

# **Coping with Career Boundaries and Boundary-Crossing in the Graduate Labour Market**

## **Abstract**

**Purpose:** This article explores the nature and role of career boundaries for enabling/constraining career self-management for occupational boundary-crossing in the UK graduate labour market.

**Methodology:** The data is provided by career history interviews with 36 UK graduates. The analysis contrasts transitions for those who started careers in low- intermediate- and high-skilled segments of the labour market.

**Findings:** Availability of development and progression opportunities were the most prominent career boundary experienced. Ease of boundary-crossing differed by career stage and educational background. Boundaries enabled career self-management by acting as psychological/external push factors, but push factors only aided progression to high-skilled segments for a third of graduates who started careers in underemployment. For the rest, an adaptation of expectations to labour market realities was observed.

**Research limitations/implications:** Although career history interviews limit generalisability, they contextualise boundaries and deepen understanding of career actors' subjective experiences and responses.

**Practical implications:** The study highlights the role of labour market and demand-side constraints for career transitions as well as proactive career behaviours. This has implications for career counsellors, employers and individuals.

**Originality/value:** This article provides a distinctive ‘boundary-focused’ analysis of emerging career boundaries in the graduate labour market. The findings point to the intricate interplay between structure and agency for career development.

**Keywords:** Boundaryless career, Career boundaries, Career self-management, Underemployment, Career mobility, Boundary-crossing, Graduate labour market

## **Introduction**

Critiques of boundaryless career theory highlight the prominence given to the demise of organisational boundaries and its overemphasis on agency for progression (Inkson *et al.*, 2012; Mayrhofer, *et al.*, 2007). Boundaries spanning domains beyond the organisation and how they shape career agency remain relatively under-researched (Gunz *et al.*, 2000; Rodrigues and Guest, 2010). This paper focuses on the boundaries presented by the changing occupational structure of the graduate labour market (GLM) and the interplay between these boundaries and agency for career development.

An increasing proportion of university graduates globally starts careers in work that does not require a university degree to get or to do the jobs, i.e., in underemployment<sup>1</sup> (Abel *et al.*, 2014; Berlingieri and Erdsiek, 2012). Graduate underemployment is particularly prevalent in countries which have witnessed rapid expansion of higher education, such as the UK or Ireland (European Commission, 2013). Although early underemployment has been treated as transitional (Elias and Purcell, 2004), our understanding of the dynamics of boundary-crossing from early underemployment into adequate/meaningful work is scarce.

This study responds to calls for more boundary-focused research (Inkson *et al.*, 2012) as well as acknowledging the “interplay of individual and structural factors shaping individuals’ careers” (Forrier *et al.*, 2009, p.739). We build on the premise that increasing graduate employment in low- and intermediate-skilled occupations indicates labour market segmentation, and assume these secondary segments to represent the operation of career boundaries. Whether these boundaries are enabling or constraining for graduates’ career mobility to high-skilled work is debated, for

example, in the contrasting assumptions of the stepping-stone versus entrapment hypotheses, respectively.

We explore these issues through three research questions concerning: the nature of boundaries and boundary-crossing within the GLM; how these boundaries enable or constrain career agency and development; and how they punctuate career progression over time. The latter is especially relevant given the relatively unexplored emerging graduate career routes within intermediate-skilled occupations.

The paper begins by reviewing evidence on the UK GLM, the focus of our analysis, followed by a conceptualisation of boundaries and boundary-crossing as socially constructed phenomena. This theorisation underpins our three research questions. Based on career histories of 36 graduates, the study explores career boundaries, agency and transitions within and across GLM segments. Discussion reflects on the importance of structural boundaries and individual agency for boundary-crossing.

### **Career boundaries in the UK graduate labour market**

Career boundaries refer to events or conditions “within the person or in his or her environment that make career progress difficult” (Swanson and Woitke, 1997, p.446). In this section, we focus on environmental conditions, particularly demand-side phenomena (Gunz *et al.*, 2000), which influence career transitions. With some exceptions (Bagdadli *et al.*, 2003; Ituma and Simpson, 2009), boundaryless career research has focused on organisational boundaries, while other, more complex boundaries remain under-researched (Rodrigues and Guest, 2010).

