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Title: The role of networks and connections in educational elites' labour market entrance

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 Abstract

Despite extensive research on the role of 'personal' capital on labour market transitions, little is known about how those with elite credentials use networks and connection to improve their labour market chances. This becomes especially relevant within debates on the meritocratic nature of the post-industrial labour market. This article investigates how networks and connections aid educational elites to gain entrance into the upper echelons of the graduate labour market in two countries: France and England. Using interview data from final year students from two elite higher education institutions, Science Po and the University of Oxford, it is assessed whether their elite educational experiences are translated into networks and connections that aid their future labour market positions. The findings reveal that in both countries students have extensive opportunities to familiarise themselves with elite employers and create useful networks. In addition, students frequently arrange exclusive internships to seek future opportunities. We argue that these networks and connections are inherent to the elite educational experience and they could therefore help contribute to a credentialisation of the graduate labour market.

1. Introduction

Networks matter in the labour market. Within both economics as well as sociology it is now well-known that many workers find jobs through family, friends and other networks (e.g. Montgomery, 1991; Mouw, 2003), indicating that social ties play an important role in determining labour market outcomes. In his seminal study on the role of social contacts in job mobility, Granovetter (1995) found that, in particular, professionals primarily depend on their set of personal contacts to get information about job-change opportunities rather than more formal or impersonal routes. For example, 65 percent of managerial workers found their job through social contacts. Others found that having good contact networks increases wages and occupational prestige (e.g. Lin 2001).

Within advanced capitalism, education is seen by many social scientists as an important lever of meritocracy, making other ascribed factors less significant. Opponents claim that educational credential inflation caused by educational expansion has provided more scope for the role of cultural and social capital (such as networks) in creating labour market advantage. Yet few have empirically shown to what extent higher education participation plays a role in creating networks and connections leading to labour market advantage. What we do know is that that educational elites have greater access to elite positions in the labour market (e.g. Sutton trust, 2009).[i]

In other words, elite education forms an important condition for employment within the elite labour market. Yet here also the role of networks and connections remains unclear. So what role do networks and connections have within elite higher education? Furthermore, if elite education provides valuable networks and connections, are these based on advanced academic performance and abilities or on opportunities grounded in privilege, class or elitism? This article investigates the use of networks and connections in obtaining access to elite positions in the labour market based on an empirical study of students from Oxford University and Science Po in Paris. It shows that for the members of both groups of students

their educational experience leads to significant labour market opportunities (such as internships) as well as the creation of a network of expertise. Here, networks and connections seem to aid social reproduction of elite labour market positions. We avoid using the term 'social capital' here as it lends itself to too many interpretations. Most fittingly would be a Bourdieusian usage of 'social capital' emphasising the individual capacity of the connections that can be mobilised to strengthen ones position in relation to others. Bourdieu's usage succeeds in capturing differential interests and power relations between groups. However, we use the more descriptive "network and connections" to also explore the less instrumental nature of the relationships that are formed during university. [ii]

2. Educational elites

Within the study of elites, the role of education has been relatively prominent. C. Wright Mills emphasises in his seminal book 'The Power Elite' that for the American elite, education provides one of the major sources of unity among the members of this group. Education is one of the sources of the large social homogeneity within the societal elites. Next to being born in the same upper class, Mill's Power Elites attend the same preparatory schools and Ivy League universities as well as other exclusive social clubs and organisations. This creates further social integration of the elite network. Mills notes:

> 'If social origin and formal education in common tend to make the members of the power elite more readily understood and trusted by one another, their continued association further cements what they feel they have in common (Mills, 2000, p.281)'

Likewise, Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) see education aiding the reproduction of the ruling class. Higher and elite academic qualifications help fill positions of power. The *habitus* and economic capital of the dominant classes provide clear advantage in obtaining access to the most renowned educational institutions which in turn provides access to elite labour market positions. For Boudieu's France, these prestigious institutions are the renowned *Grandes Ecoles* such as *écoles nationale supérieure* and the *écoles normale supérieure*. Bourdieu (1996) states that the high status of the elite institutions serves as a justification mechanism for the labour market advantage of its graduates. Elite institutions produce an elite accepted by society. Yet it requires, in particular, a dominant class *habitus* to get access to these institutions. According to Bourdieu, one also needs the right cultural capital to further secure access to top labour market positions.

