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Social class and the mobilisation of capital in physical education-related undergraduate programmes

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ABSTRACT

Expanding Higher Education has increased the focus of undergraduate degrees towards preparing graduates for employment. Much research acknowledges classed inequalities in employability-related learning, yet studies tend to explore these in graduate employability rather than via students' experiences of mobilising professional knowledge within their degree. Here, we use a Bourdieusian framework to explore how class impacts students' cultivation and mobilising of professional knowledge. Drawing on interviews from a 2-year study with 17 English undergraduate Physical Education students, the relationship between class and professional knowledge is explored in four ways: (1) connecting experience to academic content, (2) developing relationships with staff, (3) accessing complimentary employment and voluntary opportunities, and (4) utilising university societies to 'play the game'. We suggest these impact on a student's capacity to navigate employability-related opportunities at university and influence value judgements made by staff. Consequently, we call for a greater embedding of professional knowledge for all students.

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Social class; higher education; professional knowledge; social mobility; bourdieu; capital

Introduction

Widening access to Higher Education (HE) in the United Kingdom (UK) has led to a shift towards professionally orientated programmes with an increased focus on graduate employability (Webb et al., 2017). At its peak in 2017, up to 50.2% of school leavers in England enrolled in university courses (Department for Business Innovation and Skills, 2016), a trend which Tholen and Brown (2017) suggest has led to a congestion of graduate labour markets. Indeed, in the context of a competitive UK HE landscape where measurable graduate destinations matter to institutions (Daubney, 2022), it is understandable that learning outcomes have shifted in emphasis in recent years to ensure that employability is adequately embedded. To make this emphasis clear, Shay (2013) suggests that HE institutions are increasingly differentiating curricula along the lines of theoretical knowledge, drawing from academic disciplines, and professional knowledge and practices of specific occupations.

Undergraduate degree programmes related to sport and physical education (PE) have followed this trend, although in many ways have always drawn on employability to some extent. Globally, sport and PE-related degrees tend to have cross-disciplinary foundations, drawing upon parent academic disciplines such as education, psychology and exercise physiology, while also offering

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pathways to professional disciplines such as teaching, sports coaching and sports therapy (Aldous & Brown, 2021). Interestingly, sport and PE-related degrees tend to attract students with important tacit knowledge of the degree content fostered through prior sporting experience; something that is not always the case with other degree programmes, where prior learning has occurred predominantly through subject content during formal education. Aldous et al. (2014, 2016) noted that undergraduates studying sport-related degrees who cultivated the requisite qualities in external sports participation often exchanged this for content and professional knowledge within their degrees.

Within this context, however, what follows is a legitimate concern for certain advantages and disadvantages of some students over others in their ability to access employability-related curriculum outcomes. Issues around equity in professional industries pose questions about this shift in emphasis, with concerns that access to professional industries may favour middle- and upper-class students (Bathmaker et al., 2013; Friedman & Laurison, 2020). Indeed, from a Bourdieusian framework (1985b), we can say that each individual student's composition of social, cultural or economic capital will have been shaped by the fields in which their habitus have emerged. As Bourdieu (1985, p. 194) noted, to each field or sub-field, there is a certain kind of capital, which is current, as a power-stake, in that game'. The relative status positions of each field that students are exposed to prior to university are likely to influence the 'exchange value' of their existing capital within their degree.

This paper explores these concerns and aims to better understand how students from different social class backgrounds might have different experiences within their undergraduate degree programmes, focussing on the specific context of HE degrees in Physical Education (HEPE hereafter). More specifically, we adopt a Bourdieusian lens to explore how students' capital is mobilised when engaging with opportunities for professional learning during undergraduate programmes, such as within taught lectures and when accessing work placements. Data was collected as part of a larger longitudinal qualitative study over two years (see Hobson, 2022; Hobson et al., 2024) exploring working and middle-class students completing an undergraduate degree in HEPE at St Penelope's University (pseudonym), a teaching-intensive university in England.

While previous studies have recognised that upper- and middle-class students mobilise capital more readily to improve their employability, these have largely focussed upon outcomes after graduating (Allen et al., 2013; Bathmaker et al., 2013). We hope to contribute to this body of work by paying greater attention to the processes that occur *during* students' undergraduate studies, drawing on data from a recent study.

We begin by exploring research debating the changing place of professional knowledge broadly in HE curricula as well as in PE-related disciplines more specifically. Next, we outline the methods adopted in the study before presenting our analysis. The analysis explores how social class impacts students' capacity to engage with professional knowledge in four ways: (1) in developing relationships with academic staff, (2) in connecting real-life experience to academic content, (3) in accessing employment and voluntary opportunities which complement the degree and (4) in utilising university societies to 'play the game'. This paper concludes with a brief discussion about the implications of these findings for practice and further research.

