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Students' career issues and challenges for career practitioners in UK higher education
Summary of research findings
Julia Yates, City, University of London and
Wendy Hirsh, NICEC Fellow

This is a summary of the early analysis of data from a study of career practitioners (CPs) working in UK higher education (HE) institutions. It focuses on the experience of CPs working in university career services in their one-to-one career conversations with students.

If you have questions about the research or wish to be kept in touch with further materials coming out of this study, you are welcome to contact Julia Yates at Julia.Yates.1@city.ac.uk   The authors would like to thank the many career practitioners who gave their time to this study, carefully recording their interactions with students and reflecting so thoughtfully on their work.

Study aims and method

 The aim of this study was to explore:

- how career practitioners working in higher education characterise the career issues that students bring to their 1-1 conversations;

- how CPs address these issues;

- which issues CPs find challenging to deal with; and

- what further professional development they feel they need.

A survey of CPs doing 1-1 work with students collected information on the career issues students presented at 1-1 sessions, the issues CPs assessed as present, and the issues the CPs found challenging to deal with. A list of 22 issues was used in the survey derived from previous research literature and refined in conversation with HE CPs. The items reflected 6 groups of student career issues: lack of readiness; lack of information; conflicts; pessimism; anxiety; and identity. The Annex shows the structure of the issues covered in the survey.

The survey data covered 600 1-1 conversations conducted in 2019/20 by 59 CPs in 36 diverse UK HE institutions.

Follow up interviews were held in the summer of 2020 with 22 practitioners from 15 institutions, again varied by location and type. The interviews were used to gain deeper

understanding of the issues CPs observe in students, what may cause these issues, the techniques CPs use in 1-1 sessions, and their professional development.

The career issues of students

■ CPs see many HE students who are struggling with career decision-making. As shown on Table 1 below and more fully in the Annex, students most often present asking about the job application process. The interviews showed this was mostly asking for help with CVs, job applications or interviews. Students also say they need help with options and how to research them. The next most common items reflect anxiety about the uncertainty of the career choice process and choosing itself (if they can't work out what to do). Not knowing how to make a choice is a third issue about the career development process. In terms of groups of issues, information comes out highest but nearly half the students presented with some form of anxiety and a third with lack of career readiness.

Table 1 - Top career issues presented by students and assessed by CPs

Top career issue items	Presented by students	Assessed by CPs
Need help with application process	56%	57%
Lack of information about options	36%	48%
Don't know how to research options	28%	45%
Anxious about the uncertainty of the process	24%	34%
Don't know how to make a choice	23%	29%
Anxious about choosing	22%	32%
Top career issue groups	Presented by students	Assessed by CPs
Lack of information	85%	89%
Anxiety	45%	59%
Lack of readiness	32%	43%

Percentages refer to number of career conversations in which the issue or group was identified. N=600

■ The second column of figures in Table 1 shows the issues CPs assessed as present in each conversation. These are broadly the same as the items the students presented, but CPs identified issues more often than students presented them. In particular, CPs observed higher proportions not knowing how to research options and showing anxiety about the process and its uncertainty. CPs assessed well over half the students they saw as showing some form of anxiety and over 40% showing a lack of readiness.

■ The interviews with CPs enabled this study to extend earlier frameworks for career decision-making difficulties, suggesting a model of three inter-related sets of career issues manifest in higher education students. This model is shown in Figure 1. The three sets of issues are emotional (students don't feel they can deal with careers); cognitive (students don't know how to make career decisions) and behavioural (students don't take ownership of their own career development). CPs see many students who engage late with career services, are anxious and far from ready to make a choice. Students often ask for help with CVs or interviews when they have not really thought about what they want to do.

