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43 for the job and this finding was confirmed by the survey. Indeed in Scotland and the
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45 upper-market English segment, private secondary schooling carried as much weight
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47 in the decision to hire applicants.
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52 Nevertheless in a growing pool of applicants, employers wanted a sifting mechanism
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54 and applicants’ qualifications provided that mechanism. Whilst employers did not
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56 demand graduates per se, many spoke about ‘graduateness’, believing that having a
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3 degree signalled the possession of particular characteristics, skills and abilities. In
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5 other words, graduates were being recruited because of the signal sent by HE
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7 participation (cf. Becker, 1964):
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11 I think a degree is always useful, not necessarily for the subject it is in but for the
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13 things that it will teach you in terms of working on your own, your independence,
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15 your ability sort of to use your initiative. That sort of thing, rather than actually
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17 thinking about the process of estate agency and the management and that sort of side
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19 of things.

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21 Experienced agent (corporate upper market, England)
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25 The emphasis however was on soft skills and not thinking skills or even subject
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27 knowledge. Moss and Tilly (1996) usefully distinguish *motivational* soft skills (e.g.
28
29 enthusiasm, positive work attitude, commitment, dependability, willingness to learn)
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31 and *interactional* soft skills (e.g. friendliness, teamwork, ability to fit in and
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33 appropriate grooming and attire). For estate agent applicants both types are required.
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35 In terms of the first, one interviewee explained:
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39 The skill sets that they're looking for are much more about human beings ... things
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41 that are actually quite difficult to measure. Things like their attitude, their
42
43 commitment, their drive, their energy, their enthusiasm. All of these things are what
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45 they're looking for because you can teach them the job quite quickly and so they'd
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47 much rather have somebody ... with the right attitude than somebody with all the
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49 ability in the world.

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51 Property sector recruitment specialist
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53 (England)
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3 As for the second, estate agents need to be able to interact with employers, co-
4 workers and customers which means communicating clearly and getting on with
5 others. For most employers, the value of HE for estate agents was linked to
6 participating in social activities at university. It was also thought by some that HE
7 provides an environment with a wide social mix of people that would help individuals
8 develop an ability to interact with different types of people; a skill deemed very
9 important for estate agents. For example, one senior estate agent commented that
10 being an “estate agent is all about being smart and presentable” (experienced, mid
11 market, England). Another estate agent explained that “... you need to be
12 presentable. You need to have a pride in your appearance and you need to be able
13 to portray that to people and be confident” (experienced, mid market, England). A
14 manager at an upmarket establishment (England) stressed that for country houses
15 “you need to be able to speak properly, you need to be able to know how to behave,
16 have good manners and dress smartly”.