Changing degrees in HE, professional knowledge, and graduate employability

In their recent work, Aldous and Brown (2021) highlight the increasing number of individuals working in the sports sector. They also emphasise how, within government policy, the focus on developing 'talented individuals with the right skills for the job' (Department for Culture Media and Sport, 2016, p. 37) has resulted in increased professional knowledge becoming embedded within HEPE and sports degrees. Indeed, Parry (2015) argues perceived skills shortages have led to a spectrum of degrees with varying academic, vocational or professional character across many western HE sectors. While some degrees in sport still emphasise discipline-specific theoretical knowledge – with foundations in biophysical, social or behavioural sciences – emerging degrees in sport

increasingly emphasise specific careers such as PE teaching or sports coaching, performance analysis, strength and conditioning, or sports/health psychology (Aldous & Brown, 2021).

With employability holding significant weight in this context, the notion of 'professional knowledge' emerges as a key learning outcome. Following Lyngstad et al. (2022), we take professional knowledge to refer to the varying kinds of knowledge that are expected to be drawn on as part of a PE teacher's occupational role. This includes knowledge about the content of the subject as well as pedagogical knowledge, as one might expect, but also less obvious knowledge such as an understanding of cultural, organisational and political contexts (Shulman, 1986) and 'pathic' knowledge that gives teachers a sense of the intersubjective relationship between teacher and student (Rovegno, 2003). In Shay's (2012) framing, theoretical knowledge is also included in the concept of professional knowledge, although it is an applied understanding of theory that is situated in real-world practice. As such, our use of the term professional knowledge for the purpose of this paper is inclusive of diverse kinds of knowledge while also maintaining the necessary characteristic of being directly relevant to practice.

From a Bourdieusian perspective, HEPE degrees could be distinguishable as a field in themselves, or at least a sub-field of the broader PE field. Bourdieu (1985) explains that fields are social arenas with relative levels of autonomy that possess their own logic and structure. They also act as tools for ideological reproduction, interlinking with other fields, depending upon the social context. Viewing HEPE as a field aligns with Hunter's (2004) understanding of the 'field of PE' but with the additional connection to the special context of HE, which introduces new logics related to university structures (Hobson, 2022). Notably, agents (i.e. students) in this field compete for scarce symbolic resources in the form of first-class or upper second-class grades as well as meaningful relationships with faculty members who have the potential to be key enablers for securing sought-after opportunities for initial teacher training and, therefore, future employment.

Historically, both teaching and sport have been viewed as routes to social mobility in working-class populations (Reay, 2013; Spaaij, 2009), suggesting that HEPE degrees potentially encourage mobility in working-class students. However, Bathmaker (2021b) argues that the assumption that HE leads to occupational and economic mobility is increasingly dubious. Indeed, Friedman and Laurison (2020) conceptualise privilege in elite professions as a 'following wind' or a 'platform', where individuals can select both employment and experiences, maximising their employability in graduate markets, often mobilising social contacts to gain opportunities. Significantly, Storr and Spaaij (2017) argue that volunteering experiences in sport and PE are more accessible to middle-class students.

Within a Bourdieusian framing, this can be helpfully understood as a result of middle-class students' habitus, an embodied and relatively enduring system of dispositions which has been structured, necessarily, throughout their prior conditions of existence. For Bourdieu (1984, p. 166),

> The habitus is necessity internalised and converted into a disposition that generates meaningful practices and meaning-giving perceptions; it is a general, transposable dispositions which carries out a systematic, universal application – beyond the limits of what has been directly learnt – of the necessity inherent in the learning conditions.

Of relevance here is the notion that demonstrating appropriate habitus (e.g. already post-uring or communicating like a teacher or sports coach) acts as a gatekeeper to highly coveted work experience and subsequent professional knowledge. Researchers highlight those individuals who already possessed the appropriate habitus appear to naturally demonstrate behaviours awarded value in the field of sport (Cushion & Jones, 2014). Furthermore, in disciplines such as HEPE, professional knowledge is frequently developed through informal learning during work experience, such as observing others, mentoring, and reflecting on practice (Everley & Flemons, 2020; Nelson et al., 2006). We see these prior experiences as key in developing what Bourdieu refers to as cultural capital; put simply, a person's ability or skill in using the appropriate language, drawing on the 'right' symbolic associations, and knowing the established values of a particular field (Abel, 2008; Wiltshire & Stevinson, 2018). In sport and PE research, cultural capital has often been extended to physical capital, referring

to the primacy of the physical body in being a resource of symbolic and material importance too (see DeLuca, 2013; Hay & Macdonald, 2010). As such, viewed through a Bourdieusian framework, professional knowledge is a good example of cultural capital and it is highly valued in the HEPE field.

