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Graduates' conceptions of meaningful work

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Abstract

This paper explores how meaningful work is conceptualised by recent graduates. Whilst the imperative to maximise economic returns from higher education (HE) endures in HE policy, less attention is given to how meaningful work is and its relationship to values and identities. Based on a qualitative study with recent graduates in the United Kingdom, the findings show that graduates' conceptions of meaningful work centre on three, often interconnected, dimensions: meaning in the work itself as an expression of self and a vehicle for self-actualisation; meaning at work through the context of a working relationship and social relatedness; and meaning from work as a set of perceived societal outcomes. These dimensions emerge as crucial in how graduates frame the value of work and provide a motivational and affective heuristic through which they define what is of value in present and future work. The precarious socio-economic context reinforces the need to achieve meaningful work and shapes the alignment between desired and achievable future selves. There are significant educational and workplace implications for those on both sides of the HE/work nexus. Crucially, there is a need for HE institutions, work organisations and public policy to find ways of supporting graduates to identify and pursue meaningful work.

KEYWORDS

higher education, sociology of education, workforce development

Key insights

What is the main issue that the paper addresses?

The paper addresses the core issue of how recent higher education (HE) graduates understand and conceptualise meaningful work, an issue largely under-explored in the graduate employment field. Addressing this issue enables us to better understand how this may be approached by key actors in the HE/work nexus, including recent graduates.

What are the main insights that the paper provides?

The paper develops novel empirical insights centred on an original conceptual framework of graduates' conceptions of meaningful work. This empirically derived model indicates that meaningful work centres on three core dimensions, what we define as *meaning in work*, *meaning at work* and *meaning from work*.

INTRODUCTION: MEANINGFUL WORK, HIGHER EDUCATION AND GRADUATE FUTURES

The concept of meaningful work has received growing attention as a research field within the work and human resource literatures (Bailey et al., 2019; Blustein et al., 2023). Given the potential centrality of work as a core activity within an individual's life course, the pursuit, lived experience and outcomes of meaningful work have salience for individuals and work organisations. Policymakers' rationales about education and work decisions, in the United Kingdom but also more broadly, centre disproportionally on their economic returns. By contrast, the notion that work provides a sense of purpose, engendering experiences of both self-actualisation and self-transcendence, is often crucial in discourses about meaningful work (Allan et al., 2019; Michaelson et al., 2014).

A starting focus for the analysis of meaningful work has sometimes been the task-related dimensions of work—individuals' undertaking of specific job tasks and roles—and how specific work tasks are aligned to individuals' education or skill levels (Allan et al., 2019). These are often overlayed by more affective and experiential markers of meaning, for example the feelings generated from work (e.g., freedom, pride or satisfaction) and its perceived wider social value. A further level of analysis concerns the contextual mediators of work, such as the design of work activities and workplaces and their impact on employees' motivation and sense of purpose within work.

This paper investigates the way in which recent graduates construct notions of meaningful work. Whilst analysis of graduate transitions, career behaviours and employability have become more widespread and nuanced in recent decades (Akkermans et al., 2024; Jackson & Tomlinson, 2020), there is a limited body of literature on their understanding and conceptions of meaningful work. The current context suggests that greater efforts should be directed to this area. Concerns with decreasing levels of employee motivation, engagement and quiet quitting have heightened, particularly after COVID-19, with negative effects on economic growth (Hamilton et al., 2023). The CIPD Good Work Index shows a decrease in discretionary effort since 2019, as well as a 30% increase (to 47% of respondents) in the view of work being 'just for the money' (Brinkley, 2024: 7). Hamilton et al.'s (2023) generational analysis of quiet quitting in the United Kingdom found that this was more pronounced

among the younger generations—where many recent graduates are found. Recent years have also witnessed increasing concerns with the levels of inactivity in the United Kingdom (McCurdy & Murphy, 2024). Much of this is related to increasing mental health problems. While the relationship between mental health and work is complex and bidirectional, finding meaningful work may help recent graduates to navigate a path into employment.

All of this reveals a need to better understand how recent graduates conceive meaningful work. Addressing graduates' conceptions of meaningful work offers a significant insight into their motivations, values and what they expect from future work and workplaces. Higher education (HE) graduates make an important case for the analysis of meaningful work because: (i) it is often assumed that they will achieve more rewarding, skilled work that facilitates meaning, despite continued evidence of career setbacks, mismatches and under-employment (Rothstein, 2023); (ii) much of the debate about graduate 'success' has used economic markers which convey limited insight on what is valuable in graduates' working lives; and (iii) recent contextual changes, including COVID-19 and, more recently, rapid developments in digitalisation and artificial intelligence, potentially shape the meaning that graduates ascribe to current and future employment.

The paper proceeds as follows. We first provide an overview of the concept of meaningful work and show how there continues to be a dearth of research relating to graduates' employment transition and outcomes, despite the growth of research adopting so-called 'thicker' (Souto-Otero et al., 2023) analyses of employability, encompassing career development learning (Brown et al., 2022), values and identities (Jackson & Tomlinson, 2019; Siivonen et al., 2023). After describing the methodological approach, the paper moves towards an empirical account which outlines graduates' conceptions of meaningful work that identifies three main dimensions: meaning *in* work, meaning *at* work and meaning *from* work. We then discuss the implications this has for HE institutions, work organisations and policy in supporting graduates' pursuit of meaningful work.

