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Careers guidance and social mobility in UK higher education; practitioner perspectives

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Authors: Fiona Christie ([ORCID-0000-0003-1384-3683](https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1384-3683))

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Abstract

This paper reveals findings from a small-scale research project which explored how university careers advisers experience their role in guiding clients within a labour market where barriers to social mobility prevail. The research discovers that advisers' daily work gives them a depth of insight into social mobility. The professional turbulence in which advisers operate and the evolution of their role from in-depth work to a focus on breadth is chronicled. University environments vary with regard to the scope advisers have to impact lives, but a strong set of values anchors them. Recommendations are made with regard to how high quality careers information, advice and guidance can support social mobility for traditionally disadvantaged students into the labour market.

Introduction

Keisha did not have the faith that she herself could be involved in that life and still pass the exams she was beginning to comprehend would be essential. Which comprehension arrived partly through the efforts of a visiting careers officer. Reader: keep up! A young woman, from Barbados, new in the job, optimistic. Name unimportant. She was especially impressed by Rodney taking him seriously and listening to him when he talked about the law. Where Rodney Banks even got the idea of "the law" it was difficult to say. His mother was a dinner lady. His father drove a bus... (Smith, 2012, pp. 193-194)

The paragraph from Zadie Smith's novel reflects an assumption that careers guidance can play a part in enhancing social mobility but that this can be an anonymous position. This paper sheds light on this anonymity in capturing the outcomes of insider research undertaken into the careers guidance profession within universities. The questions that anchored this study addressed careers adviser views and experience of social mobility, their approaches to practice and their attitudes to the potential they have to positively influence the life chances of clients.

For decades there has been a rarely questioned article of faith amongst hopeful university applicants that participation in higher education can facilitate social mobility. However, government initiated investigations (Milburn, 2009, 2012a, 2014) present a fairly bleak picture of an elitist nation in which access to certain graduate professions (for example, medicine and journalism) risks not just stalling but going into reverse. The narrow recruitment practices of large employers, and the role of unpaid internships and extra-curricular activities in facilitating valuable social capital are just some of the

themes in government commissioned analysis (Wilson, 2012). Other related research also indicates that higher education expansion has often perpetuated positions of social advantage and subsequent labour market outcomes (Macmillan, Tyler, & Vignoles, 2013; Macmillan & Vignoles, 2013; Pennington, Sinclair, & Mosley, 2013; Purcell et al., 2012). In particular, the favourable positioning in the graduate job market of those from a private school background is well-traced. Organisations such as the Sutton Trust seek to support action which can mitigate entrenched advantage and disadvantage, which raises awareness of the constrained role of universities in facilitating social mobility; the subject is also a frequent target for media interest which attracts public concern (Harris, 2013; Paton, 2013; Scott, 2013).

Within this widespread debate about social mobility, scant attention has been paid to some of the less visible actors in this arena. Hence, it was decided to conduct small-scale research into how careers advisers respond to these challenges in practice, especially in individual interactions with students and graduates which afford a close insight into aspirations. In doing this, the study drills directly into how careers advisers understand the scope and purpose of what they do more generally, and how this co-exists with university environments with an emphasis on impact measures and graduate outcomes.

The relationship between social structures determining destiny and individual agency to counter such determinants is a backdrop to this debate. What control does an individual really have in a society that has so much stratification and barriers therein? Can the people tasked to assist, including careers advisers really help or not?

Careers advice and guidance in higher education – the context

Careers education, information, advice and guidance (CEIAG) within higher education can include a broad range of activities. Traditional one-to-one advice and guidance sits within a portfolio of activities generally managed by a central university careers service. Careers advisers are usually just one part of a team of information, administrative, and employer liaison staff, but the nature of staff roles within a university careers service continues to evolve beyond these roles. Responsibility for careers guidance tends to fall to careers advisers, although careers advisers do more than just advise and guide people; they may teach entire programmes, organise events, and sell services as well as research and write publications. CEIAG is deeply enmeshed in drivers for employability within universities, and careers support is often considered part of a wider employability strategy. The growth of the discourse of employability has been largely driven by the metrics that appear in university rankings and has led to 'careers' together with 'employability' becoming the concern of a wider community including academics, and university managers.