Our focus here is on the emergence of new boundaries facing graduates in early careers. The expansion of higher education has led to the proportion of

underemployed graduates steadily increasing since the 1990s (Felstead and Green, 2013), with increasing labour market segmentation into low-skilled (e.g., elementary) and intermediate-skilled (i.e., associate professionals) occupations (Tholen, 2013).

The sources of this segmentation are multifaceted. Along with macroeconomic and labour-market causes (e.g., the balance between supply and demand), demand-side factors which influence individuals' employability (McQuaid and Lindsay, 2005) can be identified; notably, employer practice. With increasing graduate oversupply, graduate recruiters stipulate educational credentials for short-listing into high-skilled vacancies (e.g., by degree class/university type) and, increasingly, a degree for traditionally non-graduate work (James *et al.*, 2013). Hence, educational credentials determine positions in the queue for limited high-skilled vacancies, favouring graduates from old UK universities, those who achieved higher degree classifications and those who studied more professional degree subjects (e.g., science and engineering) (Moreau and Leathwood, 2006). Early experience of underemployment may also send signals to recruiters, for example, indicating incompetence (Scherer, 2004). Nunley *et al.* (2014) show that graduates who experienced early underemployment, on average, received fewer interview requests than those who were adequately employed upon graduation.

Employer career support for the underemployed is also scarce (McKee-Ryan and Harvey, 2011) with workers in high-skilled positions more likely to benefit from formalised career management than those in the peripheral segments (Dries *et al.*, 2012). Graduates in intermediate-skilled occupations also report lower use of 'graduateness' skills (e.g., numeracy, planning) and opportunities for skill use than those in high-skilled occupations (Okay-Somerville and Scholarios, 2013). Such

workforce segmentation has dampening effects on individuals' career development (Doeringer and Piore, 1971).

In summary, underemployment in low- and intermediate-skilled occupations (i.e., secondary segments) potentially acts as a boundary to career development and limits boundary-crossing to the high-skilled segment of the GLM. This is reflected in the relatively poor objective career success in these secondary segments, in terms of limited human capital accumulation, occupational prestige and wages (Hogan *et al.*, 2013).

### **Coping with career boundaries**

Unless initiated by shock events (e.g., redundancy) or serendipity (Krumboltz *et al.*, 2013), career transitions involve some element of individual proactivity, suggesting that individuals themselves construct boundaries constraining their career transitions, e.g., through reluctance to move (Gunz *et al.*, 2000). Career self-management (CSM) behaviours enable individuals to increase self- and environmental awareness, and devise strategies allowing adaptability to labour market conditions (De Vos *et al.*, 2009). In uncertain labour markets, especially, employability has been associated not only with human capital but also social capital, self-awareness and adaptability, and particularly for graduates, needs to be examined as a process (Holmes, 2011) developed through CSM (Bridgstock, 2009).

King (2004) distinguishes between three mutually reinforcing behaviours involved in the process of CSM: (i) positioning to increase human capital and widen networks (e.g., strategic choice of mobility opportunity); (ii) influencing gatekeepers (e.g., self-promotion); and (iii) boundary management between work and non-work domains. Positioning and influencing behaviours are more common in early careers

(Feldman and Turnley, 1995) and directly impact graduate employability. For instance, graduates who are screened-out in employers' recruitment short-listing (e.g., by degree classifications) were found to be more likely to enrol in postgraduate programmes (Tomlinson, 2008). Moreover, some graduates may voluntarily start careers in underemployment (Scurry and Blenkinsopp, 2011) to build occupation-specific human capital. This may also serve to socialize graduates into careers, thereby providing a direction for career-relevant activity and career identity.

Active network development contributes to social capital by facilitating access to vacancy-related information and providing the individual with some influence over gatekeepers. It may therefore also reinforce influence behaviours which require a certain degree of career identity and adaptability (McArdle *et al.*, 2007).

Proactive career behaviours, therefore, can lead to successful career transitions (Koen *et al.*, 2012). Nevertheless, CSM is necessarily bounded by the gatekeepers who make employment decisions and are the object of career actors' influence strategies (King, 2004). Such boundaries are less permeable for some career actors.

