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# **Transitional experiences of post-16 Sports Education: Jack's Story**

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## **Transitional experiences of Post-16 Sport's Education: Jack's Story**

The paper explores the layered transitional experiences of a semi-professional athlete named Jack (a pseudonym) between the fields of Professional Sport, and Further and Higher Education. Our analysis is framed by Stone's (2005) quadripartite framework of structuration and focuses on Jack's 'in-situ' practices at his college and university in order to illustrate how these can operate to reproduce, transform, and challenge the habitual discourses and rituals that circulate within these institutions by generating forms of corporeal empowerment for young athletes who have valued conjunctural knowledge. The findings highlight the fragility of the transition process and raises questions regarding how the experiences of young people are shaped by the relationships between employment and post-16 education. Jack's experiences have implications for both policy and practice within Further Education (FE) and Higher Education (HE).

Key words: *Case Study, Further Education, Higher Education, Student experience, Strong Structuration Theory, Transition.*

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## **Introduction**

Within neo-liberal “free market” driven “knowledge societies” across the world the boundaries between education and employment are evolving, in the expectation of creating a skilled, capable and knowledgeable work-force (Tomlinson 1997, Wheelahan 2011). Such transformations in our Western education system are summarised by Ball (2006) as follows.,

During the last 15 years we have witnessed in the UK, and indeed most western and developing societies, a major transformation in the organising principles of social provision right across the public sector. Forms of employment, organisational structures, cultures and values, systems of funding...social relationships, have all undergone change in similar directions. (Ball 2006, 10)

This transformation has been partially visible within the context of the UK education system and individuals are now faced with a plethora of opportunities and experiences. The aspect of transformations with the most far reaching implications at this time are situated amongst the evolving relations between Further Education (FE), Higher Education (HE) and employment. While displaying characteristics that are inherently unique to the UK such evolutions also reflect more global attempts to reform the relations between these sectors (Gleeson et al 2005, Bandias et al 2011). One consequence of this is the increasingly diverse range of qualifications, aimed at providing educational opportunities and experiences for individuals to contribute to knowledge based economies.

An example of one such opportunity in the UK can be seen in the development of Foundation Degrees (FD). Introduced in 2000 by the Department for Education and Skills (DfES), FD's were designed to provide graduates who were needed to address ‘shortages in particular skills within the labour market’ (Quality Assurance Agency 2010, 1). This is emphasised by the Education and Skills White paper (2005, 7) that states, ‘Foundation and entry level qualifications will help put more young people onto a pathway that will lead to further opportunities and qualifications (Department of Education and Skills, 2005, 7). While tied to the politics of vocationalism, FD's aimed to

distinctively integrate academic and work-based learning through close collaboration between employers and programme providers (Harrison 2000). The distinctiveness of these relations depended ‘upon the integration of the following characteristics: employer involvement; accessibility; articulation and progression; flexibility and partnership’ (QAA 2010, 7). Reflecting this, a number of initiatives have sought to establish relations between the professional sports industry and the educational contexts of FE and HE. An example of one initiative is the Advanced Apprenticeship in Sporting Excellence (AASE), that is described as follows on the Skills Active Website (2010), ‘AASE combines a flexible education programme with a structured national training and development route across all sports, while preparing athletes for a career after sport’.

The AASE scheme reflects other initiatives in Australia, America and Europe (Hickey & Kelly 2008, Singer & Buford 2010, European Commission, 2012) that seek to provide student-athletes with opportunity to acquire educational qualifications whilst also pursuing their sporting careers. One of the unintended consequences of this relationship is the increasing opportunity for young athletes (from increasingly diverse backgrounds) to experience the field of HE. Indeed such relations are encouraged as they also contribute to a Widening Participation agenda that provides the opportunity for increased access to HE whilst also addressing social justice and economic policy developments (HEFCE 2012). Thus, following Quinn (2004 64) those who are ‘privileged’ to exist within this scheme no longer represent the ‘scholarship boys of yesteryear’ but are a distinct group of students, whose privilege is shaped by what Bourdieu (1990) describes as the the exchange of physical capital into forms of symbolic capital within the HE sector.

