Welcome to Graduate Market Trends

We welcome the New Year with a fresh design for Graduate Market Trends (GMT). We hope you agree that the magazine’s appearance is now as fine as the quality of the editorial content. This is a special issue devoted to the HECSU Research Fund. Charlie Ball’s foreword summarises the high-quality outputs from 2016’s round of funding and you can discover how to apply to this year’s fund. I hope you enjoy reading this issue as much as I have enjoyed compiling it. APHRODITE PAPADATOU, EDITOR

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News in brief

Troubled youth
A new study by the Prince’s Trust found that half of young people in the UK are so troubled they can’t focus at school. The survey was the eighth such study conducted by the trust, and this year young people’s happiness and confidence were at their lowest level since the research was first commissioned. Download the Youth Index 2017 at www.princes-trust.org.uk

More news, good news
With a more upbeat take on the same issue, December 2016 saw Parliament’s Education Committee join forces with the Health Committee to launch an inquiry into the role of education in promoting emotional wellbeing in children and young people, and preventing the development of mental health problems. Find out more at www.parliament.uk

Global risks
The Global Risks Report 2017 listed five global challenges facing the world this year, including reviving economic growth, reforming market capitalism, facing up to the importance of identity and community, managing technological change and strengthening global cooperation. Read the report at www.weforum.org

HEPI on Brexit
The Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI), working with Kaplan and London Economics, reported on their post-Brexit modelling of international student trends. It painted a mixed picture, with some UK universities recouping drops in European Union (EU) students with potential increases in non-EU students – but much depends on future government policy and economic performance. Find out more and read The determinants of international demand for UK Higher Education at www.hepi.ac.uk

HEPI on private HE
Meanwhile HEPI also published a report on alternative higher education (HE) providers. The authors suggested that the Higher Education and Research Bill currently before Parliament risks missing the government’s own declared objective of encouraging a vibrant and high-quality range of alternative providers. Notably, more than two-thirds of alternative providers are expected to remain outside of the new regulatory system. Read Alternative providers for higher education at www.hepi.ac.uk

Latest from HESA
The Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) released a range of stats and data on student enrolments and qualifications achieved in UK HE for 2015/16. These showed a continuing upward trend in first-degree enrolments and little change in postgraduate enrolments. Yet they also revealed a drop in enrolments for other degrees and some part-time study, as well as a 1% drop in first-year students from outside the EU enrolling at UK universities. Find out more at www.hesa.ac.uk

AGCAS
Despite the Brexit gloom, heads of higher education careers services reported a healthy graduate jobs market in 2016. The response to the annual Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services (AGCAS) Graduate Labour Market and Student Engagement Survey indicated an increase in graduate vacancies and saw the market as generally more buoyant than the previous year. Find out more at www.agcas.org.uk

HEDD in the news
Prospects’ very own Higher Education Degree Datacheck (HEDD) service has been making headlines again. As reported by the BBC in January, HEDD has already shut down more than 40 fraudulent (fake university) websites to date and is investigating a further 90 – and counting. Read the story at www.bbc.co.uk and find out more about HEDD at www.hedd.ac.uk

Apprenticeships
The government issued its proposed strategic guidance for the new Institute for Apprenticeships, highlighting 5 core functions and 12 supporting ones. In the New Year the apprenticeships brief is likely to gain strength. You can read the Draft strategic guidance at GOV.UK

Apprenticeship earnings
The Department for Education published the latest average earnings figures for apprentices once in work, showing particular increases for those with higher level apprenticeships. Read Average earnings post apprenticeship: 2010 to 2015 at GOV.UK

UCAS
The university applications body published its annual End of cycle report 2016, detailing undergraduate entry to UK universities. For last year it showed a record number entering HE but with continuing gaps in terms of entry between the less well-off and the better-off. Find out more at www.ucas.com

Fee impact
The government reported on whether raising fees in line with inflation might have any impact on different groups. It concluded that NHS loans apart, the impact would be limited. Download and read the Equality analysis: higher education student finance for the 2017 to 2018 academic year at GOV.UK

PISA tests
The latest batch of results from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), reporting on assessments in maths, science, reading and problem-solving for 15-year-olds across 72 countries, found England still lagging behind. Read Achievement of 15-year-olds in England at GOV.UK

Living in poverty
The Joseph Rowntree Foundation presented its annual report into poverty and social exclusion using data collected by the New Policy Institute. It found overall poverty levels have not changed much, while also highlighting rising housing costs and disability as major determinants of poverty for many working families. Find out more at www.jrf.org.uk

Responding to Brexit
The Education Committee published the full list of responses received to its inquiry into the impact of Brexit on UK HE. As expected there are major concerns from the sector about visas, freedom of movement and the future positioning of UK HE. Find out more at www.parliament.uk

HEFCE and widening participation
The Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) reported on its National Collaborative Outreach Programme, a funded programme running to 2020 aiming to target HE access ‘cold spots’. It is aligned with the government’s widening participation goals. Find out more at www.hefce.ac.uk
HECSU’s Research Fund

Prospects’ head of higher education intelligence, Charlie Ball, explains the objectives and approach of the HECSU Research Fund and gives details on how to apply – as well as discussing some of the common challenges faced by researchers.

This issue of Graduate Market Trends (GMT) covers the first set of projects funded by HECSU’s re-established Research Fund. These projects were funded in 2015 and reported in the second half of 2016 (with reports to appear on the HECSU website). A second phase of projects has been funded to report later this year, and applications have now opened for the 2017 round, with funding to be awarded in August and projects to report by August 2018.

Good practice is best underpinned by good evidence, and that is as true for careers and employability as for any other form of endeavour. The main purpose of the Research Fund is to enable practitioners to undertake research and to gather that evidence, but that is not its sole aim. We also want to help higher education careers professionals with career development by broadening the range of skills they are able to use from day to day.

We want to help services examine issues that are close to the hearts of staff and students. We would like to give practitioners a chance to take at least a modest risk by trying projects that are innovative, or which are not guaranteed to work – indeed, an innovative topic or approach is one of the crucial factors in gaining funding. Above all, we want to help foster an evidence-led, innovative research culture in higher education careers, with a community that shares experiences, information and practice and develops a mutually supportive network of researchers to make that process more effective and to lower the perceived barriers of entry to research.

Making research easier
Research is sometimes perceived as difficult, time consuming or only to be conducted by some form of elite with the ‘right’ qualifications. It is true that running a high-quality research project, even on a small scale, is not easy. It requires good preparation, attention to detail and a level of critical thinking and professional
detachment that does not necessarily come naturally to everyone. Writing up the results is another undertaking that should not be taken lightly.

But at root, good research is simply about asking the right question in the right way. HECSU tries to offer funding to make the resourcing aspect of conducting research easier, and the support we provide is meant to make the business of framing the research question more straightforward, so that careers professionals who have a good idea can help translate that into a project we can all learn from.

Understanding what research entails
I have completed a research-led PhD and worked with Doctoral candidates ever since. One common theme of this type of work is that much of the process involves overcoming adversity – things can and do go wrong. We can’t get enough people to fill in our surveys. Not enough students come to our focus groups. When we examine the results we realise there’s another question we ought to have asked. It turns out our ‘random sample’ isn’t random and so some of the assumptions we made can’t be applied. For those who are not experienced in conducting research, these issues can come as an unwelcome surprise. But they are rarely insurmountable, and HECSU offers support to you if you experience them.

We understand that few research plans completely survive contact with actual fieldwork. Sometimes the experience of starting research and gathering data means that a tweak to the aims or objectives might improve the outcome of the work – especially for ambitious, highly qualitative explorations of attitudes or behaviours.

There are other factors to take into account that are best learned through practical experience. As mentioned, a research report does not spring into being at the end of the process – they take significant effort (bear in mind that many PhD candidates drop out at the writing-up stage). You may need to go through your institution’s ethical approval system, and that process can be an enlightening experience for careers professionals.

But the counter to this point is that conducting research can be tremendously rewarding – the chance to talk to focus group members or interviewees and gain real insight into their experience; the analysis of the hard-earned data that tells you whether your hypothesis is correct (or, sometimes even more excitingly, incorrect); the chance to answer an often-asked question. And, of course, the personal development angle is very important.