Today, educational elites are still known to be more successful accessing top jobs in the graduate labour market. The Sutton Trust (2009) found that access to Oxbridge is an important educational route to the top professions. Eight in ten barristers (82%) and judges (78%) studied at either Oxford or Cambridge universities, as did a majority of top solicitors (53%). Frank and Cook (1995, p. 12) suggest that the nation's elite educational institutions have become, in effect, the gatekeepers for society's most sought-after jobs leading to a race for elite educational credentials. Rivera's (2011) empirical study on the US elite labour market found that elite employers (investment banks, law firms, and management consulting firms) mostly recruit candidates from the four most elite universities in the country, discarding most other candidates. Superior abilities were attributed to these candidates regardless of academic performance. The author writes 'the credential that elite employers valued was not the education received at a top school but rather a letter of acceptance from one (p.79).' Likewise, Ainsley and Morley (2007) found that English employers equated high standards with rigorous entry criteria within their selection process. Excluding non- elite universities was a strategy to save time and money and reducing risk (p.238).

3. Educational credentials and labour market access

It is often understood or hypothesised that modern labour markets are increasingly characterised by efficient selection and allocation processes based on achievement. The role of ascribed characteristics, such as social origin, has diminished over time (e.g. Bell, 1973, Jonsson, 1993). Closely related is the idea of the existence of an education-based meritocracy where educational attainment is seen as the prime indicator or proof of merit. Qualifications warrant skills and expertise. Once the unfair, ascriptive influences are taken out of the system and educational opportunity for all is achieved, the labour market would be fair as well as meritocratic. Goldthorpe and Jackson (2008) sum up this position, 'educational systems can, and indeed must, serve as a primary determinant of merit, and that an appeal to merit can legitimate the differentiation of rewards obtained in labour markets and the wider social inequalities that follow (p.95)'. Likewise it is thought by many that education has become the single most important factor in occupational attainment in modern labour markets as occupation-specific knowledge and skills increasingly decide selection and allocation (Blau and Duncan, 1967; Kerckhoff, 2001). Employers use formal educational qualification as the definite selection criteria and they have become the marker of job-relevant merit. This view is strengthened by empirical

research that shows greater educational attainment increases the chances of being in a higher class or status position (e.g. Heath et al., 1992; Whelan and Layte, 2002).

Among some sociologists, the idea that societies and labour market are necessarily becoming more meritocratic is contested. So-called credentialist theories (e.g. Collins, 1979; Brown, 2001) argue that formal schooling is positively linked to socio-economic success. This is however not a result of the superior skills or knowledge of the well-educated but of their ability to control access to elite positions (Bills, 2003, p.452). The kind of educational credentials demanded in the labour market fully depend on the preferences of employers and the groups that attempt to control certain credentials. Educational credentialism to them is therefore a game of social exclusion where status groups accumulate the desired capital to maintain or create an advantage over other groups in the labour market (Bourdieu, 1984, 1990; Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977; Dimaggio, 1982). In addition, persistent evidence emerges that parental background plays a role in shaping occupational status even when respondents' education is controlled for (e.g. Breen and Goldthorpe, 1999; Savage and Egerton, 1997; Lampard, 2007; van de Werfhorst, 2007). Some have pointed at the role of social skills, soft skills or manners (Breen and Goldthorpe, 2001) or put more emphasis on noncognitive or personality traits in their hiring decisions (e.g. Farkas, 2003; Jackson 2006). Others (e.g. Ganzeboom and Luijkx, 2004) have argued that if degrees become more common within the labour force, it offers a less reliable signal to employers about job applicants' potential productivity. Ortiz and Wolbers (2011) found for 29 European countries that educational expansion lowers occupational attainment, signifying credential inflation. Some point more radically to the possibility that the upper classes have now different means in order to find advantage over the occupational newcomers from lower classes or groups. As the influx of graduates saturates the demand for skilled labour, educational qualifications become of less importance to employers. Author B et al (2004) have shown for the British graduate labour market that employers are increasingly using non-educational signifiers to distinguish suitable from non-suitable candidates. The authors stress that because of the large pools of qualified people, 'personal' qualities of individuals, and their social, cultural and economic backgrounds have been increasingly exposed. It is very difficult for those from disadvantaged backgrounds to demonstrate the 'cultural' capital required to gain elite employment. Inequality is therefore reproduced under the guise of meritocracy.

So for some, educational credentials represent skills, valued by employers in an increasing meritocratic graduate labour market. Not 'who you know' but 'what you can do' is what matters. Yet others see the role of networks and connections increase in the current labour market as the influx of graduates into the labour market has lead to congestion, which has devalued university qualifications and has increased the value of other types of capital.

The remainder of this article investigates the role of networks and connections within the nexus between elite higher education and graduate labour market. We know that networks are important in finding employment. We know that elite education forms an important condition for employment within the elite labour market. So what role do networks and connections have within elite higher education? This question becomes especially meaningful and significant in relation to the debates outlined above, on the role of education within labour market access and social mobility in general. Are these networks the result of superior academic achievement and abilities or perhaps based on privilege or social background (i.e. ascribed characteristics)?

The research questions are thus as follows: Given their proven success in the labour market of educational elites, do networks and connections matter in the transition from education to labour market? If so, how do networks and connections create labour market advantage for educational elites? Is it merely an entry pass or does it provide exclusive opportunity?

