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The (faltering) renaissance of theory in higher education careers practice

David Winter & Julia Yates

ABSTRACT

For careers practitioners in higher education (HE), theory was for a long time viewed as something that one struggled with as part of a qualification but then forgot about as one started work. There was little dialogue between careers practitioners and careers academics. As a result, if theory was considered, it was likely to be limited to older theories of career choice and development and a counselling approach to guidance practice.

From the mid-1990s onwards a number of policy initiatives have transformed HE careers practice and caused it to diverge from the trends apparent in the development of career theory. However, the continued emphasis of the importance of graduate employability as a measure of the quality of HE has led to a focus on the effectiveness of careers interventions and a motivation to embed careers within mainstream academic activities. These developments have stimulated a greater strategic interest in research and the academic underpinning of careers practice. However, there are still many obstacles to the integration of theory and practice in HE careers.

This article charts the changes in career development theory and practice within UK higher education over the past two (and a bit) decades. We will outline some of the social, economic and political drivers that have influenced both theory and practice over this time and will examine the extent to which theory and practice have influenced each other, ending with some suggestions for bringing these two strands ever closer.

Defining career theory

In discussing the relationship between theory and practice in higher education we will consider a wide range of activities included within career development practice and adopt a broad definition of career theory which includes:

- definitions of career and theories of career success
- theories of career choice and development
- theories of the purpose of career development support
- theoretical models of the practice of career development support

The mid-1990s to the early 2010s

In 2001, the much-awaited Harris Report (DfEE 2001) damningly described higher education careers provision as a 'Cinderella service', which offered high quality support, but operated at the margins of the institutions with little influence or presence in students' lives. At this time, the hour-long one-to-one guidance interview was still a major feature of careers service provision but, in response to the increasing ratio of students to careers staff, services had already begun to introduce career interventions that would better suit the requirements of mass higher education. Services were offering shorter one-to-one interventions (10–20 minutes) and there was a move towards increased groupwork and teaching. This led to a growing interest in careers education or career development learning, although resistance from academics meant that groupwork in departments often took the form of occasional and optional sessions which were not always well attended.

During this period there were two policy initiatives which had a significant impact on the university landscape and the work of careers services. From 1987 to 1996, the Enterprise in Higher Education (EHE) initiative of the then Department for Education and Employment (DfEE) incentivised the development of a range of activities within universities aimed at developing student entrepreneurship, helping students to develop and record workplace skills and support them in developing and applying career self-management skills (Butcher 2007; Watts 2006). The second policy initiative was the Dearing Report (National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education 1997) which paved the way for the introduction of student tuition fees in the UK. This has led to an increasingly commoditised view of HE with a strong focus on value for money, which has been primarily equated with universities

equipping students for successful graduate careers by enhancing their *employability*. This was measured by defining a set of acceptable occupational and further study outcomes for graduates as recorded in the Destination of Leavers of Higher Education (DLHE) survey and publicised through university league tables. Whilst this political focus brought additional resources to careers services, it also brought with it an ideological tension. The liberal ideology traditionally espoused by careers professionals, influenced by the principles of non-directive counselling, began to give way to a practice driven by a progressive ideology focused on transforming graduates to better suit the needs of the labour market (Watts 2002, 2007).

As the notion of graduate employability began to dominate within HE, there was increased investment in and diversification of university careers services, with particular growth in the provision of placements and other forms of experience thought to enhance employability. A number of new roles were created in this area as well as those focusing on increasing engagement with employers and students. The presence of graduate employability on the agendas of university senior management meant that academic departments were increasingly willing (albeit sometimes grudgingly) to engage with careers professionals and it became more common for career development learning to be included in the curriculum (AGCAS 2005; Yorke & Knight 2006).

Career service practice was being heavily shaped by policy but these new ways of working were not generally supported or guided by developments in the career literature. One-to-one guidance in practice, was shifting away from long guidance interviews but, in contrast, the literature was focusing on time-consuming narrative approaches which, although attractive to practitioners, were not always practical within the HE context (Reid & West 2011). Literature provided nearly no theoretical or empirical basis for the shorter, drop-in interventions which had become ubiquitous in HE careers services (Osborn, Hayden, Peterson & Sampson 2016). Careers services were increasingly being expected to get more involved in work in the curriculum, but reference to mainstream pedagogical theories were all but absent within the career literature (Yates 2015).

Even though the concept dominated HE careers at this time, there was no broadly agreed theoretical articulation of what graduate employability was, other than as some form of

human capital (Becker 1993) until the latter half of this period (Dacre Pool & Sewell 2007; Gilworth 2018; Yorke 2006). Many institutions developed employability strategies and, although only a few of these made reference to explicit theoretical concepts, they could be defined by three primary perspectives on employability which pointed towards implicit theoretical assumptions (Holmes 2013):

- ‘possessive’ — focusing on students’ acquisition of desired workplace skills or graduate attributes,
- ‘positioning’ — focusing on students’ accumulation of various forms of human, social and psychological capital, or
- ‘processual’ — focusing on the development of attitudes and behaviours that increase students’ chances of making successful career transitions.