Previous research has explored both the role of official policy in shaping FE-HE relations (Avis 2012) and the student athlete experience (AUTHOR B 2007, 2010). However, any understanding of transitional experience must account for the complex relations and processes that provide meaning

to the transitional experiences of individuals. According to Bates et al. (1984, 12) the transitions that individuals face within today's educational context may be thought of as being, 'Continuously moulded and developed in part by direct official policy...also achieved through the experiences, knowledge and cultures of the people involved'. Such transitions are sociologically and experientially complex and dynamic processes and research in this field must examine these processes in action to better understand the relations between FE, HE and employment and how young people entering this system might be supported.

Against this backdrop, in this article we examine the case of a young semi-professional athlete named Jack (all names are pseudonyms) who opted first to take a Foundation Degree (FD) in Sports Coaching at Hope College and then a Bachelor of Science (Hons) (BSc) in Sport and Health Sciences at Ivory University (IU). The case of Jack highlights how this particular social and educational experience interweaves with his ambitions of becoming a professional rugby player in the UK. His experiences provide important insights into the manner in which the relations between employment (in this case professional sport), FE and HE are developing new transitional experiences that are based on corporeal empowerment as well as academic achievement. Our analysis provides insights into the complexity of Jack's transitional experiences and how he gives meaning to these experiences over time in different social, educational and sporting contexts. Prior to considering how the data was collected and analysed we will first introduce Jack and the settings in which he was located. The use of a singular case study provides a nuanced view of the complexity of Jack's transition (see Stake 1995). Following the thoughts of Flyvberg (2006, 223) developing this case study approach enabled the study to capture 'a unique wealth of information' that captured the complexity and richness of his experience. In what follows, we present an overview of the institutions and contexts of Jack's experience. Prior to this, we will describe the methodology that informed the wider study from which the data on Jack is drawn.

### *The participant*

Like most traditional FE students (see Lowe and Gayle 2007), Jack's educational and sporting experiences were local to the area he had grown up within. From an early age, he had set his sights on becoming a professional rugby player. The centrality of rugby to Jack was evident upon first meeting him in the 2nd year of his Foundation Degree. At this point, he had already completed A-levels at Tonnabridge College (pseudonym),

Tonnabridge are like in the top 1% in the country. They wanted me to do five A-levels when I went there so I had to do Chemistry, Biology, Psychology, PE and General Studies. I did not do too well in my first year mainly because I was like on tour for two weeks like this side of the year with exams and revision...In the 2nd year it got a bit serious and (I had to) pass PE. I did not pass biology, or chemistry but I passed psychology and general studies. (Jack: Interview 1)

While struggling to complete his A-levels, the opportunity to study at Tonnabridge enabled Jack to develop his rugby career, representing the school at regional and national level. His success in sport, interwoven into his educational experience, led Jack to be signed for the Thoronians, a national level rugby club. Through playing for Thoronians and regional academies, Jack became aware of the number of emerging educational opportunities within FE and HE,

I did not want a full time university course like here (Ivory). I wanted to have something a bit more spaced out so I could be able to do the course quite well and do my rugby and make it a bit more of a full commitment? It is only like a two day course so I can do all the rugby and stuff and be able too progress quite well. I'll probably have to top up here (Ivory) cos of its better links. It is well integrated with Thoronians coaches so I'll probably be able to do it quite well here. (Jack: Interview 1)

The extract illustrates how the importance of rugby in pre-shaping many of the educational opportunities open for him within Hope and Ivory Tower University (ITU). Before understanding his experiences, it is important to illustrate these contexts in more detail.

## *The settings*

### *Hope College*

Similar to many FE colleges in the UK, Hope offered an eclectic range of courses and opportunities for young athletes at various levels of development. One of which included the Foundation Degree (FD) in Coaching and Fitness (FdSc),

This course is for those with an interest and experience in coaching or teaching sport and PE. The broad perspective of the course opens up opportunities for employment at higher supervisor/lower management levels within sports centres, health and fitness clubs, in sports development, as personal trainers or in the wider areas of PE such as teaching, advising or co-ordinating. (Hope Course Prospectus)

At the time of the study, the FD (FdSc) had only been running for two years. Like other FD's within the UK, it had been constructed in partnership with other local institutions; in this case Oceania University and High-Tower University. The role of High-Tower and Oceania on the development of the FD at Hope is reflective of the QAA (2010, 11) benchmark concerning partnerships with Higher Education that states how, 'Each Foundation Degree must be validated and awarded by an institution with degree awarding powers'. An intended consequence of these relations was to enable students to 'Top Up' their qualification and gain a Bachelor of Science (with honours),

Students can progress directly on to the 3rd year of the BSc (Hons) in Coaching and Fitness Education at High-Tower. There are also opportunities to progress to the 3rd year of BSc (Hons) in Health and Fitness at Oceania University, or directly to the 2nd year of Ivory University for the BSc (Hons) in Sport and Exercise Science. (Hope, web extract).