4. Methodology

The research evidence presented in this article is based on an ESRC-funded project on the way talent, merit, and elite employability are conceived by elite students in England and France. Both countries have specific elite educational institutions that train most of the nation's elites. In France renowned elite universities, the *Grand écoles* such as the *Écoles Normales Supérieures* and *École Polytechnique* play this role. Hartmann (2007) observes a deep social homogeneity of its members based on a significant social selection and a consciousness of belonging between alumni and students. The author also shows that top positions in all the important sectors and society are taken up almost exclusively by graduates of the Grand Ecoles despite only representing a marginal share of the population.

In England the Universities of Cambridge and Oxford are often considered to be the two most obvious elite higher education institutions. Their social recruitment and educational association with elite labour market positions is similar to France. Hartmann (2007, 70) notes that the two university are less socially homogenous and produce more graduates than the most elite types of Grand Ecoles. For this reason the old boys' network related to these institutions are less tight and less organised. However, English elite 'public' secondary schools can produce such a network.

In England, we have interviewed a cohort of twenty final year students (13 male, 7 female) taking Philosophy, Politics and Economics (PPE) or History at the University of Oxford. In France, we have interviewed a cohort of twenty students (12 male, 8 female) taking the Masters in Political Administration at Sciences-Po, Paris. Both Sciences Po and

Oxford would count themselves as elite institutions – near the top of national hierarchies of prestige but also in international league tables. Both institutions would claim to be 'global universities'. Because of their reputations, they are highly academically selective and so they represent an educational elite. Despite attempts in both countries to widen participation, both institutions recruit mainly privately-educated students from socially privileged backgrounds. So it is important to note that these students in many cases also represent the economic elite and the link between educational attainment and class position can be mutually constitutive. Yet this makes the task of investigating how network and connections function within their labour entrance of even greater importance, as it might explore some of the relationships between economic and educational privilege.

As part of the wider research project, both cohorts were interviewed about their backgrounds, career plans, personal aspirations and perspectives on meritocracy and inequality. Our intention was to analyse these data to tease out the extent to which contrasting structures of competition in France and England led to different strategies of elite employability. During our analysis it became very noticeable that social networks play a distinct role in their labour market strategies and views on employability.

The majority of research that look at the roles of networks and connections have used quantitative methods to tease the role 'networks' and connections (see e.g. Lee and Brinton, 1996; Grayson, 2004, Martin, 2009). They have failed to uncover the subjective experience of those involved and have relied on a set of pre-set quantitative measures or proxies of 'social capital'. The chosen qualitative approach in order to understand the role networks have in the labour access of elite students gives us at the least two advantages over other methodological approaches (e.g. social network analysis). Firstly, it allows us to explore more detailed account of the networks involved within the narratives of the students as well as construct the underlying mechanisms of labour market advantage, albeit based on the views of the elite students themselves. Secondly, by focusing on the subjective perceptions of those students, we can uncover how their potential advantages are justified and understood. In line with a more Bourdieusian approach, we can explore how networks and connections are integrated within the mental dispositions of elite students. For Bourdieu (e.g. 2000), differences in position within a chosen field provoke real differences in perception and appreciation. The interview data brings out some of the reasoning that goes with the positioning towards the graduate labour market. We believe this has considerable advantages over other approaches such as rational action theory as it opens up the relational nature of employability as well as benefits from a more socialized form of subjectivity. A serious disadvantage in our methodology is that it fully relies on the views and experiences of elite students. Their statements cannot always fully reveal the actual influence of networks and connections as not all of them had secured employment at the time of the interview.

The rationale behind using both French and British elite student populations in this study was to provide some opportunity for comparison. Yet for the purposes of this paper, we focus on the group of elite students as a whole as there is compelling evidence that in general networks and connections serve similar purposes for both groups of students. Discrepancies between French and English students do nonetheless exist. Yet all these differences are relatively small.

5. The role of networks and connections in labour market opportunities

The findings of the study showed that for the elite students interviewed, networks and connections play a very important role in finding employment. Both English and French students were well-aware of the need to use and develop their networks and connections. There was a thorough understanding of the value networks and connections in order to create labour market opportunity. Networks provide access to professions and occupations that are hard to access. In particular occupations within the world of finance, law, consultancy, journalism and the civil service (mainly France) are seen to rely on elite institutions to occupy their best positions. Or as one student phrased it: 'Grand Ecoles serve as a signal to enter the professional network' [Gabriel, Paris]. Through the medium of networks, the door from elite institution to elite employer is opened. The students were able to reflect frankly on the role of networks within the education-labour market transition. Many underline that the recruitment for elite labour market heavily relies on networks and that higher education institutions are in the heart of it. The following three quotes all put networks at the centre of their labour market advantage.