### **Boundary-crossing in the graduate labour market**

Our interest is to understand the process of movement across boundaries facing graduates. Recent career conceptualisations consider the role of structural and individual factors, with boundaries shaped by both environmental opportunities and risks, and career actors' willingness or reluctance to move (Forrier *et al.*, 2009; Gunz *et al.*, 2000). An illustration of this is the relationship between individual CSM and organisational support as a process of mutual influence (Sturges *et al.*, 2005). Such findings reinforce the need to understand the role of environmental factors that facilitate/hinder CSM.

Two indicators of career boundaries suggested by Gunz *et al.* (2000) – gatekeepers’ reluctance to select and career actors’ reluctance to move – are the focus of our first research question. This aims to establish graduates’ own perceived boundaries within the three segments of the GLM.

*Research Question 1 (RQ1):* What are the boundaries perceived by career actors as constraining mobility to primary segments of the GLM?

Drawing from conceptualisations of career boundaries as socially created constructs and the distinction between boundaries as constraining, enabling and/or punctuating career development (Gunz and Mayrhofer, 2011), we present three scenarios explaining graduates’ movement across these boundaries.

First, career boundaries constrain agency by limiting opportunities for movement. This describes the entrapment hypothesis which predicts that individuals will suffer negative career consequences as a result of underemployment (Scherer, 2004). For the overqualified, transitions across boundaries do not necessarily entail an upward movement to high-skilled jobs (McGuinness and Wooden, 2009). A substantial minority of graduates are reported to be underemployed for up to ten years and show a wage penalty throughout their careers (Leuven and Oosterbeek, 2011). Furthermore, structural constraints may become subjective career boundaries over time (Gunz *et al.*, 2000). Graduates may become discouraged due to low self-esteem and perceived difficulty of movement following prolonged underemployment (Feldman, 1996).

A second scenario is that boundaries enable career progression, for example, by structuring the process of boundary-crossing by which members are socialised into careers, as in the case of professions (Inkson *et al.*, 2012). The observation that more



graduates are now being employed in intermediate-skilled occupations that are currently undergoing a professionalization project (James *et al.*, 2013) highlights the need for more boundary-focused studies to understand entry and progression routes.

By also recognizing the subjective experience of career boundaries, we can identify an interaction between institutional and agentic forces as part of this enabling process. Research unequivocally reports graduates' preference for demanding work (Wolfgang *et al.*, 2005) and underemployment as associated with negative attitudes and voluntary turnover behaviour (Maynard and Parfyonova, 2013). Thus, the perceptions of one's predicament as a boundary may act as a 'push' factor for CSM in the absence of any job/organisational career support.

Finally, career boundaries which have a punctuating role are part of a process of career formation over time. This overlaps with boundaries as enabling, but focuses more on the meaning which the career actor places on time and boundary-crossing. Lateral boundary-crossing (e.g., across different jobs within the secondary segment) may eventually lead to career progression. The 'waiting room effect' describes a process whereby some employers purposefully underemploy graduates for a temporary period to increase their on-the-job experience (Batenburg and de Witte, 2001). This may also enable boundary-crossing; e.g., by providing exposure to the requirements of professional life or forming realistic expectations.

Similarly, the stepping-stone argument (Sicherman and Galor, 1990) suggests that underemployment enhances career opportunities. More frequent and upward mobility within the secondary segment is reported (Sanders and De Grip, 2004). These lateral movements over time may build skills and experience in different areas of an occupation which provide leverage for gaining better quality employment, hence punctuating career progression.

We explore these three potential boundary-crossing scenarios in our second and third research questions. These aim to capture the tensions between structural boundaries and agency, particularly in the secondary segments of the GLM, in order to understand what contributes to movement across boundaries.

*Research Question 2 (RQ2):* To what extent is CSM constrained or enabled by the boundaries experienced in secondary segments?

*Research Question 3 (RQ3):* Is there evidence of a punctuating role for career boundaries; specifically, does boundary-crossing within secondary segments facilitate career progression to the high-skilled segment?