It became evident that the influence of High-Tower and Oceania on the teaching practices within Hope was solely placed at effectively managing the quality of the learning opportunities. Consequently, Hope had some autonomy in creating relations with other institutions within education and industry. This can be illustrated in the academies offered by Hope,



The Sports Academy is designed to provide an opportunity for talented and gifted sports performers to focus on their chosen sport, in a supportive and specialist environment, whilst gaining academic and vocational qualifications. (Web Extract, 2011).

As the extract highlights, central to the identity of Hope was the role of sport and its sporting academies, alongside the relations it had formed with professional sports clubs such as Thoronians RFC. These relations were continually facilitated and reinforced within the FD programme and by individual members of the lecturing staff. Nigel, Johnno and George, were either coaching at an elite level (Johnno and George) or had previously played at a professional level (Johnno and Nigel). Furthermore, its intention to 'provide education for all' created a FD cohort that was diverse and multi-dimensional in both academic and sporting ability; displaying characteristics commonly associated with FE. While most of the participants chose the official progression into High-Tower Jack opted to follow the non-official pathway to Ivory University (IU).

#### *Ivory University (IU)*

Situated in the UK, IU identifies itself as an example of the small number of 'elite' research-intensive institutions that claim to be continually striving to 'help shape the future of Higher Education'. In 'creating a world-class university' it prides itself on being recognised 'for the high quality of research and the distinctive student experience offered'. Based on explicit 'performance criterion' aimed at 'defining it as a 'Top UK university', the Bachelor of Science (BSc) in sport and health sciences, was regarded by the participants as being 'one of the best in the country'. Set against the discourses of research performance and distinctive student experience, the school of Sport at IU,

Maintains an international reputation for excellence in teaching and research with an exceptional track-record for student satisfaction. All programmes are enhanced by the current research of our academic staff who collaborate with industry and professional athletes to advance knowledge within this broad discipline. (Ivory Web extract, 2011)

Historically, Ivory had enhanced this reputation through ‘unofficial’ relations with the field of professional sport. Many of these were contextualised through individual agents coaching at Ivory or choosing to study on the Sport course while continuing to play at an elite level. Such relations led to the establishment of a scholarship programme,

Candidates must be of outstanding sporting ability who show evidence of achievement or potential at national level. They are only offered to students who have gained an offer of a place or normal admission to a course on their academic qualifications. (Ivory web extract, 2011)

The introduction of a scholarship programme enabled young athletes such as Jack an opportunity to combine academic and employment development. Indeed, many of Jack’s colleagues at Thoronians were also already studying at Ivory.

In what follows, we explore the complexity of Jack’s transitional experiences and the influence of the various agents and institutional resources in shaping these. Prior to this, we will describe the methodology that informed the wider study from which the data on Jack is drawn.

### ***Data Collection and Analysis***

The data about Jack is drawn from a larger 18 month longitudinal study that focused on understanding the transitional experiences of sport students between FE and HE between 2008 and 2010.

Following university ethical approval official approaches were made by (name of first author) to each institution outlining the general aims of the study and requesting access. Meetings were then held with the principal of Hope College and a course director at Ivory University. Access was also facilitated at Hope by a number of gatekeepers working there part-time who were former colleagues of the authors. Following discussions with the course director at Hope, it was agreed that data

would be collected from one Foundation Degree group in their final year of study as this would enable a more detailed picture of the transitional experience to be formed, not only within Hope but also on their 'Top Up' year at High-Tower and Ivory. The nature of study was discussed with the six students who made up the Level 2 Foundation Degree group at Hope, who agreed to be involved.

