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Research Article

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The career difficulties of university students in the UK: a qualitative study of the perceptions of UK HE career practitioners

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ABSTRACT

Existing research has identified the key career difficulties faced by those making career decisions, but little is known about career practitioners' perceptions of the career difficulties of university students in the UK. We conducted 22 in depth interviews with Higher Education career practitioners and analysed their data with a Template Analysis – a version of thematic analysis. Three themes were developed incorporating emotions (anxiety and low confidence), cognitions (unrealistic or limited understanding of themselves, of the labour market, of the processes of career choice and of practitioner career support) and behaviours (engaging late with career thinking, a disproportionate focus on CVs and a reluctance to take ownership of career planning). Findings showed that these emotional, cognitive and behavioural career difficulties were interrelated. The findings are discussed with reference to existing theory and theoretical and practical recommendations are made.

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Introduction

Career decisions involve a complex interplay between individual differences, environmental influences and geographical, political and economic states, and they are some of the most important decisions that we make in life (Bimrose & Mulvey, 2015; Santos et al., 2018). Whilst some people design and develop their career plans without trouble, others experience significant difficulties (Bullock-Yowell et al., 2014; Lam & Santos, 2017; Levin et al., 2022) which may prevent them from making any decision at all or may decrease their chances of making an optimal decision (Gati et al., 1996; Gati & Kulcsar, 2021).

More than 750,000 students graduate from universities in the UK each year (HESA, 2022) and over 3000 career workers, employed by Careers Services in the UK, support students with their career development, career choices, and transition from university (AGCAS, n.d.). Identifying the career difficulties of clients is widely established as an important early step in the career counselling process, as it is through this diagnosis that clients can develop an insight into their own situations and career practitioners can offer tailored support for their needs (for example Mau, 2001; Saka & Gati, 2023) An understanding of the typical career difficulties that clients bring to their career counselling sessions can also inform training courses to ensure that they equip practitioners with the skills needed to support their clients (Chuang et al., 2020; Milot-Lapointe et al., 2018). Yet in the UK it is notable that the career

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difficulties literature rarely features in such training programmes, perhaps in part due to a lack of directly relevant empirical research in this area in the UK. It is hoped that this paper will make a contribution to the literature by addressing this issue, exploring the aspects of career difficulties that students at universities in the UK bring to their one-to-one career conversations.

Background literature

Most of the existing literature on career difficulties has focused on cognitive career difficulties (Arbona et al., 2021; Lipshits-Braziler et al., 2015) and several frameworks of career difficulties have been proposed. Two of the most widely cited are Gati et al.'s framework (1996), based on decision theory (Gati, 1986; Katz, 1966) and Sampson et al.'s Career Thought Inventory (Sampson et al., 1998) which is based on Cognitive Processing Theory (Peterson et al., 1996).

Gati et al.'s model of career decision-making difficulties (CDMD) incorporates three clusters of cognitive difficulties, consisting of ten specific aspects. The first cluster, *Lack of Readiness* incorporates four aspects: a lack of motivation, indecisiveness, dysfunctional myths, and a lack of information about the process. Lack of motivation refers to the individual's will to engage in the career decision making process, and indecisiveness in the original model could be applied to any decision the individual faces. Dysfunction myths includes those who have an incorrect understanding, or irrational expectations of either the process of making a choice, or aspects of the labour market. A lack of understanding about the process refers to the challenges of those who don't really understand the steps involved in making a career choice. Gati et al. note that this cluster differs from the next two (lack of information and inconsistent information) in that it addresses difficulties which arise before the decision-making process starts.

The second cluster is *Lack of Information,* which includes one aspect that focuses on the individual themselves (lack of information about the self), and two which are externally orientated: lack of information about occupations and about the process of researching the job market. Lack of information about occupations could include both a limited knowledge of the range of occupations available, and a limited understanding of what those occupations entail.

The third cluster is described as *Inconsistent Information* and encompasses unreliable information and internal and external conflicts. Unreliable information could include information from poor sources, or two different sources offering conflicting information. Internal conflicts could include the challenges faced when an individual holds two different sets of values (for example, I want to work for a charity but I also want to make a lot of money), or could relate to the challenges of trying to reconcile two different parts of their identity (for example being a good parent and a good employee). External conflicts can arise from a difference of opinion within a family such as a student wanting to pursue one career path, but knowing that their parents disapprove. This model has been found to have good empirical support over 16 countries, across different ages and genders (e.g. Levin et al., 2023) but has not been fully tested in a UK context.