Bourdieu's conceptual model distinguishes between forms of capital while also insisting that they interact and often compound each other. Cultural and physical capital, for example, are likely to have been impacted by a person's social capital (the sum of their ability to draw on resources through social contacts) and their – or their parents' – economic capital (the sum of their ability to draw on financial resources). Indeed, speaking about the occupational socialisation of PE teachers and sport coaches, Everley and Flemons (2020) argue that unequal distribution of social and economic capital can significantly impact individuals' access to physical activity and sporting opportunities and, therefore, their exposure to professional knowledge of value to PE/coaching practice. This raises some questions as to how equitable access to cultivation of professional knowledge is when middle-class parents are more likely to invest both time and money in extra-curricular sport to facilitate future success (Stirrup et al., 2015, 2017; Wheeler & Green, 2019). Certainly, extra-curricular activities such as sport are key spaces middle-class families invest heavily in, helping their children stand out in fields such as education to develop future opportunities by cultivating desirable social and cultural capital (Vincent & Maxwell, 2016; Wheeler & Green, 2019). Indeed, Storr and Spaaij (2017) report 15 and 16-year-olds volunteering as coaches and officials' community sport were disproportionately middle-class. Similarly, Dean (2016) notes that middle-class teenagers' volunteering experiences generate habitus and cultural capital in the form of confidence, interpersonal skills, and knowledge they exchange in other fields such as HE. Therefore, when twinned with increasingly competitive graduate employability, markets question whether degrees are sufficient to ensure the cultivation of professional knowledge and employability are pertinent (Bathmaker et al., 2013).

Like other authors in the sociology of education, we find Bourdieu's (1990) notion of a 'feel for the game' a useful conceptual device here, helping to unpack, for example, how students exchange capital to develop professional knowledge in light of the intuitive, everyday ways in which social class impacts the skills, experience and social connections students mobilise throughout their degrees (Reay, 2021; Tholen & Brown, 2017). Indeed, Bathmaker (2021b) argues that to 'play the game' successfully, students navigate the orthodoxies that are both implicit and explicit in the cultures shaping social and academic fields in HE. Furthermore, Ingram and Allen (2019) suggest that talented graduates are often identified by ambiguous qualities that are hard to define, but easy to recognise. Here, desirable qualities are influenced by 'social magic' (Lawler, 2017) whereby arbitrary institutional and cultural norms obscure social relations of the field, identifying which qualities and behaviours are awarded value, denying inequalities in accumulating these. However, factors such as students' schooling, sense of belonging and experiences can all influence their confidence and subsequent capacity to exchange forms of capital valued in the field (Reay et al., 2009).

Desirable graduate skills and professional knowledge are not distributed or accessed evenly; moreover, the ability to demonstrate these is affected by power relations and positioning within specific fields (Bathmaker, 2021a). We have utilised Bourdieu's forms of capital here to help differentiate between people's field-dependant ability to draw on resources that are cultural, economic, social and physical. For example, in previous work (Hobson et al., 2024), we have noted that HEPE undergraduates enter university with starkly different levels of professional knowledge and compositions of cultural, economic, social and physical capital and contend that this reflects classed experiences (including the nature, volume and location of activities undertaken) prior to university (Bourdieu, 1978; Wiltshire et al., 2019). Aldous et al. (2014, 2016) also note that English working-class undergraduates' composition and volume of capital impacts their capacity to exchange it successfully when entering sport-related degrees, with those participating in traditionally middle-class sports (e.g. rugby, field hockey, cricket) being more able to mobilise capital to successfully navigate transitions to study sport at university. In contrast, students who participate in more commonly working-class sports (e.g. football) struggle with the same transitions (Aldous et al., 2014, 2016).

Furthermore, Bathmaker et al. (2013) explain that middle-class undergraduates often utilise volunteering and participating in sport to build their profile and differentiate themselves from their peers. While we recognise these studies were less about the content of programmes, they demonstrate how extra-curricular activities have the potential to help students exchange desirable knowledge and behaviours in the field. As a result, this research served as the foundation for us to investigate classed patterns of cultivating and mobilising professional knowledge within the HEPE degree. It prompted us to investigate the effects of classed experiences on students' abilities to connect content to real-life experiences, their relationships with university staff, and the role that part-time employment, volunteering, and participation in extra-curricular clubs played in their journey.

Methods

This paper draws on data from two rounds of interviews from a two-year study that sought to examine how students from different social class backgrounds mobilised capital as professional knowledge within their HEPE degree. The first round of interviews was conducted with students in their second year of a PE undergraduate degree at St Penelope's – a teaching-intensive university[1] in England, and the second phase of interviews was conducted one year after graduating, asking them to reflect upon their experience of employability and professional knowledge. The aim was to examine how different forms of capital impacted participants' acquisition of professional knowledge, and subsequent mobilisation of it, in the everyday aspects of their degree. We paid attention to students' accumulation of capital before university, as well as through activities students engaged with alongside their degree, such as extra-curricular activities, volunteering and paid employment.

Seventeen participants were recruited to the study from a cohort of over one hundred students enrolled on the same three-year undergraduate HEPE degree (see Table 1). We recognise that social class is complex and contested but sought to simplify it by utilising multiple indicators to classify participants. Initially, we recruited participants by administering a demographic questionnaire to the cohort of students in a core lecture. The questionnaire classified participants through multiple indicators such as parents' occupations and educational qualifications, the postcode of their family home and the types of schools and colleges they attended. Initially, we mapped parents' occupations against NS-SEC descriptors,[2] a set of clusters deriving from Goldthorpe and Heath (1992) class schema. However, it soon became apparent that participants did not always fit neatly into these classifications, as some parents' occupations changed over time. For example, in some

Table 1. Clusters of participants.

