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### Citation for published version:

Berg, T, Bowen, T, Smith, C & Smith, S 2017, 'Visualizing the Future: Surfacing student perspectives on post-graduation prospects using Rich Pictures', *Higher Education Research and Development*, vol. 36, no. 7, pp. 1339-1354. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2017.1325855>

### Digital Object Identifier (DOI):

[10.1080/07294360.2017.1325855](https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2017.1325855)

### Link:

[Link to publication record in Heriot-Watt Research Portal](#)

### Document Version:

Peer reviewed version

### Published In:

Higher Education Research and Development

### Publisher Rights Statement:

This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in Higher Education Research & Development on 16/5/2017, available online: <http://www.tandfonline.com/10.1080/07294360.2017.1325855>

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# Visualizing the Future: Surfacing student perspectives on post-graduation prospects using Rich Pictures

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# **Visualizing the Future: Surfacing student perspectives on post-graduation prospects using Rich Pictures**

## **Abstract**

The gradual commodification of higher education in the context of an increased focus on graduate employability attributes together with evolving labour markets is creating challenges for universities and students alike. For universities, there has been significant investment in careers services and, through institution-wide initiatives, employability or graduate attribute development established to support graduate transitions into work. Meanwhile, for students, experience of part-time work together with pessimistic post-recession employment discourses are challenging the notion that a good degree guarantees their future career prospects. Simultaneously, decreasing financial support from the state has resulted in worrying levels of debt for new graduates. This pilot study was designed to gain a fresh perspective of how students imagine themselves following graduation. The study used rich pictures (RP) as a methodology to explore student views of life beyond university in the UK and Canada. Content analysis of the RPs provided insights into their thoughts and anxieties about potential challenges for the future. Students presented both positive and negative visions of their future, with success in achieving a respectable performance in their final degree as the key differentiator. The insights gained are discussed in the context of related research into students' concerns and university initiatives to support students throughout higher education and then into graduate employment. The findings revealed student motivations, hopes and fears which can inform the development of impactful university interventions.

## **Keywords**

Graduate futures, future selves, rich pictures, graduate identity, employability.

## Introduction

While student funding models vary, university strategies focus on creating work-ready graduates ready to contribute to economic growth in contemporary businesses: graduate employability is now 'at the centre of the Higher Education agenda' (Pegg, Waldo, Hendy-Isaac, & Lawton, 2012, p. 6). However, the transition from university into graduate employment is challenging, as the number of graduates increases faster than suitable vacancies (Green & Zhu, 2010; Abel et al., 2014; Docherty, Jones & Sileryte, 2015) and employers expect demanding combinations of skills in their new staff, encompassing technical skills, teamworking capability, communication skills, social skills, confidence and a positive attitude towards work (Griesel & Parker, 2009; Hernandez-March et al., 2009; Smith & Smith, 2016). Furthermore, the acceleration of technological innovation means that higher education must prepare students for an unknown future like never before, and help them see their position in relation to an increasingly globalised economy (Barnett, 2012).

The discourse surrounding graduate attributes and higher education accountability is often predicated upon a problematic assumption that the skill levels of new graduates are reliably aligned with employer expectations (Tomlinson, 2010). However, employers in many industry sectors are turning to evidence beyond degree classification, such as extra-curricular activity, evidence which is often culturally situated in terms of building social capital and thus not universally accessible (Handy, Hustinx, Cnaan, & Kang 2009). For recent graduates moving into new jobs, careers have become less predictable, with fewer examples or expectations of stable, lifelong trajectories; instead, graduates experience increasingly frequent transitions (Savickas, 2005). Trends in the labour market show increasing reliance on fixed term contracts, zero hours positions and freelance work (Office for National Statistics, 2015). In response, university employability initiatives now typically encompass adaptability and flexibility as core skills (Tomlinson, 2007; Yorke & Knight, 2007).