## **Method**

Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with 36 graduates (43% female; Mean age=28, SD=6 years; Mean work experience=5, SD=3 years) from arts, social sciences and humanities (ASH; N=16), business-related (BUS; N=15) and engineering/science (ENG/SCI; N=5) courses. Participants (P1-P36) were recruited through a snowball technique. Graduates who had participated in a Scotland-wide survey were contacted first and then asked to refer other ASH, BUS or ENG/SCI UK graduates during the last 10 years. Degree course reflected variation in the structure of opportunities. ENG/SCI offered the clearest professional career routes while ASH/BUS students were likely to have more diverse underemployment experiences (our primary interest). Sampling was terminated when an equal divide was achieved between (i) ASH and BUS graduates; and (ii) participants who started work in low- and intermediate-skilled occupations.

Career history interviews covered all work transitions since graduation in three sections: (i) background (e.g., work experience, education); (ii) job transitions (e.g., for each job: reasons to accept, job content, attitudes, fit with career interests, reasons for leaving); and (iii) overall career reflection (e.g., career satisfaction). Interviews lasted one hour on average.

Data analysis consisted of four stages reflecting an iterative process (Miles and Huberman, 1994). The first stage categorised participants' first and subsequent jobs by skill-level using the UK Standard Occupational Classification (SOC2010). Major Groups 1 (Managers and senior officials) and 2 (Professional occupations) were categorised as high-skilled (N=7), 3 (Associate professional and technical occupations) as intermediate-skilled (N=14), and the rest as low-skilled occupations (N=15). Interviews were then further categorised to reflect transitions between these segments. Based on the skill-level of current jobs, of the 15 who started in low-skilled work, four were still in low-skilled, five in intermediate-skilled and six in high-skilled jobs. One was unemployed. Among the 14 who started in intermediate-skilled occupations, nine remained in these, four had moved on to the high-skilled segment and one was pursuing full-time postgraduate education. All seven participants who started in high-skilled jobs remained in this segment. Participants were further categorised by degree subject/classification, years of work experience, and number of job/organisational transitions. Overall, 17 currently occupied high-skilled jobs, only three of whom were ASH graduates.

Stage two focused on perceived career boundaries constraining mobility to the high-skilled segment (RQ1). These were coded for each job based on our conceptualisation of boundaries as conditions/events that make career progress difficult. Perceived boundaries identified in stage two were matched to CSM

behaviours and attitudes in stage three to explore the extent to which boundaries enable or constrain career transitions (RQ2). In exploring the punctuating role of career boundaries (RQ3), stage four concentrated on career patterns in each segment, satisfaction with progression, and specific transitions underlining sense of progression.

## **Findings**

### *Perceived career boundaries*

Boundaries perceived as constraining transitions to high-skilled work centred on: (a) the intense competition associated with limited graduate trainee schemes; (b) ASH degrees, which were associated with unclear career routes (13 out of 17; e.g., “social sciences being so general, I couldn’t see where I was going” (P26)); (c) poor degree classification (8 out of 12); and (d) the nature of work, particularly not being able to develop skills and experience. Jobs became routinized very quickly and lack of control was common (N=20; e.g., “you reach a stage where you get to know the job. From there on, you don’t get to develop anymore” (P21)). By contrast, participants who developed careers in high-skilled occupations referred to the dynamic nature of their jobs and development opportunities received from their organization.

While high-skilled occupations were reported to offer various progression opportunities, low-skilled work was perceived to create a stigma when applying for jobs (N=12) even for internal progression (N=8) and for those who had successions of temporary contracts (N=16). For eight participants who gained experience in the secondary segments, lack of credentials restricted further opportunities. Lateral job transitions, particularly between intermediate-skilled occupations, allowed the accumulation of occupation-specific experience but postgraduate qualifications were

required for progression in some careers. Lack of qualifications was also perceived as a boundary for transition into permanent positions (N=4).

Thus, the main boundaries constraining mobility centred on access to graduate employers and were stronger for ASH graduates and those with lower degree classifications. Early underemployment created further boundaries through temporary contracts and absence of skill use, internal/external development opportunities, and postgraduate qualifications.

