

Book Title - Graduate Careers in Context: Research, Policy and Practice

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Chapter - 'A career in career: mapping practitioners' transition to a new career'

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Introduction

As has already been reported in previous chapters the role and importance of employability has become central within the context of higher education in the UK (Thambar, 2018). Whilst the conceptualisation, operationalisation and utility of 'employability' has long been contested (e.g. Wolf, 1991, Holmes 2000), Higher Education Institutions are nonetheless increasingly under pressure from students, government and employers to ensure that students have the skills, behaviours and attitudes that will enable them to undertake an effective transition into the workplace (Artess, Hooley and Mellors-Bourne, 2017). To address this university careers services now offer a portfolio of activities that support students with effective transition. These can include a wide range of activities including curriculum delivery, employer engagement activities, placement support, job search support and advice and guidance (Christie 2016, Thamber, 2018).

In this chapter we present recent research which aims to better understand the expectations and realities of career development practitioners who have recently transitioned into a career development role within Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), what attracts them to the profession and how they see their new career. It provides an exploration of the knowledge, skills and experiences of career changers wanting to utilise their previous expertise within a new context. This research potentially presents an insight into the backgrounds of many of the new staff that have entered the sector over the last five years and what they bring with them that contributes to graduates who are not just better informed about careers and the labour market but are also empowered through employability and career management skill development. It presents an opportunity to

consider issues on how the sector is evolving and issues for the HE career development sector going forward.

The evolving career development workforce

The focus on metrics including the Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education Leaver's (DLHE) as evidence of successful transition from Higher Education (HE) to work has become a driver for the employability agenda and the heightened role of careers services. Whilst such metrics *can* misrepresent the reality of students transitioning into work or further study after graduating, the fact remains that universities typically place a great deal of importance on them (Christie, 2017).

This focus on employability has contributed to a rapid and dynamic expansion of careers services in some institutions. Which has also resulted in the development of a range of differentiated work roles for example curriculum development officers, placement co-ordinators, volunteering officer/co-ordinators, employability advisers, enterprise advisers/co-ordinators, DLHE co-ordinators/statistics officers. The extent to which a range of roles are provided will be dependent on the size of the service and the characteristics of the student body. Many careers services have adopted a devolved approach providing services within and across faculties and departments offering some, if not all a selection of these specialist roles.

Research by AGCAS (2016) suggests that on average, careers and employability services will have 23 staff undertaking a variety of roles, this equates to approximately 20.2 staff delivering these activities (Full Time Equivalents (FTE)). When compared with a similar staffing survey undertaken by AGCAS in 2008 the range of job roles in HE careers services have evolved significantly. Table 1 below compares how the number and variation of roles has developed.

Table 1: Comparison of staffing levels between 2008 and 2016

2008* - Mean number of staff	2016** - FTE number of staff
Head of Service (00.98)	Head of Service (1)
Deputy Head of Service (0.55)	Deputy Head of Service (0.8)
Careers advisers (4.8)	Management team role (2.4)
Employer liaison (1.69)	Careers advisers (3)
Information specialist (1.79)	Career consultants (2.2)
IT specialist (0.44)	Employer engagement officer (1.7)
	Placement Officers (1.5)
	Student engagement officers (including information and statistics (1.6)
	IT specialist (0.3)
	Admin clerical (2.3)

*72 Heads of Service responded

**56 Heads of Service responded

In addition to the posts identified above other roles were also identified including internship officers, student award officers, marketing officers and enterprise officers. The 2016 research identified over 100 job titles. There is a growing body of research which examines the role, activities and impacts of career development practitioners working in a HE context (Christie, 2016; Thamber, 2016 & 2017; Taylor and Hooley, 2014). However, due to the individual nature of HE institutions' lack of universal benchmarks concerning how services are constituted, it is difficult to compare services (Christie, 2016; Bridge Group 2017).