Universities are embroiled in an existential struggle in the face of globalisation, privatisation, massification and state withdrawal of support. While Barnett (2012) predicts the death of universities in the face of super-complexity, others would claim that universities have always adapted to change through the need to serve different functions – from educating theologians, and then civil servants, and more recently the professions (Watson, 2002). Recent trends have challenged universities to become more *customer-focussed* and business-like with key performance indicators including student satisfaction (Sabri, 2013), degree level expectations

measurements for quality assurance (Heap, 2013; Lennon et al, 2014) and graduate employment outcomes (Diamond et al., 2015). This is a reflection of a world increasingly driven by economics, with technological changes facilitating data acquisition and information exchange. But while universities are preoccupied with these challenges as they relate to themselves, the question should be asked: to what extent are universities also aware of individual student aspirations, expectations and concerns in this context, and how might these be changing? Are universities truly preparing students for career complexity beyond graduation?

In this context, our study set out to explore students' perspectives of their futures to provide insight into the nature of the student journey through university, and in particular for students approaching graduation. Two universities in the UK and one in Canada were selected as sites for a pilot study to explore student perspectives across different contexts, with seemingly similar new-graduate challenges. While the selection of only three sites is too small to gain a global perspective, this pilot explores the potential for a global discussion on students' perspectives that speaks to world readiness beyond the traditional skill development and graduate attribute discussions of the past. The particular research question under examination is, how do students imagine their 'future selves' - with a view to reconsidering the purpose and impact of university interventions ostensibly designed to prepare students for life beyond university?

## **Imagining a 'future self'**

A future self is an imagined future identity. As first introduced by Goffman (1959) identity entails enactment and multiple identities co-exist (for example, Stryker 1980). Studies have focused on the use of 'possible selves'(Markus & Nurius, 1986), a term used to describe imaginings of who one might become, in other words, a new self-identification. Possible selves represent the range of selves that may emerge from our interactions with the world including the self we are at the moment, the self we hope to become through some form of identity work, and the self we are afraid of possibly becoming (Markus & Nurius, 1986). Ibarra's (1999) much-cited paper on provisional selves suggests an identity adaptation process, considering the enactment of a possible self as a temporary solution bridging the gap between an individual's current capacity and self-concept on the one hand and their understanding of the attitudes and behaviours expected of them in a new role on the other.

Ibarra & Petriglieri (2010) introduce the notion of identity play, finding evidence that transitions create the conditions for the exploration of new provisional selves where play is undertaken away from the workplace with a view to 'test limits and possibilities' (p. 18).

Tomlinson (2010) suggests that graduate employability is dependent on the identity work of new graduates within the wider social economic discourse of employability that is underlined by 'purposive and meaningful action [...] contingent upon conditions in the labour market that may give rise to particular dispositions and orientations to future work and employment' (p. 74). Identity work, the process of constructing and negotiating identity, is itself dependent on the attitudes and lived experiences of new graduates, going beyond skills and knowledge acquisition.

To provide a holistic view of students through university, Penttinen, Skaniakos and Lairio (2013) propose a model for working life orientation that sees, at its heart, qualifications and competencies; identity construction; and labour market possibilities with universities well positioned to provide education, careers guidance, peer support, relevant work experience and other experiences in order to provide a preparedness for working life supported by reflection and an inquiring attitude. There have been calls for a rejection of the skills-based focus on employability, to consider instead the construction of a *graduate identity* (Holmes, 2013). Stryker's (1980) encompassing Identity Theory holds that i) behaviour is dependent on interaction with a categorised world and its expectations, ii) people share understanding of these expectations i.e. we behave as expected, we expect others to as well, iii) these shared expectations guide future behaviour with further meanings developing from agency in social interactions. Student and graduate identities are therefore experienced differently. Holmes (2013) presents a claim-affirmation model of emergent identity, based on students interpreting learning on the basis of making (warranting) identity claims. The model starts with an undetermined identity and includes zones for indeterminate, imposed, agreed and failed identities; with universities positioned to create resources for identity work. The premise is that if students construct a graduate identity they are more positively oriented towards a graduate future.

Cameron (1999) suggests that the social context of university life provides an opportune environment for developing and achieving the hoped-for possible self and the 'avoidance of feared selves' (p.181). However it is the balance between the possible self and the feared-for self that is important in understanding how students see the challenges and possibilities for

future careers. Without this balance, the possible self, particularly in regards to career development, may appear beyond attainment (Pizzolato, 2007). Pizzolato contends that ‘it is through the identification of hoped-for possible selves and feared selves that students find motivation to continue down particular career paths and actively avoid others’ (p. 204).