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

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

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3 Manager (corporate upper market, England)
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7 At the point of hire therefore, employers had a mixed attitude to HE. They did not
8 demand the thinking skills claimed to be imperative in and exclusive to graduates.
9 They did however use participation in HE as a signal of applicants' possession of the
10 skills that they did demand – soft skills. This demand existed across the different
11 types of estate agencies and in both countries.
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19 *What skills are needed to be deployed (or utilised) in work?*
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23 Soft skills were needed when it came to doing the job. The motivational soft skills
24 estate agents cited included confidence, commitment and determination, and also
25 patience and focus. Interactional soft skills cited included empathy, being liked,
26 charm, assertiveness, manners, presenting skills and calmness. There was a
27 consensus that these interactional soft skills were crucial to be effective in the job:
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36 ... highly attuned ability to read people, they need strong negotiating skills, they need
37 very good presentational skills, person skills, spin-doctoring skills, if you like, because
38 in some ways, if you're trying to sell a house or a flat, you need to be able to analyse
39 the market, you need to be able to come up with a profile of the person who is likely to
40 do that, you need to understand how to help the seller present it properly and you
41 need to be a really good negotiator.
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47 Professor of Real Estate
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51 Being successful in the job, meant being able to successfully interact with a wide
52 variety of clients; understanding these clients' needs and reasoning. Here there was
53 some variation between the different market and ownership segments. For instance,
54 to make sales in the upper market segment, estate agents needed to be attuned to the
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3 cultural capital of the particular buyers in this market segment. In affecting a cultural
4 'fit' (c.f. Moss and Tilly 2006), the ability to listen was thus important as was having
5 fine-tuned self-presentational skills.
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9 The importance of these soft skills was confirmed by the survey results.
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11 Respectively 98 per cent and 95 per cent of employees and employers thought that
12 'social and interpersonal skills' were either essential or very important to do the job.
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14 The ability to talk to people effectively was also deemed highly important. Ninety-six
15 per cent of employees and 86 per cent of employers thought 'oral communication
16 skills' were either essential or very important in order to be an estate agent.⁴ Eighty-
17 six per cent of employers and 91 per cent of employees thought that 'self-presentation
18 skills' were also essential or very important.
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26 As with the requirements to get the job, having a university degree was not
27 deemed necessary to do the job. Likewise the subject knowledge gained during
28 university was not needed. It was recognized that some knowledge is needed but this
29 knowledge was industry specific, such as familiarity with the Money Laundering Act
30 and the Property Misdescription Act; however, this knowledge was provided by
31 employers through training. The other knowledge needed to do the job effectively
32 was location-specific knowledge such as having awareness of local schools and
33 transport networks. However, even here, the general consensus was that, 'If you know
34 just a little more than them [the public], than that's probably sufficient' (manager,
35 upper market independent, England).
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47 Graduates did, however, bring capacities to the job that were useful. Graduate
48 estate agents explained that their university experience helped them to develop their
49 confidence and life experience. Interestingly, none of the graduates interviewed felt
50 that they were over-qualified for the job. Indeed they stated that they used the
51 majority of their skills, in particular their soft skills:
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3 I don't feel that anybody is [over-qualified]. I think if you turn around and say you're
4 overqualified for a job in this day and age you're really being far too big for your
5 boots. ... you know you're lucky to have a job, and I don't believe that I'm either above
6 this or beneath this, I'm very lucky I work with a wide range of people with a wide
7 range of skills and I'm lucky to have a job. ... I think I use pretty much what I've got,
8 you make of it what it is; if you want to be a little bit geeky about things you can be
9 geeky about things, it only enhances what you've done anyway, but yeah, I don't feel
10 I'm overqualified per se.

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18 newest recruit (corporate mid-market,
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20 England)

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24 However the survey revealed a more mixed perception on this point. Forty-two per
25 cent of estate agents felt that they possessed more knowledge and skills than needed
26 to do the job. A few (3%) felt that they had less knowledge and skills than needed and
27 55 per cent felt it was about right. Interestingly, there was no significant difference
28 here between graduates and non-graduates, suggesting that overskilling is not just an
29 issue for those with higher-level qualifications. In this respect, graduates might
30 perceive that there is a skills match because of the focus on soft rather than thinking
31 skills in doing the job. The key point is that soft skills are again needed, this time for
32 deployment in the labour process.

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

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49 Most of the estate agents agreed that a certain type of personality was a requirement
50 in order to become a successful estate agent. The skills emergent from this
51 personality (cf. Author C et al. 2004) might be innate or socialised, as one estate agent
52 explained:

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3 I think it's a bit of nature and nurture, sometimes you are just what you are, you're a
4 certain type of person just from your kind of make-up but also I am sure it's to do with
5 how you interact with your siblings at a young age or at school and all the other
6 things.
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10 newest recruit (corporate upper market, Scotland)

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14 If these skills are developed through socialization, the institutional loci of their
15 development can be varied. They can be acquired through a number of institutions
16 such as the family, school and even through interaction with friends:
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23 You can certainly refine them and you can improve them and you can develop those
24 sort of skills, but I think it does take a certain sort of person to be able to, you'd have
25 to have some kind of background, so it is through their development, whether that's
26 family, schools or a natural aptitude, you know, it's, it's probably a blend of those sorts
27 of skills,
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32 manager (independent mid-market, England)

