



## Generation Y graduates and career transition: Perspectives by gender



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### ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to explore, by gender, UK Generation Y graduates' views on their career transition after graduation from under-graduate business programmes. Following a literature review, the empirical work takes the form of an on-line questionnaire with business school graduates from a post-1992 Scottish University in five recent academic sessions. Gendered nuances are found in several aspects of the respondents' views on their career transition, including statistically significant differences in: more women continuing their student job after graduation; women being more accepting of starting after graduation in a non-graduate level job; and more women than men encountering gender discrimination in the workplace. The identified nuances and differences appear to be setting the genders on diverging career tracks as early as the transition from university, in that they seem to signal more career progress, even advantage, among the men than the women.

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### Introduction

Interest in the Generation Y group of people – generally taken to mean those born in the period 1977–2000 – is apparently well established now. Mello (2011; p43) for example notes that the high level of attention afforded to this group is not only because 'they are the current new entrants to the workforce' but also because they 'have different needs from their predecessors'. The predecessors of Generation Y are often labelled as Traditionalists, Baby Boomers, and Generation X, depending on when they were born, and contemporary workforces, uniquely, comprise all four generations (Shaw & Fairhurst, 2008). What makes this combination interesting is the defining characteristics of Generation Y. Beyond being interesting, what makes study of Generation Y careers important is Generation Ys being increasingly recognised as 'high contributors to the economy' (Poornima, 2009; p26) in sheer numbers employed and in potential earning capacity, albeit in the face of recessionary effects. De Hauw and De Vos (2010) note that recessionary times can modify elements of Generation Y's career expectations. For it has been reported that 'increasingly numbers of university leavers are finding work hard to come by' Doward (2012; p4). Reflecting this, McDonald (2011; p797) comments that 'the tumult of global markets' is shaping contemporary management approaches which encompass Generation Y, arguably underlining the interest in, and importance of, study of aspects of Generation in the workplace.

To date, much of the academic study into Generation Y careers has concentrated on the anticipation phase, in Nicholson and Arnold (1989) terms of career phases, in empirical work with university under-graduates on their career expectations (e.g. De Hauw & De Vos, 2010; Hurst & Good, 2008; Ng, Schweitzer, & Lyons, 2010; Terjesen, Vinnicombe, & Freeman, 2007). Related to this is literature on employer implications of recruiting and developing Generation Y graduates (e.g. Connor & Shaw, 2008; Shaw & Fairhurst, 2008). This paper builds on the career anticipation phase in its focus on graduates' career transition into encounter and adjustment in Nicholson and Arnold (1989) terminology. Career anticipation can be seen to be the phase of nearing completion of a university course, while transition is the phase of transfer from full time study to encountering then adjusting to a career after graduation. The aim of the paper is to analyse, by gender, UK Generation Y business school graduates' views on their career transition after graduation. The central research question is how Generation Y's views may vary by gender. While some research work on graduate transition stage has been conducted (e.g. Cennamo & Gardner, 2008; Hess & Jepsen, 2009; Kowske, Rasch, & Wiley, 2010) or is presently in train (e.g. The University of Warwick's longitudinal Futuretrack study with 2005/6 UCAS applicants), it rarely includes gendered considerations as this paper does. In order to address the aim and central research question, the paper, firstly, discusses theoretical aspects of the nature and employment expectations of Generation Y; secondly, it offers an overview of literature on gender in employment. This is followed by presentation of the empirical findings on the views, by gender, on aspects of the career transition of

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Generation Y business graduates from a post-1992 Scottish university, prior to key conclusions being drawn.

### Sameness and difference in Generation Y

Published commentary on Generation Y is now expanding in volume and momentum: an ABI scholarly journal search for this article, for example, yields 394 articles, 137 of which are published in the period 2010–date. Underlining the contemporary significance of Generation Y, McDonald (2011; p797) asserts, in his conceptualisation of contemporary management, that the ‘transcendence of Gen Y values’ is one of the main ‘forces’ shaping modern management. However, that Generation Y is unlike older generations has been called into question by a few commentators. For example Murray, Toulson, and Legg (2011; p476) level that ‘evidence of [generational] differences are largely anecdotal’ and, similarly, Parry and Urwin (2011) question the empirical – and theoretical – base of differences in work values according to generational category. In the same vein, Costanza, Badger, Fraser, and Severt (2012; p375) meta-analysis of generational differences in job satisfaction, organizational commitment and turnover intentions concludes that generational differences ‘probably do not exist’ in these regards. Nonetheless, in addressing the need for more empirical evidence of the Generation Y phenomenon (or not), in their own research on Generation Y, in New Zealand, Murray et al. (2011) find more similarities, or sameness, among their 164 respondents. However, they do find some differences too as of the 69 constructs tested, eight are different for Generation Y. Also, Lyons, Schweiter, Ng, and Kuron (2012) cross-generational research in Canada on career stages finds significant differences in the Generation Y respondents, including the 20–24 age bracket of early career transition. Thus a mixed picture on sameness and difference of Generation Ys can be seen to exist.