Social Class	working-class	new middle-class	established middle-class
Parents' Employment	Low-skilled/ Manual jobs, some were unemployed	Manual or service jobs but rose to senior positions. No educational qualifications beyond secondary schools	Business-owners, 'white-collar' professionals, and teachers. For 4/6 families at least one parent had a university degree
Geodemography of family home	Urban areas: high levels of social housing, and crime.	Suburbs or large commuter towns described as 'quiet' and 'normal'. 2/6 moved from urban areas before age 11.	Suburbs, villages and market-towns described as 'nice' and having 'lots of opportunities'
Participants	Andre (*m*, Mediterranean British) Idris (*m*, East African British) Lewis (*m*, Caribbean &White British) MJ (*f*, North African & White British) Vicky (*f*, White British)	Alex (*m*, White British) Ben (*m*, White British) Chris (*m*, White British) Lizzie (*f*, White British) Shaq (*m*, South Asian British) Steph (*f*, White British)	Charlotte (*f*, White British) Harry (*m*, White British) Kelly (*f*, White British)l illy (*f*, White British) Maria (*f*, White British) Maisie (*f*, White British)

cases, participants indicated their parents were employed in manual professions on the questionnaire, though interviews revealed these parents were appointed to managerial posts prior to participant's adolescence. As such, amendments were made as necessary to our mapping of participants (see Table 1). Following these amendments, the following clusters were confirmed: working-class (manual and unskilled occupations) ($N = 5$), new middle-class, $n = 6$ (manual or service jobs but holding senior positions), and established middle-class, $n = 6$ (business-owners, 'white-collar' professionals, and teachers). Other studies adopting Bourdieusian approaches (see Bathmaker et al., 2013) highlight the ambiguity of labelling of intermediate classes, and we recognise that different labels are adopted elsewhere. Nonetheless, we found Lockwood's (1995) label of 'New middle-class' particularly useful to identify a distinct cluster of 'first generation' students whose parents were socially mobile in traditionally working-class professions, and owned homes in suburban towns. In terms of broader demographics, twelve participants identified as white British, while five identified as being from racially minoritised backgrounds (and all but one working-class participant grew up in multicultural urban areas). Nine participants were female and eight were male; however, while we recognise gender is pertinent in shaping participants' experience, a detailed discussion of this is beyond the scope of the discussion in this paper.

As part of the larger research project, there were two phases of interviews, lasting between 47 and 93 minutes in phase one, and between 91 and 123 minutes in phase two. Phase one largely focussed on understanding differences in classed aspects of students' experiences of adapting to university, while phase two focussed on the extent to which students conformed to the demands of the course and their investment in the wider institutional culture. All interview data were coded using Charmaz's (2006) qualitative coding principles. This involved continually engaging with the data and sorting it into codes and categories, which, in turn, helped understand the relationship between class and professional knowledge. Central to our process was the ongoing 'to-ing and froing' between different layers of data and a constant comparison between the data, codes and memos, which we re-worked and refined as our understanding of the relationship between participants' classed habitus and professional knowledge developed (Charmaz, 2006). Firstly, interviews were read through line-by-line, before focussed and axial coding were completed. Specifically relevant to this paper, data coding was heavily informed by a Bourdieusian theoretical framework, focussing on the role of external experiences in the curriculum, voluntary placements, employment, extra-curricular activities and relationships with staff, with the majority of the data being drawn from phase two interviews. For example, codes related to family, friends and associates were broadly labelled as 'social capital'. However, the specifics of what constituted social capital (e.g. the extent to which teachers, family members, and friends shaped access to professional knowledge) arose from the patterns in the data and the specific codes and categories we developed. It should be noted that the full ethical clearance was received ahead of any data collection and that pseudonyms are used throughout this paper to protect the identities of individuals and institutions.

Findings

Our analysis utilises Pierre Bourdieu's 'thinking tools', in particular his concept of capital (1986) and metaphor of 'playing the game', to explore how social class – in the form of economic, social and cultural resources – impacted the ways individuals accumulated experiences and skills, later exchanged as professional knowledge, while studying for an HEPE degree. We consider students' mobilisation of capital as potentially both 'active' and 'internalised', resulting from experiences in previous fields. Thus, we frame participants' practice as neither completely 'agentic' nor structurally 'determined', but rather as relying on a 'feel for the game' in specific social spaces. Here, exposure to similar and contrasting practices and circumstances was considered to shape the possible options (e.g. relating to employment experience in sport) that participants chose from. As Bourdieu (1985, p. 196) suggests, 'the kinds of capital, like aces in the game of cards, are powers which define the chances of profit in a given field'. Thus, heeding Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992), we recognised

hierarchies and logic within HE as being reinforced by individual's investing in developing the requisite capital, with endowments of capital determining the hierarchy and who was awarded status. To some degree, participants were aware of the extent to which they accumulated and mobilised resources advantageous to their degree, but still operated in this manner either consciously or subconsciously (Bathmaker et al., 2013). Indeed, students previously exposed to professional knowledge in sport seemed to internalise an understanding of 'the game', without always consciously considering the potential outcomes (Cushion & Jones, 2014). Consequently, we identified some participants (e.g. Harry, Maisie and Alex, who all worked in sports coaching jobs prior to and during university) as more *active* in the accumulation of experiences and contacts that generated professional knowledge. Conversely, others (e.g. Steph and Shaq) internalised the accumulation of capital as an orthodox behaviour, from fields they previously operated in (Sports clubs and School PE, respectively). Thus, we place no primacy on either structure or agency in their mobilisation and accumulation of capital.