The Career Thoughts Inventory (CTI) (Sampson et al., 1998) explores the issues that hinder cognitive career decision-making. It is grounded in Cognitive Information Processing theory (Peterson et al., 2002) and identifies three elements. *Decision making confusion* is an inability to make a choice as a result of a lack of understanding about the process or disabling emotions. *Commitment Anxiety* perpetuates indecision through generalised anxiety or an inability to commit to a specific choice. *External conflict* leads to a reluctance to take ownership of the career choice process because of a conflict between what the individual wants and what they believe the other important people in their life want for them. Kleiman et al. (2004) note that these two inventories (CTI and CDMD) have commonalities – particularly identifying overlaps in the two External Conflict factors (finding a correlation of $r = .83$), but also highlight that the CTI categories are more focused on the consequences of difficulties than the difficulties themselves. The decision-making confusion factor, for example, focuses on the cognitive impact of a lack of understanding about the process and disabling emotions, two distinct difficulties, which both lead to cognitive confusion. Similarly,

commitment anxiety describes the emotional impact that both an inability to commit, and generalised anxiety can have.

Other analyses of career difficulties focus on the emotional and personality-related aspects of career difficulties, which are reported by career practitioners to be some of the most difficult to overcome (Gati et al., 2010, 2019). One widely cited example is from Saka and Gati (2007, 2023), who developed a model of emotional and personality related career difficulties (EPCD) which identifies pessimism, *anxiety*, and *identity and attachment* aspects of career difficulties. Pessimism is the tendency to focus on negative aspects of a situation or on negative outcomes and is separated into pessimism focused on the world, the process of career decision making and the individual's ability to control the process. Those with pessimistic views about the world may experience or show psychological characteristics such as depression, self-doubt and harsh self-criticism. They are likely to focus on the negative aspects of the current labour market and may be less inclined to strive towards finding employment, assuming that things will not go well for them. Pessimism about the process is linked to the idea of career decision making self-efficacy, and describes those who feel that they are not capable of career decision making. Finally, pessimistic views about one's control refers to those who have an external locus of control – those who don't feel that their actions will have an impact on the process of career decision making, the choice itself or the outcome.

The second cluster from Saka et al.'s EPCD is anxiety, which has been the focus of considerable recent research and has been widely shown to be associated with career indecision and career difficulties (for example, Arbona et al., 2021; Levin et al., 2022). In Saka et al.'s framework anxiety is divided into anxiety about the process of making a choice, about the uncertainty of the process, about the choice and about the outcome. *Anxiety about the process* describes the feelings that an individual might have before the process even starts as they anticipate the choices they are going to have to make (Kulcsár et al., 2020). The second aspect of anxiety stems from the *uncertainty involved in choosing*, which could include anxiety about what the future might hold, anxiety about being undecided, and anxiety caused by low tolerance of ambiguity (Arbona et al., 2021; Lipshits-Braziler et al., 2019). *Anxiety about the process of choosing* includes (a) feeling the need to find the perfect option (b) anxiety linked to the inevitable rejection of alternatives as you can select only one choice (c) fear of making the wrong choice and (d) anxiety linked to having to take responsibility – perhaps for making the wrong choice (Amaral et al., 2023; Serling & Betz, 1990).

In the final cluster, *Self-concept and Identity* the aspects concern the development of a stable, independent personal identity, high self-esteem and a positive self-concept, all of which have been found to correlate negatively with career indecision (Santos, 2001). This cluster is divided into generalised anxiety, low self-esteem, an uncrystallised identity and career difficulties around attachment and separation. Low self-esteem has been consistently linked with career indecision, (Kulcsár et al., 2020; Park et al., 2018) and has been shown to be important in career choice as it is self-esteem that allows an individual to actualise their self-concept in their career choices. Identity career difficulties are increasingly being shown to make a significant impact on career choice (Ibarra, 2023; Wolf, 2018), and finally, career difficulties around attachment and separation can prove difficult as people struggle to develop their own identity, distinct from their childhood or family identity (Phang et al., 2020; Whiston & Keller, 2004).