Career transitions

In this section, we explore the literature which details the skills, behaviours and attitudes that supports career change generally and discuss the limited findings on transition into careers work, in order to understand the broader context for why people might move into HE careers posts. There is considerable research into career changers, examining theory (e.g. Grzeda, 1999) as well as actual behaviour and the skills that support it, for example, Carless & Arnup (2011) who looked at the determinants and outcomes of career change, and Brown and colleagues who have focussed on career adaptabilities and the processes underlying career identity development and transition (e.g. Brown, Bimrose, Barnes and Hughes, 2012; Brown, 2015). Factors which underpin a decision to change career can be considered as individual or organisational (Rhodes & Doering, 1983). Carless & Arnup (2011) found that personality characteristics (openness to experience, extraversion), demographics (age, gender, education level and occupation tenure) and the organisational factor of job security are all determinants of a mid-career change. Haasler & Barabasch (2015) note that mid-career changes may reflect increased self-awareness and personal agency, internal struggles, a need to fully express the inner self and a move against previous restrictions and constraints. It has also been argued that when career transitions are embarked upon out of choice they are driven by personal agency and represent career adaptability, as opposed to forced involuntary transitions which indicate resilience (Damle, 2015).

Movement across roles, professions and sectors, in what are now termed boundaryless careers, requires individual recognition of transferable skills which in turn provides a significant advantage in changing career (Brown *et al*, 2012). Research from Brown *et al* focused on the role career adaptability played in decision making and skills development for mid-career changers, highlighting the importance of upskilling and/or reskilling and the potentially transformative shifts in perspective required for successful change. Research from Bimrose and Hearne (2012) indicated that career resilience and adaptability are important - those moving into the careers sector need to be resilient and anxious to make a

positive difference (Bimrose and Hearne, 2012) as well as being highly skilled at decision-making, organisation, time-management and counselling (being empathic and able to listen actively) (Patton, 2002). The literature provides some indication of the motivations for moving into careers work and the skills necessary for success, but there remains a significant gap regarding mid-career change in to the career development and guidance field, specifically exploring selection and motivation for the sector and how previous experiences/skills facilitates the transition.

Methodology

The research was a cross sectional design; data was collected at one point in time using an online survey. The key aim was to better understand the nature of the workforce in HE career guidance and enablers and barriers for recent transitioning career development professionals.

The responses were gathered from 175 UK career development professionals working in HE who had moved into the sector from another career. On average practitioners had worked for 4.5 years in a careers related role in the HE sector. The results provide an interesting snapshot of a sample of the HE careers and employability workforce. The majority of respondents (70%) were females aged over 35, 90% of respondents described themselves as white, 3% as Asian, 1% as black and 2% as mixed race. Respondents were primarily qualified to level 7 (postgraduate certificate/diploma or full masters - over 70% were at this level). Sixteen percent of respondents were qualified to level 6 (undergraduate degree level) and a small percentage (1%) indicated qualifications at sub degree level.

An online self-completion survey was adopted which contained 24 questions that were a mix of closed and open ended questions. It was circulated broadly through iCeGS contacts and adopted a snowball effect, utilising contacts within the professional associations such as the Career Development Institute (CDI) and the Association of Careers Advisory Services (AGCAS); both are membership organisations in the UK. Survey questions focused on exploring transferable skills, knowledge and experience, career trajectories, the attraction to the sector and views regarding training and progression opportunities.

Data was imported into an excel spreadsheet and analyses were conducted using excel and SPSS for quantitative data and NVivo for qualitative data captured through the open questions. Although this was purposive and a convenience sample it was sufficiently large to enable us to make some observations about the sector and the views of the new practitioners within it.