For many practitioners, during this time, career theory played an insignificant role in their professional practice, in part because the theories bore such little relevance to career practitioners’ everyday work but also in part due to a culture that did not value or prioritise academic research. Yet here and there, there were the germs of a renaissance in interest in theory. In the absence of many useable insights from the career theorists, some careers guidance practitioners began to look to areas such as positive psychology (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi 2000; Yates 2013) and to incorporate new approaches from therapy and coaching into their career guidance practice, especially those which could be more readily incorporated into shorter interactions (Law, Amundson & Alden 2014; Rochat & Rossier 2016; Yates 2014).

During this period, the authors started working as HE careers professionals and developed a strong interest in theories. They developed training for colleagues in applying theory to reflective practice (Winter 2012) and David started a blog on the subject which brought together careers professionals across the HE sector with a similar interest (Winter 2011). Career guidance training courses began to increase their focus on theories and considered ways to integrate theory in practice. In order to make it more relevant to this widening range of career professional roles, much of the content related to one-to-one guidance was eventually removed from the Career Development Theories module of the qualification course provided in collaboration by the Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services (AGCAS) and the University of Warwick.

The mid-2010s to the present day

The position of universities as competitors within a commercial marketplace whose product is employment-ready graduates was further reinforced in this period by more policy initiatives: the removal of student number controls from English universities in 2013 (Hillman 2015), the creation of the Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework in 2016 (Office for Students 2019) in which graduate employment outcomes are a key metric, and the creation of the Office for Students (OfS) as the 'market' regulator for HE. All of this has continued to focus attention on graduate outcomes and put pressure on universities to demonstrate a return on investment for students. In 2017 student records were combined with data from HM Revenue & Customs and the Department for Work & Pensions to produce Longitudinal Educational Outcomes (LEO), which focuses primarily on the earnings of graduates one, three or five years after graduation. Despite its much-publicised limitations, this data has received a lot of attention from policy makers (Universities UK 2019). This focus on graduate outcomes, with particular attention being paid to earnings, increasingly emphasises the value of objective career success, defined by prestige and salary, to the exclusion of other measures of success (Mayrhofer et al. 2016; Ng, Eby, Sorensen & Feldman 2005). Once again, we see a mismatch between the policy-driven emphasis of careers practice and the preoccupations directing the development of theory. Whilst the policy upholds the idea that a good graduate outcome can be measured by salary, the career literature is becoming increasingly interested in more subjective interpretations of career success with in-depth exploration of the idea of work as a calling (Duffy, Dik, Douglass, England & Velez 2018), a recognition of the value of meaningful work (Lysova, Allan, Dik, Duffy & Steger 2019) and focus on constructivist approaches to career practice (McMahon 2016).

Elsewhere there are more encouraging examples of closer links between theory and practice. This spotlighting of graduate employability has led to more widespread attempts to integrate careers, employability and enterprise into core teaching. This, in turn, has led to more interest by careers professionals in pedagogical theories (AGCAS Curriculum Design Task Group 2019; Artess, Mellors-Bourne & Hooley 2017; HEA 2016; QAA 2018) and an increased number of HE career practitioners undertaking post-graduate qualifications in learning and teaching. There has also been some interest in a more structured theoretical approach to understanding graduate employability capital with, for

example, Tomlinson's (2017) model forming the basis of employability strategies or career development curricula at a number of UK universities.

As the role of the careers service becomes increasingly central in HE institutions, the impetus to engage in evidence-based practices grows. In 2012, the University of Leeds introduced Careers Registration (CR) – the inclusion of two simple questions into the annual mandatory student enrolment registration. The first question was a self-reported assessment of the student's level of career decidedness and readiness to engage in career planning. The second question collected information on the extent to which a student had undertaken work experience or activities aimed at enhancing their career development and their attractiveness to employers. For the first time this gave university careers professionals an opportunity to track the career thinking of all students during their time at university and subsequently allowed them to link that to their progression beyond their studies. At the time of writing, over 80 UK HE institutions have adopted versions of CR and it has also been implemented at institutions in Australia and New Zealand. It is beginning to have a profound impact on the design, delivery and evaluation of careers and employability activities in universities as well as placing new demands on careers professionals and provoking a certain amount of interest in practitioner research and scholarship (Cobb 2019; Winter 2018). The ability to demonstrate a relationship between a student's career decidedness and their eventual employment outcomes has begun to provide careers professionals with ammunition to promote the importance of supporting students' career decision making as well as enhancing their employability capital.

Further tentative signs of a gradual alignment of practice to theory have emerged. Beverley Oliver's reworking of the widely-accepted Yorke (2006: 8) definition of graduate employability includes an explicit reference to '*meaningful* paid and unpaid work' (Oliver 2015: 59). The new Graduate Outcomes survey, designed to replace DLHE, shifts the survey date to 15 months after graduation, acknowledging the fact that it may take graduates more than six months to establish themselves in relevant employment. It also includes so-called 'student voice' questions about the relevance and meaningfulness of the graduates' employment (Kernohan 2020). This raises the potential for focusing more on subjective elements of career success for graduates. However, the usefulness and impact of these changes are still undetermined.

