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**Reference:**

De Schepper Ayla, Clycq Noël, Kyndt Eva.- Socioeconomic differences in the transition from higher education to the labour market : a systematic review  
Journal of career development - ISSN 1556-0856 - 50:1(2023), p. 234-250  
Full text (Publisher's DOI): <https://doi.org/10.1177/08948453221077674>  
To cite this reference: <https://hdl.handle.net/10067/1871060151162165141>

**Socioeconomic differences in the transition from higher education to the labour market: A  
systematic review**

17/09/2021

## **Abstract**

The transition from higher education to the labour market is considered an important and uncertain life stage wherein young adults exchange an academic environment for an often chaotic entry into the labour market. Specifically, for graduates with a lower socioeconomic status (SES), this transition involves several difficulties. Investigating these persisting SES differences in the transition is becoming more relevant given the increasing participation of students from lower SES backgrounds in higher education. This systematic review studies SES differences in the transition by looking through the lens of resource acquisition. The results demonstrate that graduates from lower SES backgrounds have more difficulty finding suitable employment and often experience lower job quality. Moreover, our findings show that the strong interdependence between the importance of different forms of capital and the (implicit) symbolic value attached to these capitals makes it difficult for graduates from lower SES backgrounds to overcome barriers in the transition.

*Keywords:* higher education, labour market, resources, socioeconomic status, transition

## **1. Introduction**

In a continuously intensifying knowledge economy, higher education participation is crucial for developing a highly skilled workforce to help an economy thrive in an era of rapid (technological) advancements (Osborne, 2003; Smith et al., 2016). As such, on a societal level, the rapidly increasing participation rates in higher education (Marginson, 2016; Osborne, 2003) are an important development. Moreover, a higher education degree is one of the most crucial levers for many families to advance or maintain their social position (Marginson, 2016). In part due to higher education institutes and policymakers' efforts, the proportion of students in higher education coming from a lower SES background is rising (Marginson, 2016; Osborne, 2003). However, the shift towards mass higher education is also resulting in more competition on the labour market (Tomlinson, 2012). Upon receiving their degree, graduates enter an uncertain period as they face the challenge of transitioning from education to work (Forrier et al., 2018). This uncertainty stems in part from the greater flexibility

employers expect from employment. Instead of hiring employees on a long-term basis with continuing contracts, there is an increasing reliance on part-time, freelance and interim employment (Aronson et al., 2015).

In light of the higher education expansion and the movement towards a more flexible labour market, it can be argued that this will lead to more social inequality during the transition to work (Tomlinson, 2012). Some research already elaborates on the challenging school-to-work transition of lower SES backgrounds (Burke et al., 2020; Duta et al., 2021; Tomlinson, 2017; Triventi, 2013). One of the main reasons for the SES gap in success in the transition is the inequality in access to resources that facilitates this transition (Croll, 2008; Forrier et al., 2018). Despite these insights, the research field on this topic is complex, which is reinforced by its highly fragmented nature and lack of synthesis. Previous research focuses on various employment outcomes, the role of SES indicators and resources and capitals therein. However, to the best of our knowledge, a harmonising overview is lacking.

Therefore, this study aims to integrate previous findings on the transition from higher education to the labour market to understand the challenges of lower SES graduates during the transition. The first research question (RQ) aims to study SES differences in achieving a successful transition.

**RQ 1:** What SES differences exist in the transition outcomes from higher education to work?

Secondly, as prior research often attributes these inequalities to differences in available resources (Croll, 2008; Forrier et al., 2018), this study adopts a resource accumulation perspective to understand which factors underly the identified SES differences. Moreover, a Bourdeusian approach is used to analyse the nature of the resources.

**RQ 2:** What resources are considered in studies examining SES differences in the transition from higher education to work?

**RQ 2a:** What role do resources play in the transition from higher education to work?

**RQ 2b:** What SES differences exist in the access to these resources?

## **2. Theoretical background**

### **2.1. Transition from higher education to the labour market**

The transition from education to work involves switching from a known context (i.e. higher education) to a usually unknown context (i.e. the labour market). Due to the change between contexts, scholars approach the transition as a process that starts in higher education and continues until the graduate has settled in a job (Grosemans et al., 2017; Teichler, 2007). In the current labour market context, graduates' careers are no longer characterised by one linear career path. However, the initial transition after graduation can predict graduates' future career prospects and opportunities in life (Akkermans et al., 2015; Scherer, 2005).