Taxonomies such as these are well-evidenced and widely used in research, but the current body of literature has not been tested within the context of Higher Education (HE) in the UK. Evidence suggests that the career difficulties that individuals experience are not consistent across cultures (Levin et al., 2020; Mau, 2001) yet there is scant literature that examines the career difficulties within the UK and it is therefore unclear whether the existing taxonomies of career difficulties reflect the current experiences of those leaving education in the UK (Kleiman et al., 2004; Kulcsár et al., 2020).

Identifying the nature of the career difficulties that HE students bring to their one-to-one career conversations could make a useful contribution towards increased effectiveness of career support in

HE. This exploratory study offers an important first step towards this, aiming to provide an empirical account of the aspects of career difficulties that UK career practitioners observe in their clients in their one-to-one career conversations. This could help career practitioners to understand their students' career difficulties more clearly, and to identify them more quickly and accurately. The findings could also offer a solid basis for the development of training programmes and might help to ensure that career practitioners are trained to support the career difficulties that their clients bring to them.

The present study

Existing literature offers a well-established and well-evidenced analysis of career difficulties in some settings, but there is limited research which accounts for the aspects of career difficulties that career practitioners face in their one-to-one work with students in HE in the UK. Our aim within this paper is to address this gap by exploring HE career practitioners' understanding of the aspects of career difficulties that students bring to their one-to-one career conversations. Specifically, this study sought to answer the research question: *How do career practitioners conceptualise the career difficulties of their clients?*

Previous research in this field has tended to use quantitative methods, making use of data from surveys, underpinned by positivist assumptions. We argue that in addition to the insights from the measurable quantitative data, the experiences of the participants should be explored through qualitative methods, using qualitative data to complement existing quantitative data and generate new fruitful avenues for further enquiry. This paper extends the previous work on career difficulties, offering a qualitative account of the career difficulties that career practitioners face in their one-to-one work in HE in the UK which may be of value in career practice and for career practitioner training.

Method

Participants

Once ethical approval was granted from X university [blinded for review] ethical approval number x [blinded for review], a single email was sent through a distribution list to career service staff working in HE in the UK (n > 3000), asking for volunteers who were qualified practitioners and who regularly worked with clients on a one-to-one basis. All those who responded were sent information sheets and consent forms; 22 career practitioners who fitted the criteria returned signed consent forms. The final sample consisted of eight practitioners from Russell Group universities and 14 from post-92 universities across England and Scotland. The Russell Group of universities are 24 of the most elite, research intensive institutions in the UK who tend to have high entry requirements for students. Post-92 universities have their roots in more vocationally orientated HE Institutions but were reclassed from polytechnics to universities in 1992. Entry requirements for students at these universities tend to be a little less rigorous. All participants were involved in one-to-one work, all qualified at post-graduate level, with all but one holding a qualification in career guidance. Most worked with students from all faculties within the central careers service, twenty were additionally formally linked to one or two specific faculties, and a number specialised in working with a particular group of clients, including research students and students with disabilities. All participants worked with both undergraduate and post-graduate students. Fourteen were female and eight were male, and their tenure in their current roles ranged from six months to 27 years, with an average of 8.5 years, although some had additional prior experience in similar roles. Further details can be found in Table S1 in the supplementary file.

Procedure

Data were gathered though semi-structured interviews. Interviews were conducted online via Zoom and took place in June and July 2020. Interviews lasted on average an hour each, and they were

audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. The participants were all given pseudonyms. As the study was exploratory and the analysis inductive, the interview was designed to encourage participants to explore the topic broadly. The questions were devised to allow participants to talk in depth about their career conversations and the issues that the students would typically raise in these conversations. There were four key open questions: *Tell me a bit about your one-to-one conversations? What issues do you most often see students bringing to their one-to-one conversations?, Where do you think these issues come from?* and *What impact do you feel these issues have on the students' career planning?* These structured questions were supplemented with prompts to elicit as much rich data as possible and to allow for a more exploratory, broad ranging and free flowing conversation.