Several researchers, for example Deal, Altman, and Rogelberg (2010), readily acknowledge that Generation Y is not totally different from previous generations because shared characteristics do exist. Deal et al. (2010; p191) highlight the need for more empirical research to inform understanding of similarities and differences across generations, asserting that the ‘relatively sparse empirical research published [on Generation Y] is confusing at best and contradictory at worst’. Therefore assumptions of generational sameness are inappropriate; instead cross-generational investigation of sameness and difference is appropriate.

Emphasising the case for further Generation Y research, Angeline (2011; p249) cautions that ‘work tensions and conflicts are inevitable if the Baby Boomer, Generation X, and Generation Y employees fail to understand and accept the unique and different characteristics of each group, and to embrace their similarities’. In a similar vein to understanding differences, Kapoor and Solomon (2011; p308) find that ‘employers must identify the separate characteristics of each generation in their workplace’. Taking this point, there is now a growing body of pan-generational research. This includes the work of: Kowske et al. (2010) on job satisfaction; Boyd (2010) with professionally employed MBA students; Meriac, Woehr, and Banister (2010) on work intentions; Andert (2011) on expectations of leadership; and Lub, Marije, Bal, Blomme, and Schalk (2012) on the psychological contract for example. All find generational differences, often alongside some generational sameness.

Consequently, sameness and difference in generational characteristics can be seen to co-exist across generations co-working in organisations today. The increasing volume of pan-generational empirical evidence is therefore gradually and evidently building a more textured understanding of Generation Y. Nonetheless there is still apparently a tendency for this age bracket to be viewed as a

collective group, yet Ng et al. (2010) national survey suggests Generation Y’s expectations and values are not homogenous, rather that they vary by several factors including gender. Further, it is worth noting that the current research on Generation Y is mainly located in westernised advanced economies, notably the USA, Canada, the UK and Australia. As a result, Generation Y is arguably a largely westernised and advanced economy concept at present. Other recent research on Generation Y concentrates absolutely and not comparatively on this generation. An overview of this secondary data is presented next in order to add to understanding of the ‘complex and sometimes paradoxical generation’ (Hershatler & Epstein, 2010; p211) that is Generation Y.

### Defining characteristics of generation Y

As signaled by Meier and Crocker (2010), failure to understand Generation Y in the workplace can give rise to issues. Hence appreciation of the defining characteristics of this generation matters. One particularly defining characteristic is the high level of familiarity with, and literacy in, information technology among Generation Ys (Flowers, Jones, & Hogan, 2010; Hershatler & Epstein, 2010). Flowers et al. (2010; p1) dub generations Ys ‘technology-savvy new type of workers’. More generally, published work by on Generation Y (Broadbridge, Maxwell, & Ogden, 2007) sets out four categories of characteristics that demarcate Generation Ys from older generations. These theoretically informed and empirically endorsed categories are: employment terms and conditions; management approach and organizational culture; personal career development; and personal values. In relation to under-graduate Generations Ys, as examples in each category respectively, there are expectations of: career fast tracking and higher entry level (Broadbridge et al., 2007); managerial support (Martin, 2005) and a positive company culture (Morton, 2002); taking individual responsibility for their careers (Broadbridge et al., 2007) and opportunities for career development and responsibility (Kerslake, 2005); and workplace diversity and equality (Broadbridge et al., 2007). Above all, it is the personal career development category, with its high number of characteristics, that seems most important for under-graduate Generations Ys (Broadbridge et al., 2007), a finding which chimes with others (e.g. De Hauw & De Vos, 2010; Ng et al., 2010).

De Hauw and De Vos (2010; p293), for instance, support the position that personal career development is of primary importance to Generations Ys in their finding that Generation Ys tend to have ‘high expectations of job content, training, career development, and financial rewards...suggesting these expectations are largely embedded within the generation’. Similarly, Ng et al. (2010; p281) find that Generation Ys ‘place greatest importance on individualistic aspects of jobs’, in keeping with – and possibly reinforced by – the emphasis on individualism in contemporary human resource management. Further, they posit that Generation Ys can ‘have realistic expectations of their first job and salary but seek rapid development and the development of new skills, while also ensuring a meaningful and satisfying life outside of work’ (Ng et al., 2010; p281). Moreover, Richardson (2010) study of Generation Y students in Australia underlines the centrality of career pre-occupations in promotion opportunities and career paths, as well as Generation Y student concerns with relationships with managers, and pay and conditions.

Related to Generation Y’s apparent inclination towards preoccupation with their personal career development is their inclination towards placing expectations on organisations to accommodate this (Hershatler & Epstein, 2010). So strong is this characteristic that Hershatler and Epstein (2010; p211) level that it is one of ‘two compelling factors that differentiate Millennial [Generation

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