These studies raise the question of whether possible selves might form part of students’ future expectations; might act as a resource for identity adaptation towards a self-identification as a professional.

### **In consideration of futures**

Universities are a fertile ground for shaping future expectations and, with investment in new curricula, employability initiatives and development of graduate attributes, they are in effect accepting some responsibility for students’ futures beyond graduation. The extent to which imaginings or expectations of the future can influence future outcomes has been widely researched from various perspectives. One perspective is individual reflection which encompasses expectations which are held to be ‘beliefs about the future’ and fantasies which are fanciful imaginings ‘depicting future events’, for example wishful thinking or day dreaming (Oettingen & Mayer p. 2002, p. 1199). Oettingen & Mayer (2002) found a marked difference in graduate outcomes between expectations and fantasies. Students who had positive *fantasies* about life after graduation were found, two years after graduation, to have applied for fewer jobs with less success in their careers than those who had expressed positive *expectations*. Meanwhile, negative fantasies were found to lead to agency in avoidance of a less positive view of the future – and subsequently led to preparation for setbacks which has been linked to increased resilience (Martin, 2002).

Other studies have considered identity-based motivation theory to find motivational power to be sensitive to an individual’s context (Oyserman et al., 2015; Oyserman et al., 2007; Hogg, 2000). In Oyserman et al.’s (2015) study, contexts were categorised as success-likely or failure-likely. In a university context a success-likely context might be enrolment on a course at a prestigious university, while a failure-likely context might be joining a course with low levels of graduate employment. They conclude that, as life is likely to throw up both success-likely and failure-likely contexts, interventions ‘should not focus exclusively on building accessibility of either positive and negative possible identities but rather should bolster both’ (p.184). Motivation to action through consideration of possible identities has been linked to

imagining temporally close possible selves (Esner-Hershfield et al., 2009) and associating a possible identity with a strategy for attainment (Oyserman et al., 2004).

## **Surfacing perspectives through rich pictures**

This study explores how penultimate year students studying computing and digital media courses view their futures, in order that universities can recognise future aspirations and the impact the university can effect in providing a place where such expectations and fantasies are formed. To understand the diversity of student hopes, expectations and concerns for the future we used a technique called the rich picture (RP). The RP is a collaborative drawing which encourages discussion and debate supporting empathetic understanding within groups. Pictures are usually drawn in small groups of 4/5 participants on flip-chart sized paper with coloured marker pens. Originally developed by Checkland (Checkland, 1981; Checkland and Scholes, 1990), the RP is a familiar tool used in information systems (Bell, Berg & Morse, 2016) to gather understanding about human activity for system design by assisting the exploration of different world views within a complex situation. Using drawings or pictures as a way of representing problems or issues is widely used for collaborative problem solving, and the power of diagrammatic representations to evoke and record human perspectives is widely acknowledged across a range of domains including sustainable development (Bell & Morse, 2013), social entrepreneurship (Curtis, 2010), information visualization (Engelhardt, 2002) and knowledge representation (Bowen & Evans, 2015).

Visuals have the capacity to communicate irrespective of possible language, culture and educational barriers and thus the 'story-telling through pictures' aspect of the RP becomes a powerful device for community engagement. Such engagement gives researchers insight into tacit perceptions such as motivations, hopes, fears, goals and threats. The visual aspects of the RP provide a safe and friendly platform to share experiences, agree or argue issues, communicate purpose and discuss concerns. RPs have been shown to be particularly appropriate in contexts which are worrying, contentious, or 'political' (Avison and Wood-Harper 1991, p. 99). In this instance, the approach afforded an opportunity to explore students' situated perspectives on issues that might be perceived as potentially personal and sensitive, in a supportive and non-intrusive way, while also providing rich and nuanced data (Kesby, 2000). The pictures produced capture not just representations of the physical world, but conceptual and emotional aspects relevant to the individuals concerned, aspects which alternative methods may not elude in the same manner.



## Methodology

Data was gathered and analysed through qualitative methods centred upon the RP tool. Student focus group workshops were held in two UK universities and one university in Canada, the home institutions of the researchers. 22 students were recruited at University 1, 9 from University 2, both located in the UK, and 15 students were recruited from the Canadian university. All student participants were in year three of a four year degree programme and were studying computing/digital media based degrees. Six were female, 40 male. The students were selected through advertisement within each university with no limitation on age or previous work experience. Our research approach was based on an understanding that student future expectations would be diverse in nature and that different cultures may face unique challenges but also have similar concerns. Ethical clearance was received from all three institutions involved.

