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Published version

MORRISON, Andrew (2020). Just deserts? Grade inflation and desert-based justice in English higher education. British Journal of Educational Studies.

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JUST DESERTS? GRADE INFLATION AND DESERT-BASED JUSTICE IN ENGLISH HIGHER EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT: *This article discusses concerns raised by the Office for Students (OfS) and other policy actors regarding perceived grade inflation in undergraduate degree classifications in England. I employ a desert-based justice philosophical framework to argue that the criticisms made by the OfS can be understood in light of the position that degree classifications occupy at the intersections of two distinctive logics of desert: as retrospective in virtue of past actions; and as utilitarian future-oriented. I then draw from literature in the sociology of education and work to contend that the utilitarian desert-bases of degree classifications, which the OfS aims to safeguard, have been undermined by the shifting relationship between higher education credentials and the labour market. I suggest that criticism of grade inflation (if appropriate) finds a stronger philosophical foundation in the retrospective bases of desert than in utilitarian ones.*

Keywords: Desert-Based Justice; Grade Inflation

Introduction

This article applies philosophical and sociological perspectives to unpick underlying questions of distributive justice that run through current concerns about perceived grade inflation within the degree classifications awarded to undergraduate degrees in England. I employ a desert-based justice philosophical focus to frame the interventions that the Office for Students (OfS), the higher education sector regulator in England, has recently made in this respect. It is not within the scope of this article to debate the existence or extent of grade inflation. Rather, I utlise the OfS' criticisms of higher education institutions (HEIs) to illustrate wider tensions inherent within the principles on which individuals deserve and receive their degree classifications—the 'desert-bases' of their degrees. These tensions emerge because

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degree awards sit at the nexus of two distinct logics of desert: as retrospective in virtue of past actions; and as rooted in utilitarian, future-oriented considerations. Drawing upon sociological perspectives, I argue that the OfS' concern with grade inflation derives from their remit to guard the labour market signalling value of degrees. In philosophical terms, the OfS privileges the utilitarian desert-bases of degree classifications. I argue, however, that while utilitarian considerations clearly have a role in the awarding of degree grades, they can only ever be a secondary consideration as desert-based justice requires that grades be conferred in virtue of students' past actions: their academic performances. An additional factor is that the utility desert-basis which the OfS aims to protect has been eroded by developments that have shifted the correspondence between higher education credentials and labour markets and thus weakened the power of the signalling model.

The question of perceived grade inflation is one of growing significance. It has been the subject of much recent scrutiny among a number of key HE sector policy actors in England, and it is also a contentious issue internationally (Johnson, 2003; Sadler, 2012). However, literature on the subject has generally been of the 'problem-taking' type, applying statistical analyses to interrogate the existence, extent and possible causes of inflationary tendencies. In consequence, underpinning principles of distributive justice that can inform debates about fairness in the awarding of degree classifications have not received sufficient attention. This article aims to address this gap within the literature by analysing perceived grade inflation through the lens of desert-based justice, a philosophical framework not hitherto applied to this problematic. This philosophical resource, in tandem with a sociological understanding of the relationship between degree credentials and work, highlights some of the nuances of an issue in which questions of desert are more complex than much current policy discourse may concede.

Grade Inflation

In 2018, the Office for Students (OfS) became the new oversight body for higher education (HE) in England. The OfS is charged with four key regulatory objectives, including ensuring that degree qualifications maintain their worth. It is with reference to this objective that the OfS has made some critical interventions in relation to perceived grade inflation. In reviewing the HE sector, the OfS (2019, p.57) observes that the proportion of ‘good’ honours degrees (‘Firsts’ and ‘upper seconds’, the two highest classifications respectively within the four-fold British system) grew from 67% in 2010-11 to 78% in 2016-17, and that the number of Firsts increased from 16% to 27%. Crucially, however, for the OfS increases in higher-level degree classifications are not evidence *per se* of grade inflation. The OfS speculates on a number of causal factors that it clearly regards as legitimate: improved teaching methods, more constructive feedback, use of the full range of marks, better pre-university preparation by schools, undergraduates’ increased awareness of the threshold function of an upper second within the labour market (OfS, 2019, p.57). The concept of grade inflation, by contrast, emerges from anxieties about the extent to which such increases in higher degree classifications may be explicable in terms of *non-legitimate* variables: a lowering of standards to make universities more appealing to students to justify tuition fees or to attain a better market position within HE league tables (OfS, 2019, p.57).