I.   Are networks important to you?

'Yes, of course. Without the network, nothing works. I think that's true everywhere. Networks are built differently from country to country but it is important everywhere and particularly in France. In France, nothing like the name of Sciences Po opens doors.' [Hans, Paris]

'It's compulsory for internships in the civil service because there are no clear classified advertisements outside of the Foreign Office. You always have to do unsolicited application. But if this unsolicited application doesn't get on the right

desk, it is fit for the bin! Networks ensure that your application gets on the right desk.' [Jean-Yves, Paris]

I.   So if you look back at three years you did here, what would you say is the most important think that you learned?

'The importance of networking I think, um, because I think that the really sort of elite, really high placed positions, either are not advertised as such so the actual recruitment pool is kind of informal' [Tom, Oxford]

It is understood that within the upper echelon of the labour market there is a homogeneous group that have similar educational ties. Networks therefore are thought to be created whilst at universities and in some cases even before this (e.g. private secondary education). Students acknowledge that there is a tendency to give jobs to those with similar social, cultural and educational backgrounds to themselves. Yet this is not necessarily experienced by the students as problematic. The next quote shows the awareness of this educational homogeneity across the societal elite.

'Although I do think that there is a huge amount of interconnectedness between sort of, almost the social, cultural league if you like, I suppose. Um… scary term but I think, you just have to look at the networks across the BBC and politics and high end businesses and all these people know each other from University, it's normally Oxbridge. Um… and I think that is still um.. the case now.' [Robin, Oxford]

These students realise that in an increasingly competitive (elite) graduate labour market, networking also necessarily closes off for opportunities for those who might not have these connections, even within elite educational cohorts. Asked about the value of networks one student said:

'It is THE most important stuff to get a job. In fact, with equal competence, what makes a difference is your personality, your way of knowing people, of approaching people, etc. And in fact, today the majority of students have been to grandes ecoles,

they have done similar internships...what counts is with whom you got along and with whom you are in touch.' [Aurélie, Paris]

Networks also provide useful information necessary to penetrate a desired sector or occupation. Here networks can help 'being in the loop and knowing where there were positions available, what you need to get to them' [Tom, Oxford]. The students' ideas on the value of networks in labour market access and progression did not appear from thin air. During their education, both French and British students were targeted by employers and in some cases were offered jobs. These opportunities are in most cases only presented to students from elite universities. There were many stories about opportunities arising or being negotiated on the basis of their educational membership. For example, one French student explains how she got an internship:

'This guy in a party... Er, for a cocktail or something like that. And he told me, 'You are at ENS*, I am looking for someone' [...] I contacted him when I was in China and then one thing leading to another... I got it.' [Virginie, Paris]

École normale supérieure

The contacts can be made with relative strangers but also via fellow students who bring in their own powerful networks, exemplified by the next anecdote:

'One day, I heard that her father was a prefect. So I wrote her in the name of our common society. She gave me her dad's contact who finally managed to find this internship for me.' [Jean-Yves, Paris]

Here it must be acknowledged that the group of elite students is not completely homogenous. There is variance within our sample in how networks and connections are significant, for example, between students from different social-economic backgrounds.

6. Networks and connections as part of the educational experience

Education plays a crucial role in providing networks and connections but also legitimizing it. There was a strong sense among the students that the networks and connections are a result of their talent and social exclusivity of their education. Their education does provide excellent opportunities to create a network of useful contacts. For many Oxford students, the

realisation of the importance of the Oxford network does not start until they commence their studies.

> 'I think so, it is one of the things that shocked me when I came to Oxford is that everything worked by networking.' [Sarah, Oxford]

> 'and that is kind of, it surprised me, it is more so than I expected basically.' [Faith, Oxford]

The question why the networks associated with their education are so strong divides the students and causes great ambivalence to many. Some students feel that their universities are a breeding ground of talent. Their education is distinct from others in rigour, quality and/or depth and thus helps create a better type of students. This generates a vibrant 'cultural' environment that attracts opportunity and interesting/interested individuals, organisations and companies. One French student accentuated that networks are valuable because they are based on meritocratic values:

'I've worked at school, I've succeeded at my examinations, so I deserve to benefit from the resources of an old boy or alumni networks [Phillipe, Paris].