Findings

Demographics

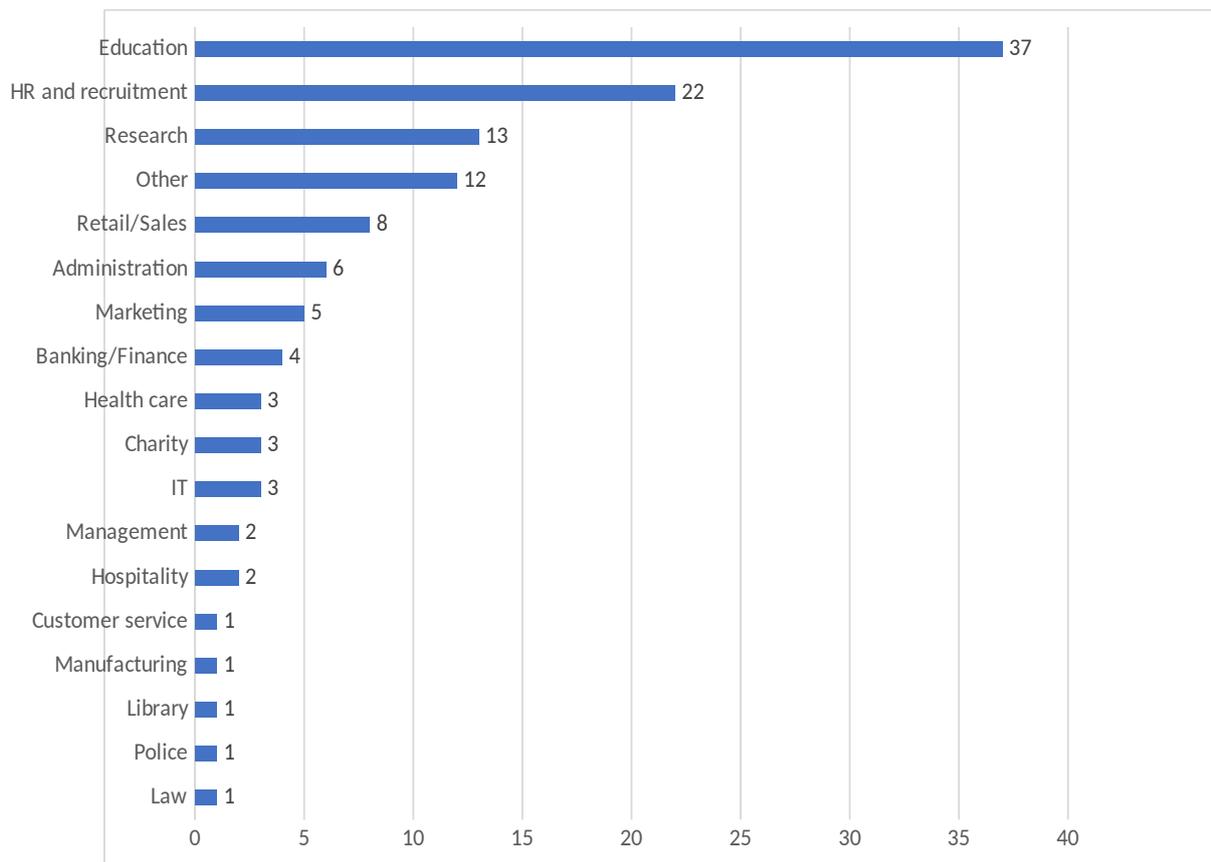
In exploring the demographic data, it is interesting to note that the workforce within careers and employability centres is characterised as white females aged 35 and over, this continues to align careers work with female dominated caring professions (Allan and Moffett, 2015). The age is less of a surprise as it is recognised that the respondents are career changers. It raises several issues concerning how representative the careers workforce is when compared with other parts of the institutions and specifically the student body? HESA (2017) present that 81% of academic and non-academic staff are defined as white and 57% of professional staff on non-academic contracts are female. When considering student ethnic groups HEFCE (2017) present that 29% of the student body entrants are BME (Black Minority Ethnic). This presents some interesting considerations concerning the lack of diversity within the careers workforce and what can be done to address this and make the profession more representative of the clients' practitioners work with.