It is difficult to gauge the extent to which the OfS is producing or reflecting concerns about perceived grade inflation. The OfS (2019, p.57) contends that it is responding to ‘the significant public scrutiny’ of standards. Certainly, among some influential right-leaning policy think-tanks, some of which the OfS review cites approvingly, the existence of grade inflation is accepted as a simple fact which needs to be addressed (Hudson and Mansfield, 2020; Richmond, 2018). It is worth noting, however, that the relatively few academic studies into this question have reached much more circumspect conclusions than the grey literature of the think-

tanks (see Bachan 2017; Elton 1998). Whatever the arguments may be about the existence of grade inflation, though, it is firmly on the HE policy agenda. The UK Standing Committee for Quality Assessment, another HE oversight body, has produced a 'Statement of Intent' which enjoins universities to provide more publicly available data on its degree classification processes (UKSCQA, 2019). These policy moves are actuated by political pressures. The present Conservative administration came to power on a manifesto which promised to '*continue to explore ways to tackle the problem of grade inflation*'. (Conservative and Unionist Party, 2019, p.37).

Desert-Based Justice

As Feinberg (2000, p.221) notes, the question of what people deserve has long been central to questions of justice. Formally speaking, desert comprises three distinct but inter-related properties: a subject (for example, an individual), a thing or treatment (for example, a reward or punishment) and a fact about the subject (for example, an action the individual has performed) In Feinberg's (2000, p.224) well-known formulation, the three form a triadic relation whereby '"*S deserves X in virtue of F,"* *where S is a person, X a mode of treatment, and F some fact about S*' and this basic structure has been widely accepted within the field (Sher, 1987; Scheffler, 1992; Kristjansson, 2006). It follows from this that desert-claims are also normatively significant in that if we accept that a person deserves a thing (a mode of treatment), then in consequence there is a reason why the individual should have the thing—although in reality that person may not always have that thing as other reasons may supervene (Feinberg, 2000; Kristjansson, 2006; Sher, 1987). However, the very concept of desert as a basis from which to make justice claims is a controversial one within philosophy. As Scheffler (1992) notes, desert-based justice has long been seen to be incompatible with dominant strands

of liberal egalitarianism. The work of John Rawls is the most influential exposition of this argument.

In his seminal work *A Theory of Justice* (1971) Rawls argued that, in a strict sense, nobody deserves rewards for their actions because these are the product of a combination of natural endowments and efforts. In the case of the former, an individual has done nothing to deserve such talents as these are the gifts of a natural lottery (Rawls, 1971, p.104). Rawls' (1971) argument was essentially that individuals cannot claim responsibility for their actions as they have not *chosen* any of the talents that have contributed to their outcome. On this understanding, desert is contingent upon responsibility, and that applies only when an agent enjoys the free will of open choices. Rawls (1971, p.72) went beyond this, however, to argue that the initial social distributions of natural endowments were unjust because they had been mediated through the prior workings of unjust social institutions, factors that were arbitrary from a moral point of view. Intelligence, aptitude and even resilience and hard work are all, ultimately, socially conditioned. The ultimate conclusion to this argument was that even where an individual may appear to exercise agency, for example in the effort they put into a task, this is no more than a by-product of both unearned natural talents and also of unearned social advantages.

It is not only liberal egalitarianism that refuses a place for desert within considerations of justice. The libertarian philosopher Robert Nozick offers a useful critique of Rawls' position on desert while rejecting any inclusion of the concept himself, although for very different reasons. Nozick (1974) directs two forms of criticism at Rawls (1971). As a metaphysical critique, Nozick (1974, p.214) argues that Rawls' (1971) dismissal of desert is based upon an inadequate view of human agency and choice-making and he suggests that Rawls does not sufficiently address the question of *how* an individual has made use of their talents and instead reduces all questions of desert to external factors. This is not, however, a defence of desert.