Here the 'inherited' network based on family or early life relations is muted. Another students describes it as follows:

> 'so if you have got lots of people at university who […] get to know each other and have similar ideas partly because they are developing those ideas together, if they then go on into later life they are likely to kind of think of the people that had those ideas with when they come to do it. So for instance the cabinet at the moment, you know half of them know each other up to or at school and in a way I think that is a kind of a natural progression that is going to happen.' [Faith, Oxford]

Why don't see students networks as an unfair advantage? It seems the meritocratic assumptions are moulded within their understanding of the labour market. For Bourdieu, a field such as the (elite) graduate labour market is basically defined by a specific logic. [iii] These logics orient actors' particular set of goals as well as justify the pursuit of them. Actors within the field share a characteristic "set of fundamental beliefs that does not even need to be asserted in the form of an explicit, self-conscious dogma" called the 'doxa' (Bourdieu (2000:15). Many of the students in this study had these rather undisputed self-evident

'doxic' ideas on the nature of the labour market that needed neither defence nor justification. The meritocratic assumptions of the labour market tightened the relationship between academic excellence and elite labour market positions, removing the exclusive networks and connections related to their education outside the realm of conscious debate. Bourdieu has noted that capital accumulation is often obscured within the taken for granted assumptions of meritocracy and democracy (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977; Bourdieu, 1984)

Yet not every student thought that networks to be necessarily meritocratic. One French student, Francoise, told us that, according to her, there is a good and a bad network. The good network is based on one's ability and academic merit 'You deserve to have a network' and the bad one is 'inherited' and simply associated with a personal ambition to succeed. Virtually all the students make similar distinctions between legitimate and illegitimate connections (albeit sometimes with ambivalence). Most think that networks derived from being at an elite university are justified being deserving of them. Academic achievement warrants access to elite employers. At the same time most reject the use of family connections as illegitimate. Again, the same meritocratic logic is at play. If the networks can be associated with hard work, the advantages supplied by it, are morally acceptable, and thus the role of the elite university stays hidden.

The deservingness of networks and the labour market advantage was also explained by the social fit between alumni and elite companies with the students themselves. The shared cultural and personal values and experiences would advance working relations in the future and thus makes elite recruitment strategies sensible and understandable. Moreover, personal chemistry and mutual recognition justified these exclusive networks and opportunities. The deserving nature of networks for elite students thus heavily relies on the homogenous nature of those within elite institutions and companies.

Others see networks and connections as necessary evil used by elites to reproduce wealth and status within the labour market.

> 'it is a shame, I just can't really see how you would eliminate it because I think that social connection is one of the ways of, you know, people want to do well for their peers and people in high status positions want to pass that down, they can't do it through a hereditary, it has to be legitimate to do it through a, well literally pass it down but obviously there are ways to get around it and I think that getting formal social connections is kind of one of them.' [Tom, Oxford]

'I mean I think that almost tragically it is the case that you can't get on in life unless you know the right people. You know sort of, that is something that Oxford does give you, it gives you the access to those people.' [Juliette, Oxford]

This un-meritocratic aspect leads some to be critical the use of education-based networks in the efforts to secure employment or work experience as they see them as tainted with privilege and political power. But overall, the socially constructed dichotomy between deserving and undeserving networks and connections tends to strengthen their reliance on what they see as legitimate education-based networks and connections.

7. **Using networks**

The large majority of students in both nations actively used their education and associated alumni, organisations, connections and networks to find employment or work experience. For the French students, their university was in direct contact with elite employers through their career service and university website or via alumni members and professors.

'Sciences Po has really helped me in looking for internships and to know what is available.' [Bruno, Paris]

...I saw an ad on the Sciences Po website. All this because the people who were recruiting in the firm had studied at Sciences Po and still give classes there and they like students from Sciences Po. I applied immediately on seeing the ad. At the same time, I had a friend from preparatory class who had already done an internship with them who briefed me about the internship. I applied and they selected me. (...) In this regard Sciences Po is very good since it encourages you to create your own network very early. Sciences Po Avenir [the alumni organisation] is always meeting old students. When I was thinking about what I will do with my life, I often went to things where people spoke about their job. They encourage teacher-student relations with the system of conference. It is designed for networking: Sciences Po is good. [Aurélie, Paris]

Students also revealed that within elite institutions there is inside information on elite employers and how to succeed in finding employment with them. One Oxford student points at the role of colleges within his institution.

'I think it is developed in a way because the collegial nature of the university. Because you know more people. Whether it is your peer group or whether or not it is your tutors, the college staff, whatever. You are far more involved in that college life and so you get more involved in the careers events and old members, old members dinners and that thing goes on. So you meet people who are at these firms. These big companies and so on. That is a big help and that is certainly you don't really get at other universities. It is that connection I suppose with your wide community and the alumni and so on. So I think it is fostered by the university yeah. In a way, I mean the whole structure, the whole set-up.' [Roger, Oxford]

Throughout the time spent in higher education, a useful network is established in a very natural but also active way. The university environment provides an abundance of opportunity to connect with members of the academic community. The next quote highlights the role of academics functioning as informal gatekeepers of labour market connections as well as information. The importance of sharing of information in labour market success has become well-established within the social capital literature (e.g. Marin 2012).