Given that the transition is a complex and dynamic process, it is not surprising that there is debate concerning the definition of a 'successful transition'. However, there is a growing consensus that it is essential to consider a variety of indicators that encompass objective and subjective aspects (Vermeire et al., in press). Therefore, we apply a set of indicators of a successful transition used in previous research. Combining objective and subjective indicators allows for a fine-grained approach to a definition of a successful transition.

Commonly used indicators of a successful transition are job quantity and job quality (Akkermans et al., 2015; Pinquart et al., 2003). Job quantity simply refers to finding employment. Job quality relates to various aspects of the job: the degree to which the job provides the opportunity to use skills, initiative, training and development, variety in job content, the degree of job security and the financial compensation for performed labour (Okay-Somerville & Scholarios, 2017). Finding a high-quality job is related to a sense of job satisfaction, socialisation at work, career development and the employee's mental health (Akkermans et al., 2015).

Further, a successful transition can be defined in terms of horizontal and vertical fit. The horizontal fit is the alignment of the employee's field of study and the job (Grosemans et al., 2017). When the graduates' educational discipline does not match their job, the horizontal fit is considered low. The vertical fit refers to the alignment of the job seeker's level of education with the required level of

education of the job (Teichler, 1999). A low vertical fit can have two different forms: over-education, where the level of education of the individual is higher than the level required for the job or under-education, where the opposite is true (Grosemans et al., 2017). Overeducation at the beginning of the career negatively impacts graduates' careers in the long run and should be avoided (Baert et al., 2013). Next to the objective fit between education and work, the perceived horizontal and vertical fit impacts graduates' productivity and job loyalty (Dibeh et al., 2019).

A final indicator of a successful transition is the duration of the transition process. A fast transition implies going through a short employment search, requiring little effort and with no or short periods of occasional employment during this search (Teichler, 1999). However, the indicator of duration only acquires meaning in conjunction with other indicators, e.g. a person could accept the first job opportunity they got regardless of quality or fit. Once again, this indicator cannot be evaluated isolated from the graduates' perception, as it affects their well-being and career behaviour (Okay-Somerville & Scholarios, 2017).

## **2.2. SES in the transition**

It is generally accepted that the current situation of young graduates starting their careers has become increasingly difficult due to the economic recession and their unexperienced position in the labour market (Aronson et al., 2015; Tomlinson, 2012). In addition, the labour market is a competitive social system that functions according to its own 'rules of the game' (Bathmaker et al., 2013; Bourdieu, 1990). To successfully enter the labour market, individuals need to learn how to play the game. However, the rules are not always made explicit. Individuals often need to rely upon tacit knowledge to understand which resources (e.g. university degrees or internships) are valued in a specific field (Bourdieu, 1990). This not only requires them to possess forms of capital that are valued in a particular field or segment of the labour market but also requires individuals to know how to use and build on these resources in ways that are considered important in this field. This makes the transition more precarious for graduates from lower SES backgrounds (Bathmaker et al., 2013; Burke et al., 2020; Duta et al., 2021). Even with the same qualifications, they often face little opportunities and lower success rates (e.g. longer unemployment, underemployment) when transitioning to work (Triventi, 2013).

In the current study, SES is operationalised by parental education, parental occupation and parental income. These indicators are considered to be 'the big 3' (Cowan et al., 2012). The purpose of the current study, to integrate previous research, requires a common definition of SES.

### **2.3. Resources in the transition**

One of the main reasons for the gap in success in the transition of graduates from higher and lower SES backgrounds is the difference in access to resources that facilitate this transition (Croll, 2008). Resources entail personal characteristics, conditions and objects that are valued by the individual (Hobfoll et al., 2018). Resources are important in graduates' and employees' career development (De Vos et al., 2020) and helps them achieve their professional goals (Vermeire et al., in press). These resources are a product of the socioeconomic and sociocultural environment in which they live. Although graduates cannot choose the environment in which they were born, they can use their agency to turn resources into their benefit as well as, to a certain extent, create resources and enforce access to new types of resources (Croll, 2008; Hobfoll et al., 2018). As resources can be interpreted in a wide variety of ways, Hobfoll et al. (2018) recommend studying resources in context by integrating them with more particular theories for a given context, i.e. SES differences in the transition to the labour market.