Workshops were held in each university during the early months of 2016. Figure 1 is an example of one of the 12 RPs collected in this project.

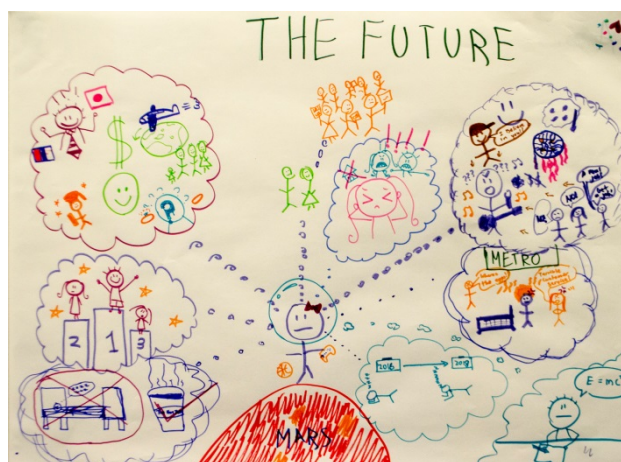


Figure 1 Example rich picture from the study

Each session involved students drawing collaboratively in small groups of 2-4 for around 20-25 minutes. Following this, each group then explained to the other groups what they had drawn and why. RPs were facilitated using the same introductory slides and the same timings and materials across all three universities with limited facilitator input to encourage group discussion. This style of RP facilitation has been termed 'eductive observation' by Bell et al.

(2016). The impact of the facilitators on the dynamics of the groups was considered and each workshop established a common context for participants to reduce the influence of existing relationships and avoid bias. Care was taken to ensure introverted participants did not default to the suggestions of stronger or louder group members. The pictures were numbered and the participants anonymised. The discussions were audio recorded and later transcribed. Participants were asked to draw their pictures based upon eight questions written on a slide which was titled; What are your hopes, dreams and expectations for the future? The following questions were solely suggestions and were proposed as an aid to stimulate conversation.

- Why are you at university?
- What do you hope to achieve?
- What are your plans for the future?
- What motivates you?
- If you have been employed before then what was your experience? Did you learn anything that might be useful for future employment?
- Tell us about people who matter to you ? (friends, lecturers family, employers)
- What are your pressures? What worries you?
- Do you think your course will help you achieve your successful outcome?

Taking a grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss,1967), analysis of responses to the questions was undertaken by means of inductive content analysis as described by Strauss and Corbin (1990). Thirty-three different codes were accumulated across all RPs from the three institutions. The codes were subsequently grouped together into four key analysis themes; desired objects, emotional wellbeing, possible futures and concerns relating to the future. A colour coding system was applied to the transcripts which separated each theme into themes of specific repetition. This coding took place independently by three researchers to ensure inter-coder reliability. The RPs were also coded using the same themed colour coding system which was influenced by educative rich picture interpretation (EI) as defined by Bell et al. (2016). Icons were isolated within the key themes when they represented an issue, action or emotion that was particularly significant, expressive, sensitive or descriptive. We looked specifically for instances where the pictures communicated additional knowledge to the

textual description on the transcript. Finally, the pictures were analysed for common RP iconography to consider their use in this context.

## Findings

Through analysis of the RPs and coding the corresponding transcripts the following themes were identified and coded as: desired objects; emotional wellbeing; possible future pathways; and, concerns about the future. The importance of a ‘good’ degree was identified as the differentiator.

### The importance of a ‘good’ degree

In terms of their close future, students place importance on degree attainment as their starting point and there is a sense that a good degree classification (or good grades) is essential to their future expectations and fantasies being realised. Anything other than a good degree is deemed a failure. The RP excerpts for each university are depicted in Figure 2. In the first picture both alternatives are shown – the successful graduate on the left hand side and the failure notification with bills piling up on the right hand side. The noose adds a macabre touch. The second and third example in Figure 2 suggest the competition students face and the importance of ranking through their respective education. One of the Canadian groups describe this competitive attitude as ‘driving in the fast lane’, represented by a racing car on a roadway.