Nozick (1974) rejects the concept completely on political grounds. As a libertarian, for Nozick (as for Hayek whom he approvingly cites) the question of moral desert in relation to social assets, or what he terms 'holdings', is irrelevant; the key question is whether persons are entitled in a minimal rules-based sense to their holdings (Nozick, 1974, p.225).

Following the arguments of Rawls (1971) and of Nozick (1974), desert receded partially from debates about distributive justice. Rawls' (1971) position on free will and responsibility presented a powerful challenge to desert. However, some philosophers, while partially conceding some of Rawls' (1971) arguments, have worked to recuperate a theory of desert-based justice. A common line of argument has followed Nozick's (1974) critique, as outlined above: that Rawls (1971) underplays the vital role of moral agency and choice-making. For example, Sher (1987, p.29) in addressing Rawls' (1971) argument about effort being an undeserved characteristic, argues that Rawls tends to elide effort-making potential with the actual exercise of that effort, and that this is not necessarily the same—sometimes individuals simply have different sets of priorities. In a similar vein, Kristjansson (2006) contends that we can preserve a sense of agency through what he terms a 'qualified desert-responsibility thesis'. On this account, early socialisation forms our values and our practical reasoning from which we make choices that, in turn, continue to form our character. Thus, we may deserve a thing (say, a punishment) in virtue of actions that we could at some point have avoided if we had made the right choices (Kristjansson, 2006, p.70).

I believe that these counter-arguments offer a way to rescue the idea of responsibility and, contra Rawls, the concept of desert-based justice. This then takes us to the concept of the desert-basis: the reason(s) why an individual becomes deserving of something. Feinberg's (2000) work is foundational here. A desert-basis is the idea that an individual *should* have a certain thing (reward, punishment etc), that there is a certain 'propriety' in their having it (Feinberg, 2000, p.222). Desert, though, requires a particular kind of propriety that

distinguishes it from other types of propriety such as entitlement. While the propriety of entitlement rests upon a formalistic, rules-based satisfaction of certain criteria (Feinberg offers the example of a candidate winning sufficient votes to be President of the United States), the propriety of desert pertains to something more diffuse: meeting certain unwritten conditions of 'worthiness' (Feinberg, 2000, p.222). The worthiness that constitutes a desert-basis may be a characteristic of an individual or relate to a past action; importantly, however, not just any characteristic or action will suffice as a desert-basis. To borrow from Feinberg's (2000, p.223) own example, if a student is said to deserve a high grade, their desert must be in virtue of some relevant fact about them, for example their abilities or earlier performances.

While Feinberg (2000) decouples desert from entitlement, Kristjansson (2006) appears to go further in the distinctions he draws between the two. He uses the example of where everyday language may say that a student 'deserved' to get an 'A' in a Mathematics exam because they answered all the questions correctly as an incidence of 'sham desert'. For Kristjansson (2006, p.62) this is a sham desert claim because it is really an entitlement claim in disguise: an individual is entitled to get an 'A' in accordance with certain institutional rules-based criteria. He argues that it cannot constitute a desert claim until the basis of the desert is provided which must be some relevant desert-conferring fact(s) about the individual, for example that they deserved to get an 'A' because of their superior efforts or the application of their intelligence (Kristjansson, 2006, p.62). The distinction that Kristjansson insists upon here derives from his view that there is ultimately a single desert basis to which all desert claims are reducible: moral virtue (Kristjansson, 2006, p.56). The logical outcome of this position is, then, that we can say that an individual did *not* deserve an 'A', although they were entitled to it, because it was only through sheer luck that they managed to answer all the questions correctly, whereas we can say that the hard-working and capable student should have deserved an 'A' but failed to get it due to illness (Kristjansson, 2006, p.62).