Informed by ethnographic principles as described by Angrosino (2007) and Wolcott (1994), data was collected by (name of first author) via field observations, informal and formal interviews, and web based documentation. Both taught lecture sessions and practical sessions were observed. Observations focused on generic themes such as the type of knowledge being delivered, the body positions and practices of the participants and their interactions with the lecturer. Reflective comments were added into a field diary. Observations on informal interactions with the participants were also recorded. For example, observations of conversations with Jack prior to his lectures at IU and the formal interviews were also documented. The observations made in the field were used to inform the topics discussed and focused upon during formal interviews that took place. In total, five formal interviews were conducted with Jack that ranged from one hour to two hours in duration. All interviews were conducted by (name of first author), digitally recorded, and transcribed verbatim by him. The interview questions were loosely structured around general issues relating the experiences of Jack and emergent themes from the field observations and previous interviews. For example, 'Can we discuss what happened with Nigel in the practical session today?' and 'How was your experience of your first Fresher's Initiation?'

Initially, descriptive exploratory comments were made about the data, for example, reoccurring phrases were underlined and key events highlighted. Within this, a thematic analysis as described by Riessman (2008) was conducted that focused exclusively on the content of 'what' is said as opposed to 'how' something is said, 'to whom,' or 'for what purposes.' Conceptual comments were then made on the content of the transcripts that involved moving away from the explicit claims of

the participants. Here, preliminary and tentative connections were made to various theoretical concepts and the contextual analytical approach.

To assist in the development of plausible interpretations, the findings and emergent themes were shared with two colleagues (names of co-authors) who had specific expertise in educational theory, life history and narrative studies. Their role was to act as critical friends who provided a theoretical sounding board to encourage reflection on, and exploration of, alternative interpretations of events in the field and the analysis of the data. Each was also fully involved in the crafting of the current article. Through this process, key emergent themes were identified in the data. Before illustrating how this analytical approach has been used to understand Jack's transition, the analytical lens that shaped our interpretations will be outlined.

### **Analytical Lenses**

Our interpretation of Jack's experiences have been framed by the Strong Structuration Theory proposed by Stone (1991, 2001, 2005) which is concerned with the 'hermeneutical-core' of social processes, practices and relations. We have found this strong form of structuration theory to be useful in drawing our attention to the nuances of Jack's transitional experiences over time and the educational processes and practices that inform them.

### **[INSERT FIG 1 ABOUT HERE]**

As Figure 1 illustrates, strong structuration theory distinguishes between the four interrelated aspects of structuration. The *external structures* dimension of the framework outlines the conditions, practices and resources that influence and inform Jack's immediate horizon of actions. Distinguishing social structures in this manner, draws upon the work of Archer (1995, 47) in highlighting how 'there is much more to structuration theory than phenomenology and memory traces'. Acknowledging the external structures of a context enables a more multidimensional picture

of transitional experience to be developed, one that identifies many of the hierarchical and horizontally organised practices, positions and relations across sets of different (yet interwoven) employment, educational and social contexts (Mouzelis 1991). The *internal structures* component of the framework focuses on the phenomenological conditions of an agent's mediation and recognition of external structures. As illustrated by Figure 1, in the case of Jack we have analytically divided these into *conjunctural knowledges* and *general dispositions*. Conjunctural knowledges are those relevant to a specific context. These may include specific curriculum, employment, social knowledge of everyday practices. They may also include knowledge regarding specific practices and rituals within institutions.

The level of interaction an agent such as Jack undertakes with these external structures is dependent on the general dispositions within their internal structures. As with Bourdieu's concept of Habitus, the general dispositions of an agent-in-focus are situated at the unconscious level, embedded within corporeal schemas (Bourdieu 1990). Stones (2005, 88) identifies these general dispositions as

Encompassing transposable skills and dispositions, including generalised world-views and cultural schemas, classifications, typifications of things, people and networks, principles of action, typified recipes of action, deep binary frameworks of signification, associative chains and connotations of discourse, habits of speech and gesture. (Stone, 2005, 88).

The internal structures enable an agent to establish a hierarchy of priorities to their in-situ actions and practices. How much *active agency* agents possess depends on their ability to draw upon their general dispositions to recognise the external structures of a context and subsequently exchange forms of capital (in Jack's case physical to cultural). These are illustrated in Figure 1 as being routine, strategic, generally pre-reflective and critical. Importantly, within the context of elite sport, these are also centralised around the corporeal practices and schemas of agents. The final dimension, outcomes, illustrates the intended and unintended outcomes of this agency. Where

agents, like Jack, are able to strategically draw upon their general dispositions in relation to the conjuncturally-specific knowledges of a context the outcome is one of elaboration and change in relation to the power relations and positions of their transitional experience.