Past, present and future challenges to the marriage of theory and practice

If careers practitioners are to retain or improve their status in HE, they need to be able to claim the position of experts in graduate careers and employability within their institutions (Thambar 2018). Amongst other things, this necessitates having a strong grasp of relevant theoretical developments in order to promote informed and evidence-based practice. Professional bodies, heads of services and career practitioners generally share the view that this is important but there are several barriers that stand in the way.

First there are practical challenges. As universities have expanded and employability has taken a more central role in HE institutions, workloads have increased. More recently, the outbreak of the global Covid-19 pandemic in early 2020 has seen many careers services frantically adapting their various services for remote delivery (Hammond, McWilliams, Bullock, Shobbrook, Valentine & Macfarlane 2020). The impact of the pandemic on global economies and labour markets is likely to put further pressures on careers services to support a lost generation of graduates at a time when a significant proportion of services are facing cuts to budgets and staffing as a result of uncertain incomes for universities (AGCAS 2020a). When you are struggling to respond to changes in political and institutional priorities as well as major social and economic traumas, engagement with theory can be seen as a luxury even if an understanding of the realities of post-Covid employment and careers service delivery are likely to be in need of structured theoretical input.

There are also issues with accessibility — many university libraries do not subscribe to key career journals making it hard for staff to access them, and it takes time and effort to wade through the thousands of career-related articles that are published each year to identify those that are of interest. The struggle to find literature that is relevant and applicable to modern career development practice in HE may, in part, be the fault of policy on research funding skewing the publishing behaviours of academics. The choice of research topic and approach is limited by the priorities of the funding organisations or the impetus to produce research that is published in the highest quality journals in order to support the submission of a high quality return to the Research Excellence Framework (REF). This has led to a narrow focus, in which academics' activities are dictated by the REF guidelines and a

culture in which conducting research is given a higher priority than engaging with practice. Researchers are generally not free to conduct research simply because it is useful to practitioners. Even when academics attempt to apply their theory to practice, we have already noted their tendency to disregard the resourcing pressures and limitations of practice delivery.

Over the period covered in this article, it is apparent that career development practice has more often been directed by political ideologies and practical necessities than by academic thinking and research. There are some indications of a positive direction of travel, but progress is slow. Careers qualification providers now teach a wide range of up-to-date theories and attempt to link them to various aspects of career development practice. This offers a strong evidence-base for those who undertake these courses, but increasing proportions of staff working in HE careers services in various roles do not acquire a professional qualification and there is currently no universal requirement of continuing professional development.

AGCAS, the professional body for HE careers services, is playing an important role. As part of its strategy, AGCAS has stated the aim of being 'experts in HE student career development and graduate employment' and of developing a professional pathway competency framework for all HE career professionals (AGCAS 2020b: 2) and AGCAS's commitment to research can be seen through their annual research conference and the frequent references to research articles in *Phoenix* the professional journal of the association. Other organisations such as NICEC play a valuable role in attempting to bring together researchers, practitioners and policy experts in the field of careers and employability through conferences, seminars and of course this journal.

However, to make a significant change — to get to where we need to be — more work needs to be done. The articles that are published need to be more relevant and more accessible to practitioners. There must be increased opportunity and motivation for practitioners to engage with the literature by embedding up-to-date theoretical understanding into continuing professional development and progression frameworks. A stronger culture of collaboration between career practitioners and academics could help, as exemplified by the publication *Graduate careers in context* (Burke & Christie 2018),

which featured contributions from both academics and practitioners. Academics should be encouraged to mentor careers service staff and students on careers qualifications to help them to produce and publish relevant, practical, high quality research. But this is of course only half the story and whilst academic career research could be more useful to practitioners, HE careers service policy in the UK too should be influenced by the existing empirical evidence based. Perhaps careers services should more assertive in insisting that scarce resources be invested in activities for which there is clear evidence of effectiveness rather than acquiescing to the less well-informed impulses of policy-makers and HE senior management. Whilst it would be valuable for academics to provide better guidance for current practice, it is also important that policy should be evidence based, and should take into account the latest theoretical and empirical developments.

The role university careers services has changed dramatically over the last two decades, shifting from small, marginalised pockets of expertise to more substantial and significant aspects of university provision. There is an irony in the fact that universities, whose currency is new knowledge, are not facilitating evidence-based policies or services, and this may be in part a consequence of the pace of change we have witnessed. But an evidence-based careers and employability service is our best chance for an effective, credible and sustainable offer and, to this end, changes need to happen on three fronts. First, HE policy needs to take account of the existing research in the field to ensure that changes to strategy are likely to work. Secondly, services and practitioners need to engage more with the existing literature to make current provision as effective as it can be. Finally, researchers need a clearer understanding of current practice to explore the most effective ways of working. Attitudes and practices are changing. Across the UK, there are many services and practitioners who are interested in and committed to learning about and implementing the recommendations from the academic literature or conducting research themselves, but a stronger emphasis on evidence-based practice and collaborative partnerships will help to push this agenda forward and ensure that our profession is the best it can be.

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