Previous occupations

Through analysing the survey responses, it was possible to identify that new practitioners in HE careers and employability work came from a broad range of job titles and sectors. Over 45 roles were reported, in order to produce a coherent visual representation of this the job roles were collapsed down into broader occupations/sectors. The results show that the most common occupations/sectors for respondents to have worked in was education (see Figure 1). Of those who had worked in education the range of roles was extremely large, hence collapsing them all down to one broader category. However the majority of respondents in this category had worked in higher education, this comprised a range of different roles including lecturing, staff development, widening participation and policy development roles. Other roles in education most commonly reported were teaching in secondary level education. This is not really surprising as HE careers services often recruit from a range of sectors and train them to undertake careers and employability work for a HE context. Neary, Hooley and Marriott (2014), present evidence from an analysis of job adverts that shows that within HE recruitment, experience of working with employers was most highly valued. Other common occupations/sectors were HR, recruitment and research. In the former case respondents often noted how they had wanted to use their knowledge of the 'other' side of recruitment to help 'young people' (although it is recognised that not all graduates are young people) entering the labour market.

Figure 1 Previous roles/sectors

*More than one occupational area may have been identified



The respondents had worked in their original career area for an average of 11 years and were well established, interestingly 42 respondents had worked for over 20 years in their sector.

“Having a previous career in business has been extremely beneficial to me in Careers. I appreciate the employer perspective and also as a career changer I can support students with their career planning strategy from an empathetic viewpoint”.

This suggests that new practitioners recognise that their experience, networks and understanding of employment sectors and what employers are specifically looking for is central to their new career.

“Having changed direction and had a period of career uncertainty involving some unemployment and short term temp work has helped me understand transitions and career decision making from a personal as well as theoretical perspective”.

This may provide an extra layer of utility for practitioners, providing this experience of uncertainty, career exploration/decision making and transitioning is considered and used empathetically by when working with students.

The new career in careers

Reflecting the diversification of careers departments in HE we identified 14 primary roles respondents had transitioned to – it should be noted however that it is often not easy to differentiate between the various roles as the nomenclature across services may vary. The majority described their new role as either a consultant or an adviser, however within some services a consultant is seen as a senior role and may have responsibility for other staff or coordinating curriculum activities. However, many other roles were reported; management and leadership, coach, lecturer, researcher, counsellor, facilitator, educator, co-ordinator, strategist and specialist. These roles were often connected to an identifier of which there were several including; employability, development, opportunities, employment; volunteering, information, rewards and placements/internships. This replicates Neary et al's (2014) findings, at least in part, they noted that the term employability was identified regularly in relation to jobs and person specifications for HE roles.

The widening range of titles and identifiers may have significance with respect to the development of a professional career identity. The role of nomenclature is an important element of career identity - Neary (2014a) argues that having titles that clearly describe what practitioners do is an important part of being a professional and contributes to the establishment of a professional identity, which is described as 'the concept that describes how we perceive ourselves within our professional context and how we communicate this to others' (Neary, 2014b:14). This is specifically important for individuals transitioning into a new career where being able to align themselves with other practitioners on similar roles will contribute to positive assimilation.

What factors attracted individuals in to the profession?

Over 70% (123) of respondents identified themselves within a practitioner role (as opposed to a management role). For many of those who contributed to the study, practice, that is to say working directly with (young) people, was an important element of their decision to move into careers work. A key driver for them was the desire to provide support to or help (young) people (44) to shape their future lives. Respondents identified a general desire for the opportunity to 'help, develop and support people' (49%), and to be engaged in 'varied, practical, work with people', comprised of '1 to 1 interactions', which offered 'security/stability and work-life balance' (37%) and that would be 'making a

difference/impacting on people's lives' (27%). As many respondents had come from roles that could be considered 'helping' in the broadest sense it is interesting to note that providing personalised support to individuals attracted career changers to the profession. This was even more apparent in those whose previous roles did not offer the opportunity to work closely with and help others; several reported a need to do something with more personal meaning and impact.