### *Impact of boundaries on career self-management*

Career boundaries were associated with two psychological states - career indecision and perceived underemployment – which either constrained or enabled CSM. Career indecision, particularly in early transitions, was related to some inertia. For ASH graduates and those with lower degree classifications, indecision arose from the difficulty in identifying high-skilled opportunities; e.g., “I was frozen with fear and indecision” (P11). For these graduates (N=14), early job transitions were largely in secondary segments or ‘stopgaps’. For BUS graduates and those with 2:1 or 1<sup>st</sup> class degrees, indecision was less pronounced as they could see career routes. They viewed first job transitions as stepping-stones; e.g., “I didn’t want any job, I wanted a career job which linked into what I studied and there was an opportunity for progression” (P23).

Twenty out of the 29 participants who started in low- (14 out of 15) and intermediate-skilled (6 out of 14) occupations perceived themselves to be underemployed and associated this with lack of skill use and opportunity; e.g., “I felt like other people were using me as a sort of dumping ground and it wasn’t really gaining me any good experience at all” (P23). Three participants discussed how this

was a hindrance to career motivation, while 15 explicitly linked this experience with low self-esteem. Although not mentally challenging jobs, interviewees discussed feeling “drained both mentally and physically” at the end of the day (P22). Such experiences were more common for those who had a number of low-skilled jobs and who held ASH degrees with lower degree qualifications. Job transitions from one low-skilled job to another had negatively influenced perceived control over their predicament, leaving a sense of futility with respect to CSM.

For six participants, perceived underemployment had no effect on CSM. Three had initially taken these jobs as stopgaps while saving for postgraduate education and therefore perceived their predicament as temporary. A further three were approached within three months of employment for relatively better work.

By contrast, for over half of those underemployed, the experience was either an external push as a result of temporary contracts not being renewed (N=12) or redundancy (N=4), or a psychological push resulting in “more drive to go and get another job” (P28). For some, comparisons with graduates in better jobs triggered willingness to move; e.g., “I realised everyone around me was trying to get their careers going. I thought I’m not waiting about” (P21). Strategic positioning, and, to a lesser extent, influence behaviours were used to secure better jobs. Positioning behaviours largely centred on strategic investment, for example, in specialised postgraduate qualifications essential for progression to management (N=8); or retraining in a different and more specialised area (N=4).

Job/organisational transitions within secondary segments could be differentiated as drifting between jobs of similar content (N=8) or developing expertise in different areas of the occupation (N=7). For some (N=5), such lateral progression facilitated networking; e.g., through recruitment agencies or contacts in

previous employment. Influence behaviours were commonly used for movement out of low-skilled work. Work in stopgaps was associated with developing generic, particularly interpersonal, skills, which some used for self-promotion during interviews; e.g., “it has amazed me how much I was able to draw from that job, even though there was absolutely no using your brain at all!” (P26). For a minority who could locate internal opportunities (N=6), upward influence was possible during appraisals or informal discussions with managers.

Generally, both stepping-stones and stopgaps played a role in guiding transitions. For those who started in what they saw as stepping-stones, experiences were instrumental in clarifying career interests; e.g., “Through that job I developed an actual interest in taxation” (P18). Stopgaps also formed “an introduction to the world of work” (P29), for some, highlighting what they did not want to do and helping to shape career interests (N=4). Thus, only for a minority did boundaries constrain CSM through indecision and perceived underemployment. Constrained progression was evident in low-skilled work, from ASH and 2:2/lower degrees. For the majority, boundaries triggered an external/psychological push that facilitated CSM behaviours. Where boundaries allowed development of occupational skills, and self- and environmental-awareness, it was often a psychological push. External push was associated with the nature of contracts and redundancies.

#### *Punctuating role of career boundaries*

Not all CSM behaviours were associated with boundary-crossing. Compared to those who started in high-skilled work, the 29 participants who started in secondary segments experienced a greater number of job and organisational transitions.

However, only for 10 did transitions also enable and punctuate boundary-crossing to the high-skilled segment.