UK: University 1	UK: University 2	Canada: University
		

Figure 2: Gaining a good degree

### Desired objects

Students also imagine what their degrees could buy them. These were coded as ‘desired objects’. Acquisitions include houses, cars, travel, alcohol, luxury items, and sports season tickets. Student 5 in University 1, “I want to also get a first degree, a half decent house and I want to see Hibs win the Scottish Cup”. Student 3 in University 1, “be on the beach getting served cocktails.” Student 1 University 2, “so we’re all kind of agreed on obviously money, family.....and basically having all the luxuries as well that come along with [a degree].”An

example of a desired object excerpt from each university is depicted in Figure 3. The car manufacturers are named to show aspirations for high value items. The ring emanates sparkle to show clearly that it is a diamond with both monetary and romantic connotations.

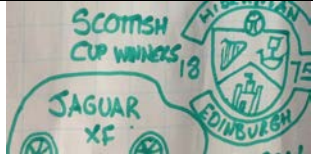
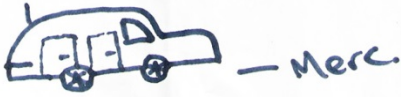

UK: University 1	UK: University 2	Canada: University
		

Figure 3: Desired Objects

### Emotional wellbeing

Students also express what their degree could facilitate, coded as ‘emotional well-being’ and visualised as a strong emphasis on future family life, travel, a stress free life and relaxing with friends (Figure 4). In particular, there are depictions of students having the opportunity to start their own family because they are established in a career.

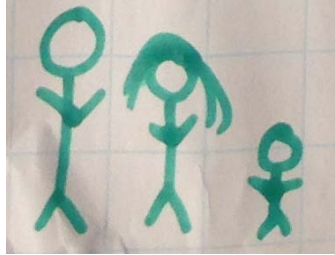

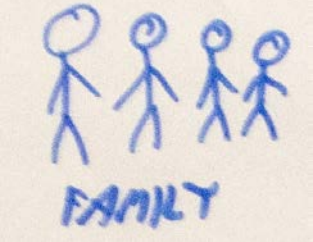
UK: University 1	UK: University 2	Canada: University
		

Figure 4: Emotional well-being

### Possible future pathways

Under ‘possible future pathways’ students depict themselves in situations where there are multiple paths ahead and multiple options meaning challenging decisions (Figure 5). One such is the possibility of emigrating to another country for work. Another is starting a business. One of the groups depict possible pathways emanating from a confused figure in the centre. The UK RPs have icons relating to further study in university whereas this is not discussed or drawn in the Canadian pictures.


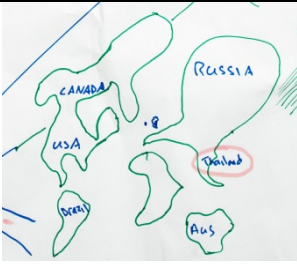

UK: University 1	UK: University 2	Canada: University
		

Figure 5: Possible future pathways

Finally, concern is expressed in the RPs about what might happen in the future, less positive imagery of alternative futures (Figure 6).

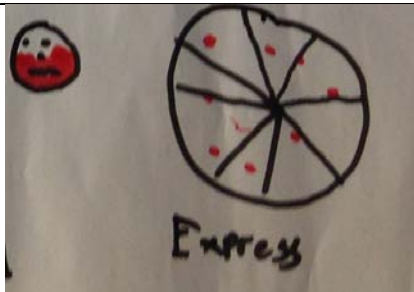

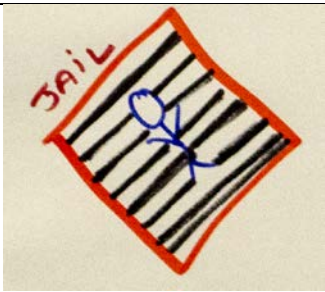
UK: University 1	UK: University 2	Canada: University
		

Figure 6: Concerns about the future

There are many concerns depicted in the RPs with much of this anxiety regarding matters of finance and worry about achieving future high income earnings.