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36 However HE was the not the primary source of these skills' development. The survey
37 asked estate agents and employers where they thought various types of skills were
38 acquired: soft skills were thought to be developed in a variety of places. Seventy-three
39 per cent of estate agents and 61 per cent of employers thought that 'social and
40 interpersonal skills' are learnt within the family context. Sixty-five per cent of estate
41 agents (55% of employers) thought these skills were learnt in school, 41 per cent
42 (33%) thought they were learnt in college and 61 per cent (51%) thought that these
43 were learnt in the workplace (more than one answer could be registered in the
44 survey). Only 37 per cent of estate agents and 33 per cent of employers thought that
45 these skills were acquired through HE. Results were similar on the acquisition of 'self-
46 presentation skills. Seventy per cent of estate agents and 61 per cent of employers
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3 thought presentational skills were developed in the family. Fifty-five per cent (48%),
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5 31 per cent (27%) and 49 per cent (44%) of estate agents (employers) thought that
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7 they were learnt in school, college and the workplace. For 28 per cent of estate agents
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9 and 26 per cent of employers these skills were thought to be acquired through HE.⁵
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13 Thus whilst soft skills needed to get and do the job could be developed at university,
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15 they are not specific to HE, respondents acknowledged, and, moreover, there was a
16
17 consensus that they are typically acquired elsewhere.
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22 Nevertheless some respondents thought that there was some added value to be
23
24 derived from HE in that existing soft skills could be honed and augmented and which
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26 could work to graduates' advantage:
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30 I never went to university so I'm not sure what skills they actually learn. I think there
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32 is the potential for them to be slightly more rounded individuals for having that sort of
33
34 whole university experience, rather than someone who's just come from school or
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36 maybe had a few part-time jobs, hasn't really seen the world much and then just
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38 comes into our business. So I'm generalising an awful lot but I think they, there is the
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40 potential for them to be slightly rounded individuals. But that's, that's about it,
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42 they've also proven that they have a capacity to learn. They can focus on certain
43
44 things and just get things done.

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46 Manager (mid-market independent, England)
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50 Many estate agents and their employers share this ambiguous understanding of what
51
52 graduates bring to the labour market. A factor at play here might be that most people
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54 currently working in estate agency have not attended HE or have much experience of
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56 hiring or working with graduates. However their perceptions seem to be confirmed
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58 by graduates now entering estate agency:
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5 I think I've definitely been more confident compared to [non-graduate] team
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7 members when it comes to you know presenting in a group situation ... I detected that
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9 there was definitely a reluctance and a lack of confidence from certain individuals that
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11 were definitely not keen on it as, I think well, you know, I've probably been doing it
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13 for a few years at school and then did it for the four years at uni as well. So it kind of,
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15 you know, it almost feels, once you're happy with your content it is second nature to
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17 deliver that to a group.

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19 newest recruit (corporate mid-market,
20
21 Scotland)

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24 At the same time it was recognized that, because skills that are needed are learnt, and
25
26 can be acquired in multiple institutions, then non-HE learning should not be under-
27
28 valued: 'I think for employers somebody who's shown a commitment to achieving
29
30 something in terms of qualifications sometimes unfairly shuts out people who would,
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32 could quite happily learn on the job as it were' (newest recruit, corporate upper
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34 market, Scotland).
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37 38 39 **Discussion and conclusion**