One of these points is crucial to our approach to funding research. Some of the best and most important findings are those that you don’t expect, or even that prove you wrong. Indeed, the classical scientific method involves setting up a hypothesis and then doing your best to disprove it. That approach doesn’t work perfectly for many qualitative questions where there is not an objectively correct answer, but it is often a good exercise both in research and in critical thinking to try to prove yourself wrong. Try it – it can be surprisingly satisfying.

Another concern of researchers is, ‘what happens if I get no results?’ Well, if you get no results at all, then there is an issue. But what is usually meant is the question of what happens when there is no obvious conclusion to draw, or if we evaluate an intervention and discover that it doesn’t appear to work. These findings too have value. They tell us to be wary of that intervention, or help future researchers to understand that the line of enquiry you pursued may not be fruitful and thus deter others from wasting resources and effort.

At HECSU we do not mind spending some of our funds to save resources elsewhere in the sector – so try something speculative that might not come off. If you conduct the research properly, and we don’t get the outcomes we’re looking for, then that tells us something that others can use elsewhere.

Benefits for the sector
Research Fund projects should have wider benefits. In this issue of GMT you will read about projects that have wide applicability from which many other institutions can benefit. That does not mean we will not fund a project looking at a niche experience. Many specialist groups of participants in higher education have specific, underexplored experiences that present specific guidance challenges and the more evidence we have about their particular needs, the better we can serve those groups.

In this issue, we hear from Rebecca Boyd of Queen’s University Belfast about PhD students, but from the rarely-explored Northern Irish perspective. Meanwhile the newer round of projects includes one from Harper Adams University examining entrepreneurship among graduates from a rural background. The broader themes are of great importance, but the focus on specific, underevloped groups adds to, rather than detracts from, the projects.

It is crucial that the work we fund reaches a wide audience and is used and reflected on by as large a group as possible. We encourage dissemination at conferences and through other means. We fund people to do their own work, not to do work on our behalf. Therefore, while we hope and expect that researchers will produce reports we can put online and write up their work for GMT, you can also use other venues or media. And we don’t even assume that the main output of the work will be a conventional report. It could be an induction module, a conference presentation or a piece of software – we’re open-minded and we’d like you to be as well. All we ask is that the sector as a whole can potentially benefit from your findings.

How to apply
The Research Fund is now open for applications. HECSU members can email research@hecsu.ac.uk and we will send you the application forms and guidelines on how to apply. We don’t ask for references – we assume that as you are applying on behalf of an institution, they and you will ensure you will produce output of sufficient quality for the institution to be associated with it, and we positively encourage applications from first-time researchers. We will ask you to have engaged with the research base as there isn’t usually a lot of point in funding a project that’s already done, and it helps to make clear you have an idea of what you’re committing to.

We will also ask you for a project plan, again, to ensure you’ve thought clearly about what you want to do and particularly how much resource you’ll need to do it. The maximum bid is £5,000, and we’ll fund only one bid per institution per year. Apart from that, innovate, take risks and ask questions, and we look forward to hearing from you.

This issue of GMT is a showcase for a group of skilled and dedicated researchers who all have something interesting, and often surprising, to show to the sector. Future issues could feature your work – we hope so.
Graduate resilience: a millennial speed bump

What attributes does a graduate need to succeed in the workplace, and what are the factors that limit their success? Shelley Morgan, Lancaster University’s skills and opportunities developer, reports on the powerful Graduate Resilience Project.
In addition to graduates who mentioned factors that had affected confidence (23/40) and those that felt or had been told they lacked experience (18/40), graduates also mentioned a lack of softer skills, which some felt they had since learned or identified from their non-graduate level work (17/40). As shown by the numbers, some identified a combination of the three factors.

Soft skills identified by graduates included communication, time management, teamwork, responsibility and leadership. Technical skills were also identified: using Excel/data interrogation, sector-specific IT systems and software, and the use of Microsoft packages. Graduates were asked to identify how the university could support them to address the issues they mentioned (Fig.2).

The following are reflections on the issues graduates identified in graduate-level roles in their own words:

- ‘It took over my entire life. There were more things than you could possibly do in the time.’
- ‘It was busier than I expected. More full-on.’
- ‘You get told what to expect, but it was worse than I expected. It was more pressured than I expected.’
- ‘I was expecting a lot more reconciliation.’
- ‘It was just very hard work, the sheer volume of workload, and I didn’t enjoy it.’

Among the most interesting discoveries of the project were subtle differences in description and interpretation between what graduates felt they lacked and what employers stated graduates lacked in their first year. Tasks like professional writing, sharing information and interpretation between what graduates understand about the labour market and what employers expect from their graduates, and can imply a link between the lack of success experienced by graduates in their applications.

Overall, when combined with strategic aims for Lancaster University, recommendations focus on three key areas for improvement:
- early employability/engagement activities for first years
- prioritisation of student confidence to both apply to roles and perform in them
- improved and tailored marketing of the careers service offer.

These categories provide a strategy for how to improve understanding between graduates and employers. A selection of recommendations is offered below:

- Request that employers identify skills shortages affecting their company and wider sector shortages having an impact when they register a vacancy or attend an event. The careers team will develop a holistic offering, linking the employers on campus with a skills-based workshop on a relevant topic to build realistic and explicit expectations to students.
- To improve confidence and to create a sense of community, peer-to-peer mentoring delivered by students and early career graduates will demystify recruitment processes and the day-to-day expectations of the workplace by supporting students to develop the mental toughness required to move past rejections and continue applying for opportunities.
- In addition to the employer insights, the graduate perspectives will be shared with departments to raise awareness from a number of perspectives and build in one-to-one careers support and referrals through academic tutorials.

- Lancaster (employability) Award will be reviewed for the feasibility of trialling an opt-out version that automatically enrols all students for employability support at registration.
- A programme of life-skills, confidence, and resilience training workshops including professional etiquette will be trialled and honed and also made available online.

Conclusion

It was found that the term resilience did not do the topic justice as there were many different factors affecting a graduate that signalled an overall lack of confidence to achieve and perform, lacking the ability to sell or use their skills and understand the needs of the business. The findings of the project have led to an increased emphasis on close collaboration with employers to support current students to understand and interpret sector and skills shortages and what these mean from the employer’s perspective according to sector.

By combining the concerns of graduates and areas of under-performance from a graduate recruiter’s perspective, the careers team and university staff can move forward with a tailored plan to support students in areas that their academic life alone cannot teach them.

With special thanks to Abi Harrison-Henshall and Helen Griffiths for their dedicated support in data collection, and to Diane Richardson and Sarah Fox for their management support.
The early career experiences of arts graduates

What is the transition from university to the workforce really like for arts graduates? How do they reflect on this and how do they tell their stories? Fiona Christie researched arts graduates’ transitions at the University of Salford, where she is a careers consultant.

Commentary on the graduate labour market comes from many sources. The media publish doom and gloom stories, the government produces a raft of statistics about the variable return on a degree, and employers bemoan the work-readiness of some graduates.

Academic analysis confirms that current graduates face considerable uncertainty in a labour market shaped by trends that include the expansion of higher education, economic changes following the 2008 recession, globalisation, and technological and organisational change in how work is structured (Tholen, 2014). But what do recent graduates, especially of subjects that have a tradition of less clear paths of entry into the labour market (for example in creative industries that have led the way in the notion of a boundary-less career), say about their experience of uncertain and competitive job markets?

Drawing on a range of data sources including focus groups with students (10) before the end of their degree courses, and a survey (112) and interviews (14) conducted between 16 and 20 months after graduation, our research analysed graduates from arts, creative arts and humanities subjects – those that, in reporting on the benefits of university study, are considered to have a lower return in relation to a graduate premium. Graduates for whom the transition from university was not smooth were the priority target for this study.

Improving career circumstances

The research discovered that some of the fears students have about the job market may not be borne out in reality. One final-year focus group participant said, ‘I know someone who got a first last year and they still don’t have a job’, which reflects an anxiety that this project has shown to be wildly exaggerated.

