

Changing Conceptions of Students' Career Development Needs

Jane Artess, *Higher Education Careers Services, UK*

Abstract — This paper takes as its starting point a brief review of a range of theoretical assumptions about the nature of career learning and decision-making and plots the emergence of the notion of 'employability' as a predominant paradigm for the organisation and delivery of career guidance services in UK higher education. The acquisition of employability skills in students is essentially a deficit paradigm that the provision of work-oriented learning opportunities seeks to address.

A key driver for the development of employability as an institutional priority is policy-making by governmental agencies that foregrounds university-business partnerships as a component of economic generation. The development of work-based learning (WBL) and work placements as part of higher education courses is shown to exemplify how responsibility for students' employability development is increasingly shared between institutions and (prospective) employers.

The paper draws upon recent research findings that explore issues of quality assurance in WBL and work placements and poses questions for institutional services aimed to support students' transition from higher education to the labour market. Access to WBL and work placements appears to be stratified and different types of opportunity are taken up by particular groups of students.

A relatively new way of conceptualising career learning as 'career adaptability' has been developed out of theories of career 'constructivism' and is suggested to provide a return to a more student-centred paradigm which has the potential to be more inclusive. Career adaptability is exemplified by the use of the career adaptability scale to support students' self-assessment of their career learning and development.

THEORIES OF CAREER

Ideas about career decision-making, career development and career management, are drawn from various subject disciplines, notably psychology, sociology and learning.

Psychological theorising

Psychological theories are arguably of the greatest significance in terms of volume and impact upon the work of career guidance practitioners. In this particular context, psychological theorising clusters around five strands: differential, developmental, humanistic, psychodynamic and behavioural. Here, we consider three: differential, developmental and behavioural.

Differential approaches to career guidance presumes that individuals possess different traits, qualities, interests and that the object of career guidance is to match clients to the 'best fit' courses or jobs. Its appeal to common-sense perceptions is very strong; it seems implausible that individuals would seek to choose occupations for which they

were not well matched in terms of aptitudes, abilities, interests and so forth. Differential approaches require that the qualities of both individuals and occupations can be accurately measured. Further, that those qualities are sufficiently enduring to make the match effective over time. An underlying assumption of a differential approach is that subtle changes in occupational requirements and individual characteristics can be accommodated but that significant change in either requires re-assessment of the match.

The purpose of career guidance within a differential paradigm is to assist individuals identify their qualities and interests, alongside an assessment of labour market requirements. Awareness-raising is achieved using the exploration of experiences (such as work experience), social or cultural activities and educational achievement, together with (ideally) interest inventories, aptitude or psychometric assessments. Analysis of labour market requirements is made on the basis of systematic surveying and reporting of employing (or educational) organisations. Career guidance based on this practice framework can be delivered via the curriculum or via one-to-one interactions and in both settings there is an observable concern with achieving 'realistic' decisions (Colley, 2000), with clients encouraged to choose from options identified on the basis of current knowledge (of particularly) educational attainments and labour market opportunities. Various aspects of differential approaches have been criticised, including the inability to take account of subjective assessments and for the 'technically rational' information processing account of decision-making (Bowman et al, 2006).

The practitioner's role is as an expert mediator, central to the process that guides the client into the 'best fit' training or educational opportunity or job. Skills used by practitioners espousing this approach are more likely to reflect a directive approach.

Change (actual or potential) in aptitudes, attainments and job requirements locates differential approaches predominantly in the present; theorising that could accommodate development of a future perspective inevitably challenged the 'trait and factor' basis of differentialism.