'There are often visiting professors who come to talk about their experience. There is always a moment when they talk to us about the network. The professors do not forcibly talk about it in class. Not during classes but when we meet them for the class dinner which is always a networking event. There is always a moment when they give us a tip on friends of friends [...] Then they give us their email address, it allows us to send them queries but it is also a way for us to keep in touch and use the contact later on.' [Monique, Paris]

Besides having the opportunity to use networks and connection, students need to know how to optimise these. The students in the study give the strong impression that one needs to be pro-active if one wants to benefit from networks and connections. One has to work on it. The requirements for maintaining a network is described as following:

'being able to speak to people and to convey your passion and sort of knowing what they do, knowing what they are interested in and being able to speak to them about it, if that's what you are interested in as well, I think that would come across. But also, maybe invites to networking events, so sort of you know, I did intern work in the city

last summer, cocktail parties at [*name of large bank*] and sort of everyone else was from Oxbridge.' [Tom, Oxford]

Especially at the many network evenings and social events organised by potential future employers, students cannot sit back but must fight 'for the attention of those few representatives who are there, who are also, you know, obviously being very charming and selling their company (Colin, Oxford). Yet at the same time, it provides opportunity to talk to these employers and gather information; an opportunity that students at other universities are unlikely to get.

The students in this study did not exclusively use education-related networks and connections but would also utilise connections through friends, family and fellow-students. Some students saw their fellow students as just more ambitious, alert and natural knowledgeable than the average non-elite student, making the multitude of useful contact seem natural. In the case of non-educational connections, student's educational status often seemed of high relevance in the establishment of the connection or the advantage related to it. For example, one of the French students used fellow elite students and alumni from the École Normale Supérieure (named *normaliens*) to set up their own business.

'We told a *normalien* friend that we were starting a publishing house. He spoke about it to other friends. One day he came to us saying that people were interested. So we had dinner with four *normaliens* and then me and my associate. By the end of the dinner, they offered to finance us.' [Francoise, Paris]

Not all students at elite institutions are equally able to maintain or use existing networks or connections. Andrew, an Oxford student from a lower middle class background looking for a career in Media well understood that that being 'in the right circles' and 'having done the right internships' were important within the career advancement. Yet he has been unable to reap the benefits from these networks due to financial reasons. He notes:

' I have been unable to do the internships because I couldn't afford to go and live in London for however long and I think that I am probably at a disadvantage there (..), I don't think that I have made sort of any networks that will help me in my career.' [Andrew, Oxford]

The financial and social prerequisites to engage with employers and others further emphasises the conditionality of network and connections. Bourdieu observes the close relationship between what he calls 'social capital' (which include networks and connections) and cultural and economic capital. For instance, cultural capital (as incorporated in the habitus) provides actors with the appropriate sociability and manners to facilitate meaningful relationships. Likewise social capital can be derived from 'economic capital' which provides the means to cultivate the desired relationship (Bourdieu, 1997).

8. The role of firms

Students from both nations do fully understand that elite employers recruit from a limited number of universities. One student commented 'had I not being doing this degree, I don't think my CV would have even been looked at' [Emily, Oxford]. This is seen as a 'natural state' of affairs. Many believe that students from their own university represent more able candidates. Students also are aware that companies exclude graduates from other universities for pragmatic reasons (i.e. cutting down the number of applicants). The next quotes link the exclusive recruitment strategy with business rationality.

> 'so it makes sense for them to come to Oxford and do recruitment fairs which obviously cost money but then on the business side they have got something in return. But I think that a lot of it is just sort of just good perception.' [Sarah, Oxford]

> 'Sciences Po recruit only Sciences Po. That is something that I have seen everywhere. When you have been to this school, you know what it is worth, and you know what a student who graduates from here is worth. You know already to what extent is he good, you know also why he is strong and you are going to train him in that manner.' [Aurélie, Paris]

Next to arguments of efficiency and efficacy there is also need for a social or cultural fit in order to work successfully within particular organisations. Students feel there is natural fit between them and the companies that recruit them. This is caused by a mixture of familiarity and affinity to a particular intellectual culture:

'But in terms if you are looking for like smart people that will fit into your like, work culture, you will probably find them easiest from the top universities.' [Juliette, Oxford]

'almost all of my interviewers for all of the jobs have been Oxbridge students in the past, especially of the [name firm], 3 out of 4 had done PPE, so you instantly have a kind of bond.' [Emily, Oxford]

Firms organise social events where companies and students 'meet' each other. These meetings breed familiarity to both parties, through interaction as well as homogeneity leading to a sort of recruitment courting ritual. This happened more often in the British context than in the French, where the internship had this bonding function. The next Oxford student describes how he was targeted by many firms and heavily participated in social events with them.