Other concerns relate to achieving respectable jobs drawing on the degree discipline. Icons depict the worry of poor employment options such as embarrassment at being found by friends working in a pizza place (Figure 6, University 1). The jail icon (Figure 6, Canadian university) represents a concern that if an individual does not get a good education, they may not develop the decision-making skills enabling them to properly evaluate situations, putting them at risk of making the wrong decisions. Wrong decisions would lead to a negative consequences and an undesirable future. We found the pictures often more expressive than the spoken explanations when discussing future concerns, however some students voiced their thoughts; student 8 in University 1 “ *if I fail then I will become a dead student*” and student 1 in Unverity 2; “ *if you don’t pass you’re not going to get a good job so ... you’re going to be in the gutter*”. The RP is used to help understand problematic and complex situations and thus concern icons can sometimes be dark and perhaps morbid. These so called pathological icons (Berg, 2013) are often metaphorical and sometimes satirical but can give

valuable insight into the human psyche. The 12 RPs from this study have 3 pathological icons; a gun representing the wider worry of possible wars; crowds jumping from a building representing suicide to avoid a corporate job (Figure 6, UK University 2) and a student hanging representing degree failure (Figure 2, UK University 1). Gaining a good degree is depicted as the way of avoiding negative futures. A strong emphasis in the UK RPs is placed on gaining a high level degree whereas this seems less of an issue in the Canadian pictures. In Scotland, the term 'good degree' in the main represents a 1<sup>st</sup> class honours degree; Student 13 in University 1 "*so the obvious one for us all, being here, is we all want a good... a first class degree*". For others it is less well defined; Student 1 in University 2, "*after you graduate you've got it there in front of you to show that you have actually achieved a decent mark.*" Degree classification together with the reputation of the institution impacts on the success of employability (Morley, 2007). The Canadian students recognize the reputation of their university (publically ranked as one of the top tier Canadian institutions (Deschamps, 2014)) and do not question the value of the degree, assuming it would be highly respected. They are more concerned with the cost of attaining that degree as one student from the Canadian university described, "we have the picture of the ATM with the bank balance of zero because [the university] drains out your accounts."

The UK students overlap considerably on acquisition of property, cars and other manifestations of a well-paid job. These do not feature as prominently in the Canadian students' pictures. The Canadian groups are more altruistic and mention helping others, volunteering and experiencing diversity as being part of their futures.

A common visual icon in RPs is the litotes or prohibition icon (Ibid.). This is usually drawn as a circle containing an object representing the restriction and a crossed sign through the circle showing the prohibition. These are visually strong icons as they show clearly and with determination what is not desired or allowed. There are 13 instances of prohibition icons drawn in this study with some of these being shown in Figure 7. Examples are crossed-out icons regarding addictions (stopping smoking and gambling in the future), crossed out \$ signs (worry regarding not having enough money) and future housing issues.


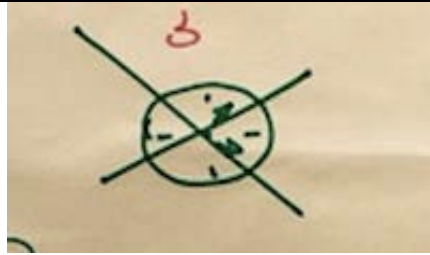
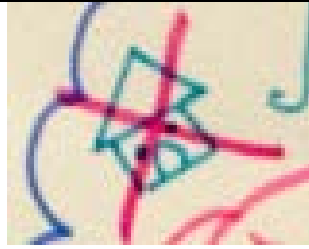
UK: University 1	UK: University 2	Canada: University
		

Figure 7 Prohibition icons

There are 2 instances (Figure 7, UK University 2 and the Canadian University) of the same prohibition icon being drawn in Canada and UK. The crossed out clock face icon depicts the rejection of expectations around working a standard 9-5 routine. For the Canadian students, this is particularly important as three different groups stress their anxiety over being trapped within a 9-5 job or within a restrictive work environment filled with cubicles. One Canadian female student stated “we don’t want to feel trapped like being in a 9-5 job [...] we don’t want to feel restricted or limited . . . caged like in a small space where you don’t have the option to be flexible with your life.”. The Canadian students’ motivations are more centred on family in terms of the expectations they feel from parents and extended family members, and the students’ own motivation to make their parents proud. Links to family are evident in all four Canadian RPs.