Career patterns for eight of these participants who transitioned out of underemployment showed a series of stepping-stones spanning both the low- and intermediate-skilled occupations prior to securing high-skilled work. These were viewed as significant transitions, building confidence and employability (e.g., “It’s like buying your first car. It’ll always be special to me. When I finally got that job, I was through the roof. I thought everything that’s happened to me has brought me to the point I am” (P26)). For four participants, comparisons to fellow graduates who could not progress out of underemployment helped punctuate this achievement further.

Career patterns for those transitioning between intermediate-skilled occupations (N=10) were varied. Two participants were in what they called ‘jobs-for-life’ and had no intentions of leaving. One participant could not progress despite strategic investment in a Master’s degree. The remainder (N=7) had three to eight different stepping-stones spanning both intermediate- and low-skilled jobs. They perceived the accumulated knowledge and experience as indicators of success, or as a process through which they clarified career interests and found meaningful work (e.g., “In retrospect, it was good to get those jobs or I wouldn’t be here” (P27)). Although we observed strategic positioning behaviours commonly within this group, these were realised within the boundaries of available jobs. Stepping-stones and stopgaps, therefore, underlined the role of persistence for career progression; e.g., “a good example of guts and determination in getting you somewhere” (P28).

A punctuating effect of boundary-crossing was also observed among those who moved from low- to intermediate-skilled occupations (N=4). All still perceived



themselves as underemployed, but this transition highlighted some progression and reflected adjustment of expectations (e.g., “it feels better than selling clothes” (P13)).

Conversely, for the four stuck in low-skilled work (all ASH graduates, three with 2:2 or lower degrees), there was consolidation of initial disappointment.

Although still in early career (mean work experience=3 years, range 2-5 years), their career reflection shows a loss of confidence and a negative outlook, e.g., “I feel like I’ve wasted my last four years” (P11).

## **Discussion**

The findings show that graduate labour market perceptions and opportunities for development following underemployment are prominent career boundaries constraining transitions to high-skilled occupations (RQ1). These boundaries are manifested in the prevalence of career indecision and perceived underemployment in the secondary segments of the GLM (low-/intermediate-skilled occupations) and enable/constrain CSM through their effects on these psychological states (RQ2). The punctuating role of boundaries on career progression was observed to the extent that CSM was enabled/hindered in the secondary segments (RQ3). Thus, boundaries play a role in graduate career development through their effects on proactive career behaviours in the first 10 years after graduation.

### *Theoretical implications*

Three primary contributions emerge for understanding career boundaries and boundary-crossing. Firstly, there is support for greater theorising of the nature of boundaries, particularly with respect to less demarcated boundaries in the secondary segment of the GLM. Secondly, the study emphasises the importance of

understanding structure-agency interplay, notably how career boundaries influence agency. Finally, the findings draw attention to the impact of this interplay for understanding objective and subjective career development.

With respect to the nature of boundaries, the growth of graduate employment in intermediate-skilled occupations has introduced new boundaries in early career whose long-term effects are relatively unexplored. Graduates were thought to embody self-managed mobility across relatively permeable organisational boundaries. GLM segmentation, however, means that such boundaryless transitions are unrealistic. Educational background constitutes a significant boundary in access to high-skilled work, as employers favour those with more prestigious credentials. Career routes are also less visible for non-professional degree graduates (Moreau and Leathwood, 2006). Our findings support the literature in two ways: (i) the prevalence of early employment in secondary segments among ASH and lower degree holders; and (ii) the perceived unavailability and lack of access to high-skilled work.

The findings also extend understanding by taking into account participants' work experience in the GLM. Graduates are assumed to transition out of underemployment within three to five years (Elias and Purcell, 2004) yet the nature of boundaries that emerge as a result of this experience are often neglected. For instance, there was a higher likelihood of redundancies, pursuing postgraduate qualifications to improve employability and more frequent job changes due to temporary contracts in secondary segments. Opportunities for occupation-specific development and organisational career support were therefore limited. Although our study does not provide demand-side data, this type of precarious employment resonates with evidence that peripheral workers are treated as expendable (Dries *et al.*, 2012).