Meaningful work—complexities and intersections

Whilst definitions of meaningful work vary and distinctions are sometimes drawn between the 'meaning of work' and meaning*ful* work, a core principle is the ways in which individuals appraise the relevance and standing of their work in relation to their overall sense of life purpose (Pratt & Ashworth, 2003; Lips-Wiersma & Wright, 2012). Crucial to this understanding is the idea that work matters, has purpose and value beyond pecuniary concerns, and potentially results in experiences such as 'when an individual perceives an authentic connection between work and a broader transcendent life purpose beyond the self' (Bailey & Madden, 2017). Individuals come to define the role that work plays in their lives, in maintaining their sense of place in the world and its interaction with other life goals. Overall, meaningful work is that which facilitates a sense of purpose and allows individuals to express values and creative endeavour and derive fulfilment within and beyond their work (Rosso et al., 2010; Steger & Dik, 2010). Meaningful work also facilitates a sense of agency and alignment between individuals' values and their work activities and outputs (Steger & Dik, 2010). Rosso et al. (2010) emphasise that meaningful work is that which affirms a strong sense of self, helps facilitate the expression of values and motivation and generates positive overall affect. Thus, meaningful work tends to make individuals feel closer to their work and fulfils a variety of personal motivational needs.

There is also a body of thinking that conceives meaningful work as transcendent of the self, as the work aligns to a wider social good or service that is sometimes inscrutable in its nature (Madden & Bailey, 2019). Related notions such as 'vocational mission' speak to the quest individuals may have to use their work as a platform to provide a wider public good

beyond their own personal priorities (Souto-Otero et al., 2023). Jobs with lower status (e.g., garbage collectors) can sustain narratives of meaning based on public good service and witnessing tangible effects of labour. A more recent discourse has centred on purpose-based organisations and the extent to which these can motivate and inspire employees to fulfil a variety of needs, including a sense of connectedness and moral purpose. These two approaches to understanding meaningful work—individual and transcendent—are closely related. As Rosso et al. (2010) discuss, sources of meaning are often intimately related to questions about self and identity: whilst work may have transcendent value, this is often mediated through its role in actualising and affirming one's sense of self.

The time dimension of work, not only job content, was also shown to be a strong mediator in how employees appraise the meaning of their work (Bailey & Madden, 2017). Work can be meaningful if it provides better access to leisure and facilitates a balanced interplay between paid and unpaid activities. Bailey et al.'s research (Bailey & Madden, 2017; Bailey et al., 2024) on employees across different sectors revealed a variety of cross-cutting themes in how employees attributed meaning to work. Salient are a series of meaningful moments or exchanges, including witnessing the manifest fruits of one's work on the lives of others, or being recognised and valued through a work activity. Examples include nurses, lawyers and creative artists generating meaning through situated episodes (interactions with patients and clients, effecting emotions from others), where meaning is brought to life and publicly enacted. Importantly, there is a reflective and discursive component to meaningful work whereby individuals engage in conscious deliberation, during and after work episodes—what has it all meant? A temporal dimension also comes into play in terms of the importance of feelings of being in greater control of the timing of work processes, and having freedom to dictate the time and speed of work.

In the organisational literature, meaningful work has been related to agency, communication and the creation of value to others in a collective context and has become strongly associated with positive outcomes such as the level of employee engagement in both workplace activities and personal career development (Coetzee et al., 2023). Those who ascribe greater meaning to their work are more prone to demonstrating higher levels of motivation, commitment, company loyalty and enhanced productivity and performance, largely because such ends are underscored by a sense of creative endeavour (Allan et al., 2019). These are all areas in which labour markets across different national contexts are seen to be struggling.

The concept of meaningful work is often contrasted with meaningless work, associated with work adding little value to the sum of an individual's existence beyond a living wage. Marx (1977) conceived labour alienation as a condition entailing the suppression of individuals' need for creative expression through their labour, whereby a worker is disconnected from both the processes and the products of their labour. The employee is a reified part of the production system that extracts value rather than nurturing creative potential. Later commentators such as Braverman (1974) and Sennett (2006) extended this approach to the deskilling of labour through automation and the gradual obsolescence of discretionary craft work, reducing an employee's command of both the conception and execution of their labour.

In a more recent guise, Graeber (2018) conceives ‘bullshit work’ as work that adds limited value—with minimal social or organisational function or outcome: ‘Hell is a collection of individuals who are spending the bulk of their time working on a task they don't like and are not especially good at’ (Graeber, 2018: xix). Jobs that are superficially important, have glossy titles and credential requirements can still have limited meaning. A higher-status white-collar manager aware of superfluously leading a team of self-sufficient colleagues who resent their presence may derive less meaning from work than a hairdresser or a manual worker who witnesses the tangible outcomes of their labour and receives favourable social signals. Hoeyer and Wadmann's (2020) research on organisation contexts marked

by growing data intensification and digital managerialism revealed that employees' experience of meaninglessness was most keenly felt when short-termist values (e.g., meeting contestable targets) and technocratic opacity were seen to delimit professional evaluative judgement and autonomy.

Meaningful work, higher education and graduate outcomes

The notion of meaningful work has been a marginalised area in debates on the value of university education. HE itself has experienced intensified pressure concerning the value of its offering, mainly relating to the provision of access to well-paid and skilled employment (Bridgstock & Jackson, 2019; Jung, 2022). As has been extensively discussed before, such framings offer a hollowed-out approach to the social value of HE, whereby its purpose is reduced to economic goals (Tomlinson, 2018; Souto-Otero, 2010).