'they do dinners, workshop days, drinks receptions, they email you once every two weeks, they try and build relationships with you, basically get pumped full of there propaganda (…) this sounds awful, last week sorry I think that I paid my own dinner once because it is crazy really, the amount of money that is invested in these kind of things. But it is very flattering and you get very nice food, get taken to four course dinners with lots of wine and those kind of drinks […] slightly embarrassing but actually it is nice to be flattered, it is nice to be made to feel like you are important and worth something even if you are not. (Tim, Oxford)

Despite reservations about the motives of companies, students saw it as 'natural' to be surrounded by large employers such as Goldman Sachs or McKinsey and have plenty of opportunity to familiarise themselves with aligned corporate cultures and recruitment practices as well as indulge in free drinks and comestibles. For the Oxford students, the selection of sectors that are seen as being on offer were restricted to finance, consulting and law. For many this ultimately closes off potential employment options in other interesting and meaningful sectors and industries.

Although this study has not engaged with elite employers (see: e.g. Rivera, 2011), it seems having connections or contacts within companies may help individuals find employment. Within the literature on social capital in the recruitment process, it has been argued that firms using referrals provide significant benefits, in particularly in employee performance (e.g. Castilla, 2005; Dustmann et al 2012). Burks et al (2013) show that referred workers are

substantially less likely to quit and perform better and argue that referrals select workers who are better suited for the particular job. Yet others have shown that there remains great inequality in terms of who has the right type of contacts (Stainback, 2008) and who can activate or mobilise social connections (Smith, 2005), creating disadvantage for ethnic and social minorities.

9. The role of internships

As increasingly common within the whole of the graduate labour market, both Oxford and Science Po students use internships to gain work experience as well create career opportunities. In many cases the internship was organised through their university, a university tutor, an alumni or through other social networks. Students also approached firms or organisations directly, in particular at social events. Many students have had internships with different companies at different stages during their course. During these periods students try out what type of positions, occupation, or sector matches with their own skills, what type of work suits them and what they are interested in doing. Through multiple internships, often at prestigious workplaces, students also gained insight into their own strengths and weaknesses and the competition for jobs. This sharpened their own employability strategies and modified career objectives. The next quote is from a student who after numerous internships found the internship at a company she liked. She was offered a job with them soon after.

'I think I decided reasonably early on that I was quite interested in investment banking and again because I like following the markets and what goes on in business and am kind of looking at companies. And so I think that I sort of got involved with doing various programmes and so I kind of did a couple of one day sort of inside intern banking things, I did a programme, a week, two weeks over the Easter with *[name of large bank]* and then another two weeks when, like later on, when they turned into *[name of large bank]*. I did a week with *[name of large bank]* and I did another event with [*name of large bank*] and so I sort of built up my kind of understanding in different areas of investment bank. And then, yes so that sort of culminated last summer in doing the internship.' [Juliette, Oxford]

The internship serves as a key tool in a wider labour market project where through experience and self realisation the student aims to find the best match between him or herself and a labour market position.

In general, both participation in, as well as perceived value of internships was higher for the French students. Internships were compulsory within many of the Science Po courses. Like many other European countries (e.g. Germany or the Netherlands) in France, there seems to be a closer functional linkage between higher education and the graduate labour market compared to Great Britain (Leuze, 2011; Author A, 2012). This means that the function of internships (e.g. work experience, matching) remains the same but internship are institutionalised within French (elite) Higher Education. For example, for Science Po students, the entrance into the civil service was made possible through exclusive internships that were only available to them. British students still rely very much on internships but seek more often alternative routes like graduate fast-track programmes, which are likewise strengthened by networks and educational status.

10. Discussion

We identify three important conclusions from the analysis. First of all, networks and connections seem prominent into gaining access into the labour market for both English and French educational elites. It was shown that there was a clear understanding that networks and connections are of strategic value in their employability. Networks and connections are not seen as a 'given', easy accessible, resource. They were seen as something that needs to be created and maintained. Yet students downplayed the privileged position they were in to be able to use or create the networks and resources to gain access into the elite labour market. Some students acknowledged the inequality of opportunity but very few fundamentally questioned the legitimacy of the advantage networks and connections provided. The role of networks and connections seems to compromise the idea that elite labour market use graduates from elite educational institutions solely because of their superior 'human capital' (which would yield higher productivity). A picture emerges that, next to selective practices of employers that discriminate non-elite graduates, elite students benefit from insider opportunities (e.g. internships) that are linked to their educational status. Some might argue that high calibre workers will naturally be targeted by interested employers as well as be successful in creating their own opportunities. However the study showed that the students' education provides systematically advantaged conditions to compete for highly sought after jobs. This is not to dismiss the qualities of all the high-achieving students that we

interviewed, yet it does mean that the labour market advantage of educational elites is not purely or necessarily based on merit or educational performance.

These outcomes also contradict those who claim that the education is becoming a signifier of ability or productivity. They (re)confirm the idea that credentialism affect the elite labour market as well as the idea that 'non-meritocratic' characteristics (such as social origin and connections) matter within the graduate labour market. The students' degrees can serve as a credential on their own to a certain extent, but the social (as well as cultural) capital attached to it also remains very valuable.