Developmental approaches to career decision-making hinge upon dual notions of 'change' and 'readiness' That individuals mature and change appeals to common-sense notions of personal and social development. Key writers (Ginzberg, 1951; Super, 1957, 1980, 1988, 1990, 1994, 1996) portray career development as phased with increasing levels of vocational maturity emerging as individuals pass

through the stages of childhood, adolescence, adulthood and mature adulthood. Vocational maturity is associated with readiness to make career decisions and take career-related action on behalf of these. Developmental theorists take account of individual differences by mapping individuals along a continuum of vocational maturity. Change is implicit but bounded by a sense of progression between stages in typically linear fashion. So a child's aspiration to become a pop star might be viewed as indicative of being at a 'fantasy' stage whilst a young adult's aspiration to the same might be viewed as 'tentative' or 'exploratory' if accompanied by participation in a pop band or direct experience in the music industry. Here again, notions of 'realism' are to the fore. Good decisions are taken when vocational maturity is reached and (occupational) information is not only made available but also accommodated into career planning.

The practitioner role within the developmental paradigm is to assist in the identification of phase or stage of development and to provide interventions aimed at 'moving the client on'. Such interventions might include one-to-one interactions aimed at uncovering the depth of understanding of career decision-making (or its absence) and the personal implications. Counselling techniques are frequently used with particular emphasis being placed upon the interpersonal skills of the practitioner being deployed in negotiation with the client and on the basis of the perceived stage of development. This facilitates a client-centred approach which is differentiated and can be delivered in curricular as well as individual contexts. The provision of guidance within a developmental approach is less likely to be dependent upon finding a match with the labour market and indeed may become separated from it.

Behaviourism has been used extensively to inform career guidance practice. Here the basic tenants of stimulus-response, action and reinforcement have been applied to account for how career decisions are made. This approach emphasises that career interests and aptitudes are shaped not only by direct experiences but also by the actions of others and by the individual's interpretation of their own and others' actions. A personality theory developed by Bandura (1977) and later by Krumboltz (Krumboltz *et al.*, 1976; Krumboltz & Nichols, 1990; Krumboltz, 1994; Krumboltz & Coon, 1995) known as 'social learning theory' has been used in career decision-making to describe how individuals acquire 'self-observation generalisations' (or self-awareness) and 'task approach skills' (or problem-solving abilities). Here, social learning is derived as much from learning experiences intrinsic to the individual as much as those observed in others. Social learning theory reveals how knowledge about self (both learned and genetic) is integrated with information that is provided via reinforcing feedback. For example, self-observation generalisations might be reported as,

'People from my course don't usually do that sort of job...' or 'I have always been very active, I am told, since I was a child - that is probably why I enjoyed work experience in the building company'

Role models and iconic representations of occupations are learned and reinforced in particular social contexts and

are said to become powerful influencers of career decision-making. Reinforcement of stereotypes are described as socially derived (from exchanges with family and peers, the media) and the rational and irrational association of characteristics. For example,

'I wouldn't want to do an office job – office jobs are boring ...' or 'Public life is full of people who cannot be trusted – everyone knows that politicians make promises they don't intend to keep' or 'Social work appeals to me because social workers help people in trouble'

The task of the practitioner in career guidance informed by this particular framework is to assist the client to test out whether previous social learning is accurate and to locate career motivations and goals. Career guidance utilises validated information in order to stimulate exploration of ideas about career opportunities and self. Within this paradigm guidance practitioners might use counselling techniques together with provocation and challenge, to encourage clients to develop and extend their knowledge, for example, *'how do you know all office jobs are boring?'*

The use of social learning theory and other behavioural approaches has been opposed by those who view the stimulus-response-reinforcement model as simplistic and failing to take account of the capacity of the client to process, interpret or reflect upon information about self and opportunities. Critics of behaviourist stances have been prominent amongst educationalists and sociologists, to which the following sections refer.

Sociological theorising

If psychological theorising emphasises individual cognitive and individual-in-group responses to the task of selecting a career focus, then sociological theorising emphasises the impact of social, economic and cultural environments on the way individuals and groups understand and act (Roberts, 1968, 1977, 1984, 1995, 1997, 2000). A fundamental assumption in using sociology as a descriptor in career decision-making is that the actions of individuals are bound to a context that can be described independently from the actions of any one individual. Sociological descriptions of career choice are significantly influenced by notions of social class and mobility (Roberts, 1993) and some authors see social structures as ascribing workplace relationships; where occupations are allocated rather than chosen. When described in this way, the passivity of behaviourism is eclipsed by the oppression of social structures. Nonetheless, labour markets (or 'opportunity structures') whilst part of wider social organisations are perceived as super-ordinate to the requirements of individuals and largely beyond their control.