Data analysis

The data were analysed with a Template Analysis, a version of thematic analysis, particularly suited to the analysis of large data sets (Clarke & Braun, 2021; King, 2004). Template Analysis involves the development of an initial, tentative template of themes and subthemes, based on a subset of the data. The limited size of the subset of data used in the first phase of coding helps the researcher to identify patterns of meaning across the whole subset, seeing patterns and making links between participants' scripts that might be lost if working with a larger dataset from the start. The researcher then works through the remaining dataset looking for examples and exceptions to further develop the template. The rigorous adherence to the data analysis steps taken, and the structured nature of this kind of codebook template analysis helped to protect against researcher bias (Clarke & Braun, 2021), and in addition, the two researchers (both academic researchers in the UK) were at pains to ensure coder consensus. To this end, we coded the first ten scripts independently, developed our own individual themes and discussed our findings until we agreed on the initial template. We then worked through the rest of the data, line by line, looking for text which could be relevant to each of the themes. In accordance with King's suggested process for Template Analysis (King, 2014), we examined words, phrases and ideas which could be helpful in understanding the career practitioners' experiences. Where they appeared to relate to the themes identified in our initial template, we coded them as such. We also looked for meaningful aspects in the data that did not relate to the initial themes and coded them separately. The codes were then grouped into meaningful themes and arranged within a hierarchy. Through this process, the template was refined. New codes were added, a priori codes deleted, labels were renamed, and hierarchical layers were inserted. The analysis was inductive, aiming to identify patterns in the data, rather than looking to fit the data into pre-fixed codes based on existing theory.

The data from 22 interviews fitted into the template themes developed in the final stages of analysis, and we gleaned no new constructs from the analysis of the last few scripts. Further collection of data was not expected to yield new insights, and we concluded that data saturation had been reached (Suri, 2011). This aligns with findings in the qualitative research methods literature which suggest that data saturation may be reached with 17 participants (Francis et al., 2010). It also falls within the recommended sample size for qualitative studies within work-related research (Saunders & Townsend, 2016 recommend between 15 and 60 participants).

Findings

We identified three interrelated themes of career difficulties from the career participants' narratives, which combine to represent their conceptualisation of the career difficulties of their clients: **Behaviour**: Students engage late with career support, they show a disproportionate focus on their CVs and are reluctant to take ownership of their own career development; **Cognitions**: Career practitioners observed that students show a limited or unrealistic understanding of themselves, of relevant labour markets (including approaches to recruitment), the overall process of career development, including how to generate job ideas and how to make decisions, and the nature of the careers service support

on offer; **Emotions:** Career practitioners reported that students often appeared anxious and seemed to have low levels of confidence.

Career practitioners emphasised the complexity of the student career difficulties, and relationships between the difficulties, giving examples of the impact that aspects within one theme have on the other two themes. Table S2 in the supplementary file shows the distribution and prevalence of the findings across the participants. The findings are described below, illustrated with verbatim quotes from the career practitioners interviewed.

Behavioural career difficulties

The career practitioners reported three common specific behaviours: students engage with career support late in their time at university, they focus disproportionately on their CVs, and they appear reluctant to take of ownership of their own career planning. Individual students might exhibit any one or a combination of these behaviours. Every one of the 22 career practitioners reported observing at least one of these behaviours in their narratives, with 15 noting the late engagement, 17 the disproportionate focus on CVs and 13 the reluctance to take ownership.

Late engagement

Many of the career practitioners observed that some students engage with career support at a late stage in their time at university, often leaving it till their final year, or even after graduation. The career practitioners explained that students engage with career support when they are ready, and many make a conscious choice to do their degree first and think about getting a job later on. Carmen said, during most of their time at university, students' "focus is on getting a degree" and Edward explained "a lot of students will leave their career planning to their final year" thinking "I want to concentrate on my degree, I don't want to do anything else, and I'll get to the end of my course and then I'll decide what to do". Lucy observed that students whose first visit to the Careers Service is late in their final year will often "have not at all put even one second thought yet into what they're going to do next".