There are no universal benchmarks with regard to how a university careers service should be constituted and relevant Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) guidelines allow for local interpretation (QAA, 2012, 2013). The Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services (AGCAS) does not routinely survey how university careers services are made up or resourced, facing as it does an uneven playing field, in which it would be hard to make exacting recommendations due to the diverse characteristics of universities. Careers services (or equivalent) have a varied workforce, of which careers advisers are one component. Some advisers are qualified guidance practitioners, and some possess other relevant qualifications, for example teaching or HR or have substantial experience in a recruitment role. The field of work has undergone rapid change in recent years, the uncertainty of which was captured in a recent edition of Phoenix, the AGCAS magazine, which conveys a struggle for identity and divided views on priorities (Phillips, 2014; Stow, 2014).

University careers services and their careers advisers face the challenge of proving the impact of what they do. Although they 'just know' they make a difference, there has continued to be a lack of research evidence to support this (Nijjar, 2009). Much of the evidence-building work for careers guidance specifically has been outside of higher education (Hughes & Gration, 2009; OECD, 2004). Notably, literature about higher education and social mobility explores deficiencies in pre-higher education careers advice, but does not explore its role within higher education itself to any great extent (Milburn, 2012b; Stone, 2012; UA, 2014). Additional funding for universities to support students from widening participation backgrounds can include career-related activities, but this varies from university to university. The Office for Fair Access (OFFA) requires universities to report on how such funding is utilised.

Ongoing national policy changes to careers education, information, advice and guidance currently impact on the purpose and identity of careers advisers. Outside higher education, structural weakness has been evident in its steady de-professionalisation as the role was effectively substituted for a more generic personal adviser role, challenging the professional habitus of staff (Artaraz, 2006). This has been followed by the dismantling of public careers services for schools by the current government. The Careers Professional Alliance (which AGCAS has opted out of) has worked to consolidate, expand and develop professional standards for advisory work in response to government policy change (Hughes, 2012; Silver, 2010). The personal and professional challenges for careers advisers working in such an environment are considerable (Bimrose & Hearne, 2012; Reid & West, 2011). This turbulent hinterland casts a shadow over careers advisers in higher education, while they continue to adapt to their own changing field.

Careers advice and guidance – limitations and possibilities

Some sociological and philosophical perspectives question critically what agency is possible for individuals leaving education and entering the job market. Important questions are raised which practitioners need to reflect upon. Will individuals just choose, and slot into an available job that befits their social background? Do careers advisers merely help ensure this happens? Much career development theory argues against such totalising possibilities, and a belief in self-determination is fundamental to careers guidance. A brief reflection on literature that addresses both the limitations and possibilities of careers guidance follows.

Writing critically of the guidance process itself and drawing on Foucauldian notions of power and governmentality, Fejes (2008) suggests that the confessor in guidance exchanges acts to ensure individuals govern themselves effectively in line with dominant discourse, and rejects the notion that guidance is '...something good, voluntary and "free",' (p. 653). He argues that employability has become a dominant discourse which increasingly shifts responsibility to the individual for their own success or failure in the labour market. If this Foucauldian line of reasoning is followed through, careers advisers could be regarded merely as agents of the state inducting their clients into taking full responsibility for their own employability, ignoring the structural barriers they may face. Also writing critically of guidance and influenced by ideas of structural determinism, Roberts has argued that careers advisers are severely limited in what they can achieve (1977, 2013) as individual career choices are regulated by social background and geography.

Other writing recognises the influence of differential social capital (Bourdieu, 1977) and the role of social structures in shaping career paths, but also argues that individual agency is possible, and that careers advice can play a role in this. Greenbank (2010, 2011) focusses on the behaviours of less advantaged students in relation to accessing helpful careers advice. Often more likely to attend less prestigious universities, and to stay closer to home, behaviours are identified that can be considered to limit individuals which include making relatively less use of formal university careers services. He argues that working class students are more likely to use their own informal connections for careers

advice rather than from more formal careers services – leading to less ‘rational career decision-making’ and a lack of knowledge of what may really be available in the graduate job market. He argues that universities need to try harder to engage such students with formal careers services. The Futuretrack research findings resonate with this analysis, showing that individuals who succeed in the job market bring much more than their degree to the competition for a graduate career – they possess more valuable social capital. The role of ‘helpful careers advice’ is stressed as a feature of supporting optimism and likely success in the job market. This advice may come from a range of sources including a university careers service. The writers conclude:

The less positive labour market experience of graduates who did not take part in extracurricular activities, who remained in their parental home when they studied, and who did not develop the kind of social networks that provided them with helpful careers advice, and the extent to which such activities are more likely amongst particular disadvantaged groups presents a challenge to the prevailing notion that HE participation is a vehicle for social mobility and reducing the impact of prior disadvantage can be further entrenched by the very different HE experiences of those from more and less advantaged backgrounds. (Purcell et al., 2012, p. 132)

A way for practitioners to steer through such environments emerges in much career and personal development theory, which does not ignore structural barriers, but suggests ways that an individual can have some ability to control their destiny. For example, Law’s Community Interaction theory describes how people make career decisions incorporating aspects of the community that influence them as well as having scope for self-actualisation (Law, 2009), and more recently, career adaptability theory (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012) provides a psycho-social approach to how individuals respond to changes in the job market. Writing on personal development, Clegg (2010) uses the concept of reflexivity in capturing how different people respond to their context and employability, arguing that social background does not have to determine fate, and that appropriate support from university staff can help facilitate agency (Clegg & Rowland, 2010).

It appears that careers advisers face a barrage of questions about what they can achieve in their daily work with clients, but that the traditions of practice and theory in career and personal development do offer them some hope in responding to such questions. This research project goes on to chronicle what values, approaches and perspectives advisers draw upon in their routine practice in supporting students in their transitions into the labour market.

Methodology

The writer’s dual role as researcher and careers guidance practitioner allowed for access to a range of individuals who were willing to partake in the study as a result of fellow membership of a professional community. The insider nature of this research (Trowler, 2011), albeit within a professional group which crosses institutions meant that in conducting the project the researcher had a depth of knowledge and expertise of the topic and could rapidly secure co-operation and understanding of participants. Akin to participatory action research, the investigation addressed an issue which is of relevance to the working lives of participants as well as the researcher, and impacts on their identity and purpose. Smyth and Holian (2008) have argued that one of the positive features of such insider research is that its depth of understanding of a topic can result in a ‘messiness’ (p.35) that perhaps an external researcher may be tempted to sanitise and therefore miss subtleties.

The chosen method was a small-scale project which involved a number of semi-structured individual or paired interviews with a total of ten individuals from six universities¹ in the north-west of England. Diverse universities from three Mission groups, that is, the Russell Group, University Alliance and Million+ were included in order to secure contrasting perspectives. Participants were targeted who held a more traditional background in careers guidance and would have a depth and breadth of insight into the questions under consideration. The careers advisers interviewed were all qualified with the diploma of careers guidance and were experienced in their role, all having worked in numerous educational institutions. The research did not set out to produce collective and consensual answers to each question, or to claim a representativeness of all university careers advisers; rather it set out to gain a range of impressions from a selection of individuals with long-held investment in the professional area. There are no up-to-date figures regarding how many university careers advisers are guidance-qualified. Historically, many new entrants to this field in higher education would hold a guidance qualification and others would qualify in-service; however, it is likely that this requirement has started to erode. Further research with advisers who are not guidance-qualified may yield additional perspectives.

Semi-structured, face-to-face interviews were used to gain qualitative research data. Interviews were considered a suitable method to probe the subtlety of individuals' opinions and practices. Questions were divided into sections on views on social mobility, power and influence, and professional approach and tactics. The semi-structured approach allowed for supplementary questioning as led by the interest of the participants. The focus was on what views individuals expressed about their own practice and the values they demonstrated in what they said. The project did not endeavour to compare this self-reporting from advisers by contrasting the views of clients or careers service managers. A thematic analysis of interview data was conducted, which afforded a tangible method for interpretation of the data responding to what were some of the most significant issues for participants.

Careers adviser perspectives

A number of themes emerged in conducting the analysis of the interviews and there was both commonality and contrast with regard to issues and concerns. Responses are organised in relation to what advisers say they witness in practice, their motivations to do what they do, how their role is adapting, and how their environment impacts on them.

