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Short summary

Universities adopt many strategies to support their students' employability and career development. However, very little in depth research explores what students report learning from the interventions they experience and if it is possible to trace impact on eventual outcomes. This paper focuses on research about an innovative employability intervention in which students took part in compulsory individual and group career coaching in their final year of study. The paper reflects on whether students value such employability and career development interactions, and if any associations can be made between engagement in such activities and levels of career decidedness. It will have implications for both policy and practice in universities, and raise questions about the feasibility/desirability of scaling up personalised support. Theoretically the paper is informed by career development and graduate employability literature which seeks to consider both contextual and individual factors influencing career outcomes

Researching practice

A research evaluation of the impact of compulsory career coaching for final year undergraduates of Business Management and Accounting

Employability continues to be a high priority for universities. This policy direction is strengthening in the UK with the use of Graduate Outcomes survey data (census of destinations at fifteen months after graduation), and salary data collected via the Longitudinal Educational Outcomes data (at one, three and five years after graduation). These will have an increased impact upon how universities are ranked in the UK government's Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework (TEF) (UK Government, 2019). In this context, the early and lifetime prospects of graduates are highly politicised and are a preoccupation of government, universities, employers and students and graduates themselves. Government policy narrowly defines successful graduate careers by standard occupational classifications (professional, managerial and associate professional) and how much graduates earn at snapshot periods, which ignores more nuanced success measures that may have greater meaning for individual aspirations and societal benefit.

In practice, many university staff navigate tensions in policy priorities with pragmatic endeavours to provide a pedagogic environment that can best provide foundations for students to build meaningful careers, however these may be defined. There is a complex employability and career development ecosystem in universities including managers, employability-focused academics, and career development specialists and learning developers. How universities most effectively foster their students' employability, is an ongoing question with no easy answers in a context in which the labour market is competitive for graduates and there appear to be fewer structured career pathways. Policy and practice in this area continues to search for new ways that can engage and motivate students, as well as equip them with career capitals to help them in the graduate job market. The direction of travel for many Business Schools has been to move away from embedding personalised career development support, which is considered too resource intensive, and has tended to rely on self-referral to specialist career development practitioners.

This paper examines a practical employability and career development intervention. In contrast to other initiatives that reduce resources, the activities that we assess represent a significant investment.

We conducted research to examine the value of a structured and compulsory career-coaching programme that was piloted across nearly 800 final year undergraduates (graduating in 2019), at a large business school in the UK. The school employed qualified external coaches; students were required to take part in a series of four coaching sessions (2 x 1-to-1 and 2 x 1-to-4 sessions). In addition, we expected students to complete an online learning course and write a reflective essay. Using qualitative data from reflective essays as well as focus groups and interviews, the research sought to explore whether students valued career coaching and what influence the experience had on their career and employability learning. In addition, it was able to situate qualitative data within findings from secondary quantitative data from across the entire cohort that asked questions about career decidedness on entry to 2nd year, final year and on graduation. This latter data is part of a national move to collect data on career thinking that has only just started to be reported upon and this study is the first to gather data from such questions on graduation (Cobb, 2019). In so doing, the study aims to make comparisons in longitudinal movement of career decidedness between students of different demographic characteristics and also levels of engagement with the employability pilot programme. The project will also be able to analyse data from the graduate outcomes survey (October 2020) in stage two.

Theoretically, the research is informed by literature about graduate employability that recognises individual and contextual factors that impinge on career development (Tomlinson & Holmes, 2016). It follows in the spirit of recent work that argues for a range of factors that influence outcomes (Clarke, 2018) and by career guidance and coaching literature that has long recognised the highly personalised nature of career learning (Yates, 2013). The pilot project itself was influenced by research that suggests that those who leave university with a career plan tend to achieve better graduate outcomes (Shury, Vivian, Turner, & Downing, 2017). It also considers the relevance of elements of the Psychology of Working theory which argues for the important moderating factor that social support can bring for individuals in their quest to secure meaningful work (Duffy, Blustein, Diemer, & Autin, 2016) and in so doing reflects upon how personalised support can be an important component in the confidence and resilience of students.

This paper will report on the findings from the project's first main stage. Emerging themes confirm the value in structuring in "career conversations" for students. Early findings suggest:

- high value placed on external, expert, qualified coaches and the stimulus of that voice, which is in addition to interactions with university staff;
- very specific spurs to take career-related action as a result of coaching;
- increased levels of feelings of confidence and resilience due to participation in the programme;
- participation acted as a motivator to develop a future orientation in career planning;
- diverse and sometimes contradictory perspectives on group career coaching.

Analysis of secondary data seeks to answer questions about whether those who fully engaged with the pilot programme made the largest movement in career decidedness compared to their peers who only partially or did not participate in the programme at all. It will also be possible to report on levels of engagement across different demographic groups and in particular, whether it is reaching traditionally less advantaged students.

The paper will have implications for both policy and practice in universities, reflecting on the value of such employability and career development interactions, while also raising questions about the feasibility of scaling such personalised support.

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