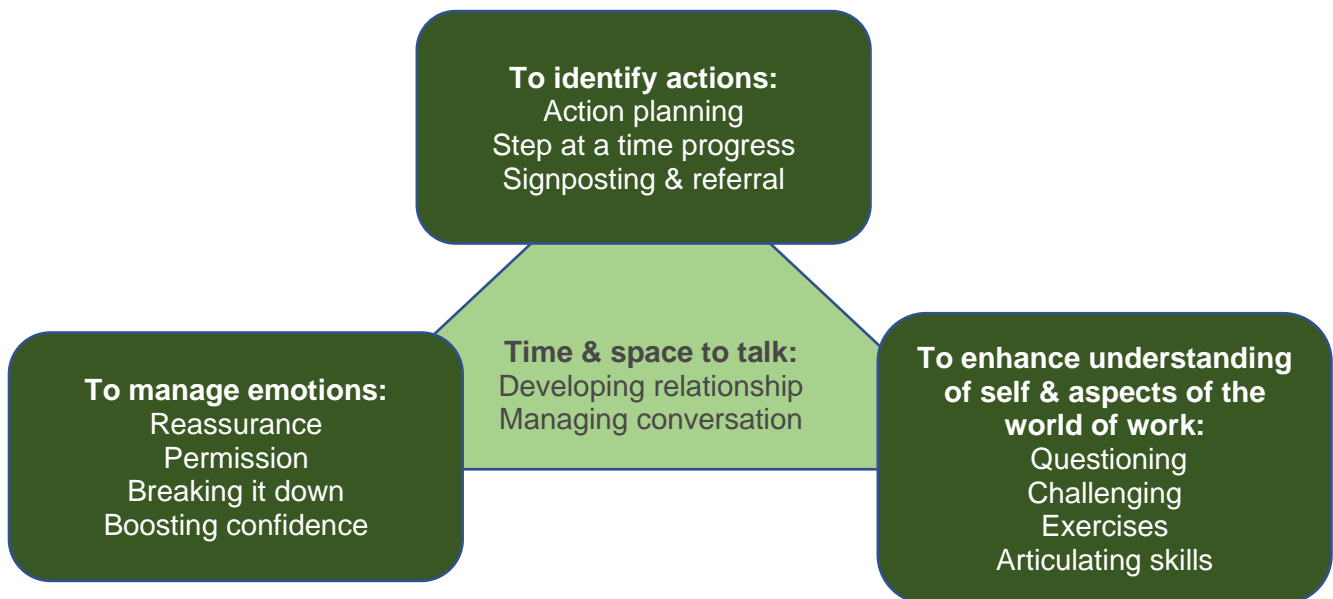**Figure 1: Manifestations of students' career issues**
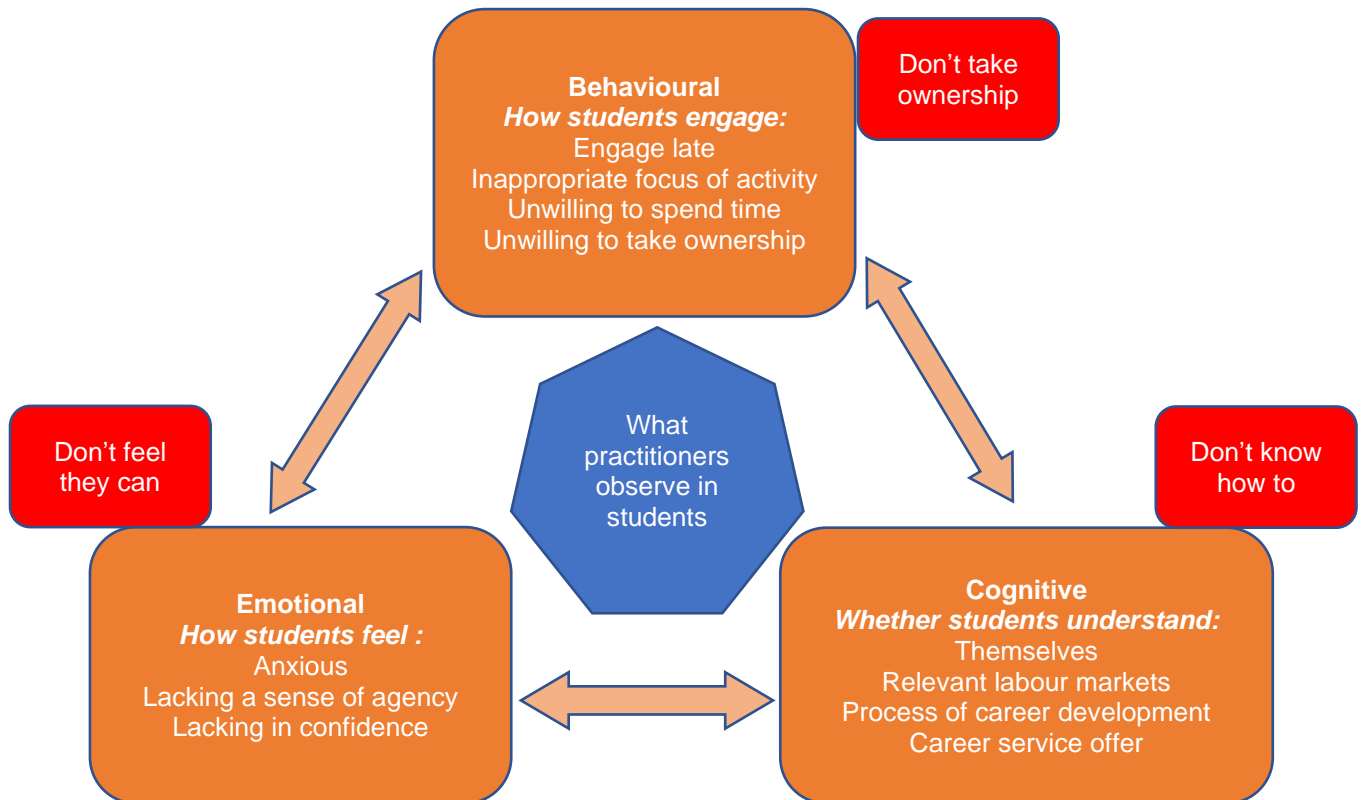
- CPs see the career issues of students as caused by social and practical pressures; their limited life and work experience; their limited experience of career education while at school and generally too little development of self-reflection and decision-making in the education system; the complexity and competitiveness of the labour market and the somewhat confusing messages about careers and career development that they experience in higher education.