Overall, the research showed a steady improvement in the career direction of participants. In the survey, reported unemployment halved between January and October 2015 and employment levels went up from 72.3% to 82.2%. In comparing participants with how they responded to the Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education (DLHE) survey, 21.3% had experienced an improvement of career status – for example moving from unemployment to work or from lower status to higher status work – with the rest staying in a similar status situation, either graduate or non-graduate level.
The subjectivity of graduate perceptions of whether a degree is required for a job was clear: of 34 employed graduates who said they did not need their degree, 14 appeared to be in roles for which a degree may well have helped, such as a graphic design graduate working as a police officer, a journalism graduate employed as a PR account executive, or a performance graduate working as a media production researcher.

There was no doubt about the rapid changes individuals experience after graduating. Survey findings illustrated both a considerable evolution of circumstances and of ideas in the 16 months after graduating. Some 58.9% reported a change of career circumstances between 6 and 16 months post-graduation, and only 25.9% said that their career ideas were the same as when they graduated.

Social background and gender
Data from both survey and interviews showed how career experiences and attitudes are influenced by social background and gender. This supports recent qualitative work which has focused on social class and gender (Burke, 2015; Finn, 2015). Those from a lower social class background seem to consistently trail behind their peers in terms of what they were doing and in their confidence in coping with the challenges they face.

For example, unemployment was consistently higher for lower-class individuals and in responses to attitude statements, 91% of higher-class respondents reported confidence in talking about their skills and strengths and 85% were confident at interview, whereas just 68% of lower-class graduates agreed with these two statements. Men also seem to trail their female counterparts with regard to attitudes to their careers, being more downbeat overall, although this is counterbalanced by data showing that males from a higher social background report the lowest levels of unemployment and unavailability for work.

Findings from interviews revealed aspects that support the resilience of young people in navigating career challenges. The importance of family and friends, who provide personal morale-building support, was significant, for example, ‘My mum’s been my most influential person – she’s a total rock star’ (Ruby, visual arts). A prolonged economic dependence on family was evident, and graduates appear to have accepted this with good humour, perhaps normalised because it is an experience shared by many peers.

Geography
The significance of location emerged from research interviews. The life-affirming experience of living and working abroad, which has a long tradition among graduates of UK universities, continues. Three of the interview participants were travelling (New Zealand), studying (France) and working (Canada) overseas and were uniformly positive about this. Within the UK, the advantages that individuals perceive they have depending on where they live is important, with London and other large urban areas holding all the cards. This creates problems for those obliged to return to or stay in family homes in small towns with limited opportunities for graduates. A delayed departure from the family home was more common among those from a lower social background.

Employer culture
The value of quality opportunities for graduates starting out was also evident, illustrating that employers do not consistently rise to the responsibility of developing new graduates. Some graduates reported exploitative practices, though all who did so had eventually walked away from what they perceived as bad employers. For example, media production graduate Bridget felt ill-treated and subsequently sought out advice about her rights from a media career network, saying, ‘I’d never ever work for that company again or work with them because of the way I was treated’. It would seem that some employers need to adjust practices that may have included a default reliance on insecure and unpaid work experience for new entrants, which does tend to be more common in creative and media industries.

Career conversations
The role of career conversations emerged. The importance of being able to talk about one’s ideas and having people that can be trusted to do so was revealed. Those who had found suitable people to talk to about their hopes, fears and ambitions were much more positive about their prospects, and it appeared that those with more valuable social capital were more likely to make such career conversations happen. Ironically, although the ‘what’s your career plan?’ question may be one that graduates dread to hear, it is one that they would love to be able to answer, so it does seem important that the supporters of students and graduates find suitable opportunities to have career conversations.

Discourses of employability
Data from the survey, but especially interviews, illustrated how individuals struggle to make sense of contemporary discourses that relate to employability, which sometimes promote behaviours and attitudes that appear contradictory. Consumerist ideas of a degree as a purchase meant statements were made that demonstrated some disappointment when a desired work outcome from a vocational degree has not emerged. In contrast, some comments were made that indicated an excessive faith in meritocracy and that talent would out; others revealed individuals claiming sole responsibility for their own career and employability, sometimes to the extent that they blamed themselves for poor success in the job market, even if they have shown considerable determination looking for work in a competitive field.

For example, media production graduate Alice is working in temporary jobs and wants to work in the music business. She held down a lifeguarding job throughout university, and also volunteered at music festivals during vacations, but feels a failure, saying, ‘I just feel it’s not satisfying and I feel like I see customers and they think I’m a failure’.

Conclusion
Finally, this research adds to critical voices of a reliance on quantitative metrics, for example used in DLHE, to capture graduate career pathways (Christie, 2016). A narrow focus on positive destinations as defined by league tables and also in the forthcoming Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) provides a limited notion of graduate success. Consideration of the stories of research interview participants, many of whom do not meet conventional notions of graduate career success, shows a group of graduates resolutely building their careers. Even in undesirable career situations, graduates are not passive players and many were pro-actively responding to the challenges they faced in seeking fulfilling work.

References

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Talkin’ ‘bout first generation

Heather Pasero, career practitioner at the University of Southampton, investigates the needs and challenges faced by first-generation university students at her institution and shares the findings of this HECSU Research Fund project.

We were keen to better understand the demographic of those whose parents do not have any HE experience.

Undertaking the project as a first-time researcher was both exciting and daunting. However, my passion and commitment to develop an understanding of how to support widening participation (WP) students gave me much motivation. In this piece I summarise the method and findings of my investigation into first-generation university students.

Method
In each group 20 students shared their stories of pre-university and first-year first semester study experiences. Much of what I heard was inspiring and revealing. The rich data gathered was entered into NVivo for analysis by method of keywords identified by the software, such as aspirations, finances, housing, parents and careers service. Amazon vouchers were offered as an incentive.

A survey was sent to first-generation students, with responses from 163 first-year students. The survey software collated the data and presented in both tabular and graph form, enabling us to report the findings clearly and accurately. We were also supported with permissions and information by the university ethics, outreach and communications teams, while within our own department peers offered feedback on content, layout and style.

Research questions
We were keen to use this research to better understand the demographic of those whose parents do not have any higher education (HE) experience, and their unique needs. In particular, we sought to understand and put the needs of these students into context by comparing and contrasting with second-generation students. Given the targeted recruitment of this demographic via our outreach programme, the university will benefit from more insight into how to offer additional support with the aim of creating a more level playing field for these students. These are the research questions we sought to answer:

• Should there be more tailored support for first-year, first-generation university students at the University of Southampton?
• Is there a correlation between an application to Southampton and a perception that the university is an employability-driven institution?
• What support did students receive at school and college that influenced their choices and aspirations?
• What are first-generation university students’ motivations, knowledge base and preconceptions around attending university in comparison with non-first generation university students?

Key findings
First-generation students:
• choose university with the idea that it might lead to a better job
• have a more ‘passive’ approach to researching their future career than second-generation students
• need support to develop more “career vision” looking towards their professional future
• use online resources as a first port of call when researching careers-related information
• possess resilience and grit
• rely on tutors and academic staff when seeking advice and value them as “experts”
• need support to cherish themselves and learn self-awareness and self-reflection skills in order to recognise their unique attributes
• value the advice and guidance offered at university open days.

Additional factors:
• First-generation students and career practitioners need access to labour market trends relating to employers actively recruiting students and graduates from a lower socio-economic background.
• For first and second-generation students there is a lack of awareness of what the Careers and Employability Service can offer.

Talkin’ ‘bout first generation

Heather Pasero, career practitioner at the University of Southampton, investigates the needs and challenges faced by first-generation university students at her institution and shares the findings of this HECSU Research Fund project.

WE WERE KEEN TO BETTER UNDERSTAND THE DEMOGRAPHIC OF THOSE WHOSE PARENTS DO NOT HAVE ANY HE EXPERIENCE
Literature review
My reading (research), summarised in the literature review, was both very interesting and perhaps the most daunting section of the report to approach. In particular, the Taylor & Francis online resources proved to be a brilliant one-stop shop to find related and significant research pertinent to eventually forming referenced analysis. Familiarising myself with this research became absorbing and illuminated my findings into a framework. I broke my literature review, analysis and discussion into three themes.

1. The shock of the jump – FE to HE
The transition from further education (FE) to HE can be a very emotional journey (Christie, 2009). We learn that with early intervention comes the risk of overwhelming first-year students, and careers services should work with all years as well as academic staff to discover ways to reach out and support students in an appropriate, timely and effective way.