In order to understand social inequalities in transitions outcomes, we draw on Bourdieu's concepts of capitals, habitus and field (Thatcher et al., 2016). Capitals are key resources that define an individual position within a social space. Bourdieu (1986) distinguishes between economic, cultural and social capital. *Economic capital* refers to material resources that are directly or indirectly transformable into money and can be called upon to facilitate reaching certain goals (Bourdieu, 1986). *Cultural capital* is the set of knowledge, cognitive skills, dispositions and behaviours that enable a person to master a society's dominant culture (Bourdieu, 1986). This implies that one must possess the 'right' cultural capital (i.e., that of the dominant culture). With regard to the transition, graduates' cultural capital must align to the workplace, wherein they seek to work (Thatcher et al., 2016). Further, Bourdieu (1986) distinguishes three dimensions of cultural capital: embodied capital (dispositions of the mind and body: e.g. language, mannerisms, playing the game), objectified capital (cultural goods) and institutionalised

capital (educational qualifications and institutions). *Social capital* includes people's relationships and social networks – and the resources they can access in and through these networks – which enable individuals to exert influence in society (Bourdieu, 1986). In terms of the transition from education to work, social networks have two functions: to provide access to information about vacancies and jobs and provide support in obtaining a job (Lin, 1999).

Although discussed separately, these forms of capital are heavily intertwined. Bourdieu (1986) captured the symbolic value of it as symbolic capital. Symbolic capital is the configuration of economic, cultural and social capital that dominant stakeholders recognise and consider legitimate. In the context of the transition to work, this is demonstrated by the fact that employers in different occupational contexts value different manifestations of capital (Thatcher et al., 2016). In addition, capitals are connected with habitus, a mental structure that individuals develop in a particular social environment, which determines how they perceive, appreciate and act in the world (Bourdieu, 1990). The context wherein habitus and capital interact to direct practice is defined by Bourdieu (1990) as field. Fields are structured places that value certain types of capital. Thus, in order to make a successful transition, graduates must exhibit a combination of habitus and capital that is in congruence and appreciated in the field they want to work in (Burke et al., 2020).

### **3. Method**

In line with previous review studies on related topics (e.g. Grosemans et al., 2017; Kyndt & Baert, 2013), the databases Econlit, ERIC, PsycNet and SSCI were selected. Search terms for 'education' were combined, using 'to' or 'transition', with search terms for 'labour market'. These combinations were further combined with search terms for 'SES'. Appendix A includes an overview of the search results.

To eliminate irrelevant studies eight exclusion criteria were used. First, articles that did not focus on the transition from higher education to the work were deleted (1). Second, only articles focusing on graduates from higher/lower SES backgrounds were included (2). Because SES differences are studied in the general population, articles focusing on early school leavers and atypical graduates (e.g. gifted students) were removed (3). Studies on doctoral students and students who have graduated from a



doctoral program were eliminated (4) because, in several countries, PhD's are considered as employees. Further, only empirical (5) and peer-reviewed (6) articles published in English (7) were selected. Finally, to study the transition in a relatively stable labour market only articles from the past ten years (i.e. the period of recovery after the global financial crisis) were included (8).

The exclusion criteria were applied in several steps according to the PRISMA flow diagram (Moher et al., 2009) (see Figure 1). When in doubt about an article, the reference was retained until the next step. The final selection resulted in the retention of 33 primary studies.

FIGURE 1 here

To assess the quality of the qualitative ( $n = 8$ ) and mixed-method studies ( $n = 3$ ) the checklist from the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP, 2018) was used. The quantitative studies ( $n = 22$ ) in this article were evaluated based on the main criteria of Aveyard (2014) and the checklist from the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (2012). Based on these criteria, each study received a quality score. The studies all had a medium or high score, except the study of Crawford et al. (2016), which had a low score due to the limited scope of the method section. Therefore, this article was not excluded. The complete checklists can be found in Appendices B and C.

Finally, the articles were read in-depth and relevant information for the research questions was categorised using the content analysis method (Aveyard, 2014). Every passage was labelled with a code that referred to the different research questions. For the first research question passages referring to indicators of a successful transition were coded. For the second research question fragments about different forms of capital were identified. As the final step, the coded information across the individual studies was combined and analysed.