Sociological perspectives have been critiqued for their inability to accommodate the agency of individuals and groups as a part of the dynamic reality of participation in real communities. Writers such as Law (1981) have supplanted notions of occupational allocation with 'community interaction' in which the meaning of social structures such as class and status are negotiated by individuals and groups.

Career guidance within sociological frameworks is aimed to enable the client to appraise and review his/her 'world view' and to assess their own beliefs in relation to factual data about labour market opportunities and probabilities. A major task of career guidance is to support adjustment to and accommodation of available opportunities via the use of validated, accurate information. The skills of counselling would be required to help reconcile individuals' perceptions as they navigate often prolonged transitions into and through complex labour markets. Like other approaches, career guidance can be provided in both curricular and one-to-one settings.

The notion that career decision making is rational underpins much recent and current government policy for career guidance in England (www.dfes.gov.uk, refers). As with other features of 'models' of career decision-making, the inclusion of rationality is plausible and apparently desirable; few of us would claim to make irrational decisions about something as important as choice of occupation or course of learning. However, there are writers who describe the emphasis on 'technically rational' decision making as misleading (Bowman, *ibid*) claiming that rationality is only possible to understand when in-depth knowledge of the individual (their aspirations, motivations, constraints, values and beliefs etc.) are understood as a whole. What might appear rational in one set of personal circumstances can be viewed as wholly irrational given another set of circumstances. Some authors have argued that 'technical rationality' should be replaced by 'pragmatic rationality' as a notion that more aptly describes the compromises, shifts and changes that individuals undergo in reaching important career decisions.

A sociological theory known as 'careership' includes the notion of pragmatic rationality in combination with two other sociological constructs, that of 'habitus' and 'horizons for action' (Hodkinson and Sparkes, 1997, Hodkinson, *et al.*, 1996), and describes career decision making as a series of routines and turning points. Here, turning points are frequently associated with the taking of career decisions, for example, at the end of a course or the completion of a temporary work contract. Routines represent the everyday experiences that characterise the transition (from education-to-work or job-to-job) and which shape the decisions made at turning points. More recently the authors (Bowman, *ibid*) have described this process in practice as 'career learning' rather than career decision making and view the boundary between routines and turning points as inherently subjective. In this way, career decisions are likely to emerge over time, as career learning is seen as a process and not a series of single events (or decisions).

The practice of career guidance within a careership model is to encourage the articulation of perception of choice at key decision points and to encourage clients to engage with and interpret information available. Further the task of career guidance practitioners is to bring about career learning by encouraging reflection on experiences amongst clients and to acknowledge the pragmatism inherent in the management of learning and progression. This view of career learning is a newer contribution to knowledge and

thus far, relatively little criticism has not been made, however, it does appear to have the capacity to bridge the gap between notions of career decision making, and learning and teaching.

Theorising about learning

A sizeable literature exists concerning the nature of learning, including much that will be recognisable in the writing about career decision making. For example, conceptions of development and differentiation are commonplace and interest in the impact of social and economic environment has been evident for decades (Ministry of Education, 1963). Behaviourist approaches to the design of learning have particular prominence in the development of work-related and vocational qualifications. Here, we select two major theoretical themes drawn from the writings about learning: 'constructivism' and 'situated cognition' and aim to indicate how these perspectives can aid thinking about the provision of career guidance.

Constructivism holds that knowledge (and learning) is socially constructed; it does not exist in an objective way, but is interpreted subjectively. One piece of learning builds upon the previous one and knowledge is thus actively constructed by the learner. This idea is not new. Kant (1959) in describing how direct experiences represent the beginning of knowledge acquisition suggested that "... *it may well be that even our empirical knowledge is made up of what we receive through impressions and of what our own faculty of knowledge supplies from itself*" (p.25).