'The world isn't an equal place and it can come down to confidence.'

There was a fairly consistent agreement in the views held on the scope of higher education to enhance social mobility, though participants were keen to stress that on its own, participation was not a guarantee of social mobility. Reservations were expressed about the liberal values often tacit in the debate and the notion that university was right for everyone was criticised.

It was remarkable that although few, if any, of the participants had any familiarity with the work of Bourdieu, how many echoes of his ideas, for example, regarding social capital, appeared in what they said around how people are socially positioned.

... the world isn't an equal place and it can come down to confidence. Things like feeling the roles that you might be interested in are more likely to be done by people ... from a higher social class and you don't actually have the control and the social capital that you feel is

¹ Russell Group; 4 individuals from 2 different universities; University Alliance Group; 5 individuals from 3 different universities; Million+ Group; 1 individual from 1 university

needed to actually get on in a particular field of work. Participant 2, Russell Group University

There were some vivid descriptions of the students that advisers work with from a variety of backgrounds and universities which epitomise the diversity of cultural and social capital students and graduates possess. Many participants had worked or were currently working in contrasting universities which had allowed them to witness such differences.

Networks are so important and some of ours, they don't even know that they need the networks; they also haven't really got that social ammunition to get on. For example, take things like the two-day assessment centres where you have two days of activities - including a posh meal and it's one of those subtleties – because many of ours, they come from TV dinner land and they may only sit down for formal meal over Christmas or at a wedding and big occasions, whereas the posher kids that's all part of their culture. Participant 8, Alliance Group University

I think I met the most advantaged students when I worked at Anyplace University²- one thing that really marked them out was that many them had had very exotic gap years – they'd done the kind of thing in their gap year that would cost money, that would look great on the CV - I never saw the like of it when I was at Anywhere University.³ Participant 3, Russell Group University

'Our role is to shove open doors for them.'

Responses were measured with regard to perceived power to positively influence clients. However, a clear purpose was evident to work with individuals to empower them and facilitate self-efficacy. In general, participants were aware that their reach in terms of face-to-face contact was limited. Frustration was expressed about this as there was a feeling that it was often those with less social capital who did not come for help that may need it the most:

The students we do get to see we do influence and we get fantastic feedback on their use. But there are so many students we don't ever see. It's an issue. If I am honest, I think we are fairly low down food chain of respected advice from many of our students across the university. The majority who don't see us will listen to their parents, their peers, academics. I think we can raise aspirations on the margins and I may be talking myself down here but in terms of aspirations and confidence – a lot is already shaped by the time they reach us. Participant 7, Alliance Group University

Advisers were aware of the difficulties in measuring the impact of careers guidance as a separate entity. They spoke of the high volume of interactions they have, and that they may only see individuals once and for a short appointment. These factors led advisers to be fairly modest about their influence. The challenge that this represents for institutions with managerial performance drivers was recognised. It is often what can be measured easily by an institution that is valued most rather than more intangible activities. One respondent expressed how she had adapted her approach to clients, as she knew that she would not be able to see many clients more than once on an individual basis. Her task was to generate independence amongst clients rather than dependence, and to facilitate the possession for clients of tools to manage their career:

² Anyplace University, Russell Group University, previously worked at by participant

³ Alliance Group University, previously worked at by participant

It's really hard to measure impact and influence of careers guidance. There are so many influences. Careers aren't static so maybe they only see us at one point in time. Really I am trying to give them the Swiss Army knife of careers that they can carry with them without us. Participant 6, Alliance Group University

The negative framing of careers adviser influence was mentioned in all interviews and seemed to act as something of a shared folklore of exasperation to carry:

You meet people and they say 'my careers adviser at school said that I couldn't do that'. I'm dying to meet that careers adviser who ever told someone they can't do something. I've never met one yet. Participant 6, Alliance Group University

Another participant in re-telling the same story said that when people say this they most likely will not mean a qualified careers adviser, but more probably a careers teacher in a school. Some participants described incidents they had witnessed in which they had observed school teachers and university academics telling students what to do and not do, sometimes based on inaccurate information. Advisers' approach was generally non-directive aiming to empower a student to reach their own well-informed response to their own question, rather than to tell a client what to do.