The continued critique of human capital and skills-centred approaches to employability remains legitimate given the enduring preponderance of such discourses in framing the debate on the value of HE, and the quality of teaching and learning. There is, however, a growing acknowledgement of the relevance of meaningful work in graduates' future employment outcomes. The current Graduate Outcome Survey asks a specific question concerning the extent to which graduates 'find their work meaningful'. As a relatively isolated component of the survey, it is largely devoid of any discussion on how they attribute meaning. There is also limited connection to the workplace context (e.g., workplace organisation, design, training and cultural dimensions) in influencing such responses.

A useful distinction is made by Souto-Otero et al., (2023) between 'thin' and 'thick' approaches to employability, which can be extended to the meaning of work. The former approach has become prominently associated with policy-based prescriptions about what effective graduate outcomes should constitute principally framed around being able to demonstrate successful returns on investment (Holmes, 2023). Meaningful work is one component of a 'thicker' approach as it is developmental and processual and entails graduates making meaningful connections between their formal and non-formal/informal educational experiences and their approach to their careers, including the wider social value (Hinchliffe & Jolly, 2011). The more relational approach to employability and careers connects to substantive developmental approaches to finding alignment between HE-related experiences and future employment outcomes. This extends to alternative ways of conceiving 'graduateness' beyond the instrumental gain (Ashwin et al., 2023; Marginson, 2024), that embraces notions of self-formation, human agency and capability, towards enriching the moral and publicly orientated dispositions of recent graduates.

These wider issues present an opportunity to go beyond current graduate outcome measurements by investigating how graduates conceive the meaning of their current and/or anticipated working lives and the different dimensions around which this is constructed. This paper therefore addresses the following objectives:

- How do recent HE graduates conceptualise meaningful work?
- Can these provide further insights on how the pursuit and realisation of graduates' meaningful work can be supported across different stakeholder groups?

METHODS

This paper's data is based on a qualitative component of a larger study combining interviews and surveys with recent graduates from UK Higher Education Institutions, which had

been ethically approved by the lead author's institution. The study drew upon 56 individual interviews with graduates who were between 6 and 18 months post-graduation: 47 had graduated in summer 2020 and 9 in 2019. These formed a sub-sample within an earlier survey that had been disseminated to graduates via a group of Association for Graduate Careers and Advisory Services' Heads of Careers Services, who facilitated the dissemination of the survey to their recent graduate population. Those who indicated a willingness to be interviewed were contacted, with a low response of around one in seven positive responses. Overall, there was a reasonable balance of gender, type of HE institution, subject discipline and ethnic and age profiles. The interview sample consisted of 30 female graduates, 24 male and 2 nonbinary. Of these, 39 fell in the 21–25 age bracket, 8 in the 26–30 age bracket and 9 in the 30+ age bracket. These profile differences, however, did not appear to fundamentally shape the nature of the data in relation to the substantive themes that emerged.

There was variation in the employment circumstances of the graduates interviewed, ranging from those who had been unable to find employment or were in contingent and temporary employment (just over half the sample) and those who had managed to secure employment and were either in graduate training positions or in relatively junior graduate positions (just under half the sample). Within the former group, there was further variation between those who were dissatisfied with their current employment and wished to secure more favourable work and those who were biding their time before starting chosen work or further education. Around two-thirds of the sample indicated that their early transition from HE to employment had been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Interviews lasted on average between 45 and 60 min and were recorded and transcribed. The interviews began in a loosely structured way whereby participants were invited to discuss their current situation and their main experiences post-graduation. The interview then moved towards more semi-structured areas that explored the perceived state of the labour market, the ongoing impact of the pandemic and challenges for those leaving HE. Graduates were asked about their approaches to managing their early employment, including how they were being supported in finding work or in their early employment. Questions also specifically focused on what they valued from their work, what kinds of things they wanted to achieve from their work and how important their current and/or future work was to them. The interviews were often infused with graduates' narratives of sense-making and meaning-making in the context of a turbulent labour market, the perceived impacts of the COVID-19 context and their endeavours to manage these challenges.

In the current analysis, thematic salience—the relative importance of a theme within the data—was explored, attending not only to the frequency of mentions of a topic but also to how strongly participants discussed it and its relevancy in relation to the research questions. During this process we drew particularly on questions about the importance ascribed to interviewees' future work, interlinked with other questions exploring the perceived effects of recent labour market and social changes. The study adopted a principally inducive approach to developing its analytical narrative, combining analysis of semantic viewpoints with more latent ideas that underlay the surface level of the text (i.e., the meaning behind the meaning) (Saldaña, 2015). The analytical framework was informed by the overarching thematic content relating to the variety of sources of meaning that, in turn, generated dominant coding schemes (e.g., meaning and self-identity; meaning in work settings), which further resulted in ancillary codes (e.g., actualisation and realisation). The analysis was then refined further to encapsulate the complex layers of data (and their intersection), which helped to construct the thematic schemas discussed and outlined below.