Those who have made it to this Russell Group institution are perceived to be studious, a perception that cuts across and overshadows class difference (Reay et al., 2010). I also looked at the influence of cultural capital and habitus (Bourdieu, 1984) and potential triggers for distress and how any such issues can be supported (Leese, 2010).

The research reveals a really exciting opportunity to work in a more joined up way with academic staff, the university outreach team, the Careers and Employability Service and parents to support pre-entry students. Open days were reported as extremely influential events when students engaged with academic staff. Fostering current relationships to offer pre-entry and first-year students added value supporting employability could result in a very dynamic and forward-thinking model of early HE careers intervention.

2. The ‘career vision’ of the educated working class
In this paper I have introduced the concept of ‘career vision’, the ability of students to develop ‘strongly individualised narratives’ for the future (Tomlinson, 2007). My research reinforced the idea that second-generation students engage with the prospect of university with more ‘certainty’ (Reay, 1998) in comparison with first-generation students who are developing their HE career vision from scratch. My research also reinforced that although parents of first-generation students influence the decision to attend HE (Lehman, 2009), their children need the skills to navigate the path successfully.

These students have achieved academically despite, rather than because of, their circumstances – with many demonstrating hard-won resilience, having faced difficult life challenges. As far as I could see, when the students spoke about their past difficulties, they were not aware of the valuable capital they possess in terms of grit and triumph against adversity. By teaching self-awareness and self-reflection skills, these students can learn to cherish themselves and expect to be cherished and nurtured by future employers seeking to hire resilient graduates.

‘First generation students could be seen as ‘ritualist’ versus ‘careerist’ (Tomlinson, 2007). The clearer career vision of students from a low socio-economic background is based more around equal opportunity, good employer leadership style, and good work/life balance as well as job security. This compares to second-generation students looking for high salary, high levels of responsibility, status, prestige and an attractive location. Given these research findings we can help a wide range of students gain access to the labour market and look to a career where they will be cherished.

But the reality is that many graduates cannot ‘cash-in’ on their investment in higher education and that there are still positional differences between graduates on the basis of social class’ (Tomlinson, 2007). This research tells us that the core need for first-generation students is the development of skills to enable forward thinking and the formation of a realistic career plan. Students cannot rely on media representations or stereotypes to gain a true insight into their future career. We must offer services to help students build a rapport with their chosen sector, occupation or field, before they enter the graduate labour market.

3. Content is king, marketing is queen
All students interviewed were unaware of the range of career service offers. Much of my reading was related to the design of products for pre-entry students with unique needs, as well as the idea that targeting pre-entry students can create loyalty to the service (Pelloni, 2004). Greater awareness of the gaps in the students’ information set can be used as marketing opportunities.

As a careers service we work very hard on the content and presentation of our services, but this research shows us that many of the opportunities open to students are not communicated to them effectively. With so many ways to communicate, perhaps our message is getting lost, but it is our responsibility to find new ways to reach those students who need our services to gain a greater advantage.

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Working class students in UK higher education

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THE CORE NEED FOR FIRST-GENERATION STUDENTS IS THE DEVELOPMENT OF SKILLS TO ENABLE FORWARD THINKING AND THE FORMATION OF A REALISTIC CAREER PLAN

RECOMMENDATIONS IN THE PAPER

Procurement of a mentoring software platform to facilitate the building of a strong and wide professional network for all students.

Career champions – first-generation University of Southampton students go into schools and colleges with the outreach team.

Online interactive transition resources for first-years, including careers information and advice.

CAREERS SERVICE MARKETING GROUP TO TAKE ON PLANNING FOR CLEAR AND EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION OF EVENTS, WORKSHOPS, SERVICES AND RESOURCES TO DISADVANTAGED GROUPS IN PARTICULAR.

A more joined-up and structured model of working between the university outreach team, academic staff, parents and careers service to nurture ‘career vision’ via cultural capital practices.

Provide students with access to ‘friendly’ labour market information (LMI).
Employability teaching: which kind works?

What are the advantages of adopting a discipline-specific versus generic approach to credit-bearing employability teaching? Dr Helen Standage, senior employability education manager at the University of Essex reports on the findings of her team’s first-of-a-kind project.

The higher education (HE) sector is under increasing scrutiny with expectations from government, employers and students for a high-quality service that fulfils a range of needs in society. Objective metrics in the form of Key Information Set (KIS) and Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education (DLHE) statistics evaluate each institution’s performance with regard to employability and these in turn feed into the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF), which serves as a larger barometer of university health.

There is increasing pressure on universities to adopt strategies that maintain and/or improve their league table positions. Graduate outcomes being one key element has led many institutions to introduce credit-bearing employability tuition into the curriculum with a view to boosting student employability awareness and consequently increase graduate employment.

Room for research

This strategic shift from employability being an extra-curricular central service responsibility to a more integrated, academic, within-curricular pursuit is somewhat uncharted territory. While there is some loose guidance on how to tackle teaching employability in the curriculum, there is limited systematic empirical research as to the optimal approach. To illustrate, the Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services (AGCAS) published a Careers Education Benchmark Statement (Stanbury, 2005) outlining various models of careers education teaching within the curriculum, ranging from discrete modules to full integration, and provides example case studies but does not compare the success of one model against another.

Likewise Foskett and Johnston (2006), based on a survey of 51 UK universities, classified credit-bearing provision into five types:

- standalone generic unit
- integrated generic intra-unit
- integrated discipline-specific unit
- integrated discipline-specific intra-unit
- fully integrated.

Similar to Stanbury, Foskett and Johnston supply a valuable picture of credit-bearing careers education provision in the UK and outline useful taxonomies, but do not compare the efficacy of each model.

In addition, Yorke and Knight (2006), as part of the Higher Education Academy’s (HEA) Learning and Employability Series, published a paper on Embedding Employability into the Curriculum. The underlying message from this paper was that the development of employability pedagogy is localised, meeting the needs and ethos of each individual institution. This suggests a need for a more coordinated and collective effort in the development of employability pedagogy. The HEA (2015) responded to this need by providing a review and more detailed framework of possible approaches for teaching employability, but again supplied no research-based indication of which approach is optimal.

It becomes apparent that there is a clear need for the careers education sector to move from general pedagogic guidance, based on broad impressions of large numbers of case studies, to a more systematic and scientific investigation of which factors within employability teaching...
are successful, which are not, and why. This endeavour is challenging and will require a collective commitment to research-based enquiry and dissemination in order to build an organised, objective and meaningful literature from which teaching choices can be made.

Our project
In line with this aim, the current project compared the effectiveness of two credit-bearing models of employability teaching: a degree-specific model and a generic model. The degree-specific model involved linking career theory and concepts to the intellectual content of the student’s home degree. The generic model focused on pure career theory, emphasising topics such as personal development (for example human motivation, emotional intelligence, self-efficacy, positive psychology) and societal influence on individual career choice and progression. Thus the theoretical substance of the generic model is applicable to all irrespective of degree discipline and can be conveniently slotted into any department/school.

Intuitively, the degree-specific model of embedding employability into the home subject should facilitate greater student engagement and understanding and this hunch is consistent with numerous published case study examples (see HEA, 2015 for an overview). However, the drawback of the degree-specific model is that it requires expertise in two specialisms – career studies and the home discipline. Such dual knowledge within a single individual is rare and thus more challenging to teach compared to the generic model. Given the greater intellectual effort of adopting an embedded versus generalised academic employability teaching approach, the utility of the embedded model over and above the general model needs to be demonstrated empirically. Therefore, the aim of this research was to compare the merits of each model.

Overview of the method and hypothesis
The method involved surveying first-year sociology and literature students who undertook a compulsory credit-bearing employability module. The sociology students received employability tuition in the form of the generic model with no attempt to blend with their degree subject. Conversely, the literature students received employability tuition in the form of the degree-specific approach. This was achieved by employing a completing PhD student with a literary studies background, who adapted the generic module content so as to have relevance to literature students.

Based on overviews of the pedagogy employability literature (e.g. HEA, 2015) it was hypothesised that the literature students (representing the degree-specific model) would show greater engagement, achievement and satisfaction in their employability module compared with the sociology students (representing the generic model). That is, the degree-specific model would be more effective than the generic model.