The role of trustworthy careers information was a recurrent issue for advisers in terms of how they approach raising aspirations that are also realistic. In response to questions about specific scenarios, advisers drew upon their knowledge reservoir but were also conscious of what they did not know or were not up-to-date with and the need to draw on other experts. One participant gave an example of how she acts to ensure careers information is from a trusted resource:

I think we can help in building their aspirations and also encourage realism. People say there's loads of information out there but we can help with trusted sources. For example, I've recently organised a session for some of our science students here who are interested in graduate medicine which I ran together with someone from a medical school. Participant 9, Alliance Group University

Another participant talked about the clear role to build morale amongst students and graduates who may feel quite bleak about their future and her perception that individuals value the perspective of an impartial professional:

They do come in heads down over stories in the media and can be quite depressed. They think that there might not be anything out there so we have to help them and tell them that it's important to be determined and to realise it's competitive. There are strategies that can help and you mustn't dampen their hopes while also making sure they know that sometimes it may take longer to reach a goal and also you need to have a plan B/ backup plan. Participant 10, Million+ University

In summary, advisers had a clear value-set and purpose in approaching their job and as one said they wanted to 'shove doors open for people'. They saw themselves as different from academics in how they related to clients. Although some advisers do have quasi-academic responsibilities, for example, marking and assessment, they generally were able to approach clients on a more impartial footing and had a clear purpose to empower clients, build morale, direct clients to trustworthy information as well as to give them the tools to be independent career-seekers.

'It feels like what we were trained for isn't what we do.'

Considerable debate was generated about the changing nature of the role of a careers adviser in higher education. Advisers described the multiple identities they inhabit and that their current role is far away from what they were originally trained to do when careers advice was anchored by

individual guidance with a client that could be seen repeatedly. The role has changed and the learning and professional development to support this has been patchy; participants described learning from one another rather than through formal training routes. Individuals had to adapt to the diversification of their role, which includes guidance, writing, communications, event planning, teaching and training. Generally, they welcomed this evolution of their role's responsibilities; pragmatically they saw an expansion of their role beyond individual guidance allowing them to reach those students who may not have the social capital to opt in for traditional careers guidance. However, amongst some participants there was regret expressed with regard to the shrinkage of the face-to-face guidance offer as it was felt that the personal connection and support that could be given through individual guidance could have a significant impact for the individuals that experienced it. Although the role's expansion of repertoire could lead to greater possibilities to reach students, it could also lead to a dilution of professional practice.

I have been here for a few years and I've never had any training in house on guidance practice and I think that's a shame. I think our role is changing - much more about curriculum, focused on organising events, so guidance and that aspect has actually got much lower priority. Participant 3, Russell Group University

The practitioner debate around directive and non-directive approaches to individual careers guidance proved a sticking point even though the latter has been a pillar of how most advisers are trained. Although this is a commonly stated position, there were some misgivings about how it worked in practice, and could fit with the current role of a careers adviser within higher education with large caseloads, time pressures and many single interactions, as well as an increase of teaching and group work. Some advisers admitted they had become more directive over time and in certain situations. One participant observed how the non-directive guidance approach takes longer and can be more challenging for clients, which has led her to adapt her practice:

I think our whole guidance approach in terms of how we have been trained is challenging for students because it means that we are asking them difficult questions. You can do that in longer interactions and you can build the trust to do that but we have to be careful because we don't want them interpreting our questions negatively - they could interpret as 'she said I can't do this'. I think sometimes the way we were trained in the counselling model doesn't fit with our current practice when we see many more students for shorter periods of time and see more and more groups. Participant 3, Russell Group University

Another pillar in practice is being well-informed of labour markets, occupations and employers. Indeed, for many participants the vast majority of professional development was around the information aspect of the work, gained through attendance at careers fairs, employer visits and industry insight days. However, some participants expressed a concern about how hard it is to be well-informed. With client caseloads that are global and go into the thousands covering a great diversity of occupations and employers, advisers said it is hard to have the expert knowledge that would be desirable. The different universities represented in this research had varying numbers of careers advisers but those that had bigger teams were able to have more specialisms in terms of career sector knowledge.