The case that Kristjansson (2006) has advanced might seem to vitiate much of the argument of this article since, if accepted, it would follow that some students would deserve their degree grades but others would merely be entitled to them. However, I believe that it is possible to incorporate a more expansive notion of desert in relation to degree grades than Kristjansson (2006) will allow. Firstly, I would argue that, even if we accept Kristjansson's (2006) distinction between desert, as an evaluation of moral virtue, and entitlement, as an outcome of rule-based procedures, we can still say that degree grades are a question of desert in his terms. This is because they necessarily entail judgements on the part of the assessor about intelligence and, perhaps, effort and these are both qualities which he himself cites as desert-making virtues. Kristjansson's (2006) distinction between desert and entitlement (at least, in the example given above) is rather too abstract since in concrete terms, that is, in assessment procedures, they cohere. Secondly, I would argue that Kristjansson's (2006) example of the undeserved (but entitled) gaining of an 'A' grade due to simple luck leads him to overplay the role of mere fortune and to underplay the role of agency here. An individual who is lucky in the questions they have to answer in the exam paper may well be much luckier than their equally intelligent peer; they may well, therefore, deserve the 'A' grade less than their harder working peer. Nevertheless, they still have to answer those questions to a sufficient standard to impress the examiners that their work is worthy of an 'A'. Thus, at least some degree of work and effort is required and so they have a relevant (if lesser) desert-claim to their grade.

If a desert-base requires a certain propriety, it is also characterised by its particular temporal nature. It is commonly accepted that desert-bases are retrospective, that is, they derive from an individual's *past* actions (Feinberg, 2000; Sher, 1987; Kristjansson, 2006). However, it is also true that past events may only emerge as desert-bases in the light of later actions. This is what Sher (1987, p.178) means when he notes that a future event may enter into a 'trans-temporal relation' with a past event thus altering the past event's significant relational

properties—when we reward the deserving we convert hitherto unrewarded past actions into rewarded ones. Schmidtz (2002, p.779) sums up this form of desert-base in the concept of *compensatory* desert whereby '*…inputs we supply prior to receiving X put a moral scale out of balance, such that our receiving X rebalances the scale*'.

It follows from this emphasis upon the retrospective nature of desert, that what Schmidtz (2002 terms promissory desert would likely be rejected by most scholars within the field. Schmidtz (2002, p.781) offers a formulation of promissory desert wherein, '*A person who receives opportunity X at t1 can be deserving at t1 in virtue of what she will do if given the chance*'. This is the basis upon which employers hire employees and degree credentials (and thus the OfS) play a role within this, and it is for this reason that I outline it here. This temporal element informs us that while an individual may deserve their job opportunity at t1, they have *not* yet settled their moral account by supplying the requisite inputs within the job itself; rather, the applicant is considered worthy of choice in the belief that they will *later* supply the inputs at t2 which will prove them worthy and thus rebalance the account. This is a risky business since, as Schmidtz (2002, p.782) observes, employers are simply making a calculation that the chosen individual will have the 'desert-making internal features' which will translate into future productivity.

Among most philosophers of desert, the concept of promissory desert as outlined by Schmidtz (2002) cannot be regarded as a true form of desert. This is because of its future-oriented temporality. It is perfectly understandable that employers are interested in employees' future productivity and not their past achievements. However, it is not possible to locate desert in the future in the way that Schmidtz (2002) contends when he argues that promissory desert rests upon an individual's ability to supply the requisite desert-making inputs at some point beyond their initial appointment. For Sher (1987, p.178) that would be tantamount to arguing that a future event (an individual's performance in a job after appointment) in some way *caused*

a past event (the individual having been appointed to the job). Similarly, while Kristjansson (2006, p.143) concedes that all questions of desert arise in some minimal sense against a context of future expectations, if we go beyond this to a more substantively forward-looking view of desert we arrive at a conceptually awkward and impractical idea akin to the notion of repaying a debt that has not yet been incurred.