A second contribution is to highlight the interplay between agency and structural constraints, and the process of boundary-crossing within careers. Recognition and deeper understanding of boundaries leads to a more nuanced picture of individual proactivity. Our conceptualisation of proactive career behaviours builds on the understanding that CSM is necessarily bounded by gatekeepers (King, 2004). We also recognise that employability and career transitions are determined not only by proactive career behaviours but also by the nature and availability of opportunities (Forrier *et al.*, 2009; McQuaid and Lindsay, 2005). Visibility of alternatives and the nature of jobs and how these are perceived by the individual encourage or discourage proactive career behaviours, which may then differentially impact the extent to which early underemployment leads to stepping-stones or dead-ends.

Our contrasts between participants who started careers in secondary segments highlighted the importance of both individual proactivity and ‘good’ job opportunities which allow skills utilisation and development. This interplay is observed through two psychological states: career indecision and perceived underemployment. One example is the perceived futility of CSM among participants who were stuck in low-skilled work. For a minority, this experience further reinforced career indecision by limiting exposure to opportunities, and negatively influencing self-esteem. By contrast, more positive adaptation to external push factors was exemplified by those who developed careers as a series of temporary stepping-stones in intermediate-skilled occupations or required postgraduate qualifications to progress.

A further example of structure-agency interplay is when perceived underemployment acts as a push factor for proactive behaviours. Through extracting the limited transferable and/or occupation-specific skills gained in secondary segments, by social comparisons, and through positioning behaviours, graduates

overcame initial career indecision and developed greater perceived ease of movement to 'relatively better' jobs. In the high-skilled segment, graduates who engage in more proactive career behaviours have been found to receive more organisational support for career development (Sturges *et al.*, 2005). In the secondary segment of the GLM, our findings suggest that jobs which offer limited skill development may stimulate proactive career behaviours.

We might argue that the effects of perceived underemployment on proactivity are similar to developing employability competencies, such as self-awareness and adaptability (McArdle *et al.*, 2007). Sadly though, rather than adaptation to the fast changing 'knowledge economy', it is adaptation to the reality of few high-skilled opportunities. Thus, the study demonstrates a move away from an agency-structure duality in understanding career transitions (Forrier *et al.*, 2009). Using the GLM context, we draw attention to conceptualisation of emerging boundaries and their effects on individualistic concepts.

Further understanding of how boundaries punctuate career progression is a third contribution of this study. Findings support both the stepping-stone and entrapment hypotheses of underemployment. The former is most clearly visible in transition from secondary to primary segments of the GLM, through a number of stepping-stones. Subjective experience of these stepping-stones helps not only develop skills and experience and enable boundary-crossing but also builds confidence in employability. However, contrary to evidence that early underemployment is a temporary phenomenon (Elias and Purcell, 2004), on average this group had the longest work experience (only one moved out in two years; for the rest this transition took between six and 10 years). Moreover, of the 16 ASH participants who started in secondary segments, only two successfully moved on

despite retraining and strategically positioning themselves in labour market stepping-stones. This may suggest that ASH degree-holders take longer to overcome initial career indecision and/or that there are fewer high-skilled opportunities in the labour market that accommodate their skills.

Most participants who transitioned from low- to intermediate-skilled work were in early careers. This is consistent with reports of upward mobility within the secondary segments (Sanders and de Gripp, 2004). However, for those starting in intermediate-skilled occupations, we observed similar longevity in the secondary segments to those who progressed to high-skilled work. The role of volition in underemployment (Scurry and Blenkinsopp, 2011) was observed in all but one participant who started careers in intermediate-skilled work. A minority had no intention to change jobs/occupations, as they perceived their jobs to be adequate. In the rest, we observed an adaptation of expectations of moving onto higher-skilled work following an early start in stepping-stones. This is reflected in the punctuating effect of stepping-stones in this segment, and their satisfaction with career development.

Objectively, this supports the entrapment hypothesis of underemployment; career mobility is confined to the available jobs in this segment, which has been shown to offer inferior job quality in comparison to the high-skilled segment (Okay-Somerville and Scholarios, 2013). Subjectively, however, in negotiating career boundaries, particularly those associated with temporary contracts and lack of development through the job, participants in intermediate-skilled occupations use on-the-job experience to promote employability across lateral transitions; they act as stepping-stones and punctuate career progression, albeit horizontally.