Some advisers commented that meeting the demands of daily work means that they do not have the opportunity to reflect on issues such as the evolution of their role, how they approach guidance practice, or manage their knowledge of graduate labour markets. With reference to what happens in individual guidance, it would appear that much practice is taken-for-granted, or only really reflected upon in client evaluations. One interpretation of this is that advisers are trusted by managers in what they do. However, another interpretation is that university managers are less interested in

individual guidance which is a resource-intensive service to provide. It is the larger scale activity that demands more attention, for example, careers fairs, employability awards, and most importantly, performance in the Destinations of Leavers of Higher Education (DLHE) survey. Any development of guidance practice, such as coaching tools and techniques appeared to be as a result of individual interest and motivation rather than a requirement by management.

In conclusion it does appear that a significant way that advisers are reaching a larger number of students, including less advantaged groups is by widening the repertoire of what they do. Increasingly careers support activity is programmed in as part of the curriculum, rather than something optional for individuals. There were mixed views on this as it could lead to a side-lining of individual guidance work, although this is an activity that can have a powerful impact in supporting individuals in developing the agency in their career planning. Mass participation in higher education means resourcing individual guidance for more than the few has become increasingly difficult for university managers, especially as it is hard to prove its impact.

‘We have moved into a numbers game.’

Advisers discussed the tension between professional values and institutional priorities. A repeated concern was that individual guidance work had been de-valued in contrast to other parts of their role, although the extent of this varied depending on context. All advisers described the challenges of current work practices, whilst also holding onto core values:

It's sad that the one part of our work that is probably most valued by many students is actually least valued by management and the institution and we seem to have moved into a numbers game. Impact and influence is measured by numbers. Participant 5, Alliance Group University

In terms of influence I think we witnessed the demise of the longer guidance interview with a lot more quick queries at just 15 minutes. We do 8 x 15 minute sessions one after another. You are not going to do much in 15 minutes and I would guess that limits your influence. I think it also sets us up a bit more like the doctor's surgery room environment where students are tending to expect to come along and get a quick answer, and off they go. Participant 4, Russell Group University

Reference was also made to ensuring positive graduate outcomes as part of the DLHE survey and the role that careers services have with regard to this as one of the performance drivers that influences higher education management. Careers advisers demonstrated an ability to move between different discourses in this respect. They acknowledged both the role they may play in positively influencing the DLHE survey; whilst also maintaining a person-centred approach, which may sometimes not fit with the interests of the institution.

There was evidence of contrasting institutional commitment to careers advice and guidance. Some universities were developing proactive approaches around supporting students from less advantaged backgrounds.

As a university we're doing much more about Widening Participation issues - we have a careers adviser who was appointed to develop this work, we've also appointed a data analyst to look at things like DLHE data and analyse the usage of our services. We are looking at doing confidence workshops, and those kinds of activities to support students and also do things as part of the XYZ Town Access programme. Participant 2, Russell Group University

Some participants considered that less advice and guidance was available from specialist careers advisers in universities which had more vocational programmes in which there was an implicit assumption, that academic staff would do careers advice too, or students needed less. One participant working in two different institutions commented on the disparity of support available:

It is an eye-opener working in two different contrasting institutions. Students in Anytown University⁴ are equipped so well relatively and it's interesting that those students, who probably need less support in terms of careers guidance, are getting more support than those at this University, where there's less specialist careers advice due to less resources.
Participant 10, Million+ University

Conclusions

The careers advisers in this study saw themselves as having a unique position within institutions in terms of the wide range of individuals they meet and the insights they gain around barriers to social mobility. Their responses also demonstrate the values and tactics they espouse professionally. The inter-connectedness of the limitations and possibilities for their careers advisory role was evident in the stories they had to tell.

Their professional community across institutional boundaries was clear and there were many shared values, through which some showed a greater belonging to their professional group than to their institution. The political pressure that their profession is under more widely contributes to this. Their commitment to clients appeared to enable and motivate them, as well as make them resilient in a turbulent environment.