## **4. Results**

### **4.1. SES differences in a successful transition**

The first research question aims to identify SES differences in achieving a successful transition. Indicators of a successful transition are used to structure the results.

**Job quantity.** The results showed that graduates from higher SES backgrounds have a higher chance to be employed than graduates from lower SES backgrounds (e.g. Assaad & Krafft, 2021; Baldry, 2016; Donnelly & Gamsu, 2019; Naseem, 2019; Okay-Somerville & Scholarios, 2017; Rivera & Tilcsik, 2016). Considering specific SES indicators, the studies showed that *parental education* is positively related to being employed. For example, first-generation college graduates in the USA have less chance of being employed in full-time jobs than graduates with parents with an academic degree (Aronson et al., 2015). Besides, a study conducted in China found a positive correlation with the educational level of the father (Wei & Binglong, 2014). The analysis of the articles showed that *parental occupation* also plays a role in securing a job. For example, Hurst (2018) concludes that graduates from working-class and lower-middle-class parents (i.e., parents with lower educational and occupational levels) in the USA are less likely to be employed than graduates from (upper-)middle-class and elite parents. Similar conclusions are drawn from studies in the UK and China (Donnelly & Gamsu, 2019; Wei & Binglong, 2014). Two articles showed that *parental income* is related to finding employment. Baldry (2016) highlights that in South Africa, graduates from poor families, indicated by receiving regular financial support, have a higher than average prevalence of unemployment. Also, in China, a positive connection between parental income and employment was identified (Fengqiao & Dan, 2015).

**Job quality.** The articles dealt with various aspects of job quality. Most of the studies conclude that SES shows a positive correlation with the *wages* of graduates and thus on the degree of job quality (e.g. Fengqiao & Dan, 2015; Graham et al., 2014; Manzoni & Streib, 2019; Oh & Kim, 2020; Rivera & Tilcsik, 2016). The analysis showed that *parental education* has a positive correlation with graduate earnings. For example, some studies in the USA show that graduates whose parents have a high level of education are more likely to have a high salary (Aronson et al., 2015; Hurst, 2018). Crawford and van der Erve (2015) draw similar conclusions in the UK. In addition, *parental occupation* is related to graduate's earnings. In the USA, having parents employed at a low professional level is linked to low wages (Hurst, 2018). *Parental income* is also related to the income of graduates. In the UK, higher family income graduates earn more than their lower family income peers (Crawford et al., 2016; Crawford & van der Erve, 2015). However, three studies did not find a significant relation between SES

and graduate earnings. Yet, these studies did not directly measure graduate earnings but studied differences in graduate's enrolment in the highest paid jobs (Donnelly & Gamsu, 2019), the occupational status (Jacob et al., 2015), or the employment quality as a part of graduate's employability (Okay-Somerville & Scholarios, 2017). Finally, some studies found a relation between SES and other aspects of job quality. For example, Assaad and Krafft (2021) state that graduates with a lower educated father have a higher probability of irregular wage work or informal employment, thus lower *job security*, than graduates with a higher educated father. In the study of Graham et al. (2014), graduates from low SES communities notify that they cannot *showcase all of their learned skills* on the job. Moreover, graduates from low SES backgrounds were more likely to report a low *person-job fit* (Hu et al., 2020).

**Horizontal fit.** Only four primary studies examined SES differences in the degree of horizontal fit. Most of the results showed that graduates from lower SES backgrounds have a higher risk of being employed in a position outside their educational discipline and thus of achieving a lower horizontal fit than graduates from higher SES backgrounds (Graham et al., 2014; Hurst, 2018; Naseem, 2019). *Parental education, parental occupation and parental income* are linked to the degree of horizontal fit. Graduates from the United States whose parents are employed in manual labour or at a low professional level are more likely to be employed in a field outside their educational discipline (Hurst, 2018). This is in line with the findings from Naseem (2019); in many instances, working-class graduates in the UK fail to secure jobs matching their field of education. Graham et al. (2014) show that graduates from low-income communities in Canada often are employed outside the field in which they were trained. In contrast, Xu (2013) did not find a noticeable relationship between parental education and income and the degree of horizontal fit in the USA. According to Xu (2013), SES indicators already influence enrolment in higher education; thus, once enrolled in higher education, students start in a new environment with relatively equal opportunities to build resources.