For us, Bourdieu's (1990) concepts of a 'feel for the game' and 'fuzzy logic' were particularly helpful metaphors for understanding the ways in which students viewed the intricacies of demonstrating and developing professional knowledge. Therefore, our findings and analysis focus on how students accumulated and mobilised capital in four intersecting ways:

(1) Relationships with university staff
(2) Making connections with real-life experiences during HEPE degrees
(3) Part-time employment and voluntary opportunities
(4) Extra-curricular clubs and societies

Relationships with university staff

While discussions in lectures were seen as important spaces to demonstrate and reflect upon knowledge of HEPE, participants of all social classes recognised the value of being an independent learner. That said, all participants noted significantly less interactions with lecturers at university compared with their teachers in school, citing the cohort size, and lecturers' irregular contact with them (e.g. only teaching them once or twice a week) – and the impact of this on their capacity to connect with teaching staff. As Lewis, a working-class student, explained:

> I built a small relationship with Serge [lecturer] but besides that, it was like, attend the lecture, leave the lecture, send an e-mail if it was ever needed … I felt like just another number.

This sentiment was one repeated by students across social classes. However, the extent to which this negatively impacted students appeared to be dependent upon a variety of factors such as their personal commitments outside of university, financial circumstances and commuting. Most notably, the lack of interactions with academic staff appeared to negatively impact working-class students who commuted. One such example was Andre, who found the lack of interaction isolating, leading to him feeling 'othered' and frustrated. In his previous schools and colleges (situated in deprived urban areas of a large city), he had close relationships with teachers, who had knowledge of the challenges young people faced. Furthermore, these teachers often supported him both academically and provided extra-curricular activities, which developed his professional knowledge. For example, when he participated in PL Kicks (a local sport development initiative) at his school:

> When I was [playing] at Kicks they put on our level one [coaching] programme. … My PE teacher was saying "you know what? That's a really good thing for you so, you should consider doing it" … [I] ended up doing that. I started doing a work experience with them for two years.

In contrast the lack of relationships with academic staff at St Penelope's left Andre feeling unfairly judged for his lack of interaction in lectures, where he believed staff were not sympathetic to his need to invest long hours in working as a cleaner:

> I was working till 5.00am, coming for a 9.00am lecture, fair enough about fifteen minutes late, I got berated, "oh you're not taking this seriously, why are you falling asleep in my lesson?" They [lecturers] weren't taking that into consideration … [but were] berating me for actually wanting to come into uni, and actually not taking into consideration that I had to earn this money to be able to travel to uni.

Consequently, whereas Andre had strong relationships with his teachers in his previous educational settings – and he felt they understood the financial and social barriers he faced in cultivating professional knowledge – this was in stark contrast to St Penelope's, where he felt unfairly judged and unsupported. This experience was not unique to Andre, with other working-class students also feeling they did not develop the same supportive relationship with academic staff as they did in school. A factor compounded by only having between nine and twelve hours of lectures a week. For example, Idris explained:

> … two days a week. That's a bit of a problem … I come in for those two days, just talk to people that I feel comfortable around, then I just attend lectures and go home.

While all students recognised the limited timetable as creating a lack of connection with academic staff, middle-class students rarely highlighted this as an issue and often utilised the extra available time to develop professional knowledge and skills. Notably, middle-class students did not mention experiencing the same financial pressures and othering experiences; furthermore, they mobilised social connections cultivated either through university or in external opportunities to enhance their professional knowledge. This was seen to facilitate the opportunity to work or volunteer in related fields and accumulate capital, something we address in the next section.

Making connections with real-life experiences during HEPE degrees

When we asked participants how the 'ideal' HEPE student might mobilise their capital in academic settings, established and new middle-class students emphasised how having a 'feel for the game' required students to strike a balance between being both independent and interacting with academic staff. For example, Ben (new middle class) suggested:

> They (the ideal student) would not be, the 'extra busy' person, because I can imagine there's probably a line that as a lecturer you want someone to have their input in lectures … And you want them to come to you for advice, but I suppose there's a line you (wouldn't) want to cross.

Thus, possessing appropriate professional knowledge was not enough; it required mobilising capital in nuanced ways that were in tune with the 'fuzzy logic' of the degree. Considerations of how best to interact with staff also extended to how regularly students expressed themselves in lectures and mobilised their real-life experiences. For example, Harry (an established middle-class student) highlighted that it was important to only engage in class discussions if your point added value:

> I did talk a lot if there were conversations going on in lessons that I felt really passionate about. I still do that now on the PGCE[3], I do stick my hand up if I've got something I want to say, but only if I think it's really important.