Meaningful work

The analysis revealed three areas of discussion about the meaning of work. The first of these, meaning *in* work, contained substantive issues relating to the ways individuals positioned work as denoting aspects of self-worth and identity formation (what the work says, or what they want it to say, about themselves and how this is experienced). The second domain, meaning *at* work, centred predominately on the affective and processual dimensions of work connected to labour processes and organisational features that shape meaning (who you work with, how you do the work and in what context). The themes of labour process value including autonomy, working conditions and positive social connectedness were salient. The third domain, meaning *from* work, concerned the appraisal of meaning from the wider outputs or effects of one's work beyond the immediacy of experiencing and performing it. What did they want the work itself to achieve (if anything) within the social domain? The data also revealed converse negative discourses on meaning, expressed as an antinomy to the more affirmative themes. In some cases, graduates were either experiencing this in their current role or referred to undesirable outcomes to be avoided and linked to certain circumstances (e.g., being under-employed, unsatisfied, bored, trapped). See the authors' model in Figure 1.

These domains were not mutually exclusive and often presented thematic coupling. Pertinently, both labour processes and outcomes appeared conjoined in that the meaning that graduates attributed to work emerged from their immediate experiences and relations of work, but also from its broader social and economic value. Contextual influences were prominent in graduates' appraisal of meaning, including time in the labour market, previous experiences (which may have included periods of lower-valued work experience) and, most saliently in this context, the COVID-19 pandemic (which was often experienced as a destabilising force). The latter had implications particularly for the meaning of financial return: rather than an indication of core markers of objective career success

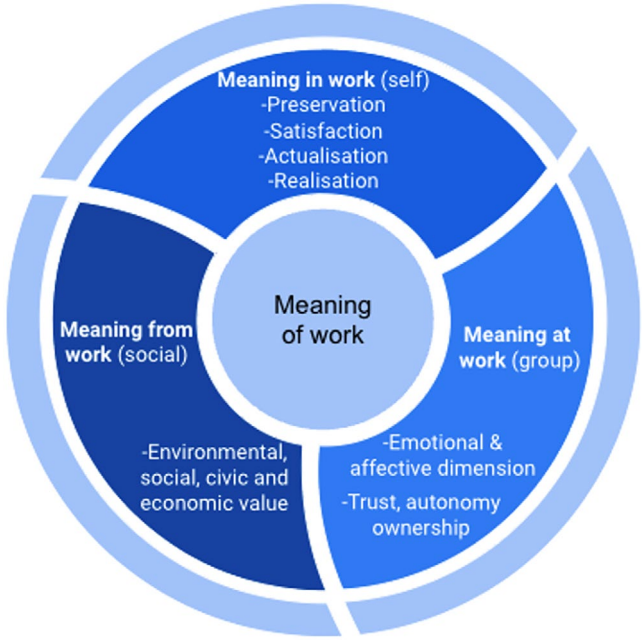

FIGURE 1 Sources of meaningful work for graduates.

or concerns with maximisation of returns, meaning was often framed in terms of financial security in the context of a challenging economic climate. Below, we discuss each of these areas in more detail.

Meaning in work—meaning, identity and self

Self-preservation, self-actualisation and self-realisation

For participants, work was a non-discretionary matter: they had to work. But it was also a source of meaning, fulfilment and identity. How work contributed to meaning ran in a continuum: from earning a living (preservation) to enjoyment (satisfaction), developing (actualisation) and becoming (realisation). 'Thin', instrumental and materialistic conceptions were rarely mentioned as a source of meaning, although the need for an income was a given. When material elements were mentioned, this was not framed in terms of 'competition' and maximisation of income, meritocracy or social mobility—key terms entrenched in the policy discourse on graduate outcomes. In fact, multiple interviewees positioned themselves in opposition to financialisation discourses. Instead of a race to the top, interviewees referred to ideas around 'self-preservation' and being able to 'earn a living' through decent work. This was the case as other facets of life were more valued:

> *I don't* [think] *we need to get absolutely to the top. I do want to get promoted a few levels, but I don't feel that my career is my kind of top priority in life in all honesty. I think the top priority in life is: am I happy, am I comfortable and how are things going now? I don't feel the need to just get promoted for the sake of getting promoted*.
>
> (Economics, Male, Public-Sector Management Trainee)

> *Yes I want to achieve things and yes progressing is important but also there's more to life. So it's I would say like a seven, a six or seven now out of ten. Because it's so important to me and I get a lot of validation out of my career, but at the same time I can also get validation and be proud of myself for the volunteering that I do or for*
>
> (Health and Social Care, Female, Health Administration)

Thus, as opposed to the more instrumentalist preoccupations of *homo economicus* in search of maximising earning potential, many of the motivations around financial return were expressed in more circumspect terms: having sufficient means to get by, live independently and afford a middle-class lifestyle, including home ownership and holidays. It is important to underline that this rejection of ideas of upward mobility and income maximisation cannot be assumed to be external to individual lived experiences. In several cases it appeared to be the result of a process of reformulating individual goals, following a realisation that social mobility will not happen:

> *I accepted a long time ago I was never going to be very rich*. (…) *Maybe when I was younger, I felt differently. I don't know. I thought having a big house that I know was like, oh, what? My kids have a big house. I don't care like that. Obviously, I want my kids to be happy and to have everything that they need. But I think it's so important for me that you enjoy what you're doing. I just can't envision not wanting that*.
>
> (English and Drama, Female, Freelance Performer and Teacher)

The contextual reference framework of the COVID-19 and post-COVID-19 labour market was salient in supplying graduates with a sense of what was important and how this may contrast with present anxieties. A recurring issue across some interviews was a desire for existential stability, including meaning through job security and stable employment. In particular, those who had experienced difficulties in achieving graduate work were content to have a 'working life' rather than a 'career' and seek meaning outside of work.