The importance of networks for elite students to access desirable employment can be understood as a response to the congestion of the graduate labour market as a whole. As the supply of graduates increases and the number of top positions stays stable, individuals will seek to acquire in addition non-educational credentials to signal distinction to future employers. Despite the fact that a significant share of the elite labour market is largely closed off to those without elite educational credentials (as demonstrated by Rivera, 2011), other areas are less so. In addition, talented graduates from all over the globe are increasingly targeting the same top jobs (Author B et al 2010). Credential inflation does not fully spare the educational elites. Graduates from elite educational institutions always have used exclusive networks to find employment. Yet our study has found evidence that networks have become active tools in the positional competition for elite jobs. Networks and connections have become more important to elites as a source of positional advantage, and also to employers as a way of recruiting at a time when they are inundated with applications. Students from both countries felt that the competition for a livelihood had become more intense especially in comparison to their parent's generation. Through active mental categorisation between legitimate and illegitimate (e.g. family) social resources, exclusive education-based networks and connections are deemed both acceptable as well as crucial in order to attain advantage over fellow labour market entrants. Deeper understanding of use and transfer of selective and exclusive resources such as connections and networks within the context of an increasingly competitive graduate labour market can increase our understanding of the social reproduction of elites. Also, combining and/or integrating both qualitative and quantitative research strategies can help distinguish relevant factors within the elite graduate labour market as well as outlining underlying mechanisms.

A second conclusion is that networks and connections are integral to an elite student experience. A distinctive feature of the modern functional elite is the cultivation towards and the development and understanding of, the elite labour market, through the educational process. Whether in the lecture hall, at university social meetings or external corporate events, the familiarisation with elite employers, gatekeepers of information or otherwise

useful contacts are woven into the university experience. For the French students in particular, exclusive internships were part of their education and as such formed a conduit into the elite graduate labour market. For the students labour market distinction is achieved through academic performance (having gained access to and a qualification from an elite institution) but equally through developing networks and benefitting from selective opportunities. These exclusive experiences are then added to the already advanced social and cultural capital that many already posses through family life and/or private education.

The most salient point here is that students use the connections and networks that reach parts of the labour market that non-elite students cannot. Within a congested graduate labour market using these exclusive opportunities seem fundamental to the labour market success we know elite students will have. Likewise, companies are offering exclusive sponsorships and internships and network opportunities primarily to the educational elite. This is in accordance with their recruitment and selection strategy that seeks to limit the number of potential candidates in order to reduce costs. The nexus between elite higher education and the upper segment of the graduate labour market has tightened not in a traditional, academic sense but through cultural homogeneity and strategic connectivity. Elite universities function as important sites for the tightening to emerge through development and utilisation of exclusive networks and connections.

Students from non-elite university are asked to compete for top graduate jobs despite their relative disadvantage. They are faced with a higher education system that symbolically places great value on those who have managed to get access to elite institutions whilst actively reproduce these ideas through socialisation (see: Author A, 2013). This is unlikely to change any time soon. As Hartmann (2010) observes, 'The more closed the social recruitment of elites is, the more strongly their actions will be oriented at their own advantage, the more they will ignore the interest of the average people and deeper is the gap between the rich and the poor (p. 319).'

A third conclusion relates to the wider debate about internships and their access to the professions (e.g. Snowdon, 2011; Wilson, 2012). Many like UK Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg have observed that social mobility is greatly hampered by unequal access to internships (Clegg, 2012). Others have observed a stark class divide between who can afford to advance through unpaid internship and those who cannot (Curiale, 2010). Our investigation provides evidence that students from working class backgrounds therefore are less likely to benefit from internships in a second way. As working class students have yet to fully penetrate prestigious higher education institutions, their internship opportunities are even more limited. Even if they do, they might not benefit from them. This means that

curbing the use of unpaid internship, despite being potentially effective does not solve the whole problem as intra-institutional educational inequality will not disappear. It is beyond the scope of the article to find policy options that would tackle this problem. Yet it seems that if the relationship between higher education, elite networks and the professions remain unaltered, efforts to widen access to a university may never achieve greater equality of opportunity in the competition for a livelihood.

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[i] We understand elite education to be prestigious top-ranked educational institution. Within higher education this means those universities topping international comparisons such as QS-Times Higher Education's Annual World University Ranking or the Shanghai Ranking List, aided by a global reputation of excellence. In most cases these universities are highly selective on who enters.

[ii] It must be noted that strictly speaking we do not actually empirically observe the network. This would require a network analysis.

[iii] Bourdieu defines fields as "spaces of objective relations that are the site of a logic and a necessity that are specific and irreducible to those that regulate other fields" (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992:97).