

WHO WINS THE RAT RACE? SOCIAL JUSTICE AND THE GRADUATE LABOUR MARKET

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Tristram Hooley, Professor of Career Education and Head of iCeGS at the University of Derby, presents the case for a serious injection of ethics and politics into careers guidance practice.

The rat race has been fixed

“Even if you win the rate race, you’re still a rat”.

Lily Tomlin

We often hear that we are in a ‘war for talent’. The language of war certainly makes graduate recruitment sound more exciting but it has some negative connotations. War has winners and losers and those who lose end up dead or damaged. Is this really the best metaphor?

For me, the graduate labour market isn’t really a ‘war for talent’. It is actually a rat race and what is more it is a rat race in which some rats get to start from a very different place on the track than others.

There is a lot of research that shows that the graduate labour market operates in ways that are far more about preserving privilege than they are about supporting meritocracy and social mobility. Graduates from less advantaged backgrounds are less likely to enter the professions (Macmillan et al., 2013) and they earn less and don’t progress as fast once they get jobs (Anders, 2015).

Gordon (2013) explores the reasons for social inequality in the graduate labour

market. He argues that those who are more privileged are more likely to achieve at school and attend a better university and that they also have more money, better networks and greater understanding about how to get on with employers.

It is not just class that makes a difference to graduates’ labour market outcomes. There is evidence that race (Rafferty, 2012), gender (Chevalier, 2011) and a range of other factors also have an impact. The war for talent is clearly not a fair fight. The rat race has been fixed.

I am not the first person to notice the unfairness in the graduate labour market. The Association of Graduate Recruiters booklet *Don’t Miss Out On The Best* sets out a range of strategies that employers can adopt to make their recruitment more fair. It highlights the ways in which things like unpaid internships, relying on networks for recruitment and targeting a small number of elite universities further enables the privileged to succeed.

Should we politicise careers advice?

While employers are talking about inequalities within the recruitment processes, careers services are less sure about how to respond. It is easy to feel that talking about inequality is too political and that it may lead to disillusionment and fatalism amongst students.

Careers work is traditionally about raising aspiration, fostering resilience and operating within the structures. Is it really right to start talking to students about whether the structures are fair and right?

In a recent lecture (Hooley, 2015) I argued that careers professionals need to become much more political. Much of this is about fulfilling our duty to tell the truth. If the graduate labour market is unequal there is nothing to be gained from pretending that this isn’t the case.

Careers work needs to offer people a chance to understand the opportunities and the barriers that are in front of them. These are different for different people and your class, race and gender matter alongside other factors.

If we can help people to understand how political and economic structures work we will actually be empowering them to navigate their way through these structures.

I think that we also need to go beyond this and to encourage people to ask more fundamental questions about how the graduate labour market works and whose interest it works in. Why do some jobs get paid more than others? Why do some companies only recruit from certain campuses? And perhaps even more importantly, what do these companies do and why? Our career choices have ethical and political components that need to be acknowledged.

This is not to argue that it is the job of a careers service to preach the gospel of Jeremy Corbyn. If we become the servants of a political party or doctrine we will lose credibility with students fast.

However, we do need to give students the tools and knowledge to critically examine labour market structures. At the moment we end up selling the rat race and the war on talent to students even though many of us have doubts about the way that this frames career decision-making.

A race or a journey?

Bill Law (2008) makes the point that we can think about career either as a race or as a journey. In a race we work against each other trying to win. In a journey we can co-operate for the best mutual outcome. He argues that we need to move away from a focus on racing and encourage more journeying. He also notes that although we can pause on a journey for a race, we can’t stop a race for a journey.

Learning areas	Key questions
Exploring ourselves and the world where we live, learn and work.	Who am I?
Examining how our experience connects to broader historical, political and social systems.	How does the world work?
Developing strategies that allow us individually to make the most of our current situation.	Where do I fit into the world?
Developing strategies that allow us collectively to make the most of our current situations.	How can I live with others?
Considering how the current situation and structures should be changed.	How do I go about changing the world?

Careers work runs the risk of framing people's careers in ways that are ultimately destructive for them and for wider society.

For many in the careers profession Carl Rodgers' (1995) description of self-actualisation as 'the mainspring of life... the urge which is evident in all organic and human life – to expand, extend, become autonomous, develop, mature' (p.35) describes what they are trying to achieve. This focuses on enabling people to reach their potential and express their humanity.

An excessive focus on winning the rat race offers an alternative vision that is best expressed by the 1980s slogan 'he who dies with the most toys wins'. 'Fetishising

the accumulation of wealth and power in this way can have some negative social consequences as it delegitimises focusing on relationships, public service and helping others.'

Labour market information provides a good example of this kind of framing. It provides us with certain kinds of information (qualifications, salary, promotion prospects) that tend to frame our career decisions as a race.

It doesn't typically provide us with other kinds of information that might frame our decision-making differently (for example the social and environmental impact of the job or information about the happiness of those that do this job).

Facts are never just facts as they always convey meanings of one kind or another. There is a strong case for broadening the range of facts that we give people.

An emancipatory framework

I have developed a framework for thinking about career education and guidance that will allow us to address some of these questions of social justice and move us away from being cheerleaders in the rat race.

The table above sets out this framework. It is based around five key learning areas that could be used to structure a radical or emancipatory career education programme. It identifies a key question related to each which we could be encouraging students to ask.

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I think that this framework could provide a way forward for practitioners that would be practical in a range of circumstances, could be squared with professional ethics and which would not need to be immediately threatening to those in power. Implementing such a framework would require us to do career education in HE differently.

It would need us to make cross-curricula links, connect with the traditions of student unionism and student activism and encourage students to be critical about the opportunities that are most obvious to them.

There IS such a thing as society!

Careers services have an important role to play in linking students up with graduate employers.

But, brokering this connection does not prepare someone for a career. It is only when we prepare people not only to get a job, but also to keep a job, to know how to operate within a job and ultimately to think about when to quit a job that we are really doing our job.

Careers work is not about managing recruitment processes, it is about thinking about work, its place in your life and its place in the world.

We should be inviting trade unionists, campaigners and whistleblowers to talk to our students alongside recruiters and CEOs. This is a more complete career education and one which supports social justice and good citizenship.

The challenge of careers work is that it needs to maintain both a practical and an ethical position. Our students need concrete help in finding jobs that can allow them to pay off student loans. However, they also need to know that kowtowing to power is not the only way to achieve this.

As workers and as citizens we have power that we can use to get what we want both

as individuals and for our society. This is an important aspect of work and career that is often bypassed by conventional careers work.

A more political radical conception of career education and guidance will require us to change our practices and challenge our assumptions.

We will have to broaden our focus on individuals and recognise that sometimes the best outcome for an individual can be achieved through collective endeavour.

We will also have to recognise that the position of careers workers as brokers between students and graduate recruiters is an extremely challenging one.

It is not our job to police the behaviour of recruiters, but neither is it our job to legitimise this behaviour.

The unequal nature of the graduate labour market only serves the purposes of the privileged. Its construction as a desperate rat race frames students' career decision-making in unhelpful and socially destructive ways where nothing is valued except winning.

We need to take a step back and offer students the opportunity to think more critically about their career and the contexts within which they might pursue this career.

If this means that they choose to leave the rat race or to challenge its basis then we might end up with a world with fewer rats in it.