Overview of findings
Drawing on student university records (with student permission) and online survey responses, inferential tests found no statistically significant difference between the two groups of students (literature vs. sociology) across four separate measures: engagement (measured by level of coursework submitted); achievement (measured by student’s module marks); level of summer work (measured by participant self-report) and satisfaction (measured by response using a five-point scale, to the survey question ‘the module ‘understanding employability’ has been of value to you’). These results collectively suggest that the additional intellectual effort of contextualising employability content to fit with degree subject is unwarranted.

To further test this suggestion, a secondary analysis was undertaken on qualitative data collected. A series of focus groups were conducted drawing on a subsequent cohort of first-year literature students. One purpose of the focus groups was to analyse student perception of the intellectual links made between the topics of employability and their degree subject. Findings revealed a notable absence of student appreciation for intellectual links made within the module. There was a greater preference for the more generic components of the module (such as self-development and career theory). Thus qualitative data from focus groups aligned with the quantitative data taken from student records and surveys, with both supporting the view that the extra investment of integrating employability into the intellectual content of the degree discipline does not pay off – intellectual linkage is neither useful nor valued by students. All the data indicates that students have no preference for a contextualised over pure employability module. Therefore the hypothesis that the degree-specific model will be more effective than the generic model was not upheld.

The survey aspect of this research was quasi-experimental and so cause and effect relations between type of teaching model and outcome measures cannot be assumed. Differences in individual student characteristics (such as ability, attitude, conscientiousness etc.) may have aligned with the literature and sociology departmental grouping variable. Similarly, environmental variables (e.g. tutor teaching style, nature of degree subject etc.) may have served as further potential confounds. In addition, the focus group aspect of the research generated findings based on qualitative data from only 13 students. As such, these findings cannot be generalised with certainty to represent the view of the full cohort of 150 literature students and additionally cannot be applied universally to all undergraduate students as year of study may have a possible influence.

Nonetheless, the mixed model approach to data collection and analysis adopted in this research does provide triangulated evidence suggesting the integration of careers education with degree discipline may not be the optimal teaching approach and as such caution should be shown before publishing pedagogic frameworks and guidelines that may suggest as such.

Interestingly, analyses revealed an overwhelming student preference for the practical taught elements within the module. Such practical components consisted of students learning about aspects of the labour market relevant to their degree, tips on recruitment and selection and in particular meeting professionals and employers which gave them a ‘real’ insight into professional working life.

Conclusion
The current research suggests practitioners should avoid intellectualising employability and place greater emphasis on pragmatic aspects of careers education with a particular focus on meaningful contact with professionals and/or employers. However, future research needs to continue to interrogate the merits of different models for teaching employability in HE, whether that be comparing integrated with discrete approaches, at module or programme level, or asking the more fundamental question of whether academic, in-curricular employability teaching is better than the original non-credit-bearing practical method.

References


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The impact of undergraduate credit-bearing careers education

Research by Ruth O’Riordan, Dr Elena Del Rio and Jakub Wieczorek at the University of Dundee provides a fascinating insight into the positive effects of credit-bearing careers education on graduate destinations.
The positive impact of credit-bearing careers modules is reassuring for module leaders, impressive for university senior management and more importantly affirmative for our undergraduate students.

Part two
The question we addressed was: does taking a careers module make students feel more prepared to graduate? Part two utilised an anonymous online survey and again made use of students who had completed any of the three modules noted above (current fourth year students). Some 124 students had completed one of the aforementioned careers modules in academic session 2013/14 and thus made up the module attend group. The non-module attend control group contained 313 students. The return was 33 students who had completed a careers module and 35 students who had not completed a careers module.

Firstly, students were asked a closed question with a multiple choice Yes/No answer: ‘I have a clear plan of what I am going to do after graduation?’ (Fig.1)

The conclusion is therefore that taking a careers module means students are 21% more likely to have a career plan upon graduation than those who have not taken a module.

Students were then asked to rank themselves: ‘on a scale of 1-5 (5 being highest) I feel confident about making career decisions’ (Fig.2).

If we consider the more prepared end of the scale and total the students who selected 5 and 4 we see that for those students who took a module the total is 63.6%, while those who didn’t take a module totals 31.4%. There is nearly double the number of students who rate themselves as feeling confident about making career decisions in the careers module attend group compared with the control non-careers module group.

Students were then asked about their career knowledge: ‘I know the steps I need to take to reach my ultimate career goal.’

Figure 3 illustrates that nearly twice as many students who took a careers module know what they need to do to reach their career goal when compared with those who did not take a careers module. In fact, 11.1% of students who took a module reported that they either didn’t know what to do to reach their goal or did not have a career goal in mind yet, compared with 22.8% of non-module attendees.

In summary, we are clearly seeing that across all questions regarding preparedness to graduate, students who completed a careers module felt much more prepared to graduate and had a clearer plan for life after graduation.

Conclusions and next steps
In carrying out this research we are confident to conclude that partaking in credit-bearing careers education has an encouraging effect on the likelihood of a positive graduate destination as defined by HESA. Similarly, the impact on our final-year students was fantastic, with students commenting positively of the impact the careers module had on their feeling of preparedness to graduate.

In presenting this information to senior management within the university, a question arose regarding the motivation of students who take a careers module - surely those students who choose to take careers modules are more motivated and would do well regardless? HEC SU are kindly supporting us to investigate the dynamics of the students who choose to take the aforementioned optional credit-bearing careers modules. Investigating such confounding factors will allow us to present a much fuller picture about the impact of careers education.

The main question arising from this positive result was the number who progressed into graduate employment as opposed to non-graduate level employment.

If a student had taken a careers module, the odds of them reaching an employment destination (as opposed to unemployment) were 37.2% higher than if they had not taken a module.

The main question arising from this positive result was the number who progressed into graduate employment as opposed to non-graduate level employment.

If a student had taken a careers module, the odds of them reaching a graduate employment destination (as opposed to non-graduate employment) were 40.1% higher than if they had not taken a module.

A combined look at graduate employment as opposed to non-graduate employment and unemployment combined illustrates that, if a student had taken a careers module, the odds of them reaching a graduate employment destination (as opposed to non-graduate employment or unemployment) were 45.9% higher than if they had not taken a module. The positive impact of credit-bearing careers education at the University of Dundee is therefore clear to see. The positive odds of reaching a successful graduate destination following completion of a credit-bearing careers module are reassuring for module leaders, impressive for university senior management and more importantly affirmative for our undergraduate students.

Next we considered the numbers of students who went into employment following completion of their undergraduate degree. From our sample a total of 503 went on to employment while 98 students were unemployed six months after graduation. Once module attendance was considered we found that:

- If a student had taken a careers module, the odds of them reaching an employment destination (as opposed to unemployment) were 37.2% higher than if they had not taken a module.
- The main question arising from this positive result was the number who progressed into graduate employment as opposed to non-graduate level employment.
- If a student had taken a careers module, the odds of them reaching a graduate employment destination (as opposed to non-graduate employment) were 40.1% higher than if they had not taken a module.
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Twenty-first century drifters

Why do students defer their career decisions? Vanessa Casaru, careers adviser at the University of Bolton, and her team decided to explore this issue and how to prevent and overcome it.

‘I’ve completed my degree but I’m not sure what I want to do now?’ How many of us working in higher education (HE) careers have heard this statement from a graduate? It’s certainly the experience of our careers department, where anecdotal evidence pointed to a drift without focus for a large percentage of students, starting with the transition from further education (FE) to HE and continuing as students progressed to the latter stages of their course.

The university careers team were successful in securing funding via HECSU to investigate. Our aim was to explore reasons for this deferred decision-making and look at strategies for preventing and overcoming this. Research was undertaken with a range of stakeholders, including university staff, students and external personnel from FE. Desk research was also undertaken to explore wider developments and examine national policy.

Early observations from the careers team
Our experience in careers guidance has supplied us with a wealth of information regarding the decision-making behaviours of our students. This provided a starting point for our research. Key points to note include:

- Very few prospective students were seeking advice about potential career paths at open days.
- The careers team had very little pre-entry involvement in events organised by our marketing department.
- Students weren’t accessing the Careers Service until the latter stages of their course.
- There was a notable lack of white British males accessing careers support.
- There were a large proportion of graduates, contacted via the Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education (DLHE) survey, who had not accessed the support of the Careers Service.
- Request for careers support was minimal from academic staff working with first-years in comparison to those teaching second and third-year students.
- There were no clear trends (by year group) in relation to career planning. This was an issue that transcended the whole student body.
- When approaching career planning in sessions, students being asked to devise a ‘back-up plan’ saw this as demotivating, and a deviation from their primary goals.