It is also important to underline that the link between work and income was not only associated with self-preservation but included notions of preservation/work as care for others. This was particularly the case for participants in the process of family formation (Schmidt, 2018):

> *I've just had the wee one. My main focus is just to stay in a job to be honest, just to get something that will bring in the money for us so we're comfortable and just make sure she's looked after but as far as where I want to go, I'm not too sure yet.*
>
> (Human Resource Management, Male, Banking Management Trainee)

For a higher share of interviewees, meaning came not from high incomes but from satisfaction, passion and enjoyment rather than elusive material rewards. This was often connected to the idea of time. First, was number of hours spent each day at work. Second, interviewees considered their working lives to be too long to be doing something that they saw as not enjoyable. Work and life were contrasted, noting that work takes time from life ('half of the life'), from early in the morning to late in the day. In this context, the importance of enjoyment at work and being intrinsically motivated was emphasised strongly.

> *I think, any job that you're happy to wake up* [at] *7 am in the morning for. Because I know, at the time when I was in placement, and I woke up and I just don't want to go to the job. Because I just wasn't enjoying it.*
>
> (Business and Management, Male, Unemployed)

Such a reflection was again particularly important in the context of COVID-19, which had made participants reassess their priorities by underscoring both how quickly once-taken-for-granted experiences could suddenly become impossible and, more broadly, the fragility of life. This is arevealing angle, since it is suggestive of the way in which COVID-19 has affected values and preferences at work (Reeskens et al., 2021) and also how it has done so in very specific ways: participants could have reflected on the importance of material gains from work to be better prepared for difficult labour market conditions such as those that emerged with COVID-19; but this was not raised during the interviews, maybe as a result of COVID-19 showing '*how temporary things can be*' (Female, Health):

> *I think this whole Corona thing has really … I don't know about you or anybody else, but for me it has been a very transformative experience, in terms of making me realise what is important in life—being happy and just doing what you enjoy I value so much more than just money.*
>
> (Male, Environmental Sciences, Part-Time Employment)

Self-actualisation goes beyond enjoyment, to refer to the achievement of one's full potential and the development of one's abilities in an environment that provides sufficient challenges to learn. Having colleagues who can teach and provide the right support to 'go somewhere' was thus important. This was connected to understandings of self-worth but also expressed in varied ways, with some respondents emphasising the external markers

of career success (e.g., visible achievements and outcomes) in providing self-validation. Yet intrinsic values tended to predominate:

> *What's really important to me is a sort of career where I can use my brain and I'm like always be learning because I find that really interesting. I don't feel like I should stop learning just because I graduated. Create more outputs based on my knowledge. Most career sections in most companies will offer a lot around your learning*.
>
> (Psychology, Female, Unemployed)

> *Progression not to feel frustration: whether that be up the career ladder or towards professional certification*.
>
> (Engineering, Male, Part-Time Employment)

> *That's my future career-wise, I'm looking for a career that I can continue to learn and grow in. And for me career is a massive thing for me*.
>
> (Finance, Female, Trainee Accountant)

The interviewee providing the last quote referred to her internship as a crucial development period of acculturation, which had augmented the capabilities and dispositions developed through her degree programme. Being able to exercise these in practice was perceived as affirming an identity that had been consolidated during this work experience:

> *In terms of when a problem arises or you have to analyse something and can get to the bottom of that. I'd find that even during my internship I loved that. I would think that that would sort of arise and you had to analyse it and you finally solved it. So if I had a sense of accomplishment*.

Self-realisation—the understanding of who one is and the achievement of one's self, rather than one's potential—through work was a final motivation related to the self. Graduates who had orientated to a specific occupational area wanted their work to both reflect and express their identity:

> *I feel that I have never been that person who would say that a job would identify who a person is. I've never been that person*. (…) *I now feel exactly that, that I am tied down to who I am. If I don't get a job, I am a failure. I have to go back. I have failed at everything. And if I do get a job, I have passed a test that has been put and I have succeeded, and now I can look up, just have my chin up in the air*. (…) *Your job does not tie your identity down* (…) *however the conflict within me is just so strong that I just cannot look past going back*.
>
> (Economics, Female, Part-Time Employment, Casual Work)

In many ways, ideations around the anticipated culture, modes of practice and expected persona of these occupations figured prominently. Some of these graduates were waiting to enter a target profession, whilst others had already taken up a role in an organisation and were looking to firmly establish an identity within a sector or profession. In most cases, those who strongly identified with a profession were perceived to have a well-defined organisation role and identity, often in contrast to more indeterminate identities as students.

The notion of being able to be authentically involved in work and finding alignment between values and work activities, was strongly connected to self-realisation. For some this represented a continuity between emerging identities formed during HE and the

identities they sought to inhabit when in specific work roles. There were clear linkages between those who had a strong career orientation and the perceived role of work for their identity. Related to this was the fulfilment of a clear 'vocational mission' and the notion of a 'calling', which helped orientate a graduate to a specific occupational mission (e.g., helping clients, developing learners) that can define both an immediate and longer-term purpose.