The final aspect of desert that I wish to consider relates to its utilitarian value. For Feinberg (2000), utilitarianism refers to the wider social utility produced by rewarding individuals or groups with what they deserve, particularly where it also promotes a range of other values that are relevant to distributive justice such as cooperation or good moral behaviour. Much depends, however, on the role that utility plays in desert-making. Feinberg (2000, p.236) takes the example of academic grading procedures as a case-in-point. Assigning grades to individuals permits predictability, control and the efficient allocation of relevant resources. As Feinberg (2000, p.238) observes, desert is not always readily apparent, and when it is not, the 'deserved modes of treatment' may be completely unclear. Consequently, rule-based qualifying conditions in the form of exams and other assessments are often necessary to minimise injustice. Using the same example of grades, Sher (1987, p.112) maintains that this practice also has the utility of allowing us to give vent to what he terms the 'expressive element' of reward-giving: the need to show our appreciation to people. However, both Feinberg (2000) and Sher (1987) are clear that social utility is *not* a desert-maker in itself; rather, the desert-basis must originate in relevant facts about the individual—their past academic performances within this example. Where considerations of wider social utility play a disproportionate part in desert-making, we are in danger of lapsing into what Feinberg (2000, p.236) terms 'naïve utilitarianism'.

This paper is concerned with the different and, to some extent, conflicting grounds on which we may judge what is 'fair' in the awarding of degree classifications. The necessarily

limited outline of desert-based justice that I have given above will indicate its complex, multi-faceted nature. And I believe that this makes it a potentially useful concept to apply within the sociology of education. When questions of fairness are dealt within sociological literature, they are often viewed with some reference to Michael Young's concept of meritocracy whereby merit and advancement derive from ability plus effort. Of course, although Young's meritocracy was only ever intended as a satirical warning of a dystopian future, it has long since been appropriated by politicians who use it at face-value as a positive concept. Sociologists (and others) have then reacted to this by critiquing the concept as it has been employed in dominant discourses, with the result that it remains the principle lens through which we discuss fairness. Consequently, as an item of cultural 'intelligibilia' meritocracy has long since slipped free of the meaning invested in it by its progenitor and has taken on a semi-autonomous life of its own (Archer, 1995). However, meritocracy is too limited and one-dimensional a concept with which to discuss the problematic of fairness in relation to grade inflation, even when a subject of critique itself. By contrast, desert-based justice is a more intellectually discriminating concept that requires us to distinguish desert from other, perhaps equally laudable, justice claims. In the following section, I apply a desert-based justice framework to the concerns raised by the Office for Students (OfS) regarding perceived grade inflation.

Desert and Grade Inflation

It will be recalled that grade inflation refers not to degree grade increases as such but to increases that may be attributable to non-legitimate causal factors. The OfS (2019) has speculated upon the effects of market pressures leading to a lowering of standards in marking. Other influential policy actors also point to the opaque workings of 'degree algorithms', computerised calculations that may permit practices such as 'compensation', where lower

grades within some modules may be counterbalanced by higher scores attained in other modules, or by 'discounting' whereby some lower scoring module marks may not be counted at all towards the final degree classification (Richmond, 2018, p.22). If we view the criticisms of both policy actors here through a desert-based justice frame, we can see that the locus of their concerns lies in the idea that at least some graduates have gained degree classifications not through what Schmidtz (2002) terms causal inputs that are internal to the individuals, but via external factors for which they can assume no responsibility. On this reading, therefore, grade inflation is a failure of the responsibility condition of any desert-base. As I indicated previously, it is not the focus of this article to question the existence or extent of grade inflation; that has been the subject of other studies. Instead, it is my argument that there are tensions inherent within the desert-bases on which we award degree classifications, and that these may be understood in terms of the contending logics of desert in virtue of past actions, and the more future-oriented utilitarian function of desert.

In England, HEIs typically employ a combination of two grading practices in their assessment and awarding of degree classifications, as identified by Sadler (2012). The first Sadler (2012, p.208) terms 'cut-offs on aggregate scores'; this assumes a 100-point scale and grade classifications (an upper second or First would be an example) are allocated to all aggregate scores that fall within a fixed range (60-69 and 70+ in this case). This is the most widely used form of grading in higher education but in recent years it has been joined by another system which Sadler (2012, p.210) refers to as 'codification'. This system employs text-based statements to detail the standards required at each level of achievement; examples of this approach that are now commonly used by HEIs include rubrics and grade descriptors. The two grading practices can be used in tandem and frequently are because both are 'criterion-referenced' forms of grading where marks are awarded against what are supposed to be transparent, objective and external referents (Sadler, 2012, p.210). The criterion-referenced

basis for these two common grading practices points towards a particular understanding of desert: where a student is judged to have produced work of a certain level, they are rewarded commensurably and any attempt to intervene otherwise would be seen as an inappropriate incursion into practitioner-led academic standards (Sadler, 2012, p.208).