How practitioners address students' issues in 1-1 conversations

- CPs support students in 1-1 sessions by giving them *space to think*, using approaches that help them with their emotions and self-awareness and encourage them to identify next steps they can take. Figure 2 shows some of the common ways in which CPs address the behavioural, emotional and cognitive issues observed in students.

- Some elements of practice were mostly shared across CPs in this study. These include a student-centred set of values and approaches, largely based on counselling techniques. CPs have a largely shared range of techniques to manage the students' anxieties, increase their self-awareness, and give practical information about job hunting (CVs, interviews etc). Articulating skills was quite often used as a start point for thinking about jobs. CPs have a positive approach to signposting and referring students to other university services, for example where there is a significant mental health issue.

Figure 2: How practitioners address students' career issues in 1-1 conversations

To identify actions:
Action planning
Step at a time progress
Signposting & referral

Time & space to talk:
Developing relationship
Managing conversation

To manage emotions:
Reassurance
Permission
Breaking it down
Boosting confidence

To enhance understanding
of self & aspects of the
world of work:
Questioning
Challenging
Exercises
Articulating skills

- Practitioners have less commonality around their role in acquiring and sharing labour market intelligence with students, with some CPs very ambivalent about this aspect of their work. In the 'enhancing understanding' area of Figure 2, CPs were much more confident describing how they help students understand themselves than how they enhance labour market understanding. Although none of the CPs felt they should be directive about career choice, some were more directive than others about action planning. CPs had varied practices and attitudes about following up 1-1 conversations with students, sometimes depending on the policy of their career service.

Gaps and challenges

- There is limited evidence that CPs *explain career development as a process* to students. Practitioners are frustrated that students do not understand what a CP can do in a 1-1 session*,* especially that they cannot take a decision for the student. But the CP interviews did not include clear *articulation of the place of 1-1 guidance* within the broader process of career development. There also seems to be a gap in relation to approaches to *generating career options* with those students who have no ideas about what they want to do. This is another key issue the CPs observe in students.

- Although most of the CPs also have roles in career education, often within faculties, and despite the sector-wide focus on 'employability' only a few offered descriptions of their 1-1 practice that explicitly included the development of *career management skills* in students.

- Most CPs say they do not use *theory* in a specific way as the basis for their practice, beyond general adoption of a student-centred, counselling type (or Rogerian) approach, including significant emphasis on action planning (Egan was often mentioned), although there were some exceptions to this. Some had been trained in specific approaches to structuring career conversations, often as a series of steps, but these are not used in a detailed or rigid way. Ideas about values and social or structural

factors in careers were also mentioned in general terms. It seems that initial training and theory may enable CPs to develop their own ways of working. But those interviewed expressed some unease that their practice is not more firmly grounded in theory, especially career theory, or evidence.