The suggestion that, ideas, knowledge and ultimately what we might refer to as 'career learning' is actively constructed provides career guidance practitioners with a way of perceiving how the student pieces together aspects of self in relation to available (career) opportunities. Each student's presentation (of motivations, preferences, interests etc.) is unique and although often sharing common understandings with those of a similar age, development phase or social class, the student's situation is entirely individuated. The task of career guidance within a constructivist approach is to enable the client to review previous and anticipated learning for its utility in relation to career aspirations. Further, career guidance (again within groups or one- to-one settings) is required to accept the uniqueness of individual perspectives, in what is often referred to as 'unconditional positive regard' (Egan, 1998; Rogers, 1961) and subjective rationality, whilst introducing new (career) learning opportunities. The suggestion here that new learning opportunities be introduced is deliberate and shifts perception of the role of career guidance practitioner closer to that of teacher.

Situated cognition is the term given to learning which is thought to be context-dependent. By this, we mean learning that is grounded in the concrete situation in which it occurs (Anderson, 1996; Lave and Wenger, 1991). An important feature of situated learning is that it is believed to result in learning that is unlikely to transfer between different learning tasks. One implication of this

phenomenon in career learning is that learning in educational settings may not readily transfer to workplace settings (or vice versa). Another implication is that if learning takes place in particular situations (for example, in work experience placements) that learning away from these settings (for example, within school/university) will be of little value. This theorising potentially undermines attempts to ‘make sense’ of career-related experiences via career guidance strategies, such as class or individual discussion. However, it has been found (Klahr and Carver, 1988) that learning transfer hinges upon the degree to which tasks share cognitive elements and that where learners are explicitly advised to utilise learning from elsewhere, learning transfer does occur. Whilst situated cognition is a contested notion, it nonetheless may offer career guidance practitioners a framework for understanding and addressing how clients may compartmentalise (or disregard) important features of their career learning.

II. THE EMERGENCE OF EMPLOYABILITY IN THE UK

The Browne Review in the UK (BIS, 2010) in proposing a new financial relationship between the state (and institutions) and students/graduates emphasized that higher education (HE) matters because it transforms the lives of individuals, in particular through enabling access to employment.

On graduating, graduates are more likely to be employed, more likely to enjoy higher wages and better job satisfaction and more likely to find it easier to move from one job to the next. Participation in higher education enables individuals from low income backgrounds and then their families to enter higher status jobs and increase their earnings. (p 14)

It has been found that a primary reason why prospective students consider entry to higher education at all is to enhance their employment prospects. The Futuretrack study (Purcell, *et al.*, 2008) identified that two of the three top reasons why students apply for a course of higher education are employment-related and that higher education is viewed as an investment in future employment. This finding suggests that whilst the pursuit of interest in the particular subject is important there is an underlying assumption amongst prospective students that a degree will provide access to a ‘better’ job or career than one that could be accessed without a degree.

Employability and skills

Participation in higher education is believed to confer knowledge, skills and attributes that are sought by both employers and students alike, albeit students are assumed to be deficient in these to varying extents, when they begin their courses. That this has to be remedied, has led to some commentators referring to the ‘deficit model’ in which the attributes of students (and ultimately graduates) have to be brought into line with the requirements of employers. Government policies over many years have emphasized the need for higher education to better prepare graduates for future labour markets and organizations such

as the Confederation of British Industry (CBI) reinforce the importance of university-employer partnerships to enhance economic well-being for individuals as well as economies (CBI, 2009). It is not difficult to see therefore, how the ‘employability’ of students and graduates has become such a dominant theme in the discourse within higher education during the last decade.