"I wanted more opportunity to see a direct impact in what I was doing"

"A light bulb moment, it gave me the opportunity to put something back in and to be authentic".

"Helping people as opposed to selling"

Eight of the respondents had been inspired by a career guidance professional or had a positive experience of career guidance. Role modelling is an important element in attracting others to the profession (Ibarra 2004) and underlines having staff that represent and reflect the client group is important. Role models need to demonstrate desirable attitudes, behaviours, goals or social status and serve to motivate and inspire aspiration in others (Gibson, 2003).

"Having my own career coach, when I got made redundant from a PR job about 6 years ago, was the first thing that inspired me about careers work, as I think may be the case for others in this field. I was also influenced by my Dad who did a coaching course (NLP) many years ago and really inspired me about this kind of practice".

Many of the respondents felt that they had experience, knowledge and skills that were transferable within their new role. These tended to focus on two key areas; skills which were related to their original roles such as recruitment practice, management etc. and a large range of skills that are specifically considered as helping skills such as communication (42), understanding others (29), listening (23), coaching (14), advice giving (11). The skills that individuals already had were felt to have contributed to their selection of career development work as their new career. These findings align with those of Patton (2002) who found that decision-making, organisation and time-management skills are required in addition to those of counselling.

Being able to see alignment between current skills and future careers would seem to aid transition and ensure that there is a stronger fit within the new role. Ibarra (2004) suggests that 'knowing yourself turns out to be the prize at the end of the journey rather than the light at its beginning' (p161). Another way to consider this is that practitioners have, had within their roles the opportunity to reflect on and compare their current roles with the

previous ones they did. As such with hindsight they can make clearer alignment between what they were able to bring to the role and also how they have been able to use it. Again, this type and level of understanding is essential in professional practice helping students to understand their learning and skills and how it transfers to the wider context.

“Communications: - Knowing how to best get messages about our service across and generally present written information in a way that is digestible (which I developed while working in marketing) - Also, communication/interpersonal skills generally developed through working with a range of people throughout my career”.

“Supporting people within organisations with their training needs, understanding recruitment practices from the employer point of view”.

Satisfaction with new role

We asked respondents about their expectations of their role and the extent to which these had been met. Approximately 42% of the new entrants sought out opportunities for placements, shadowing and work experience prior to applying for jobs. Most found this very or extremely useful. Over half believed it had had at least some influence on their decision to move into careers. Having the opportunity to gain some experience and to observe in practice what the work involves is (as we know) a good way not just for the participant but also as a recruitment activity for the service. These opportunities also helped to explore potential recruits' expectations of the role and to help them to envision themselves within it. Ibarra (2004) refers to this as exploring possible selves and helps individuals to consider the options of who they might become. Yates (in press) considers that individuals in career transition may have multiple images of their possible self: these can be positive, negative, realistic or fanciful. This is an important element of career change and the transition process where individuals are able to identify congruence between how they have previously seen themselves and what their future selves may look like.

The majority of respondents were happy with their new career. They found that it provided them with opportunities to undertake work on a personal level with individuals and groups, it was rewarding and they had a real sense of job satisfaction. They particularly enjoyed the practical nature of the job

“I find it as satisfying as I'd imagined. The majority of the time I am offering practical help to students who need help to get on in their preferred career, and sometimes I am helping people through some difficult issues which makes it very rewarding”.

When asked to describe how they felt about their role the most common terms used were 'enjoy', 'autonomy' and 'variety'. Respondents focused very much on key elements of the

role specifically providing one:one support and group work, which all enjoyed. For those who were less happy in the role, this tended to be due to lack of one:one/group contact. This predominantly arose because they were in supervisory positions which were less client focussed. Respondents referred to the client focused nature of the role the relationship they have with their colleagues as being important to them in their new career. It is worth recognising that as the focus of the research was on recent career changers, practitioners who have been in the role longer may have different views (Barbour, 2016).