Some participants, it should be mentioned, took a very contrary stance to the above. They noted that work is not their life and did not define their identity, even if some still referred to enjoyment:

> *But in my job, I want to be able to enjoy it and progress in it, but I don't think it's my identity. I think it's more just a means to an end, but I want to enjoy those means while I'm doing it. I want to be able to feel I'm doing something productive. I want to be able to feel I can progress within my career.*
>
> (Psychology, Female, Traineeship in Cyber Security)

Meaning at work—work context and social connectedness

Meaning was also derived from the context of work, mainly through the social dimension of workplaces, which helped accommodate the kinds of identities and values indicated in many of the interviews. This was often framed around meaningful social relationships within workplaces, and the role of others in mediating this, not least colleagues, managers and wider organisational cultural contexts.

Structurally, organisational practices were seen to influence the expression of core values including agency, autonomy and being able to have some ownership over the shaping of one's work activities. The perceived effect of this source of meaning was largely around freedom to innovate and excercise creative input, discretion and trust:

> *It's about feeling valued was something I was really looking for after my Master's degree, because in previous jobs that I would get as just an undergraduate I didn't necessarily feel valued* (…) *and in the jobs I have now I do feel valued. I'm responsible of classes, I'm responsible of certain projects. And I've been trusted with those things because of my experience.*
>
> (Environmental Entrepreneurship, Female, Environmental Project Officer)

References to the structural dimension of conditions of employment including policies, rewards, compensation and working patterns conveyed a sense that a baseline for meaningful work was in 'decent work'. The converse was identified in practices that constrained employees' capacity to achieve these outcomes. Culturally, the social dimensions of work, concerning the inter-personal and affective quality of workplaces and relationships with others, was a significant source of meaning. This was expressed as a sense of being exposed to a favourable company culture, being valued by others, spending time with people you like, being 'missed' when no longer there and a feeling of organisational and collective belonging—all indicating the salience of gaining recognition within a workplace context. The issue of positive, meaningful and engaging social relations with others in work contexts recurred through the interviews and connected closely with the concern about identity affirmation.

> *Yeah, definitely. I think, yeah, that was the really big impulse thing. Now looking at working culture, X, like it made me think that I could fit to be perfectly honest. I felt a lot more better with the working culture at Y* (…) *so you felt a lot more*

> *relaxed. I mean*, (…) *this is how people just dress up. Like, for example, X is a lot more casual, whereas Y is a lot more formal and a more sort of that stricter environment*.
>
> (Accounting Finance, Male, Finance Administration)

References were made to the ways in which this could be influenced by those having the capacity to mould workplace culture, namely managers and business leaders. A sub-theme emerged in discussions about working conditions in lockdown. Perspectives varied concerning the relative benefits and challenges of working from home during COVID-19, even among those who had enjoyed working remotely from their home environments. The more positive appraisals of homeworking related mainly to convenience (cost and time), relative freedom to structure a working day and lack of micro-management. Some who had already started to establish themselves in their work roles conveyed some degree of continuity once those practices and protocols had been established. Others, however, lamented the lack of direct contact with colleagues beyond online calls, limited interaction with wider organisational members or being unable to develop a coherent sense of collective workplace belonging. This sometimes extended to potential (tacit) knowledge losses in the remote environment and being disconnected from work cultures and potentially significant processes of early work acculturation.

Meaning from work—social value and organisational contribution

A third major source of meaning was found in the generation of social or organisational value from one's work, or 'making an impact':

> *I remember a therapist being surprised that there's more and more kids of my generation are thinking this way, where we want the work that we do to be important in some way. That it does positively have an effect on the world around us*.
>
> (Product Design, Male, Part-Time Casual Employment)

This appeared to provide a strong sense of purpose and confirmed the perceived value of the work within the organisational, social and public sphere. The link between self-actualisation, vocational purpose and the wider contribution or impact of the work was framed as highly relevant. Across most of the interviews, subjective career success was also referenced against the tangible outcomes from one's work, its social or environmental relevance:

> *Oh, I think if you're able to contribute something good for … I personally like a lot of volunteer work. If I entered*, [a job] *where you are able to create a difference in someone's life, and I think that in itself is a pretty successful career. Obviously, there is a there's the finance part of everything. And we'd all be lying if we said that it's not because of the money, because we need it to keep going and to keep progressing. But at the end of the day, if a job is not rewarding or if it's if you're not contributing to something good from our perspective* (…). *So I hope that's where I get to in the next few years, making a little bit more of a difference, no matter how small, to the community, I think*.
>
> (Biomedical Sciences, Female, Health Care Assistant)

Social relevance and the wider impact on social relationships, societal functioning and civic value provide an important source of meaning. There were widespread references to

the societal bearing of work, not just in terms of social recognition conferred on specific work but the observed benefits for multiple parties:

> *I think for me it's very much what I found most fulfilling is I really love helping people and seeing a general direct impact and very much I'm quite relational so that's what I've looked into things like teaching. I'm really passionate about kids and development and that's why I've also been looking into the healthcare side of things just … it's not the financial aspect of it for me the fulfilling bit is, yeah, feeling like you're making … seeing the people that you're making an impact on directly and feeling some of that appreciation I guess as well in some ways*.
>
> (Sport and Exercise Science, Female, Unemployed/Volunteering)

For some, there was a sense of duty in meeting social needs—normally caring for others such as through teaching, nursing or caring for animals or the environment. But meaning from work was not always social and communitarian. Some presented contributions to organisational improvement, efficiency or profit as part of the 'impact' of their work:

> *I think for me, what is a job with value that I can contribute to is something like research or something where I can help other people either directly through frontline work or indirectly through trying to help a company or organisation streamline their processes and make them more effective in some way*.
>
> (Psychology, Female, Unemployed)

Others, however, viewed positive social impact as an impossibility and ascribed to organisational cynicism views that underline negative effects and beliefs around the lack of integrity of business organisations (Naus, 2007):

> *Not to be too amoral, but I'm not really fussed for what the work is. That's why I'm more focused on my day-to-day personal development and working with others as opposed to the big-picture stuff. If you get too big-picture, you end up finding out that a lot of companies are really bad. They're not the best people in the world. So I'm not so fussed on what the work is as what I get out of it personally*.
>
> (Engineering, Male, Part-Time Employment)

Reference was sometimes made to the COVID-19 context and work during a crisis, including the reappraisal of social value. This context had forced some graduates to reappraise what they had once viewed to be meaningful. There was an awareness of the salient discourse of 'essential work' and how this was often located outside of traditional graduate-level occupations, yet impacting beneficially on core societal functioning.

Meaning and the avoidance of meaninglessness

The way in which graduates construct meaningful work was also juxtaposed or contrasted with experiences or conditions that amounted to meaningless work. This provides a converse perspective to many of the more purpose-orientated, motivational and values-alignment themes found in the above viewpoints. Whilst a significant proportion of the graduates were experiencing a time-biding period of waiting, others were experiencing the precarious effects of COVID-19 and its perceived adverse impacts on their career planning. This had brought into sharper focus a view of wanting to spend time in more worthwhile ways than waiting for labour market conditions to improve. Another dominant concern in relation to

meaninglessness was around the predicament of under-employment in jobs below their qualifications, which some participants in the study had been experiencing first-hand. The experience or anticipation of under-employment was strongly linked with conceptions of meaninglessness, mainly through associated feelings of being disempowered and misplaced, leading to a sense of detachment from the labour market:

> *This generation, or this generation of graduates in particular, we are just seeing—we have got nothing to look forward to Apart from oh yes, there is another job opening up at Costa or at Asda or wherever. It is like brilliant, it is like … I 100% get it, you have to do these things, you have to get jobs that you don't want sometimes, that is totally understandable. But, it is like I don't know, do I want to do it anymore*.
>
> (Environmental Sciences, Male, Part-Time Employment)

Ultimately, being involved in work that under-utilises skills and qualifications affirmed a sense of work being 'pointless' or unrewarding and diminishing their labour value. So much discussion around meaningless work referred to the self, in particular lack of actualisation and development. Under-employment and meaninglessness were closely coupled in that the work represented a divergence between idealised goals and present feelings of creative stagnation. In some cases, this compromised the perceived personal and economic value of their qualifications, even among those who ascribed significant personal benefits to being in HE:

> *But then I also do still hold hope there's a lot of value in my degree. It's just at the moment that value is not there, but that at some point again in the future there will have to be the value there, because of the way university numbers keep on rising and rising and rising, so there'll be more and more people with the set of qualifications in the future*.
>
> (Theatre Studies, Male, Self-Employment Initiative Scheme)

The temporal dimension is important here as prolonged under-employment (in the case of graduates, 6 months or longer in non-graduate employment) heightened anxieties about being under-valued and unable to actualise potential. Those who experienced a sense of meaninglessness through under-employment used terms such as being 'trapped' or 'stuck' in the present role, but also self-doubt:

> *I'd say massively it's affected my self-confidence* [being unemployed]. *I do then in between long periods of time, worry that I can't do the job. I think more self-doubt begins to fill your mind the longer you're not doing something. And the more you start to think, maybe they're not hiring me for a certain reason. And it does put self-doubt and I would say, if I'm being completely honest, there has been dark days where I am like, what is the point?*
>
> (Business and Marketing, Female, Part-Time Employment)

The study did, however, indicate some nuances in the relationship between under-employment and meaning in cases where the experience was short-term and could contribute to achieving more rewarding and identity-affirming work. For those who were delaying entry into something more sought after, such as continued HE qualifications or a future graduate-level job, the sense of meaninglessness in current under-fulfilling work was less acute and reinforced the desire to do something more meaningful and fulfilling in the longer term.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Based on a qualitative analysis of recent graduates' early employment experiences and trajectories, we have revealed salient dimensions on how HE graduates conceptualise and engage with meaningful work. The study demonstrates the importance of meaningful work and that it provides a powerful heuristic in shaping HE graduates' understanding of the value of their employment, role and place within the labour market and what this amounts to in their lives overall. Understanding the importance of meaningful work is crucial given the widespread tendency among policymakers to conceive the value of HE almost exclusively in terms of economic returns. Prevailing perspectives provide a restrictive take on what recent graduates expect both from education and from work. Problematising such economistic conceptions of education and work is essential in contexts like the United Kingdom, where engagement at work is seen to be decreasing (Hamilton et al., 2023). The study indicates that across our sample, the meaning of work plays a significant part in what recent graduates want from working life, how much they come to value their idealised or actual roles within the labour market and how they conceptualise their futures in paid employment and wider life purposes. Given the limited research on meaningful work in relation to this group, or more widely to individuals recently transiting to the labour market, this is a significant new contribution.