They had a strong sense of responsibility for their clients, especially for those who may not be able to draw on the support of a more advantaged background. Their expanded repertoire of activities increases their reach amongst those clients who are less likely to have the social capital to access services voluntarily (Greenbank, 2011). They had no doubt that they could make a positive contribution to the life chances of individuals; although they recognised the challenge of proving this, and they knew they may be a small part of the jigsaw.

Advisers had an awareness of the structural constraints in which their clients operate (Purcell et al., 2012). Their focus on individuals and their humility in terms of how they view their influence seemed to run counter to the warnings that Fejes (2008) expresses around governmentality and the power exercised in educational guidance. Without perhaps realising it many advisers were influenced pragmatically by Law's careers guidance community interaction theory with its balance between the self and society (2009).

Although formal training has not always kept up with actual practice, individuals were adapting through informal learning when taking on new duties, as well as developing their own guidance practice. There was concern that as they took on other responsibilities, the role of individual guidance to make a difference to individuals' lives was being side-lined, which could be especially detrimental to more disadvantaged students.

Contrasting institutional provision and priority given to careers advice and guidance indicated how context could limit but also enable advisers. Individuals working in more prestigious institutions were often more satisfied with their scope to do their job due to greater staff resourcing, as well as access to more graduate employers. There was an indication that more support was available to students who are already advantaged by attending a more prestigious institution. Some advisers working in institutions where they had more regular contact with less advantaged students,

⁴ Anytown University, Russell Group University, also worked at currently by participant

expressed frustration that they could not do more for these students due to volume of caseloads as well as not being a target institution for graduate employers. However, virtually all advisers expressed regret with the high volume, time-constrained individual interactions they had with students, and the limitations this put on more in-depth work.

Clegg and Rowland's (2010) focus on personal values in their analysis of kindness and pedagogy resonates with the perspectives shared by respondents in this study. Arguing that the value of kindness recognises differential positioning and power relations; they also warn that such a personal value can be threatened by a focus on performativity. Such a value, which the careers advisers in this study tended to aspire to does mean that they prioritise the 'helping others' part of their work and can struggle within more managerial and performative higher education environments. The very fact that they honestly admit the limitations to the influence they have over students is probably not wise if wanting to influence university managers whose priority is impact metrics in terms of staff resource planning. On the other hand, this pragmatic humility may make for a safer pair of hands when working in a role which is fundamentally about enabling others.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are based on the findings of this research and invite action and reflection which could enhance how universities support less advantaged students through careers education, information, advice and guidance (CEIAG). Many address how CEIAG is structured and managed in a system of mass participation in higher education. Others directly relate to the role of careers advisers.

- AGCAS to explore ways to develop the research evidence base for the effectiveness of career-related interventions, particularly with less advantaged students.
- A stronger occupational structure within university careers services is required which can respond to the diverse tasks to be performed, and help to ensure mentoring and training for new entrants.
- AGCAS to conduct a survey of university careers services in order to better understand their resourcing and how this relates to the social backgrounds of students at different universities. There is scope to consider benchmarks of resourcing based on this.
- Recognition needs to be given to how the role of careers advisers is evolving, and the changing skills and attributes required. It would be useful to re-visit what characterises their professional identity.
- It is questionable whether careers advisers can effectively wear all the hats that are asked of them. The reality that one-to-one guidance holds lower status to other responsibilities needs to be addressed if this is not to further shrink.
- There is a risk that there may be a shortfall in the supply of qualified staff due to recent education policy which has reduced careers guidance in the pre-higher education sector. University managers need to be willing to support the training of new entrants.
- Any staff delivering CEIAG should have relevant training to a designated threshold in order to ensure quality of service.
- Continue to reach out to clients that would not volunteer for careers support by embedding career-related activity into programmes, and find ways for careers staff to work hand in hand with academics. Capitalise on this relationship and recognise positively the different power relationships that careers staff hold with students.
- Ensure high quality careers information about employers, occupations and labour markets is readily available for all. Marketing for university courses should be influenced by such content too.

- Universities should consider resourcing specialist careers advisory posts that have the objective to develop work for disadvantaged groups of students.

Notes on contributor

Fiona Christie is a careers guidance practitioner in UK higher education who is also an active researcher in the field of careers and employability.

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