**Vertical fit.** The analysis showed that graduates from lower SES backgrounds have a higher risk of being overeducated than graduates from higher SES backgrounds (Crawford et al., 2016; Erdsiek, 2016; Graham et al., 2014; Hurst, 2018; Naseem, 2019; Steffy, 2017; Wakeling & Laurison, 2017). *Parental education* shows a positive correlation with the degree of vertical fit. In Germany and the USA, it is

negatively related to the risk of overeducation (Erdsieck, 2016; Hurst, 2018). In addition, *parental occupation* is linked to the degree of vertical fit. Graduates from the UK whose parents hold senior management positions are more likely to find such positions themselves (Wakeling & Laurison, 2017). In addition, working-class graduates are far more likely to experience overqualification as involuntarily than middle-class graduates who experience it mostly as voluntary (Steffy, 2017). *Parental income* also plays a role in achieving a vertical fit. In the case of UK graduates, this SES indicator is positively related to a high vertical fit (Crawford et al., 2016).

**Duration of the transition.** Only three studies elaborated on SES differences in the duration of the transition. On the one hand, Graham et al. (2014) and Naseem (2019) state that graduates from low SES backgrounds experience a more extended period of unemployment. However, on the other hand, they often find quickly precarious work (Graham et al., 2014). Hu et al. (2020) argue that this is because of these graduates' more urgent and immediate needs to find a job. They do not have the financial resources to be unemployed for a long period (Naseem, 2019).

#### **4.2. Resources considered by studies examining SES differences in the transition**

The second research question is aimed at identifying the resources that studies examining the SES differences considered. These are classified into three forms of capital: economic, cultural and social capital.

**Economic capital.** The analyses showed that having economic capital facilitates the transition indirectly. By having economic resources, graduates are able to take prestigious courses at prestigious educational institutions (Crawford et al., 2016; Hurst, 2018), participate in expensive extracurricular activities such as studying abroad (Hurst, 2018), attend classes to learn skills (Liu, 2016) and taking up unpaid internships (Aronson et al., 2015; Bukodi & Goldthorpe, 2011; Hurst, 2018; Lehmann, 2019; Rivera, 2011). The value placed upon these time and resource-intensive activities by educators and employers make graduates more attractive candidates in the labour market. In addition, not having many economic resources has an effect on transition outcomes. Graduates with a lack of economic capital are often forced to *work part-time* during their search for permanent employment, which is correlated with

overqualification (Erdsiek, 2016). As a result, they have less time to acquire other forms of capital (Hurst, 2018; Naseem, 2019). In addition, graduates with high study-related debts often have no other option but to take up employment with a lower vertical and horizontal fit (Hurst, 2018). The cost of education is reported several times; however, these findings cannot be generalised to countries with a low cost of education. Parental income, one of the SES indicators, implies that graduates from lower SES backgrounds have less economic capital than graduates from higher SES backgrounds. Moreover, graduates with limited economic capital often have few opportunities to acquire other forms of capital, creating a downward spiral that makes the transition of graduates from low SES backgrounds increasingly difficult (Hurst, 2018).

**Cultural capital.** The results highlighted various aspects of cultural capital that indirectly influences the success of the transition. Institutionalised cultural capital is put forward in the studies as the choice of a certain academic discipline and educational institution. A large proportion of the studies conclude that attending a high-status university can improve the transition to work (Crawford et al., 2016; Donnelly & Gamsu, 2019; Giani, 2016; Manzoni & Streib, 2019; Oh & Kim, 2020; Okay-Somerville & Scholarios, 2017; Rivera, 2011; Wei & Binglong, 2014). University prestige has a significant effect on finding employment (Wei & Binglong, 2014), employment quality (Crawford et al., 2016; Okay-Somerville & Scholarios, 2017) and earnings (Donnelly & Gamsu, 2019; Manzoni & Streib, 2019; Oh & Kim, 2020). According to Rivera (2011), employers believe that educational prestige represents a candidate's learning ability, social skills and self-presentation. In addition, the field of study affects the transition as well (Erdsiek, 2016; Fengqiao & Dan, 2015; Graham et al., 2014; Jacob et al., 2015; Manzoni & Streib, 2019). Certain disciplines (e.g. social science, arts and humanities) have a negative influence on job income (Fengqiao & Dan, 2015; Manzoni & Streib, 2019) and the risk of overqualification (Erdsiek, 2016). Furthermore, extracurricular activities, like work placements and internships, also has value for one's future career (Hurst, 2018; Lehmann, 2019). It is an opportunity to acquire skills and knowledge outside formal education and an occasion for networking. As for objectified cultural capital, professional service employers tend to prefer graduates who participate in activities associated with the upper-middle-class culture, such as practising certain sports like golf,