These findings present progression as contextualised by how career actors perceive and cope with boundaries. This affirms Gunz and Mayrhofer's (2011) reconceptualisation of career success as necessarily 'boundative' and temporal, requiring understanding of the types of boundaries crossed and current/future boundaries' constraining/enabling effects. Overall, the findings suggest that subjective experience of career progression is shaped, partly, by navigating boundaries which serve not only to disrupt, but provide meaning, to career progress. This highlights the value of examining boundaries as objective and subjective phenomena, and their constraining, enhancing and punctuating role for career progression.

#### *Practical implications*

The paper directs attention to the changing structure of the GLM, its emerging boundaries and its associated gatekeepers (e.g., employers). For some graduates, declining opportunities with graduate employers, which traditionally offered socialisation into work and upward development, present a significant boundary. There is a need to encourage wider career exploration and job search, and to acknowledge that stepping-stones and, to a lesser extent, stopgaps, provide initial socialisation into work and/or specific occupations. Expanded work experience, via internships and work placements, may increase exposure to opportunities and thereby overcome initial career indecision.

Policy reports recommend university-employer partnerships in preparing graduates for employment (CBI, 2009). While these may help increase self- and occupational awareness, further segmentation may arise given that employer practice has been observed to be increasingly liberalised with regards to graduate skill-use

(Keep and Mayhew, 2010). For example, employers may consciously hire overqualified workers, believing them to be more productive or that they may be in short-supply in the future (Cedefop, 2010). Employers could be encouraged to make better use of graduate skills. In the secondary segments, graduates commented on the rapid routinisation of work limiting further development. Hence, job redesign that focuses on increasing skill use, variety and autonomy, particularly in intermediate-skilled occupations, is important. Temporary contracts were found to create further hurdles to progression. This is an issue of concern considering estimates of approximately 17% of UK graduates in temporary work in the first four years after graduation (Mora *et al.*, 2007).

With respect to the career actor, in uncertain labour markets, such as the GLM, proactive career behaviours facilitate progression. Hence, career exploration and networking remain vital. Particularly for the underemployed, this points to developing adaptability and, therefore resilience, to labour market realities. Koen *et al.*, (2012), for instance, demonstrate how training geared towards enhancing adaptability strengthens perceived control over career development, and improves employment outcomes.

## **Conclusion**

The boundaryless career discourse downplays the role of labour market limitations on career development and privileges proactive career behaviours for navigating boundaries. Yet, an increasing proportion of graduates faces underemployment. Building on the observation of GLM segmentation, this article explored: (i) the boundaries to progression in emerging areas of graduate employment; (ii) the role of such boundaries in enabling/constraining CSM; and (iii) the extent to which these

career boundaries play a role in creating alternative, albeit disrupted, progression routes from secondary to primary labour market segments.

Using both voluntaristic and deterministic traditions to understanding career development allowed us to respond to an increasingly more vocal call for careers research that takes institutional boundaries into account (Inkson *et al.*, 2012). Findings highlight the intricate relationship between structure and agency in development of CSM and occupational boundary-crossing.

Future research that accounts for labour market boundaries would benefit from examining the interplay between structural constraints and individual proactive career behaviours in more depth. Increasing graduate underemployment provides an important context within which to study this interaction, especially as it relates to sectors that heavily rely on temporary workers or ASH graduates (e.g., creative industries).

While the career history methodology provided rich data for exploring how individuals experience and negotiate labour market barriers, it limits generalisability and introduces autobiographical memory and common method bias. Further research using a representative sample which longitudinally tracks graduate careers would provide additional evidence on how graduates navigate boundaries.

Overall, the study challenges the boundaryless career concept by demonstrating the relevance of boundaries. Using the case of graduate underemployment, contemporary careers for skilled workers seem far from boundaryless and proactive career behaviours seem to be necessary but not sufficient for crossing occupational boundaries. We also show that boundaries play a role in both constraining and enabling CSM, and hence career progression. The study reinforces the call for ‘bringing back boundaries’ into careers research and examining



the tensions between structural boundaries and agency as individuals navigate through careers.

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<sup>i</sup> Underemployment is used here to describe a mismatch between education and employment and is synonymous with the concept of overqualification.