Against this conceptual backdrop, in what follows we highlight how Jack was able to draw upon his general dispositions acquired within sport, to strategically acquire sets of conjuncturally-specific knowledges. The subsequent exchange of physical capital for forms of academic (cultural) and social capital resulted in outcomes that challenged the existing habitual discourses, practices and relations between the FDSc at Hope and the BSc at Ivory between FE and HE. We illustrate how Jack's transitional experience may be thought of as 'empowering' when shaped within the interactions between his general dispositions and those conjunctural knowledges accumulated from everyday practices and discourses observed and detailed within Hope and Ivory.

## **Findings**

Before entering Hope and Ivory, Jack's identity was most powerfully shaped by the experiences of being a young athlete at Tonnabridge and Thoronians RFC. Within both these institutions, Jack is socialised into recognising the educational and professional choices available. Both institutions and the external structures that defined their power and positions, had provided him with educational choices and opportunities not traditionally recognised as being afforded to students within FE. This is something that Jack is aware of.

I did not want a full time university course like here (Ivory). I wanted to have something a bit more spaced out so I could be able to do the course quite well and do my rugby like even better and make it a bit more of a full commitment? You know it is (Foundation Degree) only like a two day course and last year it was only a three day like, two and a half day so it is like I can do all the rugby and stuff and you know be able to progress quite well. I'll probably have to top up here (Ivory) and cos of its better links. (Jack: Interview 1)

Jack recognises the value of both his own physical capital as an athlete and the value of the educational choices available to him. Through this interaction Jack is able to strategically construct his transition from student to full-time professional athlete. Interestingly, Jack based his strategic choices on the experiences of other 'young athletes' and the positions they held within Thoronians. In doing so, he is able to exchange his physical capital for economic capital, valuing himself at '£4,000' and someone who is seen to have 'a lot of potential for playing first team rugby but hasn't played any first team rugby'. The positions Jack inhabits within Thoronians, allows the identification of specific forms of external structures, resulting in Jack being able to strategically recognise his physical capital and subsequently convert this capital to control the pace of transition and the positions available to him from within Hope.

Jack's involvement with Thoronians also shaped his experiences on the FD at Hope. An example of this is Jack's use of his conjunctural-specific knowledge and training experience as an external resource in one particular module.

Nigel would relate the information on the powerpoint back to a rugby context and on a couple of occasions ask Jack what kind of training he did. This was noticeable at one point when he asked Jack to bring in his own training schedule to use with the rest of the class. On other occasions Nigel would relate the information on the specific tests to someone that Jack would know from the rugby club. (Field Notes: 12/11/07)

The extract reveals how Jack's embodied practices and dispositions began to transform and elaborate upon the basic educational positions and resources of the FD. This became clear within the taught sessions, where Jack was often used to demonstrate various techniques to the rest of the class. Jack's practices and his interaction with the external structures of Hope, support Ryan's (2007, 52) suggestion that participants, 'often used bodily descriptors of self and or others. In some cases, own practices were used almost as a 'yardstick' for the practices of others...to indicate their 'authority' to speak about and pass judgement on such matters'. Importantly, becoming a bodily

descriptor from which other external structures are constructed and transmitted, placed specific cultural and social capital upon Jack's physical practices and experiences of elite sport. As he stated, 'It's (I am) a good asset to have for the class and stuff. I can add in information about what we're doing and stuff as a professional athlete (interview 1).

The positions Jack adopted within Hope are implicit to him, based on the recognition of valued dispositions, in this case, the physicality of his body and the knowledge acquired as a professional athlete. In many respects, Jack's body and his physical capital provided a corporeal prism reflecting both educational and employment acquired knowledge. It is this practice-position relation that empowered Jack to challenge some of the more established hierarchical structures within the context of IU.

As the study continued, Jack's willingness to exchange his physical capital for forms of cultural capital became more evident.