Affirmation icons are also prevalent in the RPs with ‘smiley faces’ being the common distinguisher but others being the sun icon, stick figures with arms raised as well as ‘thumbs-up’ and tick icons. One group produced a prohibition and affirmation icon bounded in a single story (Figure 8, UK University 1). The group described this icon as representing what they might have to leave behind as students (sleeping when they want) and replace it with more caffeine to counteract the effects of the changes they foresee occurring with full time employment.

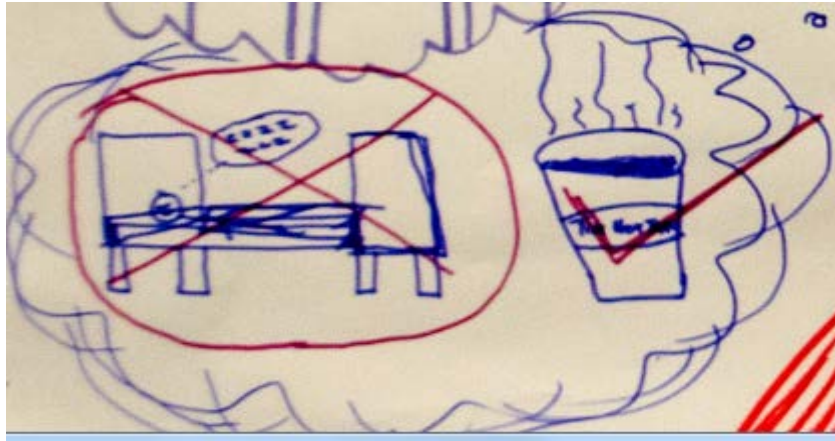


Figure 8 Example of affirmation and prohibition icons (UK University 1)

The relationship of the facilitator to the student groups impacted on the nature of the rich pictures. In UK University 1 participants show, through their pictures and transcripts describing the pictures, a relaxed existing relationship. In UK University 2 motivation and encouragement by staff, in particular one of the facilitators, is shown as a factor in successfully obtaining their good degree. The Canadian participants had a comfortable relationship with the facilitator, aware of her role within the department. The comfort level facilitated detailed and enthusiastic story-telling by each group, thereby shedding more insight into the use of icons to represent various feelings, pressures and excitement about the future.

## **Discussion**

Imaginings of future selves are both positive and negative and are considered below in terms of expectations, fantasies and possible selves.

### **Positive imagery**

Positive imagery includes travelling the world as parents and partners. Wide circles of contacts and socialising with friends are also depicted in a positive way. Positive expectations as beliefs (Oettingen & Mayer, 2002) are expressed as graduating and the benefits of graduating, in particular, with a first class, or good, degree, often depicted as a podium with first, second and third place winners. All participants were in the later years of their courses and had been successful in navigating into and through university. High expectations of success have been shown to lead to strong performance (Anderman et al., 1999), while strong performance reciprocally leads to high expectations of success (Bandura, 1978). Positive expectations have also been shown to lead to increased agency in job seeking and career



success (Bruner, 1990; Polkinghorne, 1996; cited in van Rijswijk, Akkerman, Schaap, & van Tartwijk, 2016) . The notion of a degree facilitating a bright future closely represents the way universities market their courses with the inference that if you do not get a degree life will be somehow a lesser thing due to limited opportunities. This, unfortunately, does not fully reflect employer expectations which place importance on purposeful additional activity, beyond a good degree classification.

Positive fantasies or imaginings of a positive future include fame, fortune, a stress-free life and travel. For the UK students starting their own business is revealed as a positive fantasy. These goals, as elsewhere (van Rijswijk et al., 2016) lack specific information about how they would be achieved beyond the acquisition of a good degree. A picture of a more liberal tradition of education (Godwin, 2015) emerges from the Canadian pictures which look beyond work to consider a future which includes helping people, volunteering and paying attention to wellbeing. These notions could be advantageous to realising a satisfying career after graduation. For example, Zacher (2014) found that being open to new experiences influenced career adaptability and noted that ‘career adaptability is an important psychosocial resource of employees in a time of more unpredictable, diverse, and global careers’ (p. 197). The positive imagining of a future life facilitates the development of a positive possible self representing what one could become through positive choices in relation to, and the avoidance of, what not to become – a feared for self (Markus & Nurius 1986; Cameron 1999; Pizzolato 2007).