Disproportionate emphasis on CVs

A common theme was that students often place a disproportionate emphasis on their CVs, focusing on this instead of, or prior to, giving much thought to their career plans, as Lucy explained "quite often the request is the CV, but the real need is guidance". The career practitioners acknowledged the value of a CV, as a job hunting tool, but felt that very often, students focused on a CV as a displacement activity, to avoid a more difficult or demanding conversation, or because they were not aware that a bigger question needed to be answered. The career practitioners felt that students sometimes found a CV check an easier place to start – for some, almost an excuse to get in the door, as Tania explained "it's an obvious reason to come" and Mark observed "Incredibly often, the conversation isn't about their CV it's about their plan for the rest of their life, you know, but it's just one way of getting into it". Some practitioners believed that the lure of a CV check lies in the fact that it is "tangible" (Carole) and "there's an outcome" (Jane) and Carolyn and Andrea both described students who would come to the careers service "clutching their CV" suggesting they derive some comfort from its tangible presence.

Students are reluctant to take ownership

Career practitioners described students who seemed reluctant to take ownership of their career planning, expecting, as Lucy said, "someone else to fix it". Career practitioners observed students wanting everything arranged for them – Adam described a typical student's request as: "can you

fix my CV and then find me a job with it, please?". Career practitioners observed that students can be prompted to come to the careers service because of pressure from their families, rather than because it is something that they themselves are motivated to do. Martin felt the students often come "because their parents tell them to" and Carmen echoed this, explaining that students often say: "I'm only here because my dad told me to come". Some career practitioners felt the reluctance to take ownership was a tactic on the students' part, looking for someone else to blame if things did not work out, as Carolyn suggested, students can think "well if it goes wrong, it's not me that did it". Others felt that the students would sometimes choose to put the burden of choice onto others because they wanted the process to be swift and straightforward. Charlie suggested they might think "I want an easy life, therefore I want this person to do it so that I don't have to think about it".

The career practitioners observed that some students seemed to be quite resistant to self-reflection. Elizabeth explained "I think, they're uncomfortable with it, […] they don't like digging deep" and Jean noted

> When I work with engineers they really don't like reflecting, it's a really hard notion for them; They don't want to reflect on how something made them feel or their reality of things; they didn't want to give it any time.

Carolyn too observed that "they're reluctant to really want to delve that deeper" and wondered if it they might find it a bit daunting, saying "maybe they're a little bit scared of doing that".

Cognitive career difficulties

In the second theme we identified the cognitive aspects of career difficulties: unrealistic expectations of the support available from the careers service, limited understanding of themselves and an unrealistic understanding of the labour market and the process of job hunting. Every one of the 22 career practitioners mentioned at least one cognitive aspect of career difficulties, with 16 mentioning self-awareness, 18 labour markets, 15 career development and 18 career support.

Unrealistic expectations of the support available from the careers service

Perhaps most frustrating to the career practitioners were the frequent instances of students who did not understand the nature or scope of the support that the careers service can give. Some students were simply unclear about what to expect from the service as a whole. Carolyn felt that students often "don't know what Careers is about", and Tess explained that they might not know what to expect in a guidance interview, wondering "what's going to happen in that room? What is it they do?". Some students were thought to have a narrow understanding of the service offer – often thinking the service is "all around transition stuff" (Rob), or more specifically "they think it's about CVs" (Carolyn). Many participants thought that the students expected that the service would be able to get them a job – a "one-stop-shop" (Harriet), a "job centre" (Carmen), "recruitment service" (Jean) or "job agency" (Mary). The participants described a common assumption of a medical model, in which the student expects the practitioner to diagnose them and cure them, and two participants implied a sort of alchemy, suggesting that students expected them to have "a sorting hat of jobs" (Martin) or that "I'm in some sort of way a wizard relating to your future" (Mark).

Unrealistic or limited understanding of the process of career development

A number of the career practitioners spoke about students' assumptions that choosing a career would be easy and quick. Lucy explained "students think it will be a very short journey form nothing to the perfect job" and Martin illustrated this point jokingly quoting a "typical" student who might turn up at the end of their degree course saying: "Can you make this quick because my dad has got the bags in the car, I'm already packed, can we get this over with now?". More

often, the career practitioners described students who "just don't know where to start" (Elizabeth) or as Tess described: "haven't got a clue where to start thinking". Some career practitioners noted specific gaps in the students' understanding of career planning. Rob commenting that many of them "don't really know how to make decisions" and several participants, including Elizabeth, emphasising that "they don't know what their options are".