Nigel told the students that they would be doing practical core strengths in the room. Immediately, Jack stated that he was not doing it, he had a game tonight. Nigel, clearly frustrated, then asked 'why not?'. The mood became standoffish with Nigel wanting Jack to give a reason. 'Aggravated Vertebrae' was the answer given with a wry smile. You could see that Nigel did not think very much of this answer and so then publicly stated that not only he but others felt that Jack was opting in and out of stuff. (Researcher Field Notes: 5/11/07)

In allowing Jack to draw upon his positions within Thoronians and the conjunctural knowledge of injury, coupled with the practical logic that in "having a game tonight" was more important than participation in class, which by the very nature of the course was difficult to challenge. This centralises Jack to the teaching delivery within the module. It is here where Jack's use of embodied dispositions, developed within the context of professional sport, enables him to negotiate and construct new positions that can challenge the existing practice-position and power relations of the



course. In doing so, it is possible to observe how Jack draws upon his general and conjunctural dispositions in the manner what Bourdieu (1990) refers to a generative grammar and how through this is empowered to co-create what Bourdieu (1998) referred to as interspaces that provide a momentum for action, interpretation and even social change. While this form of corporeal empowerment has been documented within social structures of higher education sport (name of author et al. 2007), Jack's practices illustrate how young athletes are able to do this within an in-curriculum educational context. Indeed, this strategic use of legitimate embodied disposition illustrates how young athletes, who are able to recognise the external structures of specific contexts, are able to construct further educational opportunities for themselves.

The successful completion of the FDS, enabled Jack to apply for the BSc qualification at Ivory. The reputation of this university, coupled with the opportunities offered to elite level athletes in the form of sport scholarships, immediately caught the attention of Jack who had always aspired to be part of an 'elite',

I know what it is like, and the standard of the degree here (Hope/High-Tower) is not as good as it is there (Ivory). It would be the best option for me because it is linked with the Thoronians forwards coach and he could sort me out with a scholarship. I've looked into the course and what I need to enter. (Jack: Interview 2).

Alongside the 'quality' of Ivory's educational experience, the thoughts of Jack illustrated the significant influence of relations between Thoronians and Ivory had on the choices he made. This illustrates the dualities of Jack's empowered transitional experience. The role Thoronians played in shaping the value Jack placed on education and the standard of degree qualifications is evident. Such value, begins to interact with the embodied dispositions of Jack's internal structures forming spaces within his transitional experience in which he actively and strategically positions himself. It is the continual exchange of physical to social capital that begin to shape the positions Jack adopts

within IU. This led him to display elements of empowerment and control within his transition to Ivory.

I am not too bothered by people going ‘fuck sakes you did a fucking Foundation Degree’. I’ll know some of the boys that are in their second year and I know the boys that are in the year above me...If they have a problem with me doing a Foundation Degree then they really need to move on. (Jack: Interview 2)

The empowerment Jack displays leads to a position in which he is able to strategically adopt certain positions; rejecting some (in the form of the FD and the identity of the ‘rugby boy’) and acknowledging others (the boys in the second year). However, in rejecting the FD, Jack then draws upon his knowledge regarding established positions within the course at Ivory; as illustrated by ‘the boys’. This highlights the importance of the social positions occupied within transitional experiences, something that will now be discussed in further detail.

Unlike his experience at Hope, the positions and strategies Jack utilised during his time at Ivory are more situated within the positions and hierarchies of the rugby squad,

Everyone knows everyone else pretty much. You know, everyone’s a lot more friendly it doesn’t take much to get hold of someone. No one is out there to be an absolute dick within the rugby squad anyway. I have found I am just part of the scene. Saying that, the mechanisms for this are there so. (Jack: Interview 4)

It was evident that Jack was not the only student who had links with the Thoronians club and as a consequence he is able to position himself as a valued part of the scene. Accordingly, Jack begins to display signs of different positional strategies and practices to situate himself within Ivory.

I find it funny that 3rd years are like ‘Fuck you Fresh’ - I just see it as a long line of people who have been through 1st year and have just been bullied by 3rd and 2nd years, simply because they were bullied and had to do it and stuff like that. I am like the same age as the 3rd year boys so it is a bit like, ‘Oh Fuck off’’. I am considered a fresh pants as it were as it is my first year, even though I am in the 2nd year, I am considered as fresh

because of the rugby and it is my first year at Ivory bla bla bla...Saying that I am not getting treated as badly as a fresher so it is not too bad. (Jack: Interview 3)