The Higher Education Academy (HEA) in the UK has done a great deal to promote ‘employability’ as an important theme in HE. Here employability is defined as, ... *the acquisition of attributes (knowledge, skills, and abilities) that make graduates more likely to be successful in their chosen occupations (whether paid employment or not).*

Employability has become a key metric by which institutional performance is assessed by statutory funding bodies. The employment of graduates is one of five broad areas of performance:

- access to higher education
- non completion rates for students
- outcomes and efficiencies for learning and teaching
- employment of graduates
- research output

The data most frequently used in the measurement of the employment of graduates is the Destination of Leavers from Higher Education (DLHE) surveys of which there are two; the first is a census at six months following graduation which is followed up with a sample longitudinal survey at approximately three and a half years following graduation, known as Longitudinal DLHE (LDLHE).

The policy driver of enhancing student choice via the publication of more course-based information underlies the rationale for the development of a market in HE and potentially shifts the emphasis for students’ perception of themselves as consumers of HE toward that of customers or investors. Graduate employment then occupies center stage as a key way of distinguishing the institutional offer and appears likely to become increasingly used in competition to attract talented and potentially successfully completing students; thus contributing to the achievement of another important performance measure. It can be inferred then, that the employment and employability preparation of students and graduates has never been of more central, strategic concern to higher education institutions.

In the following paragraphs we examine a selection of literature relating to aspects of becoming employable in the HE context.

Experiencing work

The provision of relevant experiences of work is a long-established feature of higher education and courses that attract professional accreditation are required to include clearly defined components and learning outcomes. It is reported that employers view students/graduates with work experience more favourably than those without and use work experience as a form of extended interview where both sides can assess the appropriateness of future employment. Recent work (BIS, 2013) has identified that

those graduates who have experience of paid work and structured work-based learning (WBL) achieve better outcomes than those without either paid work or WBL alone, and a good deal better than those who experience neither (Table 1 refers). The BIS, 2013 report also identifies that access to different types of workplace learning is highly differentiated by for example, the type of institution attended, and the subject of study.

Table 1
Proportion of respondents with each outcome separately by type of work undertaken

Outcomes	Type of Work Experience				Number of respondents
	Paid work only	Work-based learning only	Both paid work and work-based learning	None	
Good degree	77.0	73.1	81.9	67.3	8386
Self-confidence	82.5	84.6	85.7	78.1	8389
Unemployment	9.2	7.7	6.1	14.9	8384
Graduate job	36.2	59.4	55.2	33.6	6057
Wage ¹	19442.3	22054.7	23581.6	18343.6	6278

¹ the figures for the wage give the mean wage

Reproduced from BIS, 2013

Whilst the relationship between work experience/internship and graduate job entry is well demonstrated there is relatively little research on the impact of the experience of work on learning in HE. Little and Harvey (2006) note that most learning frameworks that identify work experience anticipate a wide range of skills to result, including, personal and social skills, problem solving, creativity and organizational skills. Little (2000) challenged this skills development approach and suggests it provides for an apt beginning rather than an outcome. *the explicit identification of certain skills seems to serve as a useful prompt to students and employers to address these aspects in discussions about suitable tasks and activities for a work placement.* (Little, 2000, p122)

Little and Harvey (ibid) sought to demonstrate whether a various types of work placement, that is, (short, - up to six weeks, compulsory thin, - two x six month periods, and year-long – compulsory or optional) impacted on students' HE learning. They found evidence that participation in work placement did have beneficial effects on students' subsequent learning in HE, in particular it was reported that verbal communication skills increased, as did the ability to network and build relationships in work settings. Positive gains were made in relation to increased levels of self-confidence and personal organization, including leading on tasks and projects and meeting deadlines. Assimilation into workplace practices and emergence of professional approaches to working with others, including subsequently with student peers, was also found. Students were found to

be able to articulate their learning from work placement and frequently referred to work having provided a vehicle for the application of theories. Little and Harvey noted that students seemed more aware of the provisional nature of subject knowledge and whilst they did not find evidence of the development of higher order skills (such as critique, synthesis and analysis) during work placement, they did identify that students were more able to cohere aspects of their HE learning and make connections with professional practice. Specifically, positive changes were reported in students' approach to learning, their ability to cope, listen and challenge were amongst these and also an ability to see the relevance of course content. In short, students were reported to have become more actively engaged in their learning following work placement.