While HEI grading practices are rooted in what most philosophers of desert would accept to be the only proper basis upon which to award degrees, in a retrospective temporality that gives attention solely to prior academic performances, the OfS is guided by one that pulls in a different direction. In their comments on perceived grade inflation, the OfS (2019) is careful not to spell out what may be an 'acceptable' proportion of First and upper-second degree classifications; nevertheless, what is very clear is that the most recent ratios they report upon are regarded as excessive and that at least some of the increase is unjustifiable in terms of legitimate variables. The increase in higher-level degree classifications is of concern to the OfS (2019, p.57) because it makes it more difficult for employers to discriminate between an 'average' candidate and an 'excellent' one. This, in turn, goes to the core of the OfS' remit: to protect the value of degrees over time and thereby to justify the investment that students have made through their tuition fees. To this end, the OfS (2019, p.3) deploys the language of barely concealed threats in stating the hope that '*…the higher education sector will take decisive action itself, in order to avoid further regulatory intervention*'. The injunction could not be clearer: bring grading down to a more 'acceptable' level or face some form of imposed change or sanction. It is not to take the argument too far to conclude that what the OfS (2019), and other influential policy actors, are calling for is a form of 'grading on the curve'. As Sadler (2012, p.209) notes, this grading practice, whereby the frequency distributions of marks are divided into predetermined and controlled proportions of the cohort who are then allocated grades, is attractive because it offers the assumption that grades are comparable across courses (or, in this case, HEIs).

The perceived threat to the wider social utility of degree classifications lies at the heart of the OfS' public criticisms of the higher education sector. The OfS is concerned that perceived grade inflation amounts to a breach of what Sher (1987, p.115) terms the 'principle of veracity'. Under this principle, awarding a grade in accordance with established assessment rules amounts to making an assertion about how well the recipient has performed, and any deviation from those rules must constitute a false assertion. For the OfS, 'excessive' proportions of higher-level classifications amount to such false assertions which are weakening the confidence of both employers and student-consumers in degrees. In consequence, the degree grading system is in danger of lacking a vital social utility as a reward system, that is, as a reliable proxy guide to the deserts themselves (Feinberg, 2000, p.238). The OfS, then, is guided primarily by utilitarian considerations—the signalling value of degrees and the confidence this instils in students and employers. However, while these concerns are certainly valid, it will be recalled that utility is not a desert-maker in itself; at best, it fulfils a secondary function in buttressing a desert-claim. Furthermore, as I discuss in the following section, there is evidence to suggest that the utility value of the signalling model is now being challenged by developments that have altered the relationship between higher education credentials and labour markets in England.

At this point, however, it should be acknowledged that, in order to delineate the differences under discussion, my argument has rested to some extent upon use of ideal-types. By this, I mean that it would be disingenuous to suggest that HEIs have always applied a purely retrospective desert-base in their degree classifications with no consideration of their utilitarian functions. Universities are keenly aware of their outward-facing role and consequently institutions have generally functioned with some sense of an 'acceptable' or, at least, anticipated proportion of higher-level classifications. In concrete practices then, the tensions that I outline are a feature of how universities seek to negotiate their degree-awarding role. One

of the key points of this article, though, is that the tensions between the different desert-bases are no longer confined to universities and are now played out in the politically-charged relationship between the sectoral regulator and HEIs. Higher education is now rapidly assuming the role that schools have long endured in England: as political football. As Hewitt (2020, p.9) notes, the more directly interventionist stances of the OfS need to be seen in the context of policymakers' aim both to raise workforce productivity and lower the costs of higher education through better identification of which graduates are most likely to repay their student loans.