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41 There are a number of assumptions about graduates and their skills: because work is
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43 now said to be more complex, it requires higher-level graduate skills; graduates are
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45 thus a key source of economic competitiveness; and these 'graduate skills', uniquely
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47 acquired in HE, centre on 'thinking skills' (e.g. respectively, Brinkely and Lee 2006;
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49 Boden and Nedeva 2010). Even employers offering non-graduate jobs can benefit
50
51 from these skills because graduates entering such jobs use them to upgrade their jobs,
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53 thereby enhancing employers' competitiveness (UKCES 2014). As such it is believed
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55 that this employer demand for graduates needs to be matched with supply, with HE
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57 expanded accordingly.
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3 Deliberately focused on a graduatising occupation – residential sales estate
4 agents – our research findings cast doubt on these assumptions. In this research we
5 make a distinction between employer demand for graduate skills at the point of hire
6 and the point of use in work. Although graduates were being hired for non-graduate
7 jobs in estate agency, few employers had a strong preference for graduate applicants
8 and, at the point of hire, graduate thinking skills were not in demand. Once employed,
9 graduates in estate agency do not deploy their thinking skills in their work. Instead, to
10 both get and do these jobs, graduates, as all employees in estate agency, primarily
11 need soft skills. Parking what will be a key debate of the future – whether, as the
12 number of type of institutions classified as universities expands, all universities instil
13 thinking skills in their students (see Arum and Roksa 2011) – these thinking skills
14 seem to be of little concern to employers in estate agency, regardless of country
15 location or market segment.
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30 Significantly these soft skills are recognized by employers and employees to
31 be developed in a broad spectrum of situ, including but not confined to universities.
32 At best, it was felt that HE honed the soft skills that individuals already possessed
33 before going to university through their families and/or schools. It might thus be said
34 that HE was perceived as a kind of finishing school, fine-tuning graduates existing soft
35 skills. The answers to our research questions are therefore that whilst graduates are
36 being employed in non-graduate jobs, employers require soft skills, not graduate
37 skills at the point of hire; the same is true in terms of the skills used by graduates in
38 these jobs, and that these soft skills are developed to some extent in HE but mainly
39 elsewhere, in other institutions.
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50 One consequence of this emphasis on soft rather than thinking skills is that
51 what employers expect of graduates' skill set is much wider than traditionally
52 understood as 'graduate skills'. The emphasis on thinking skills acquired in HE
53 downplays the range of other skills, particularly soft skills. Understanding of the skills
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3 possessed by graduates needs therefore to be more inclusive, concerned less with
4 'graduate skills' and more with the 'skills of graduates'. That is, recognising the skills
5 possessed by students at the point of graduation but not necessarily acquired in
6 higher education. In order to discern the value added by HE to graduates'
7 employability, such a shift would mean that future research would need to be
8 cognizant of the skills possessed by students at the point of entry to HE and,
9 thereafter, their augmentation and/or supplement during HE to the point of exit –
10 graduation. Some research has already adopted this format but is centred on
11 measuring thinking skills, for example critical thinking (Arum and Roksa, 2011). The
12 same approach should be adopted for soft skills.⁶

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24 In this respect, our findings have implications for how 'graduateness' is
25 currently conceived. The term graduateness is used to capture positive personal
26 qualities associated with HE: 'a set of qualities consequent upon the university
27 experience (Glover et al. 2002: 294). It is not a new term. Nevertheless, despite the
28 expansion of HE and the codification of the skill set of graduates centred on thinking
29 skills, graduateness remains unspecified and often tautological in characterisation:
30 'something experienced and attained as a set of qualities consequent upon the
31 university experience' state Glover et al. (2002: 294) for example. Some employers in
32 our study used this term but, again, for them, graduateness was manifest in soft skills.
33 This employer position is not unique to our study. A number of employer surveys
34 indicate that employers want a broad spectrum of soft skills and attributes from
35 employees, such as interpersonal and communication skills, self-management,
36 integrity and confidence (e.g. Archer and Davidson 2008; Hinchcliffe and Jolly 2011).
37 The issue, of course, is whether these skills are acquired or developed uniquely
38 through HE and if so how – informally or formally for example.