The career practitioners thought that many students had an unrealistic notion of the relationship between their degree subject and their future career, with many practitioners observing that students feel they are obliged to use their degree subject in their career. Vicky explained "they think you train in a degree and then you get a job in that area" and Harriet was surprised to see that "so many of them still believe if they've studied psychology they're going to be a psychologist, or biology, they're going to be a scientist".

Limited understanding of themselves

Career practitioners noted how common it was for students to lack an understanding of themselves as they might relate to employers, or within the employment context. Edward explained:

> they've got that, sort of, self-awareness up to that point. But of course what we're looking at really is the self-awareness that goes beyond that, and it's an assessment of themselves, and their strengths and skills and interests and all the rest of it, that would help them to choose the right sort of occupation; that slightly more sophisticated self-awareness.

Rob clarified that the students need to identify "what are their strengths, what are their aptitudes, what are their interests, what is the thing that fires them up?" and Charlie described it in terms of a developing sense of self, explaining that "their sense of identity is quite fragile". Elizabeth felt that this lack of awareness was particularly obvious when it came to their degree subject, saying: "They don't really understand what they have to offer, in terms of skills, particularly in relation to their degree".

With some students, the issue seemed to be a lack of understanding of how to present themselves or articulate what they have to offer to an employer. Tim explained "there are some who just don't seem to be able to articulate their skills and knowledge" and Siobhan described students as "not being able to articulate on paper things like their experience, skills and knowledge".

Unrealistic understanding of the labour market and job hunting process

One of the most prevalent themes, noted by 18 of the 22 participants was the unrealistic or limited understanding of the labour market. Vicky noted: "most students don't have any idea of how things work in the labour market" and many students were described by Adam as having "very poor labour market information" and by Gary as having "a very superficial understanding".

Some participants reported that students can have a narrow idea of the job market, assuming, as Edward noted, that "there are lists that go with certain degree courses". Several others described students who get "fixated on a job title" (Elizabeth) or are keen on "a graduate scheme […] with a big company" (Tess) even though they don't really know what this might mean. Other students just seem to lack knowledge or understanding, often as a consequence of limited life or work experience. Martin saw students wondering "what does an engineer look like?" and explained that "for some of them who have not had any experience it's a really hard one for them to see". Elizabeth felt that a lot of the students she sees have limited horizons explaining that they will choose a particular path "because that's all they know, that's what they've heard, they've read it somewhere, you know, that that's their only option" but notes that when she asks them to explain the role in more depth "they show from their response they know very little about it".

Many career practitioners reported that students have an unrealistic, sometimes over-optimistic view of the process of job hunting. Martin observed "its time and effort is often underplayed" and

Mary explained that students often think “that they’re going to walk into what they want to do”. Many students seem to think that their degree is going to be enough. Jean noted “They come in [to university] with a perception that university is going to get them into a good job”, and Carmen echoed this view explaining that some students believe that “getting a degree will allow them to go straightaway on their dream job”.

Emotional career difficulties

The final theme developed focused on emotional career difficulties, and the career practitioners highlighted the widespread fear and anxiety, and low confidence they saw in their students. These were seen in the narratives of 20 out of the 22 participants, with 18 noting anxiety and 13, low confidence.

Anxiety

This came up frequently in the career practitioners’ narratives, and the participants identified that students were anxious about both making a choice about their future and applying for jobs. Lucy explained how complex the anxiety can be:

> There’s a feeling of being behind, a feeling of doing something wrong or lacking something or being deficient; if you say it out loud then you’re stuck with it, and then what if somebody laughs, what if it’s a terrible idea, what if they haven’t actually correctly understood what it is?

Some students found the very idea of making a career choice daunting, with some, in Charlie’s words, “frightened of making the wrong decision” and others, as Adam explained, “anxious that there isn’t anything out there that I enjoy doing”. Mark felt that students perceive a career decision as something that is “too big and it’s a bit scary actually” and Rob observed that “a number of students you see are overwhelmed with the decisions situation, decision making process”. Other students found the amount of information and the number of options daunting. Martin said: “you can see their eyes going, oh, don’t give me more choice!” and Harriet explained: “there’s just so much information out there now for students […] they probably just feel overwhelmed”. Lucy clarified that even being asked questions about the topic could be difficult, explaining that student think: “Well, I don’t know, so don’t make me answer these questions, because I can’t do it; I only like being asked questions I know the answers to”.

