

**Proposal for paper at the 25<sup>th</sup> ESREA Life History and Biography Network Conference  
'Discourses we live by' (How) Do they benefit the world we live in?**

**'You need post graduate level education to work in Aldi these days': Class, credentials and occupational aspirations in contemporary Higher Education**

In EU and national higher education policy employability has become a new buzzword. Access and widening participation is now firmly linked to the idea of employability. But very little research explores what happens to non-traditional students after university and even less work is available on how 'employability', either as a discourse or a set of characteristics, is viewed by these students. This paper draws on the findings from two countries, Ireland and England, from a six country European research project on employability and non-traditional students which is using biographical methods (Merrill & West, 2009). Each country is collecting 40 student and graduate interviews as well as conducting research with employers and university staff. The focus of the paper will be on one of the main research cohorts – working class students. It will first map out the socio-political and policy context for the research and offer a critical review of the emergence of employability as a policy keyword. The introductory section will also offer a brief review of available research on working class students and employability linked to wider analyses of work and employment. The core part of the paper details the main findings through the narratives of four students (two Irish and two English). Here the meaning of class in relation to notions of occupation, education and conceptions of the lifecourse will be discussed. The various ways these are discussed indicates a generalized sense of precarity in a highly reflexive and fluid society (Alheit, 1999; Alheit & Dausien, 2002; West, 2016). Despite significant continuities in class experience and structures there is in the narratives a strong sense of the unforeseen and the new. The final section will explore this paradox of continuity and change and outline the broader theoretical implications of the findings in relation to two contending discourses of precarity and class (Savage et al, 2015; Standing, 2009). The paper will conclude with some remarks on theorising about precarity in relation to higher education and the role employability as a discourse has in perpetuating class inequalities both within HE and society as a whole.

Alheit, P. (1999). On a contradictory way to the 'learning society': A critical approach.

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Alheit, P. & Dausien, B. (2000). Biographicity as a basic resource of lifelong learning. In J. B. P. Alheit, E. Kammler, R. Taylor & H. S. Olesen (Eds.), *Lifelong learning inside and outside schools: Collected papers of the European conference on lifelong learning*. (pp. 400-422). Roskilde: Roskilde University.

Merrill, B. and West, L. (2009) *Using biographical methods in social research*. Los Angeles; London: SAGE.

Savage, M. et al (2015) *Social class in the 21st century*. London: Penguin

Standing, G. (2009). *Work after globalization: building occupational citizenship*.  
Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.

West, L. (2016). *Distress in the city: racism, fundamentalism and democratic education*.  
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