Harry's 'getting involved' in lectures was dependent upon having valuable knowledge and experiences to share. It was clear from the data, then, that for students to demonstrate professional knowledge, a combination of both what to say and when to say it (i.e. when to engage) appeared important. Such knowledge was often gained from previous real-life experiences. For example, Maisie (an established middle-class student) recognised how her parents' heavy investment in extra-curricular activities prior to university helped her appear knowledgeable in lectures:

> I cared about and liked sport and was able to talk about multiple different ones … I could talk to different lecturers about different things. And it meant that I could engage in more conversations within class. So that whole idea of being an engaged student, it worked well for me because I had so much access as a kid to so much sport, so I could join in with loads of conversations, which made me look better.

This notion was supported by Ben (a new middle-class student), who recognised that his experience as a former player and current coach at a professional football academy was valuable to his degree. He simultaneously mobilised his experiences as professional knowledge in lectures and could also develop his understanding of theoretical content by reflecting on these lived experiences.

> Last year, when we had discussions about sampling and specialization, I can relate to like the relative age effect and stuff like that … Then this year the analysis module and the psychology module – it's quite nice to link some of the content to the experiences I've had. Just to make it more just to link it to real-life experiences is helpful.

While Ben's capacity to mobilise experiences from elite sport was unique, there was a consensus among participants that knowledge drawn from sporting experiences outside of university had transferable value in lectures. Interestingly, it was disproportionately the middle-class students who recognised these experiences as having value in the course, perhaps having practiced a wider variety of formally organised extra-curricular sports – and more regularly – prior to university than their working-class peers. Consequently, this had an impact upon both the extent to which participants felt they were able to construct relationships with academic staff and whether they felt these relationships impacted their development, as discussed below.

Part-time employment and voluntary opportunities

Significant to participants' cultivation and mobilisation of professional knowledge was the paid employment and volunteering (placements) they participated in, both as part of their course and as external enrichment activities. All students were required to complete voluntary work placements in second- and third-year modules on the programme; furthermore, all participants were employed in part-time work, partially due to their limited contact hours. Social class appeared to impact the nature of, access to, and ability to maintain employment and voluntary placements, which complemented the course. Therefore, these had a significant and varied impact upon students.

In terms of part-time employment, some students appeared to solely work in industries complementing their studying, such as jobs in schools and sports coaching. Others found work in sectors unrelated to their course, such as retail and hospitality. For example, Vicky (a working-class student) appeared conflicted about whether her work in a pub helped her to develop transferable skills for her course, stating:

> When you work in hospitality you kind of have to, bite your tongue and things like that and just have better manners. I don't know. I work at the pub now, but that's not supporting my studies at all.

Such work had limited transferable value to the course and was not considered to cultivate professional knowledge compared to 'pedagogic work' in schools or sports coaching. Educational work, such as the kind that Alex (a new middle-class student) engaged in, was seen to cultivate capital that students could exchange in the course.

> With my refereeing and coaching … So my first year at uni, I was travelling home on weekends to do my refereeing and my coaching. It's given me more of a confidence base. And just knowledge (of) a lot of practices which has helped me in the course.

Subsequently, for students like Alex, professional knowledge accumulated outside of lectures appeared to have exchange value within the programme and helped students to develop the relevant knowledge which aligned with the HEPE field.

While all five working-class students had previously gained pedagogic experience prior to university, either through volunteering or working – at their schools, in sports initiatives or, in one student's case, at his local Mosque – only one was consistently engaging in this throughout university. While an extreme example, Andre explained how a combination of factors, such as serious youth violence and financial precarity, influenced his own choice to give up the coaching work he had undertaken since he was sixteen:

> I did that for six years it all stopped last year. Because someone got stabbed in one of the sessions … right in front of me … Yeah. Luckily, he was still alive. He was in ICU[4] for three days … it kinda woke me up. It was like he could have died. But then again, I could also have got stabbed in the mixfire [*sic*]

It is important to note, for context, that Andre lived off campus and was commuting to university. Moreover, his decision to give up pedagogic work was informed by both what he saw as the perceived risk – the potential to be a victim of gang violence – and the financial insecurity associated with this kind of work:

> I was working twelve hours a week. But then it was spread over five days because I was coaching … . In two days [of bar work] I could probably do twenty hours over two shifts and I'd be much happier. Then because I get paid weekly, I don't have to stress about at the end of the month. If I have exact money just to top up my Oyster[5] to get to uni … . Whereas last year I had to work the twelve hours minimum … Because if I didn't work the twelve hours, I couldn't travel to uni and I wouldn't be able to pay my bills.

Despite receiving student loans, the sessional nature of pedagogic employment meant it was not always financially or logistically conducive alongside studying at university. While the experiences of only a small sample of working-class students are captured in our study, the shift patterns in hospitality and retail described by Andre that are prohibitive of engaging with more relevant pedagogical work experience are plausibly linked to the circumstances that working-class students are likely to be in while at university.

In contrast, middle-class students within this study did not report the same tensions when engaging in paid employment and placements and were more likely to engage with roles supporting their studies. In particular, students blocked time off either during the semester or over the summer to engage in (paid or voluntary) work experience and were not required to balance time and finances to fit it in. For example, Harry – an established middle-class student – highlighted how he gained work experience via friends and used this to demonstrate professional knowledge through his voluntary placement modules on the course.