Evolving Labour Markets

In relation to labour market recruitment, the signalling model is premised upon the notion that HE credentials signal that an applicant may possess particular attributes which are difficult to observe in hiring processes but which are considered highly important for an individual's productive potential (Brown and Souto-Otero, 2020; Caplan, 2018; Di Pietro, 2017). As recruitment can be a lengthy process involving considerable 'sunken costs' against hiring of graduates who may well move on after 12–18 months, employers look to minimise expenditure by using degrees, and degree classifications, as the quickest and most cost-effective signal of talent (Di Pietro, 2017, p.512). Thus, on this model, qualifications are not seen to directly contribute to the productivity of applicants on entering the labour market; rather, they serve to send a signal for the individual's *future* productivity and trainability (Brown and Souto-Otero, 2020, p.97). And, as Caplan (2018, p.15) observes, an applicant's future productivity is something that is very difficult to gauge within any recruitment process. The signalling model explains sociologically what the promissory model of desert argues in philosophical terms: that moral life often requires decisions to be made under conditions of uncertainty (Schmidtz, 2002, p.783).

On the signalling model, however, credentials are supposed to limit the element of uncertainty in which employers must operate by providing them with what Caplan (2018, p.15) terms 'statistical discrimination', that is, the use of 'true-on-average' stereotypes to assist as reference points. Thus, an individual with a degree may, on average, be assumed to be more productive (by being more trainable) than one without, while a person with the highest classification of degree would signal greater potential than one with the lowest classification. The principle of signalling is therefore rooted in what Feinberg (2000, p.238) terms the 'utilitarian considerations' that surround desert-making: it offers a system that is supposed to act as trustworthy guide to the deserts themselves, that is, an individual's suitability for a job. Furthermore, the signalling model is future-oriented in that its utility resides primarily in what Schmidtz (2002) would term its promissory function—its role in permitting employers to select the applicant with the greatest productivity potential. However, as Di Pietro (2017, p.502) notes, there is very little research literature on the signalling effects of degree classifications. Moreover, there are indications to suggest that the assumptions on which the signalling model is based are now being undermined to some extent.

There is growing evidence that employers, and particularly those at the elite, highly competitive tier of the graduate labour market, now place considerable emphasis upon what Brown and Souto-Otero (2020, p.102) term 'social qualifications' in their recruitment practices, that is, non-credentialled social skills. This development is itself a by-product of two other shifts within the relationship between credentials and employment. The first relates to what Brown (2013) terms 'social congestion': the expansion of higher education has outpaced the supply of graduate-level jobs in an economy that is no longer able to deliver on the 'opportunity bargain' of well-paid professional employment. Essentially, too many graduates, all capable of doing the job, are chasing too few jobs. The second underlying shift relates to the remorseless pressure on employers to keep costs down in the context of unremitting

competition (Keep and Mayhew 2014; Lauder, Brown and Cheung 2018). As a consequence of this, employers increasingly aim to shift training costs, as far as possible, from themselves to the applicant by employing job-ready candidates who are able to deliver value to the company straight away: the ‘plug and play’ employee (Brown and Souto-Otero 2020, p.109). These two factors mean that employers no longer simply invest faith in the signalling value of a candidate’s qualifications; increasingly, they are likely to place a premium upon a candidate’s ability to exhibit a quick and unproblematic ‘social fit’ with the company through their display of ‘soft’ skills and certain behavioural competencies such as drive, resilience and personal charisma (Brown and Hesketh, 2004, p.33).

This emphasis upon non-credentialled attributes reflects the movement that the graduate labour market has made from being a meritocracy to a ‘performocracy’ where individuals must display their market worth to an employer (Brown, 2013). In an old-style bureaucratic meritocracy credentials were supposed to signal talent in a relatively clear way, and thus to function as positional goods within the labour market. This principle has always been compromised by the reality of raced, classed and gendered graduate labour markets [reference removed for anonymity]. The difference, however, is that the functioning principle itself behind qualifications is fast shifting. Thus, in a ‘performocracy’ credentials are a necessary but by no means sufficient condition in assessing whether an applicant is choiceworthy. In today’s graduate labour markets, qualifications have lost much of their signalling value because employers’ requirements now reach far beyond the lecture hall and require applicants to demonstrate a range of skills and attributes that encompass both hard and soft skills (Brown and Souto-Otero, 2020). In short, graduates are required to be able to present employers with a ‘narrative of employability’ whereby their academic, cultural and social resources are actively packaged up into a plausible and attractive story of the self that exudes productive promise (Brown and Hesketh, 2004, p.36). And a winning narrative requires the