Meaning can derive from various sources. Looking at meaning in work, we proposed a continuum from earning a living (preservation) to enjoyment (satisfaction), developing (actualisation) and becoming (realisation). These fulfil personal and motivational dimensions at a personal level, which sustain personal value, affirm identities and provide a potential springboard for purposeful pursuits. But one clear finding from our study is that for our participants, social aspects (both in terms of the social organisation of work—meaning *at* work—and the social consequences of work—meaning *from* work) were often important sources of meaning. Thus, the ways this meaning is also situated and contextualised within a person's working life and through its social impacts also carries much significance. The findings from this study resonate with studies on more established employees (Bailey & Madden, 2017; Bailey et al., 2024), as we found that the quest for meaningful work provides direction and motivation for recent graduates too and, when experienced, is often strongly affirmative.

The study also points to noticeable overlaps in the concept of vocational purpose and a greater-good element beyond one's immediate personal gain and the meaning derived from self-orientated goals around establishing and exercising a clear professional self. The study thus speaks to the notion that for contemporary HE graduates, work is both integral to the maintenance of one's self and something that functions and projects beyond oneself, supporting the wider literature in this field (Bailey et al., 2019; Blustein et al., 2023). Rather than being a paradox, this fuses personal and societal orientations in the construction of meaningful work. Overall, therefore, we argue that rather than one dimension of meaning taking primacy in shaping how people relate to their work, think about it and plan their career goals, it tends to work as a dynamic integration of meaning. The study's findings connect with Casser and Meier's (2018) framing of work meaning as constituting a flow entailing some interaction between different facets of meaning(fulness) that exist contemporaneously in time and context. Meaningful work is affirmative for the self and provides motivational action frames through which individual graduates look to engage in their work and potentially observe its overall social and economic value.

The results raise some important implications for understanding the relationship between employees' motivation and financial return. The evidence overwhelmingly indicates that financial return is a necessary but insufficient consideration and, once the conditions and rewards to work are ‘decent’, individuals also attend to meaning-orientated concerns.

Such evidence is not readily consonant with overriding policy levers that have progressively predicated the value of HE in economic terms (Tomlinson, 2018; Souto-Otero, 2010; Maisuria & Cole, 2017) and related calls to measure the quality of HE with reference to this criterion. Finding meaningful work can contribute to increased engagement in the labour market and at work, two areas in which the United Kingdom has been struggling, particularly in recent times.

A starting place is for HE institutions to engage more substantially with the issue of meaningful work; to inform different facets of the curriculum, with enhanced career guidance and external stakeholder engagement—for example, the enhanced design of (and reflection on) work-integrated learning and work experiences. The study supports the 'thicker' and more developmental orientation of career development, which may be interlinked with students' formal studies to help make connections between disciplinary acculturation and career pursuits (Ashwin et al., 2023). Such orientations may need to be a more prominent focus in any policy levers on the perceived value of HE: how much graduates attribute the value of HE in pursuing and realising meaningful work and efforts to engage students towards more meaning orientation in study and career planning. This will entail a fundamental shift away from the current short-termist and instrumentalist ('thin') employability approaches and measures prominent in HE institutions, found in current policy frameworks that place skills acquisition at the forefront.

Engaging with meaningful work at HE level further helps mediate relationships between formal study, work-related learning and future labour-market activities, providing a framework for enhancing future employment in ways that have purpose and value—students 'seeing the point' of what they engage in and towards what purposive ends (Quinlan & Renninger, 2022). Curricular and co-curricular activities that build the pursuit of meaningful work are likely to result in more empowering and agency-enriching work identities during and after HE. Actions could include greater offers of mentoring to support students' articulation of meaningful goals and aspirations, structures that support self-reflection on interests and values, or more systematic exposure to authentic narratives on real work experiences (see also Gallup, 2019).

These matters, of course, are also contingent on what occurs in a work organisational context as the role of others (mainly colleagues and managers), as well as work organisation, provides significant reference points for meaning. There is clear evidence within the human resource literature showing the influence of workplace organisation, value systems and design in supporting employees' sense of meaningfulness in and from their work (Bailey & Madden, 2017; Lysova et al., 2019). Much of this rests on employers making active efforts to enhance employees' motivation, retention, perceived personal value and sense of belonging that, in turn, is exchanged for commitment and loyalty (Akkermans et al., 2024), including in the context of the adoption of new technologies, which present both new threats and opportunities in this regard (Smids et al., 2020; Turja et al., 2022). Workplace contexts clearly provide a source of meaningful work, so it becomes imperative for employers to provide appropriate conditions—strong workplace cultures, integrated work practices, reward and recognition, to name but a few—towards its facilitation.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper has shown the ways in which graduates construct notions of meaningful work and the different ways in which this may be expressed, personally, organisationally and socially. We have demonstrated, through an empirically derived framework, that core to this is meaning *in* work, meaning *at* work and meaning *from* work. This study has revealed salient features in each of these dimensions, which are likely to be experienced contemporaneously

at different points in an individual's working life. Its findings are novel to this group of employees and have the potential to generate further research in this area—for example, employing larger-scale survey work to validate the dimensions and inter-relationships, complemented with richer ethnographic studies of graduates' situated experiences of work, would further enrich this specific area. The study's findings certainly also call for greater emphasis on the implementation of practices, on both sides of the labour market, to support the pursuit of meaningful work.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

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ETHICS STATEMENT

Ethical approval was sought and obtained from the University of Southampton's Faculty of Social Sciences ethics committee for the research on which this paper is based. The participants all gave their consent to participate in the study and for their data to be used anonymously in research dissemination.

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