### Negative imagery

Negative expectations are depicted as the consequences of not obtaining a good degree and include notions of failure, lost opportunities and even suicide. Work is not seen in itself as a positive outcome in expressions of the future. Indeed there is no positive work imagery, rather the anticipation or fear of a restrictive work environment inhibiting happiness and quality of life. Future workplaces are depicted in general in a negative way with figures trapped behind desks or contained by large corporate headquarters. Archer (2007) recognises increasingly value-driven approaches to work and life; individuals’ desire to *move on* in terms of the life they want to lead, rather than *move up*. While the rich pictures methodology offers valuable insights into the students’ perceptions of their future, as the pictures in this study were created in groups of students, peer pressure may have influenced the contents of the pictures. Oettingen and Mayer (2002) note their research participants’ likely reluctance to cover negative content that is socially undesirable or positive content that they fear ‘might not

come true or lead to ridicule' (2002; p1208). In this case the student participants may have focused on the dominant discourses of their peer groups, such as worries or ambitions concerned with money. All 12 RPs across the three universities drew synecdoche dollar or pound sign icons representing their concerns with money. Student debt is a particular concern for the Canadian students. They described how much of their money had gone toward paying for their education and they were still paying. They picture their student debt as following them into the future and as an obstacle to someday alleviate (see Sagan, 2014).

Negative selves reflect failure and this failure is represented as visible to others. One example is a picture of a figure in the gutter, looking up at the stars with successful people walking by. Another is the embarrassment of serving in fast food restaurants, generally serving more successful graduates. The negative fantasies of the non-graduate workplace depict shame. In particular the imagery conjures up low status and low paid work, citing well known low cost brands, and in many cases reflecting current part-time jobs. Labour market discourse including the impact of new work contracts which favour the employer at the employees expense, have been found elsewhere to be leading to a more transactional approach to work which is challenging previous so-called psychological contracts based on mutual trust between employer and employee (Noon, 2013).

Possible selves researchers (Markus & Nurius 1986; Cameron 1999; Pizzolato 2007) all stress the importance of the balance between the hoped-for desired self with the feared-for undesirable self. Indeed balanced future identities have been found to increase goal persistence (for example, Oyserman & Markus, 1990; Strahan & Wilson, 2006) and better grades (Oyserman et al., 2004). Participants visualize both of these aspects, claiming that a good or respected degree is the required capital for achieving success and staving off the potential of an undesirable image, albeit they acknowledged challenges in the process.

In these pictures, education is seen as a means to an end, not an end in itself. One of the Canadian groups depict the university as a savings bank with student money pouring in. It is clear that the students' pictures reflect the binary narrative of a good degree and that they have positive expectations offering a resource for successfully realising this outcome. This is a simple marketing message for universities in a commercial competitive environment. But is it selling students short? The outcome of a highly paid job is satisfaction only in the things that that could buy. Leaving employers recruiting mercenary employees with a transactional view of work would not serve either companies nor graduates well. The Canadian students

however, also illustrate a hopeful future, again not through employment, but through depictions of diversity and hoped-for engagement with other cultures as a way to contribute to society and the world.

## **Conclusion**

This study invited student participants to share images of their hopes and fears of their futures beyond university life. Scott (2015) contends that universities must begin preparing students to be work ready 'plus' so that they can meet the new challenges presented by shifting workforces in uncertain times. The 'plus' is what a student gains through leveraging connections, developing empathy, recognizing the need for reciprocity, adapting to new situations and confronting the unknown, much of which falls within the affective domain of learning and capacity building (see also Fullen and Scott, 2014).

For universities with concerns for their graduates' employment outcomes, facilitating student consideration of their future selves, whether within success-likely or failure-likely contexts, will impact on those outcomes. This will affect whether they are producing graduates who are merely work ready in a transactional sense – a student who focuses on avoiding the feared for self, or world ready through a desirable possible self. Whether through employability initiatives or graduate attribute development activity, finding ways to support the development of balanced future selves will not only affect motivation but also prepare graduates for the challenges ahead. Further research on students' perspectives of who they want to become as future professionals, workers, and citizens is needed to support a balanced approach to developing graduate attributes that better align with the challenges of the world beyond higher education and promote desirable future selves.

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