accumulation of a range of experiential assets: extra-curricular activities (ECAs) and internships (often unpaid) are two such non-credentialled resources which are now seen as prerequisites within a highly competitive graduate labour market (Bathmaker *et al*. 2016; Social Mobility Commission, 2016; Friedman and Laurison, 2019).

The extent to which these changes have become a feature of the wider graduate labour market beyond elite-level recruiters is contested (see Elias and Purcell, [2013]). However, research has indicated that in some sectors of the jobs market which graduates are now entering in some numbers, such as estate agency work, employers place a premium on the applicant's job-readiness as signaled in their interpersonal and communication skills (Tholen, 2014). This finding is more broadly supported by Hincliffe and Jolly (2011, p.575) who also found that employers rated interpersonal skills above credentials in their recruitment practices, although the extent of this varied with employment sector. Finally, in the largest study of its kind involving the analysis of over 21 million job adverts, Brown and Souto-Otero (2020) came to the clear conclusion that most employers within their sample were less concerned with credentials and more focused upon non-credentialled signifiers such as experiential assets or behavioural skills that indicate an individual's level of job-readiness. And, as Brown and Souto-Otero (2020, p.110) go on to argue, this takes us directly to the point where the signalling model is being most undermined by the demand for applicants who can quickly bring market returns to a company: that the most trainable candidate (as traditionally signaled by credentials) is not necessarily the most job-ready applicant.

The promissory function of the signalling model is attenuated because the relationship between jobs and education is now much more diffuse and is marked by a range of different, extra-educational requirements. The effect of these labour market developments has been to undermine the wider social utility of the signalling model to graduates and employers. And there is an irony in this because, as I have noted above, the OfS' interventions have themselves

been strongly driven by Feinberg's (2000, p.238) 'utilitarian considerations': the need to shore up public faith in classificatory grading.

Conclusion

This article has applied a desert-based justice philosophical framework, and also drawn from studies within the sociology of education and work, to unpick underlying questions of distributive justice that pertain to current concerns about degree grade inflation raised by the Office for Students (OfS) in England. I have argued that tensions emerge from the position of degree classifications at the intersections of two distinct forms of desert logic: as retrospective in virtue of past actions; and as based in utilitarian, future-oriented considerations.

The article has made the case that a true desert claim can only be made from past actions and be related to factors directly relevant to the individuals concerned—in this case, their academic performances. This is largely the basis upon which academics assess students. Where there is evidence for the intrusion of extraneous considerations into academics' assessment evaluations—for example, pressure to promote institutional market position—grade inflation may be a valid criticism. It has not, however, been the focus of this article to debate the existence or extent of grade inflation. Rather, my point has been to underline that the OfS has its own institutional remit which, in itself, has the potential to pull degree desert-making in a different direction from traditional practices: the utility agenda. The future-oriented labour market utility value of degrees is important but can only ever be a secondary or additional consideration in desert-making evaluations. When utility becomes a dominant bureaucratic objective which supervenes over the desert-claims of traditional academic assessment practices, there is a danger of lapsing into Feinberg's (2000) 'naïve utilitarianism'. In practice, this may mean erring towards a sectoral-wide form of 'curve grading' in the awarding of degree classifications. This is not an implausible scenario given the political clout the OfS may wield to impose its will upon the sector in England. However, this may be of limited value since, as

I have also argued, the utilitarian considerations around degree grading—the function of the signalling model—have themselves been weakened by the shifting nature of the correspondence between degree credentials and jobs within contemporary labour markets. In the current policy landscape of English higher education, the question of desert in relation to degree classifications is a contested, politicised one.

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