As Jack revealed, his physical capital and positions within Thoronians enable him to challenge the established 'commandments' of the rugby club and the established hierarchical structures of fresher, second year and third year. As (name of author et al, 2007) note, adherence to these commandments or rules usually leads to successful membership. However, as Jack's experience indicates, for a chosen few, such positions may be challenged. This resistance and critique of the social positions further illustrated how Jack is empowered through the value he has as a professional athlete at Ivory. Such challenges to the established external structures are reflective of the findings of Tinning (2004) and Singer and Buford (2010), in the sense that Jack begins to display very specific discourses of masculinity, such as toughness, power, aggression and the willingness to control the power relations on his terms. Furthermore, in contrast to understanding of the failed experiences of those vocational students described by Bowl (2001), it is this breaking down of the social hierarchy that make's Jack's experience interesting and different to many others. However, in challenging these external structures it was also evident how the positions and practices of Ivory also began to reshape Jack's identity,

Did first interview with Jack today since he had moved from Hope to Ivory. I asked to meet him in the union, the central hub of all student activity on Ivory. When I went in, Jack did not stand out from the crowd like he had done at college, the outfit of tracky bottoms, green hoody (with hood up) and trainers with water bottle in close proximity all signs of Jack adopting the standard issue of most of the Sport Scientists which are often seen within Ivory, sure indications that Jack was blending into the surroundings. The only thing making him slightly stand out was his enormous size; the body of the professional athlete placing him explicitly at the top of the Ivory's hierarchy. (Field Notes: Researcher)

As the extract illustrates, Jack increasingly adopted the dress and valued positions of this group of students at Ivory. In finding himself in a position to strategically adopt many of the ritualised

practices and positions of Ivory, while rejecting others, Jack enables himself the support from peers and the scholarship system to acquire sets of conjunctural knowledges, particularly strategies to manage the educational demands of Ivory,

I was sort of in my comfort zone with rugby boys so it was just a matter of getting to know the rugby boys a bit better. Now I have met a few people on my course out of university, like at the disco or through the boys sitting room or just out in [name of city] or something like that. Obviously the initial week, people are half looking at you but I don't really mind. In terms of different people and stuff, most of them seem really keen and nice enough. Everyone pretty much sorts of knows everyone else. The atmosphere and learning environment are good, I think pretty much all the resources you need. (Jack: Interview 3)

Thus, the positions and strategic management of Jack's educational demands and knowledge is aided through the social positions developed beyond Ivory at Thoronians. The recognition of this need for support, allowed Jack to overcome the crucial stages of transition; namely the initial months at Ivory. In many respects, unlike other students from diverse backgrounds, through his employment at Thoronians, Jack has already been exposed to the culture of Ivory and has implicitly acquired various repositioning strategies as demonstrated by his comments of his first year. Jack's identity as a professional elite athlete also enabled him to overcome many of the habitual and tribal initiations that continue to invisibly order and maintain the social and cultural hierarchies within elite universities (in this case sporting hierarchies). While the long term consequences of this for Jack remain to be seen, there were indications of how fragile these positions may be within the current economic climate.

It is a very difficult time at Thoronians at the moment because they're going to cut the 52 squad down to 35 for next season. There's a lot of boys going and you know there's a lot of attitudes and stuff. Training is becoming quite difficult at the club at the moment because you know some boys aren't happy with the decisions that the directors of the club have made and some boys won't be staying, some might be staying but will be getting a pay cut. Boys like me haven't been told if we are going to stay or not yet. I really did not know. It is very much all up in the air at the moment...I feel a bit half pissed

off because they're being a bit harsh. I have still got another year at university and feel as if I am going to be chucked out on a limb because they want to get promotion. My development is going to hinder in not being in such a professional set up. (Jack: Interview 4).

The experiences of Jack illustrate that transition between FE, HE, and employment are not 'value free', and are built upon fragile foundations, with uncertain outcomes. The data alludes to the fragile negotiation between the external structures of education and employment within sport and the embodied dispositions of students/athletes who tread this pathway. Jack's particular experience, also hints at how complex this relation is as it develops over time in different situations.

## **Discussion**

The experience of Jack partially illustrates the myriad of relations, positions and practices that continually interweave to create particular experiences for students undergoing transition between the contexts of FE, HE and employment. Interestingly, the case of Jack alludes to the sets of processes that continually interweave to provide different cultural and institutional positions across time and space. While focus on policy, practice and rituals of the post-16 education have been insightfully illustrated within isolated spaces and institutions, Jack's story provides a more complex representation of the relations between FE, HE and employment by revealing the student experience as being a process that transcends a number of different institutions. The ambiguity and complexity of these transitional experiences; poses questions regarding the current climate of FE and HE and the possibilities these relationships offer for young people in transition between them in today's economic climate.