> The placements were done through friends. So, it makes it a lot easier when you've got a friend in a school who can go and speak to the head and help you out, it's just (my) go-to strategy.

In these instances, students' social capital allowed them to quickly gain access to schools and sport coaching posts where they could gain knowledge and experience that could then be exchanged in university assessments. Other such examples were middle-class students who accessed placements at their parents' workplaces, or through family friends and wider networks developed through sport or university experiences.

Extra-curricular clubs and societies

Extra-curricular societies[6] (such as sports teams) were popular among students from across social classes but were more frequently accessed by students (across class-boundaries) living in student accommodation. Indeed, all but one student living in university accommodation was a member of a university society, while only two commuter students[7] were members, thus impacting the composition of social capital mobilised during university. Both middle-class and working-class students were members of societies, though notably they experienced these differently. Extra-curricular societies played different social roles, ranging from acting as a surrogate family to being key sources of accumulating capital. For example, Vicky (working-class) described the Volleyball team as being 'like our own little family', and Lewis (working-class) explained the focus on elite sport in his society required immersion in the practices of the club, shaping his daily activities:

> So (training) massively influenced everything we did because we couldn't get away from it. Because we lived it, we trained it, we studied around it.

Thus, societies played a significant role in shaping these working-class students' daily routines, social activities, and sense of belonging at university; they served a social purpose, helping the students

integrate with the university's cultural norms. However, while societies were primarily about socialising, some students utilised these – either actively or passively – to accumulate professional knowledge and experience (e.g. by engaging with students in different year groups). For example, some (predominantly) middle-class students referred to membership in sports teams as acting as a site for networking and facilitating employment and knowledge complimenting their studies, while also supporting them financially. As Alex explained:

> James [a member of the football team] luckily was already working at David Lloyds.[8] They got me in for an interview straight away and the rest is sort of history.

Similarly, Maisie described how her role in the university leisure centre, which she found out about through teammates, supported her studies.

> I used to work the Sunday shift, there was no supervisor, and there was also nothing to do because it was a Sunday, and everyone goes home. I'd book tennis courts at the beginning and then I would sit and re-read my diss [dissertation]. It was perfect. I would absolutely say that's the reason I was able to get a good mark in the end.

Both Maisie and Alex had become aware of these roles through their peers in their societies and maximised these opportunities to reduce the tensions between employment, developing professional knowledge and their academic work; a process that was true for other middle-class students who also lived on campus. Furthermore, they also mentioned discussing experiences of things such as optional units and applications for teacher training interviews with their peers from societies. Notably, this contrasted with their working-class peers, who used sports teams for social purposes or struggled to balance cultivating professional knowledge, employment and studying.

However, not all middle-class students engaged with societies, with middle-class commuter students such as Harry and Ben both highlighting how they tried participating in sports clubs but did not enjoy them. Rather, they valued external opportunities such as working in schools and coaching tennis and football. As Ben noted:

> Twice, I think, I played for the [football] team. It was almost like a turn up, play, go home. I'm not sure some of the old boys were totally keen that I was playing because I wasn't like part of their circle really, which is probably part of the reason I didn't play more. The couple of times that I did play on a Wednesday, I didn't even have time to shower because I'd have been late to get to work. And that was my priority.

Therefore, for middle-class students who already possessed strong professional networks outside of university, these clubs were not seen as essential for either creating a sense of belonging or cultivating capital that could be exchanged on the degree. Subsequently, their choice not to invest in these societies had little impact upon their ability to mobilise knowledge and 'play the game' in lectures and assessments.

Conclusion

In this closing section, we return to our aim of exploring how different forms of capital impacted participants' acquisition of professional knowledge and mobilisation of this in the everyday aspects of their degree. Within the study, we found that both working-class and middle-class students were aware that accumulating professional knowledge externally to the formal curriculum was important to successfully navigate HEPE at St Penelope's. However, social class distinctions were more evident with regard to the accumulation and mobilisation of capital. It should be noted, as a point of limitation, that our observations about patterns between class groups throughout should be appropriately caveated, keeping in mind the small sample size used. While our emphasis has been on developing a theoretical understanding of *how* social class impacts students' cultivation and mobilisation of professional knowledge, there is an inevitable reliance on probabilistic thinking, which would benefit from support from further research that can draw from larger sample sizes (e.g. surveys or qualitative meta-syntheses).