■ CPs identified at least one challenging issue in just under half of the 600 interviews included in the survey. The challenges most often cited were students with an unrealistic idea of how to make a career choice (for example expecting the CP to tell them what to do); low self-confidence; lack of information about options; anxiety about the uncertainty of the process and not knowing how to make a choice. Again, we see the interplay between lack of information, lack of readiness and student anxiety.

■ In the interviews it was clear that CPs feel challenged most when they feel they are disappointing the students. Their frustration is felt when students expect the CP to tell them what to do, or where students have very unrealistic career expectations or in the small proportion of students with complex needs. Complex needs could be practical, for example in the multiple difficulties faced by some international students, but also emotional, including some students with significant mental health issues.

Professional development and tensions in professional practice

■ The CPs interviewed wanted a much more serious approach to CPD, like "proper professions", as several said. Some would like peer review and supervision. CPs are interested in short courses, both within their own service and more widely, although budgets are often a constraint. Some CPs interviewed had undertaken or were planning further academic study. Where CPs were in services with leaders who encouraged peer and team learning, this was much appreciated.

■ In terms of the content of CPD or further training, those interviewed were interested in keeping up to date with theory but want this to be integrated with its practical application. There is also interest in acquiring a wider range of helping techniques, especially coaching and, for some, a deeper knowledge of counselling. Another common area of interest is in dealing more confidently with mental health issues and effectively managing the boundary with specialist mental health services.

■ There are some evident tensions between CPs' commitment to a counselling approach to guidance and their commitment to addressing the career issues of students, who come expecting the CP to offer concrete suggestions, give them information and help them get a job. The lack of readiness of so many students to make informed career choices does not sit easily with the still prevalent model of a single careers interview, even an in-depth and skilfully conducted one. Only in some institutions is it easy to book follow up sessions, and some students need more support than can be offered.

■ CPs understand the logic behind delivering career education teaching in faculties, but most do not experience students as engaging well in these activities. CPs appreciate the cost drivers for using less highly trained staff for quick queries, but also observe that students who ask for tactical help with job getting often need help with career choice. These are just some examples of a number of tensions between the career

issues of students; career service organisation and resources; and the experiences, professional identities and preferences of career practitioners in UK higher education.

Annex - Survey results

For each item, the table shows the percentage of interviews in which the issue was reported. For each group of issues, the percentages refer to interviews in which at least one item in that group of issues was reported.

N=600	Client's presenting issues	CP's assessment of issues	Issues challenging CP
Lack of Readiness			
Lack of motivation	2%	6%	2%
Indecisive	12%	15%	3%
Don't know how to make a choice	23%	29%	6%
Unrealistic idea of how to make a choice	6%	16%	9%
Lack of Readiness Group	**32%**	**43%**	**16%**
Lack of Information			
Lack of self-awareness	7%	21%	5%
Lack of information about options	36%	48%	6%
Don't know how to research options	28%	45%	4%
Need help with the application process	56%	57%	5%
Lack of Information Group	**85%**	**89%**	**17%**
Conflicts			
Internal conflicts e.g., between sets of values	8%	11%	3%
External conflicts e.g., with parents	5%	9%	4%
Conflicting information about options	13%	15%	3%
Conflicts Group	**22%**	**28%**	**8%**
Pessimism			
Pessimistic about the world	2%	3%	1%
Pessimistic about the process of choosing or getting a job	8%	13%	3%
Pessimistic about their ability to control the process	9%	14%	4%
Pessimism Group	**14%**	**21%**	**6%**
Anxiety			
Anxious about process of choosing and getting a job	22%	32%	3%
Anxious about the uncertainty of the process	24%	34%	6%
Anxious about choosing (if can't work out what to do)	9%	13%	2%
Anxious about the outcome (if it doesn't work out)	15%	21%	4%
Anxious when comparing self with peers	9%	13%	3%
Anxiety Group	**45%**	**59%**	**14%**
Identity			
Low self-confidence	9%	21%	7%
Unclear about identity (who they are & what they want)	7%	15%	5%
Struggling with breaking away from the past	3%	6%	3%
Identity Group	**15%**	**34%**	**13%**