University-business partnerships

More recently universities have been urged to form partnerships and collaborations with businesses to not only enhance students' employ-abilities but also to aid economic prosperity (BIS, 2013b). Following the Wilson review's recommendations, (BIS, 2012) the new National Centre for Universities and Business has been established to support initiatives aimed at bring universities and business into closer partnership and to promote good practice in the provision of work placements.

In 2013 guidance on the provision of quality in work-based learning to help institutions manage work placements by mapping 7 principles of good practice to the Quality Assurance Agency Quality Code was produced (ASET, 2013) consolidating further the importance of effective dialogue between universities and businesses.

III. CAREER ADAPTABILITY

An alternative to the fundamentally employer-led employability discourse is the notion of career adaptability. This derives from the work of Savickas (2013) and others, and conceptualises career development and transition as a process of adaptation, rather than linear development, and provides for a way of thinking about transition that is more student-led. At its core lies theorising about career construction that "... explains the interpretative and interpersonal process that individuals as actors, agents and authors use to make a self, shape an identity, and build a career" (ibid, p 179). Savickas promotes different approaches to careers guidance interventions for actors (vocational guidance), agents (careers education and coaching) and authors (career counselling) and demonstrates a model of career construction counselling that focusses on enabling the client (student) to explore how her/his own career thinking has been constructed.

Savickas and Porfeli (2012) show how career adaptabilities can be measured and validated for use in 13 countries. Career intervention and support can then be offered to students on the basis of self-assessment against 24 items in the 'career adaptabilities scale' under the themes of concern, control, curiosity and confidence (Table 2 refers). In the UK, the career adapt-abilities scale

is currently being piloted for use as a diagnostic tool to help students self-assess their career learning and to help university careers services target resources effectively.

Table 2

Questions in the career adapt-abilities scale

Different people use different strength to build their careers. No one is good at everything; each of us emphasizes some strengths more than others. Please rate how strongly you have developed each of the following abilities using the scale below.

- 5 = Strongest
- 4 = Very Strong
- 3 = Strong
- 2 = Somewhat strong
- 1 = Not strong

1 2 3 4 5

Concern	Thinking about what my future will be like Realising that today's choices shape my future Preparing for the future Becoming aware of the education & vocational choices Planning how to achieve my goals Concerned about my career
Control	Keeping upbeat Making decisions by myself Taking responsibility for my actions Sticking up for my beliefs Counting on myself Doing what's right for me
Curiosity	Exploring my surroundings Looking for opportunities to grow as a person Investigating options before making a choice Observing different ways of doing things Probing deeply into questions that I have Becoming curious about new opportunities
Confidence	Performing tasks efficiently Taking care to do things well Learning new skills Working up to my ability Overcoming obstacles Solving problems

CONCLUSIONS

Within a broad context of theorising about the nature of career learning, and interventions aimed to support it, we have seen a recent emergence of a predominantly employer-centred paradigm for careers work in HE in the UK, where the focus is the enhancement of 'employability' and which serves the needs of students via meeting the needs of employers. Employability runs the risk of

increasing exclusivity, as the development of students' skills (and knowledge, values and workplace competences etc.) is presented as the remedy to students' deficiency (in skills etc.) and in order to help them compete in entry to and progression within the labour market.

There is some early indication of interest in a more student-centred approach based on 'career-adaptabilities' which foregrounds the role of the individual student in shaping a sense of self and identity and constructing his/her career. This approach may foreshadow a more inclusive approach that builds upon prior learning (skills, knowledge, values, etc.) and places students at the centre of career-related interventions.

It may be that 'career adaptability' as an organising paradigm will overtake 'employability' within HE. We will have to wait and see.

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