Nevertheless, this study suggests that the ability to engage in academic sessions and build relationships with staff, as well as undertake employment and/or volunteering and engage with extra-curricular societies, all played an important role in distinguishing which students developed a stronger 'feel for the game' in HEPE than others. Adopting Bourdieu's tools to explore the cultivation and mobilisation of different forms of capital helped to identify how students from different class backgrounds 'played the game' in different ways, particularly with regard to developing professional knowledge that was advantageous in both the formal HEPE curriculum and future employability. In this respect, students' behaviours and practices were often shaped by class-related differences in habitus and capital. Thus, while in theory, all were playing the same game, and students were not necessarily competing on a level playing field while doing so. Such insights have enabled us to understand classed advantages of middle-class students, despite their actions not always being conscious or obvious. For middle-class students in this study, the advantages they accrued were not simply from academic backgrounds but also from everyday elements of their social milieus – both within and outside of university. In fact, the internalised logic of navigating spaces such as lectures and sports clubs led to them finding such spaces 'comfortable' and gave them advantages over their working-class peers. Thus, strategies adopted by middle-class students to develop and demonstrate professional knowledge acted to reinforce their position within the HEPE degree at St Penelope's.

In this study, students' capacity to 'play the game' was visible in their attitudes, behaviours and how they interacted with academic staff within and outside of lectures. In this case, it was middle-class students' instinctive understanding of how to act and what to say that allowed them to demonstrate professional knowledge when interacting with staff. In this respect, it was apparent that prolonged engagement in multiple sports spaces – as both a participant and volunteer/employee – shaped knowledge and dispositions, making these participants distinct (Bourdieu, 1984). Moreover, their ability to call upon family and friends to access work experience and to prioritise gaining relevant experience over economic capital helped to cultivate professional knowledge in their degree. These dispositions resulted from cultivating desirable qualities in their youth (Wheeler & Green, 2019), and a lack of constraints associated with their material conditions while at university. Furthermore, their orientation towards sports clubs and societies highlighted an internalised propensity to utilise social capital to generate opportunities leading to professional knowledge and increased employability.

Like Abrahams and Ingram (2013), we recognised that working-class students can experience tensions, in terms of their habitus being compatible (or not) with the university field. As a means to ease these tensions, they often either invested in activities away from university life that had contradictory norms to university or immersed themselves in social fields at university. The tensions working-class students experienced meant they were disadvantaged in mobilising the capital accrued externally in the same way their middle-class peers did. In particular, as articulated within this paper, the sense that academic staff were 'not interested' in them or that they were 'just another number' was profound in shaping their investment in lectures. Moreover, while access to pedagogic experience and professional knowledge was constrained by working-class students' compositions of social and economic capital, immediate financial pressures impacted participants' capacity to invest in the future. Furthermore, even when working-class students were involved in extra-curricular activities (such as societies), they were less likely to demonstrate an internalised propensity for using these as a network to build professional knowledge and prioritised socialising and belonging.

In considering middle-class students' greater propensity to 'play the game' and subsequently accrue and mobilise capital, we argue that it is important for practitioners in the field to recognise that the increased presence of vocational and professional knowledge in HE curricula can work to privilege students with relevant experience. While attempts to embed employability in curricula are often viewed as potentially promoting social mobility, it appears it can act as a form of social magic, obscuring the platform middle-class students have to mobilise differing capitals (Ingram & Allen, 2019). Thus, instead of alleviating social inequalities, it potentially reinforces them.

Consequently, we recognise Koutsouris et al.'s (2021) call to consider how our formal curriculum and practices as lecturers potentially imply idealised notions of students who demonstrate a 'feel for the game'. Our analysis leads us to consider implications for curriculum development in HEPE, and Arday et al.'s (2021) call to recognise the knowledge (in this case professional) we include and assess our students on in our curricula benefits some students over others. As such, attention is needed to consider how we (as academics) conceptualise 'playing the game', and the emphasis placed upon knowledge accrued external to formal curricula. Thus, it is our role to re-imagine the 'stakes of the game' in a way that does not privilege middle-class students' capacity to exchange capital in their favour. Alternatively, we might consider ways we can empower working-class students to accumulate capital and reduce the tensions resulting from economic, social and cultural pressures they may experience. If academic programmes can identify barriers to developing professional knowledge for working-class students and strategies used to 'play the game' by middle-class students, we believe this could enhance initiatives offered by academic faculties targeting supporting opportunities to develop professional knowledge. Hereby, the development of policies and initiatives working in partnership with widening access initiatives and employability services is essential in addressing equity for working-class students.

Notes

1. In England teaching intensive universities are often considered to be newer universities, which were historically polytechnics or specialist training colleges for professions such as teaching or nursing.
2. The NS-SEC descriptors are a set of classifications based upon employment status which evolved out of Goldthorpe and Heath (1992) class schema, and are the most common way to classify class in UK Policy.
3. A PGCE (Post-Graduate Certificate in Education) is a postgraduate teacher training qualification usually completed over one year after completing a students' undergraduate studies if they wish to qualify as a teacher in England, Wales and Northern Ireland.
4. In the UK, Intensive Care Units (ICU) are specialised hospitals treating people who are seriously ill or in a critical condition.
5. Oyster Cards are payment methods for public transport in London. This a smart card system, commuters add money to in order to pay for journeys as they go.
6. A university society consists of a collective of students coming together around a shared interest or engaging in a specific activity, usually governed by the university student union
7. The Office for Students classes commuter students as students who do not live in university accommodation or rented student accommodation in the local area and travel some distance, often from their family home.
8. David Lloyds is a chain of high-end private leisure centres in the UK.

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