What our students said
We established a student consumer group in the early stages which provided a chance for students to discuss how they made their career decisions. Our student feedback revealed some clear and consistent messages. Most students were not aware of the pathways open to them as graduates and lacked direction. ‘I hoped I would find a career path along the way’ and ‘I didn’t have much understanding of where the course would lead’ were comments made by many.

Their reasons for choosing their course were not based on careers research or future...
goal setting. Some decisions were made out of a financial necessity such as the cost of moving away from home, while others were made after an open day visit, where ‘new buildings and good facilities’ were a driving influence.

In terms of support for decision-making, particularly in relation to choosing a course, the most common source of direct help cited was with academic staff. Other personal sources of help included friends, family and teachers. Students also named sources of information and data that they had used: university websites, UCAS course search and prospectuses. There was general agreement that guidance in schools and/or FE focused on the UCAS application form itself, rather than exploring reasons for course choice. Many students did not feel that they had had sufficient guidance regarding the impact of their degree choice on issues such as salary and progression.

In addition to the consumer group we surveyed all first-year home students to find out what support they had received prior to university. We had 118 responses with the following findings:

- There were 21 students who didn’t have a clear picture about their career options prior to university.
- Some 31 students felt that they weren’t well prepared when applying for their course.
- Significantly, 73 students felt that their family had helped with career plans, 46 cited friends, and only 18 said they had help from a careers adviser.
- UCAS was named as the main resource used to help with career planning by 63 students, 31 students named Prospects and 12 cited the National Careers Service.
- There were 55 students who felt they were given no help prior to coming to university with their career plans.
- Only 21 students had had help to choose their degree programme.

What would help?
From a student perspective, a number of suggestions were made to improve career decision making. These included:

- pre-entry careers talks from the careers team that outline progression opportunities
- signposting to academic staff so students can talk directly about courses
- more robust information on the university website/prospectus
- social media groups/forums that allow students to engage with the university before applying
- all students to have an appointment with a careers adviser within their first year of study
- course specific inductions focused on potential career paths and routes into careers.

**Careers staff in FE making comparable responses**

Further consultation took place with representatives from five local FE institutions in terms of transitional arrangements, the overwhelming response was that FE students were also deferring their decision-making, and some of the reasons for this were: the pressures of clearing; priority of UCAS form completion; lack of information, or the perception that there was a lack of information; inconsistency of HE transitional events; decisions based on information received during marketing campaigns rather than from a qualified adviser; a shortage of qualified guidance practitioners in FE; a blurring of boundaries between the advice provided in FE and HE; and a lack of engagement with the careers team.

There was agreement from those consulted that students they worked with were interested in doing “a degree” rather than thinking about any future employment prospects that may result from their choice.

**Project recommendations**

Research has an implicit obligation to effect change. Change could not have happened without the support of colleagues at the university who included members of the student experience team, the marketing team, employability staff champions and the Bolton Award project officer.

Their feedback was vital in terms of helping to shape the recommendations that would improve the support that students receive with their career planning. The recommendations are aimed at the careers team and are also specific to the University of Bolton, but may be appropriate and find resonance with other HEIs. The recommendations are:

- to integrate the early introduction of careers planning with the work of the student experience team
- for careers staff to work more closely with admissions and marketing in order to link with partner FE institutions and support pre-course events
- to compile and issue a ‘Welcome to Careers Planning’ guide for first-year students
- to establish a Volunteer Employability Ambassadors scheme, drawing students from a range of faculties to promote the Careers Service and attend open events
- to develop better course progression information for the University of Bolton prospectus and website
- to pilot a career registration process asking students key employability questions at enrolment
- to develop a webinar schedule for prospective students
- to work with media students to produce YouTube resources focused on career planning
- to embed ‘choice and planning’ into the Bolton Award model
- to explore the demographics of Careers Service users utilising the new Student Hub software, with a view to addressing any gaps.

The findings and recommendations of this research project helped the University of Bolton to put strategies in place, focused on helping students to make choices. This inevitably will have an impact upon future employability, as poor career choices undermine a student’s ability to plan, take action and compete.

These findings have also been corroborated at a national level. The recent HE White Paper Success as a Knowledge Economy: Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility and Student Choice (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, May 2016) highlights the importance of support for students in choosing their degree programme, stating that these decisions are ‘significant factors in determining a student’s future life and career success’. This emphasis on careers planning at each HE level may mean that we will find ‘driven’ students, not ‘drifters’, moving through the twenty-first century.

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**RESEARCH SUMMARY**

Students often do not have a career plan in mind when choosing their degree.

The need for more help with career planning prior to HE, with better information about progression routes, was highlighted.

Links to course tutors were considered to be extremely important.

There is a blurring of boundaries between FE and HE guidance. The sectors need to acknowledge mutual responsibility.

Students are often continuing to defer their career planning until the latter stages of their degree. Research indicates that specialist careers intervention from an early stage would help students to understand their career choices better.

There was a lack of engagement by students with careers staff in both FE and HE. Any careers education, information, advice and guidance (CEIAG) intervention needs to ‘connect’ with students, and should recognise the importance of emerging technologies and social media platforms.

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I have always suspected that young people’s early experience of careers education and guidance may well affect how they respond to the employability support they receive later on, in a higher education setting. My interest in researching this topic stems from the first part of my career, which was spent working as a careers adviser in schools and further education colleges. Once I moved into the higher education sector and encountered first-year students who were struggling with career-related decisions, I was left wondering about when their uncertainty had started. My experiences caused me to reflect on the link between young people’s early access to careers support and how this impacts on their engagement in further career development once they enter university.

Informing factors
There have been a large number of structural and political changes affecting the careers guidance profession in recent years. With the advent of the coalition government in 2010, the remit for careers work was transferred with limited funding to schools and colleges. Significant funding cuts were made to education business partnerships such as Connexions. In September 2013, Ofsted published a report about their evaluation of careers provision in 60 schools and concluded that ‘arrangements for careers guidance were not working well in just over three quarters of the 60 schools visited’ (Ofsted, 2012). I wanted to investigate whether this ‘postcode lottery of careers provision’ (Langley et al, 2014) was in fact reflected by the past experiences of a sample of LJMU students.

Methodology
I asked a sample of 340 students to complete a questionnaire that was designed to capture data about their past experiences of careers education and guidance. These questionnaires were mainly completed by students during their first term at university. The findings from these questionnaires provided a lot of revealing quantitative data, which was supplemented by semi-structured interviews that I carried out with a small sample of first-year students. In addition to this, I conducted interviews with career practitioners who were working in a school or college setting. This brought another dimension to the research as I was able to find out more about the issues faced by careers advisers who were working in an ever-changing landscape.
Findings
A lack of consistency in the careers support that students had previously accessed
Of the LJMU students surveyed, 65.6% stated that they recalled having a careers guidance interview at school or college. Meanwhile, 60.1% of LJMU students indicated that they had received some careers education at school or college. It is of course important to acknowledge that I was reliant on our students’ self-reporting and what they remembered about the careers support they received. However, this still leaves a significant proportion of around a third of students who do not recall receiving any careers input at school.

The above figures also correlate with other national research that has been carried out. Archer and Moote conducted a survey in 2014/15 of Year 11 students, which was completed by 13,421 pupils from 360 secondary schools. Their findings showed that 62.5% of these young people reported receiving some careers education (Archer and Moote, 2016).

It is not only the level of exposure that LJMU students had to careers education or guidance that matters, it is the impact this careers input had on them. Of those students who had a careers interview, 60.2% said they had found it ‘quite useful’ or ‘very useful’. During the qualitative interviews I carried out, there were students who were very positive about the careers support they had received at school or college. However, others expressed a few doubts about the expertise of the person who delivered their careers education, as one student stated, ‘We were taught careers by the Latin teachers who just stuck an episode of The Apprentice on in every session.’