playing a musical instrument, or learning a foreign language (Liu, 2016; Rivera, 2011). Similar results were found for the public sector (Hurst, 2018). In addition, young people with the 'right' embodied cultural capital often have a better *understanding of the labour market* (Hurst, 2018), undertake different actions to improve their career prospects (Erdsiek, 2016) and spend more time on activities that might maximise their career success (Hu et al., 2020). For example, they are more strategic, have more available resources in their search for work and are stronger in matters such as writing a curriculum vitae and using other forms of capital to make a successful transition (Hurst, 2018). Even the *dialect* of graduates may play a role in the transition (Morrison, 2014). Moreover, employers often tend to recruit graduates with the same embodied cultural capital because they can better identify with them (Rivera & Tilcsik, 2016).

Graduates from lower SES backgrounds often have less of the 'valued' cultural capital or not the 'right' cultural capital at their disposal than graduates from higher SES backgrounds (Erdsiek, 2016; Hu et al., 2020; Hurst, 2018; Morrison, 2014; Oh & Kim, 2020; Rivera & Tilcsik, 2016). For example, graduates with high educated parents are more likely to study at prestigious universities and choose more often subjects with a lower risk of overqualification (Erdsiek, 2016). Furthermore, working-class graduates are less likely to take part in specific training courses that employers consider attractive (Liu, 2016). As a result, employers regard these graduates as less interesting candidates. Here too, there is an interplay with the other forms of capital; it is difficult for graduates with a low degree of economic capital to acquire upper-middle class (i.e., the 'right') cultural capital through attending a prestigious university or participating in costly activities (Hurst, 2018; Lehmann, 2019; Liu, 2016). This limited access to cultural capital also affects the possibility of acquiring social capital.

**Social capital.** Social capital can contribute directly to the transition by allowing graduates to use personal connections to find employment (Erdsiek, 2016; Fengqiao & Dan, 2015; Hurst, 2018; Jacob et al., 2015; Lehmann, 2019; Okay-Somerville & Scholarios, 2017; Rivera, 2011). According to Erdsiek (2016), finding a job through parents or friends increases the probability of being overqualified, while social relations based on internships support finding a job with a good fit. Other studies nuance these results. Family can help graduates finding a high-paying, prestigious job, but only if they have high

cultural capital (Hurst, 2018; Lehmann, 2019). Furthermore, graduates can draw information from their social network to promote a successful transition (Graham et al., 2014; Lehmann, 2019; Liu, 2016; Morrison, 2014; Rivera, 2011). Information on writing a curriculum vitae, application skills, potential employers and suitable vacancies can lead to high-quality jobs (Liu, 2016). Finally, social capital also indirectly influences the transition. For example, social actors can provide career support (Graham et al., 2014), teach graduates how to present themselves in professional circles (Hurst, 2018) and cultivate soft skills (Liu, 2016). However, graduates from lower SES backgrounds often have less ‘valued’ social capital at their disposal than graduates from higher SES backgrounds (Fengqiao & Dan, 2015; Lehmann, 2019). This mainly relates to the amount of capital available to the actors within their social network (Fengqiao & Dan, 2015). For example, parents of graduates employed at a low occupational level often have few contacts and little information that can facilitate their children's transition into certain types of jobs or positions (Hurst, 2018). In addition, the limited degree of social capital is partly due to limited access to economic and cultural capital (Hurst, 2018). Because graduates from lower SES backgrounds have less access to these other forms of capital, they have fewer opportunities to network and participate in activities to acquire social capital than graduates from higher SES backgrounds (Hurst, 2018; Liu, 2016).