Respondents liked that they had control over the work they did, however some were critical of the universities as being bureaucratic, managerial and target driven. Considering the backgrounds of the respondents this is interesting as it offers up the possibility that HE institutes may be more bureaucratic, managerial and target driven than the organisations they previously worked in.

“... but HE is very bureaucratic compared to the City and it takes a very long time to make meaningful change”.

Other elements of the work which were valued were variety and diversity within the role . Most respondents felt that the role provided opportunities to engage with different people across the institution and wider afield and contribute to a wide range of activities and to feel they were making a difference to people’s lives.

“I had originally intended the role to be a stepping-stone, but instead the role has grown to embrace my skills and, to an extent, ambitions. I did not expect the experience to be so diverse and did not expect to gain the influence and reach that I have. It has been much more enjoyable than expected. So, my expectations have not been met - they have been exceeded”

Autonomy and control over the work was an important element for many, this was often linked to creativity and the opportunity to be innovative with the development of practice. From a professional practice perspective, many felt that they were generally valued within the institution, however some were surprised at what was perceived as a disparity in how careers practitioners were perceived by academics. This reflects Thambar (2016) who suggests that careers advisers often feel unconfident about the professional identity due to a lack of recognition of their role. The employability agenda has undoubtedly helped to develop the form and visibility of careers services within HE (e.g. AGCAS, 2008; Wilson Review, 2012) but it may be there is still a lack of understanding by academics of the roles, responsibilities and abilities within them. Given that careers professionals working in HE not only play a central role in supporting performance metrics, and are knowledge workers just like academics (knowledge workers are those “who access, create and use information in a way that adds value to an enterprise and its stakeholders”, (Tymon & Stumpf, 2002:12) this lack of understanding is no longer warranted.

A number of respondents had been supported to extend their qualifications and specialist knowledge such as undertaking masters level, guidance qualifications and psychometric testing to enhance their abilities, providing good opportunities for CPD and personal growth. Some responses suggested the work not only developed their knowledge and skill sets but also fed into social and professional cultural capital. They were able to work in projects in other departments, allowing them to develop their own profile, and that of the careers profession within the university.

“It has actually been a much broader and richer experience than I anticipated, with more focus on education and learning than I expected (in addition to the one: one guidance I thought I would be doing primarily). I have also found that, working in HE, there has been a lot of focus on issues of policy and approach to employability generally which is really interesting, with more scope than I expected for collaboration with or learning from/about other parts of the university and related student/learner agendas”.

For most respondents, the role met their expectations or in some cases exceeded their expectations; specifically, where practitioners have had the opportunity to influence the direction of the service.

“It has exceeded my expectations. I find it a rewarding, challenging and creative job. I keep learning and developing skills. And I'm now in a position of influence over institutional strategic planning”.

Conclusions

Higher Education has become a dynamic and fast paced environment subject to much external scrutiny through a variety of metrics (Christie, 2017). For institutions the concept of employability plays a central role in being able to perform well in these metrics - the need to demonstrate tangible outcomes linked to higher education have rarely been more important. This has led to careers services evolving in form and content. The research here has demonstrated that the careers and employability workforce although lacking (currently) in diversity in terms of gender and ethnicity, do bring a wealth of relevant, experience, skills and knowledge from previous employers. Central to this is their experience of being in transition, assessing their skills, undertaking pre-employment shadowing and experience to test out their new career ideas. These activities reflect the current experiences and anxieties of many of the students they are working with.

The practitioners in this study were passionate about the work they do, hugely enthusiastic about the difference they make and feel a sense of reward, job satisfaction and value. Whilst the new format of HE allows diversity, specialisms and variation in working, allowing expectations to typically be met, HE can also be a bureaucratic, management heavy place to work. Given that people are intrinsically motivated to work in this sector because the work is meaningful and allows them to make a difference, it may be important for management and the institutions to place less emphasis on quantity and instead place emphasis on quality of service. The data suggests that both social and cultural capital may also be tied to the role of careers professionals.

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