Negative preconceptions about accessing careers education and guidance based on past experiences
The responses from LJMU students indicated that (despite some mixed prior experiences) many of them did still intend to engage with our services. For example, 66.2% of students said they were likely to book an interview with a careers adviser to discuss their future career direction. A much lower percentage of the sampled students (38.2%) said they would be likely to attend optional careers sessions. It is difficult to know if this reluctance to attend optional careers sessions stems from our students’ past experiences or if it is because as first-year students, they were still developing an awareness of how such careers sessions could help them. Many university careers services do invest in branding and marketing to make sure that their services are effectively promoted to their students, and my findings show the importance of this.

How lack of earlier careers support may increase the probability of a student discontinuing from a higher education course
Just under half of the students I interviewed had at some point discontinued from a further or higher education course. It is significant that none of these students recalled having a careers interview with a guidance practitioner before coming to university. This does provide anecdotal evidence that lack of careers guidance may impede an individual’s ability to make an informed choice about the most suitable progression route open to him or her. One student, who had previously spent a year on an unsuitable course at a further education college, said, ‘I went on to college to do computers and I had no intention of going into computers, but it was only because I had to do something because I couldn’t get a job... I think if there had been someone to advise me on what else was available I would have pushed myself to pick something more appropriate.’

All of the students who reported that they had taken the ‘wrong path’ at one stage had eventually been able to rectify this and were now on what they felt was the right degree programme for them. These stories do, however, raise questions about what happens to the individuals who choose the wrong route and who are (for any number of reasons) not able to rectify this and move onto a more suitable career path.

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Gatsby (p.11), Going in the right direction. Careers guidance in schools from September 2012.
Video interviews are becoming more commonplace within the recruitment process. However, at MMU, there doesn’t seem to be a corresponding increase in confidence among students when faced with this scenario. Our assumptions about young people being confident using the technology have generally been proved wrong, so our challenge has been to explore ways in which we can support our students through the recruitment process.

Like a few other university careers and employability services, we have invested in video interview software for our students to use for practice and for training within employability units. This article will summarise the research we undertook looking both at the experiences of our students using the software and our own experiences in trying to promote and utilise the service.

What do students think of video interviews?
One answer to this question is that it doesn’t matter what they think. The employers have the power in this relationship so the students just have to get on with it. This is probably true, but it could be useful to talk to students who have gone through a video interview process and get their advice and top tips to support other students. In the academic year 2015/16 we talked with students who have taken a practice video interview with us. This was through focus groups and surveys. Some students had taken the interviews as an assessment, some voluntarily as a practice offer on their course, and some as practice ahead of an imminent ‘real’ interview with an employer.

Survey of students
This survey was conducted in February 2016 and 140 students were contacted. They were from a range of different courses and had taken the video interview for a variety of reasons. There were 38 responses. Some key figures include that:

- Of 38, almost all (37) felt that they had benefited and improved their interview skills.
- Roughly half (21) put in some preparation before taking the interview.
- More than half (58%) of students felt that a video interview was a fair representation of the candidate.
- Nearly a quarter (24%) of students felt confident ahead of their first video interview, 40% felt ‘OK’ about it, and 36% felt apprehensive. A challenge is to get that confident number a lot higher.

Student focus groups
To explore student thinking about video interviews further we held two focus groups of distinct groups of students who had recently taken a practice video interview – one for students from fashion/apparel courses (seven attended) and one for students from sports marketing management (nine attended). The sports group took the video interview as a formal assessment, the fashion group for general practice. Amazon vouchers were given to students who attended and participated. The main comments from these students were:

- Set up was easy and straightforward.
- Only two viewed their video interview once it was submitted, and then only briefly. Most students do not like watching themselves back on video. One sports student even commented, ‘I couldn’t think of anything worse’. A challenge here is to encourage
students to embrace self-assessment as an effective learning tool where video interviews are concerned. However, although students didn’t view their interview, all said that they felt much more confident if they were to take a video interview again.

• However, while students generally said they had a sense of how well they had performed in their video interview, it was only those who received formal feedback (through assessment or one-to-one appointment) that had a clear sense of what they did well and areas for development.

• All felt they would benefit from individual feedback but weren’t necessarily clear about how they could seek this.

• Students expressed concerns about internet speed in shared houses and access to a quiet room.

• Preparation is key – the students who prepared in advance tended to get more from the process. All students commented on the need to recognise the link to preparation for a ‘real’ interview.

• All students (fashion and sport) said they felt on-course assessment should be compulsory. It’s a great way of developing communication and interview skills.

• The students felt they would benefit from example answers used in both lectures and attached to video interviews.

• The students taking the interview as part of a formal assessment were more likely to ‘dress’ for the interview.

• All students said they would recommend the video interview service to other students.

**What do academic colleagues think of video interviews?**

Without exception, all academic colleagues who become aware of our video interview service think it’s an excellent tool to develop interview skills with students. They recognise the convenience, as opposed to face-to-face interview training.

Julie Hodson, senior lecturer in apparel, commented, ‘Student feedback frequently states the interview process as one of the most stressful parts of seeking employment. Being able to configure each question relevant to the roles students apply for gives them the chance to practise and hone technique. Feedback from the apparel student focus group confirmed that the students who took the practice video interview really benefited from it, they recommended other students should take one. This video interview technology is a tool I think should be compulsory within the curriculum.’

**Issues for careers and employability services**

At MMU, the feedback we get from students and academics about video interviewing is all hugely positive. However, the fact remains that while the numbers are increasing, only a fraction of students actually takes a practice video interview. In addition, only a small number of courses use video interviews in formal assessment.

Generally, academic colleagues appear to be reluctant to take on extra assessment of video interviews. Experience tells us that once familiar with the system, it takes between 15 and 20 minutes to view and write up a five-question interview. Getting as many colleagues on board as possible is of course the answer. Recently around 250 Level 5 computing students went through an assessed video interview with 28 tutors sharing the load (9 assessments each).

Recent years have seen the growth of students being assessed through reflective practice on employability units. Perhaps encouraging courses to allocate a proportion of marks within this process specifically to video interview reflections is the realistic way forward.

With regards to improving the service for students, we need to consider:

-embedding video content of example answers (with comments) within video invitation emails
- providing facilities for students to book rooms on campus to take video interviews
- promoting the service more effectively on all courses and working closely with students who have taken video interviews with employers to provide us question feedback

• a rapid turnaround of practice interviews and feedback – most employers only give five to seven days for candidates to complete a video (some even less) and given that many students only seek careers support when faced with an immediate need, we have put systems in place to respond to this
• making the practice interview as targeted as possible to the job and employer – talk to students and employers to build up a bank of relevant questions
• keeping on selling the service to academics – students listen to them.

**Summary**

We would recommend that, if possible, careers and employability services invest in video interviewing software. Shop around – there are a number of providers out there. Academics and students who get involved think it is great, and it does replicate the ‘real world’. We just need to reach out to more students. We have learned through experience and I am happy to share that experience with colleagues at other universities. If you would like to find out more about video interviews at MMU, email me (d.f.nelson@mmu.ac.uk) and I’ll be happy to help.

**TALK TO STUDENTS WHO HAVE GONE THROUGH A VIDEO INTERVIEW PROCESS AND GET THEIR ADVICE AND TOP TIPS TO SUPPORT OTHER STUDENTS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>VIDEO INTERVIEW TIPS FROM STUDENTS</th>
<th>Practise (in front of the mirror, camera, friends and family, careers consultant).</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Prepare, smile and look at the camera. Make sure you’re in a relaxed environment.</td>
<td>Read the question carefully and utilise the time.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Write down notes with your skills and answers for possible questions (general, competency-based).</td>
<td>Forget that it’s an interview. Most students face pressure from the situation rather than specific questioning.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research the employer and the job role.</td>
<td>Pretend there is a person there.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Act like you would in a normal interview (dress appropriately, get the set-up right, clean your bedroom, be positive and assertive, remember to smile, keep eye contact).</td>
<td>Keep practising to get used to being on camera, Google all possible interview questions and try not to use academic examples as everyone uses them.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Just be confident in yourself.</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
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Career transitions: Doctoral graduates’ experiences

Rebecca Boyd, senior careers consultant, and Stephanie McAlinden, postgraduate researcher – from Queen’s University Belfast – report on the findings of a qualitative study providing insight into the challenges and experiences of recent doctoral graduates moving into employment.