**Symbolic capital.** As stated above, economic, cultural and social capital are intertwined, but how do these capitals relate to each other? Economic capital often gives direct access to resource-intensive, culturally valued activities (Lehmann, 2019; Rivera, 2011). Those activities are also accessible to a lesser extent through social capital (Hurst, 2018). In turn, participating in these culturally valued activities allows graduates to enhance their social capital (Liu, 2016). Through personal connections, graduates learn how to 'play the game' in the labour market, which can finally give them an advantage in the labour market. Thus, having one strong resource is linked to having other resources. However, this does not mean that graduates from low SES backgrounds, who often lack economic capital, cannot accumulate other resources. For example, formal education allows graduates to enhance cultural and social capital (Lehmann, 2019; Rivera, 2011). However, it should be noted that graduates from low SES backgrounds, who often start in higher education with limited cultural and social capital, find it difficult

to use opportunities to increase resources over time. Even more important is the value that is placed upon this configuration of capitals by employers. Not all expressions of cultural or social capital are equally valued in the labour market (Rivera & Tilcsik, 2016). Employers want to be able to identify with a potential employee. Thus, graduates need to have a certain feel for 'playing the game'. In order to understand the game and understand which expressions of capitals gives them an advantage in the labour market, graduates need some socialisation to it through parents or significant others (Morrison, 2014). Due to the lack of cultural and social capital, graduates are unaware of the value that this capital can play in the transition to the labour market; therefore, they often rely solely on their educational credentials (Hurst, 2018; Lehmann, 2019).

## **5. Discussion**

This study set forward to synthesise the findings on the complex role of SES in the transition from higher education to work and to integrate findings from a fragmented research field. In doing so, it made three key contributions to the literature.

First, this review provides a clear overview of SES differences in the transition. Graduates from lower SES backgrounds are less likely to achieve a successful transition compared to their peers from higher SES backgrounds (e.g. Aronson et al., 2015; Erdsiek, 2016; Hu et al., 2020; Hurst, 2018; Jacob et al., 2015; Steffy, 2017). More specifically, SES is related to various indicators of a successful transition, such as the degree of job quantity and job quality (e.g. wages, job security and person-job fit), vertical and horizontal fit and the duration of the transition. Thus, when studying school-to-work transitions and thereby using any career development theory, it is essential to integrate the idea that not all graduates start on a level playing field in the labour market. This pertains to our next contribution showing not only the playing field often entails more obstacles for some categories of graduates, but also the rules of the game and the resources to play the game are often (implicitly) biased.

Secondly, this study rethinks the importance of certain resources by demonstrating that it is often not the number of resources that matters but the symbolic value these resources entail. Graduates from low SES backgrounds not having 'the right' the capital, i.e. the capital that is more highly valued by dominant



groups on the labour market, are therefore being disadvantaged in the transition from education to work (Liu, 2016; Rivera, 2011; Rivera & Tilcsik, 2016). For example, employers often hire graduates from a high-status university because they believe that educational prestige is an indicator of a graduate's social skills and self-presentation abilities (Rivera, 2011). Symbolic capital also plays a role in the perceptions of activities undertaken by graduates. Both groups engage in activities, but graduates from higher SES backgrounds appear to engage more in activities that employers find attractive and/or have in common with employers. For example, being part of an intensive sports team or a 'pay-to-play club' (e.g. rowing team, field hockey, lacrosse) is more substantial than being on the ping pong team or playing soccer (Rivera, 2011). These expectations driven by symbolic capital are not made explicit by employers; it is often an unconscious mechanism that takes effect. Graduates from higher SES backgrounds, who were brought up with the 'rules of the game', have greater access to this tacit knowledge than graduates from lower SES backgrounds. This points to the importance of Bourdieu's concepts, whereby it is essential to include both capitals and habitus and field in a model to understand and analyse the transition to the labour market. Thus, Bourdieu's Theory of Practice can be a valuable addition to existing career development theories. To understand the positioning process of graduates on the labour market and their career development, not only graduates' characteristics must be taken into account, but also the context in which graduates find themselves. More specifically, the labour market and even each sector within the labour market has its own valued symbolic capital and implicit rules that ought to be played by to make a more successful school-to-work transition.