Low confidence

Some career practitioners reported widespread low confidence in their students. Carolyn and Mark both used similar language to illustrate the low confidence they so often saw in students, Carolyn saying that the students feel that they are not “up to the mark” and Mark that they feel “I’m not up to this”, and Lucy said: “I’ve noticed how many people just think they can’t do it”. As well as the confidence associated with actually getting the jobs, some students lack the confidence in their ability to make a choice – Tess explaining that some don’t feel “confident about their own kind of thought processes”. A number of the participants described an emphasis on boosting the confidence of their students within their one-to-one conversations, Tim explaining the importance of “trying to keep people confident about who they are and their capabilities” and Mary talking about “boosting their confidence”.

Relationships between themes

The three themes of career difficulties we developed, behavioural, cognitive and emotional, were closely linked to each other. Each was reported by the participants as both an antecedent and a

consequence of each of the other two. For example, an unrealistic assumption that it was going to be easy to get a job (cognitive), or a sense of anxiety about the process (emotional) might lead to a student postponing a visit to the careers service until late in their time at university (behavioural). Students failing to engage with career support early (behavioural) might mean that they don't develop a realistic understanding of the labour market (cognitive), and a lack of engagement with the career service (behavioural) might make students feel anxious that their peers are make more progress with their career planning than they themselves are (emotional). A lack of understanding about the process of career development (cognitive) can make students feel anxious about the uncertainty of the process (emotional) whilst a lack of confidence (emotional) could lead a student to under-estimate the skills that they may have to offer an employer (cognitive).

Discussion

This study is the first, to our knowledge, to try to understand university students' career difficulties from the perspective of career practitioners in the UK. We explored the nature of the issues that students bring to their one-to-one career conversations in depth with 22 career practitioners and identified three themes based on the experiences of participants. We identified emotional, behavioural and cognitive career decision-making difficulties.

The themes we developed overlap to some degree with existing frameworks of career difficulties. We introduced earlier three such taxonomies: Gati et al.'s career decision making difficulties taxonomy (CDMD), grounded in decision theory (1996), which focuses on the nature of cognitive difficulties; Sampson et al.'s Career Thoughts Inventory (1998), based on Peterson et al.'s Career Information Processing Theory (1992), which identifies causes of cognitive difficulties; and Saka et al.'s Emotional and Personality Related Career Difficulties (EPCD) (2008). We will discuss the findings of our present study in the context of these three existing frameworks (see Table S.3 in the Supplementary File) and then offer some recommendations for practice.

Gati et al.'s taxonomy (1996) incorporates three clusters and ten specific career difficulties. There was considerable overlap between Gati et al.'s career difficulties and those noted by the career practitioners in this study, although there were differences too. Gati et al.'s first cluster, *lack of readiness* was manifest in our "cognitive" theme of lack of information about the process of career service support, but also within the "behaviour" theme, manifest as students' late engagement with the careers service, their reluctance to take ownership of their own career planning and, for some, the disproportionate focus on the CV. Gati et al.'s notion of "dysfunctional myths" was evident in our theme of limited understanding of labour markets. The aspect of indecisiveness, core to Gati et al.'s model was not so prevalent in our findings. The second of Gati et al.'s clusters, *lack of information* was widely noted in the participants' narratives and is reflected in our "cognitive" theme as limited understanding of themselves and of relevant labour markets. Gati et al.'s final cluster, *Inconsistent information* was less evident our data.

Our data also revealed overlaps and distinctions with the Career Thought Inventory**.** The data from this study highlighted both the lack of understanding of the process of career development and the disabling power of emotions, which align with the decision-making confusion of the Career Thought Inventory. The generalised anxiety and the inability to commit from the Career Thought Inventory were also both represented within the Anxiety subtheme in our findings. The external conflicts within the CTI and the CDMD was not clearly represented in our data.