While numerous studies have looked at the transition of graduates, fewer focus on the experiences of recent Doctoral graduates, and those that do tend to take a quantitative approach, providing overviews of destinations and impact. With a growing number of PhD graduates entering an increasingly diverse range of careers, our project aimed to develop a better understanding of experiences of transition, providing insight into the challenges faced, the value of Doctoral study in relation to employment, and career management strategies to support a successful transition.

We conducted 12 in-depth semi-structured interviews with a targeted sample of Doctoral graduates across disciplines and working in a range of roles, both within and mainly beyond academia. The data was transcribed and thematic analysis was conducted to identify key themes.

Findings
Challenges for PhD graduates
Doctoral graduates faced a number of challenges when moving from PhD to early employment. Many did not have a definite career path in mind at the start of their PhD and did not focus on career planning at an early stage. The perceived competitiveness of the academic job market also presented key challenges for those considering this as a potential pathway while the associated pressures of the academic environment influenced others’ decision to seek alternative options. Another key challenge was the perception of employers outside of academia, with participants highlighting the need to demonstrate that the skills they had gained over the course of a PhD were transferable.

For example, a social sciences PhD graduate working in the public sector said, ‘It was kind of
How a PhD prepares graduates for early employment

All graduates that we spoke to were in agreement that the transferable skills they had gained over the course of the PhD were essential to them when it came to finding a new job. Even though our participants came from different disciplines, the key skills identified as being useful for both acquiring and performing their job were consistent. These included critical thinking, problem-solving, project management, research skills, networking and communication skills.

One arts and humanities PhD graduate working in the voluntary sector said, ‘What the PhD has done, has been giving me skills that have been very, very useful in my work. (...) We had to give lectures and seminars (...) So every day, be it you know, dealing with the public, meeting deadlines (...) developing something, a PhD develops... and I think the PhD has been very good for me... because you have to take an idea and you have to run with it.’

Several mentioned how they believed their PhD had caught employers’ attention and was viewed as having an associated status, but also highlighted that beyond the interview it was their responsibility to demonstrate the value of their skills. Participants also spoke of how the process of PhD research had taught them resilience, which proved to be very useful in the employment context.

‘You obviously have to overcome a lot of challenges when you’re doing your PhD (...) you have to become quite a resilient person. So it’s probably a good exercise in (...) developing resilience to, you know, difficult working conditions,’ said a life sciences PhD graduate working in academia.

A physical sciences PhD graduate working in the voluntary sector added, ‘I think it definitely gave you the edge in terms of level of experience, your expertise, and the range of different things you gain, the difficulties you face and how you’d overcome them. It definitely gave me a lot to talk about in interviews.’

In terms of preparation for employment, the central value of the PhD was felt to be through facilitating development of key transferable skills, most notably communication, presentation and project management.

Our findings also identified the importance of proactive career management and development, with participants highlighting the importance of recognising and seizing opportunities, gaining practical experience and being able to articulate their skills in a competitive job market.

An arts and humanities PhD graduate working in consulting said, ‘Having had the discipline to go and work by myself, because a lot of your PhD (...) can be a very solitary experience, where you have to plan and own the responsibility of the entire work. I’ve been finding that ability to plan and own responsibility of the entire work (...) has mapped over quite nicely.’

Transitioning from PhD to early employment – what can current PhDs do?

The majority of our graduates were in strong agreement that the PhD had to be an active not a passive process and that PhD candidates should be making a conscious effort to get the most out of their postgraduate research experience. They stressed that they could no longer consider doing a PhD as just a matter of producing a body of work at the end of their study but had to ensure they got involved in activities that would enhance their employability, such as conferences, training opportunities, teaching and work experience.

‘[On whether the PhD provides you with employable skills] I think so. (...) Provided during your PhD, you’re sort of ambitious and you want to go to conferences and you want to present and you want to do some teaching and you’re (...) trying to take up all the opportunities that you can. If you’re stuck in a library for three years then the skillset isn’t quite as transferable I don’t think,’ said a life sciences PhD graduate working in the voluntary sector.

Being aware of the challenges that exist can greatly aid early graduates’ job search. Participants also identified the need to be proactive in relation to career management, identifying the need to seek out job opportunities and make use of available career support services. Doctoral graduates highlighted the competitiveness of the current labour market and the need to prepare and be able to effectively articulate their transferable skills in order to compete successfully within the selection process.

A physical sciences PhD graduate working in the voluntary sector said, ‘I tried to bring out [in interviews] the fact that I had collaborated a lot throughout my PhD and that I was well used to talking through problems with an external collaborator and trying to find a solution, and really trying to demonstrate that I had that capability, that even though the PhD was very much working on your own, that you are also working with other people. And even just demonstrating in terms of presentation skills that I got from my PhD, the fact that I presented externally and locally (...) the fact I had to explain my work to someone from a non-technical background, all of those things that I knew were going to be very relevant no matter what job I was going to go into, I tried to focus on that.’

Although the majority of participants had not had a clear career plan when commencing the PhD, those who had moved away from academia were eager to advise current PhD students not to limit their sights of an end goal to academia alone, but spoke about just how rewarding an experience other options could be.

‘Don’t necessarily think that you have to stay in academia... the skills that you learn during your PhD are very transferable, you might not just be aware of that... It is interesting to see... who businesses employ and who they’re looking for because although maybe they’re not saying ‘I want somebody with a PhD’... but [my employers] needed someone with analytics and able to critically evaluate, well, that’s the skills you learn [in a PhD],’ said a life sciences PhD graduate working in industry.

Encouragingly, virtually all our participants both within and beyond academia were extremely happy with their current employment, often reporting an intention to stay within their current role or sector.

Recommendations for career development professionals

Based on the findings, the following actions are suggested to prepare postgraduate researchers to make an effective transition:

- supporting postgraduate researchers and graduates to consider a range of career options
- helping postgraduate researchers to identify and clearly articulate their transferable skills
- working with employers to increase awareness of the value Doctoral graduates can bring to diverse employment contexts
- increasing opportunities for team working, management experience and work experience as part of the Doctoral study programme.

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The International Centre for Guidance Studies (iCeGS) is a research centre at the University of Derby that specialises in career development and career guidance. This update provides a summary of two pieces of research of interest to GMT readers.

In They’ve Got Their Backs To The Sea (derby.openrepository.com/derby/handle/10545/620945) Claire Shepherd and Tristram Hooley have investigated the educational and career aspirations of young people living in the seaside towns of Margate, Ramsgate and Broadstairs. The research found that young people in the area felt they needed to choose between attachment to home, family and community and the kinds of adventure and opportunity that were offered by university and other options outside of the area.

The researchers also contacted schools where the young people were studying. The schools in the study were generally keen to provide good quality career support for their students, although some interesting different perspectives emerged about what the aim of such support was. Some adults felt that career guidance should be encouraging young people to understand the full range of opportunities locally and helping them to contribute to their communities. Others felt that career support should focus on shifting young people’s horizons to enable them to see the opportunities that exist beyond their community.

This issue of the relative balance of individual versus community outcomes is a key consideration for those who are working with young people to help them to consider their futures. While the report does not seek to resolve such issues it makes for interesting reading for careers professionals and those involved in widening participation.

Meanwhile, iCeGS has also just published Developing a New Generation of Careers Leaders (derby.openrepository.com/derby/handle/10545/620676), which evaluates a scheme run by Teach First to develop leadership for careers in all schools. Lots of recent research has highlighted the problems in schools’ career guidance provision, but the report finds that the programme developed by Teach First offers a valuable way forward. By identifying and then training a middle leader with responsibility for careers in all schools it is possible to rapidly shift the quality of the schools provision. This idea of careers leadership is increasingly being seen as a core part of a new approach to school-based career guidance.

These reports and all of the rest of iCeGS research are listed on www.derby.ac.uk/research/icegs and most research is available to download for free.

iCeGS runs an MA in Careers Education and Coaching (www.derby.ac.uk/courses/postgraduate/careers-education-coaching-ma) and a range of Doctoral programmes (www.derby.ac.uk/research/icegs/courses/doctoral-programmes) for careers professionals who are interested in developing their careers and becoming a research informed practitioner.

For further information about iCeGS contact Siobhan Neary at s.neary@derby.ac.uk