Thirdly, the integration of findings demonstrates that resources act in concert during the transition and are strongly interrelated. This is consistent with the work of Hobfoll et al. (2018), who argue that having one strong resource is linked to having other resources. When a person has few resources, it is difficult to increase resources over time. Graduates from low SES backgrounds have limited economic capital inherited from their parents, making it difficult to acquire other forms of capital (Crawford et al., 2016; Hurst, 2018). SES inequalities in the transition are also partly a result of SES differences in capital throughout their formal education. For example, students from lower SES backgrounds are less likely to be enrolled at high-status post-secondary institutions than students from higher SES backgrounds

(Jerrim et al., 2015; Zhang & Wang, in press). As a result, these graduates often end up in a vicious circle, making it difficult to obtain and accumulate resources. This is reinforced by their belief that a diploma is the highest value in the labour market; as a result, they pay less attention to the role of cultural and social capital.

### **5.1. Implications for practice**

The key findings of this study indicate that addressing SES differences in the transition is not easy. However, educational institutions can and need to undertake the effort to make these resources available to every graduate. There are several possibilities for this; for example, to enhance social capital, educational institutions can offer bridging activities that strengthen the link between graduates and the labour market. These include direct contact with employers via job fairs and (paid) internships or collaborations with organisations focused on workplace learning (Aronson et al., 2015). These programs foster important skills and provide students from low SES backgrounds with opportunities to make connections. Establishing partnerships with the labour market can also be interesting for employers. It allows them to identify and attract a larger group of high achievers early on and offer them a job. Moreover, because they can actively see students performing on the job, for example, through internships, the focus of selection procedures can be more on performance and potentially less driven by unconscious bias stemming from symbolic capital in the transition. At the same time, employers also need to reduce SES inequalities in the transition by making the ‘rules of the game’ explicit or even making the rules more fairly. The different value employers place on activities undertaken by graduates from higher and lower SES backgrounds is not an indicator of a potential employee's qualities; being aware of and countering the bias they could have towards graduates from lower SES backgrounds is the first step towards an equal labour market.

### **5.2. Limitations**

Despite the contributions of this study and the systematic approach that was adopted, there are some limitations to the present study that need to be considered. The first limitation of our study is that we solely included empirical and published studies. This entails a possible publication bias (Cheung &

Slavin, 2016). It is possible that contradicting articles were not published, thus reducing the evidence base against SES differences in the transition. However, research in the past years shows that SES impacts various levels of education and transitions. A second limitation concerned the focus on the transition process. We only included articles that specifically referred to the transition from higher education to work. Only three articles were included that deal with graduate recruitment. The job search and hiring process is often linked to the transition period, but this was not the main focus of this review; therefore, these were not included as specific search terms. We tried to minimise this bias by using a large range of search terms to include studies that refer to but do not explicitly mention the transition (e.g. Grosemans et al., 2017). Finally, we are aware that inequalities in the transition are not exclusively linked to SES; gender and ethnicity also play a role (Baert et al., 2016; Mills & Präg, 2014). These three variables are often interlinked and can amplify each other's impact, making it difficult to distinguish between these effects. However, this study adds to the existing literature on diversity and inequality in the transition by looking at it from an SES perspective revealing how certain social class processes can cross ethnic groups.

### **5.3. Future Research**

The focus of this review study was broad, namely identifying SES differences in the transition and differences in resources. Further research offers opportunities to elaborate on the role of certain resources. This study shows that social capital can directly facilitate the transition by allowing graduates to use this resource to find employment and indirectly by giving access to other capitals, however, there is limited knowledge about the role of social networks in the transition from education to work. Therefore, it is relevant to further examine the role of social networks by using social network analysis in the transition. Likewise, symbolic capital and understanding of field rules are of great importance for a successful transition. Nevertheless, their intangible character makes it challenging to grasp the underlining mechanisms of these concepts. For example, textual analysis can meet this challenge by providing information on how graduates make sense of labour market information and communicate during the transition.

Furthermore, it has been argued that graduates' labour market trajectories have become even more precarious due to the global pandemic. As such, it would be interesting if future research could examine the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and compare the results with the findings presented in this review in order to reflect on the impact of COVID-19 on SES difference in the transition from higher education to work.

Previous research shows that some graduates from low SES backgrounds nevertheless successfully transition from education to work (Crul et al., 2017; Duckworth & Schoon, 2012). However, research on graduates from low SES backgrounds making a successful transition is sparse. Longitudinal designs and biographical methods open up possibilities for examining critical resources that facilitate successful transitions against the odds.

## Acknowledgements

We want to acknowledge and express our gratitude for the contribution of Maximiliaan Janssens in our search for primary studies as well as the initial phase of the analysis of the studies.

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