Our findings highlight how Jack continually repositioned himself within a carousel of positions-practices and power relations within the institutions and settings of Thoronians RFC, Hope and Ivory. As the findings allude to, while these institutions have distinct rules and practices that

warrant further exploration in their own right, the interconnections between them must also be acknowledged. Furthermore, in drawing upon dispositions conferred with physical capital from other contexts, Jack is able to continually elaborate on his educational positions, readily acquiring of social and academic (cultural) forms of capital. In doing so, the data also alludes to how the particular form of Jack's valued physical capital acted as a corporeal prism that refracted and absorbed the kaleidoscopic sets of position-practice relations and resources. Importantly, through actively reshaping what Bourdieu (1998) terms the 'interspaces' which people occupy with their bodies and identities, Jack is also socially validating the experiences of the other students like him in our study. Unlike many other more typical student transitions, rather than being continually positioned by the external structures of education, Jack's body provides a catalyst for educational inclusion and achievement. Thus, what his experience begins to illuminate is the possibility of a different type of FE student, one that emerges from the interaction between industry (professional sport) and education in ways that can influence the social and educational practices of institutions. Interestingly, this experience contrasts to many of the vocational stories that have informed our understanding of post-16 vocational qualifications in which students often cannot associate themselves with the positions and practices of higher education institutions (Reay et al. 2005). As the policy landscape of FE-HE and employment shifts, the experience of Jack, therefore, provides reason for both hope and caution.

The case of Jack highlights the complexity of transitional experiences within Western education. Unlike cases in which individuals, with no form of recognised or valued capital are subject to imposed transitional pathways, Jack's case demonstrates the intuition and tenacity agents may display in negotiating particular pathways into education. The case highlights a sense of emergence agency in which the physical capital of Jack begins to develop his own generative grammar that generates specific forms of social and academic (cultural capital). Importantly, Jack's case highlights the role of physical capital in providing educational opportunities for those students from

particular socio-cultural backgrounds. While Jack's case demonstrates a level of academic ability (in the form of A-levels), this ability was framed amongst the sporting opportunities afforded to him. Accordingly, while our findings are situated within the context of professional sport, they have the potential to contribute to understanding of other transitional experiences within educational-employment contexts in which the exchange of physical capital into forms of academic (social) and cultural capital are prominent. This is important given the increasing number of employment opportunities that require forms of academic qualification and professional accreditation (e.g. health industry and coaching development initiatives).

The framework presented has a number of methodological and conceptual implications from which such considerations may be forwarded. While more detailed accounts of the conceptual developments forwarded are available (see STONES 2005; AUTHOR 2012) the paper has again highlighted the possible contribution strong structuration frameworks can make on enhancing the strength of singular case studies of agents involved within the FE-HE transitions. The use of the strong structuration framework has provided a strong lens that sought to go beyond the surface level interactions within Jack's transitional experience. In one sense, the framework has accounted for not only what practices Jack adopted within his transition but also their origin and value. In analytically distinguishing between sets of internal structures, the framework has highlighted how the cultural and physical nature of his dispositions are shaped and shape sets of rules and resources within the contexts of FE and HE. Equally, in identifying sets of external structures, the framework has the structural influences that come to shape the agency he displayed.

The strong structuration framework that has informed our interpretation of Jack's case has the potential to make understanding of similar transitional experiences more richer and more meaningful. This is because rather than focusing on the surface level interactions of transition and experience, the framework illuminates particular elements of transition. The framework reveals the

microcosms of experience; allowing an understanding of the internal, meaningful and experiential dimensions of an agent's experience "in relation" to the relevant networks of social and educational structures that currently shape FE-HE and employment relations. The strong structuration framework provides conceptual and methodological guidelines that can dissect agency-structure relations that shape forms of education-employment transitions like Jack's. Following the thoughts of Stones (2005, 197) the framework provides a 'informed and sympathetic critical humanism; a hard-headed, systematic, in-situ realism about what can and can't be done; and an idealistic, imaginative, creativity set to work on conceiving the other, better, things that it might just be possible to do'. At a time within education where there are a multitude of transitions are being shaped, it is these elements of strong structuration theory that provide the foundations for further cases to be explored and understood.

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Figure 1. Diagram to illustrate Jack's experience of transition. (Adapted from Stones 2005).