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55 This issue raises another important issue about how HE responds to employer
56 skills demand as former UK Minister for Universities and Science, David Willets,
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3 insisted that it should (Vasagar 2011). If HE curricula are to be fashioned to this
4 demand then clearly much HE is currently lacking. UK HE tends to be generalist rather
5 than specialist (Estervez-Abe et al. 2001). There is a tight knowledge education-
6 employment coupling for some occupations such as law and medicine. However the
7 percentage of graduates entering these professions, what Elias and Purcell (2004) call
8 'traditional' graduate jobs, is now around 11% (Purcell et al 2013: 16). If Chillas
9 (2010) is right about some of what Elias and Purcell term as 'new' graduate jobs, a
10 further 16% of the jobs of graduates involve a similar tight coupling of HE and
11 employment. Beyond these sets of graduates no such coupling exists: graduates'
12 acquired subject knowledge is unused post graduation. Instead soft skills are what
13 these other graduates need to get and do their jobs. To reform HE in the way Willetts
14 wanted, for many graduates, acquired subject knowledge would become irrelevant,
15 and the task of universities would be to instead develop (and assess) soft skills –
16 thereby institutionalising their finishing school role. However in pursuing this new
17 role, universities would have to demonstrate that they are capable of developing
18 individuals' soft skills – which would require academic staff trained in transmitting
19 and assessing such skills, and it is a moot point if universities' current academic staff
20 are capable (or willing) to adopt this function. Even if they can, if soft skills
21 development becomes the explicit function of universities, then many would-be
22 students might question the financial investment in HE in terms of the fees and costs
23 of living now required of them in the UK.

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47 Already there is indication that some graduates are questioning this
48 investment as the percentage of recent graduates (less than five years after
49 graduation) working in jobs deemed non-graduate has risen to almost half (47%)
50 (ONS, 2013). Robust research is needed but, according to a survey conducted by the
51 website notgoingtouni.co.uk, 31 per cent of respondents believed that their degree
52 was 'completely irrelevant' to their current job. More than half wished that they had
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3 opted for further education rather than HE, with 61 per cent believing that in doing so
4 they would have gained a better job (Parr 2013). Similarly in a survey of employed
5 and unemployed graduates conducted by Citizens Advice Scotland (McLister 2012),
6 many respondents lamented the lack of career advice about alternatives to attending
7 university: 'Other options were brushed aside,' said one respondent (p.15).
8 Respondents also noted a lack of focus in universities on employability skills and the
9 lack of exploration of the skills students do acquire in university.
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13 The issue is whether this disillusionment is temporary; an outcome of the economic
14 downturn experienced by the UK from 2008 or is part of wider structural problems
15 with HE, most obviously over-capacity. The downturn has had an impact, as Elias and
16 Purcell's (2013) recent analysis shows, but also reveals that over-supply is structural
17 rather than cyclical and, as their previous analysis highlighted, the graduates of mass
18 HE were already cascading down into non-graduate jobs long before the downturn
19 (Elias and Purcell 2004). In this downward cascade, an interesting issue is whether
20 graduates displace non-graduates, pushing them out of these traditionally non-
21 graduate occupations. In the case of estate agents, hybridity is occurring as graduates
22 and non-graduates work alongside each other doing the same job under the same
23 terms and conditions. At the very least therefore, there is need for policy-makers to
24 evaluate the function of HE in the UK. This evaluation should be informed by research
25 appreciative of a more inclusive understanding of the skills of graduates and how
26 these skills relate to employer demand in the labour market, how these skills are
27 deployed in the labour process and the ranges of potential situs in which these skills
28 can be developed.
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11 Endnotes

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18 ¹ Now PricewaterhouseCoopers.

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

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

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

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

23 ⁶ Possibly also technical skills, for example computing skills; again not necessarily taught as part of most university
24 courses but which students acquire during their study often informally through independent learning or with peer
25 assistance.
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Table 1: The case study strategy

Upper market agencies	Mid-market agencies
Corporate <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 3 in SE England • 3 in central belt of Scotland • Interviews: 1 manager, 1 newest recruit, 1 experienced agent 	Corporate <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 3 in SE England • 3 in central belt of Scotland • Interviews: 1 manager, 1 newest recruit, 1 experienced agent
Independent <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 3 in SE England • 3 in central belt of Scotland • Interviews: 1 manager, 1 newest recruit, 1 experienced agent 	Independent <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 3 in SE England • 3 in central belt of Scotland • Interviews: 1 manager, 1 newest recruit, 1 experienced agent