There were a number of prevalent difficulties within our "cognitive" theme which do not seem to be well represented in the two cognitive taxonomies we describe. First, the lack of understanding of the careers service offer came up frequently in the narratives of our participants but is not identified in the CTI or the CDMD. An obvious explanation for this discrepancy lies in the context in which the research has been conducted. The present study made use of career practitioners as subjects, rather than the students themselves, and has explored practitioners' perceptions of issues of students who choose to come along to the careers service; as such it is perhaps no surprise that a lack of

understanding of the careers service support is more common in our participants' narratives than in other studies, which put the career-decision makers themselves as participants. A misunderstanding of the nature of career development support could arguably not be classed as a career decision making difficulty, as it lies outside the decision process itself. Yet this misunderstand could be significant. If clients are unaware of the nature and scope of careers support available then they will not be in a position to capitalise on the services on offer, and their career decision making process may be slower or less effective than it might have been.

One other issue, widely noted in our participants' narratives, which has not explicitly been noted elsewhere was lack of information about the job hunting process. Participants frequently mentioned supporting students with developing their CVs and with mock interviews. Reflecting on its dominance in the career conversations in this sample, it is perhaps curious that this issue was not incorporated in the CDMD or the CTI. Perhaps Gati et al. might have considered this as an aspect of what they term "lack of information about occupations" although it could be argued that it is in fact quite a distinct type of information and fulfils a different function within the career planning process. Alternatively, perhaps this item is not included within the original taxonomy because it is considered to be outside the realm of career decision making. Saka and Gati (2007) suggests that career difficulties should be conceptualised broadly, but literature, from Parsons onwards (Parsons, 1909) suggests that these "transition skills" (Law & Watts, 1977) constitute a distinct and subsequent stage of the career process that occurs after a choice is made.

The data in this study, however, suggest that this job hunting support is integral to career decision making. As well the overall frequency of these difficulties in the career conversations in this study, the data indicate that requests for job hunting information are often interwoven with other aspects of career difficulties. It was widely reported that students commonly focus on their CVs as a displacement or gateway careers activity – an easy and undaunting place to start their career planning. This then suggests that a request for job hunting support is not a part of the process that comes only after the career decision itself is made but rather is often closely bound up with the career decision process. We would argue then that the request for support with job hunting skills is central to the career development process.

The emotional and personality related clusters of career difficulties of Saka et al.'s taxonomy (2008) were also represented in our data. In particular, the career practitioners highlighted the prevalence of anxiety in their one-to-one conversation, noting the increase in the prevalence of anxiety in recent years and the complexity of the anxiety the students were experiencing. They also noted one aspect of anxiety not covered in Saka et al.'s taxonomy, which is anxiety stemming from others – whether due to family hopes, the weight of expectations experienced by high-achievers, or anxiety coming from comparisons with peers. Our data also incorporates some of the specific aspects from Saka et al.'s "self-concept and identity" cluster, most notably self-esteem (described in our findings as "low confidence"). The Pessimism cluster from Saka et al.'s taxonomy was less represented in our findings, and issues of attachment and separation were also not mentioned in our participants' narratives.

Alongside the emotional and cognitive aspects of career difficulties highlighted in our data, our findings suggest that a third theme of aspects of career difficulties is needed to reflect the issues described by the career practitioners. Three behavioural aspects of career difficulties came up frequently in our participants' narratives: engaging with career support late, disproportionate focus on CVs and reluctance to take ownership of career planning. It could be that behavioural difficulties have traditionally not been included in frameworks because they are considered the consequence of career difficulties. This is the assumption within Sampson et al.'s Cognitive Information Processing model (1992), which identifies emotional and cognitive difficulties as antecedents to unhelpful behaviour. Our data however suggest that certain behaviours can cause emotional and cognitive career difficulties, and as such, could themselves constitute career difficulties. Examples given in our career practitioners' narratives include a focus on the CV as a displacement activity, or a reluctance to take ownership meaning that students don't spend time on more useful parts of the career

development process such as researching the labour market, or engaging in self-reflection; late engagement leads to higher levels of anxiety, as students feel under more pressure to make quick decisions.

One other feature about the aspects of carer difficulties identified in this study is the interrelationships between the different career difficulties. Career practitioners made frequent mention of the links between cognitive, behavioural and emotional aspects of difficulties, illustrating, for example, how a cognitive difficulty can engender an emotion which then prevents the individual from acting; or how career inaction might lead to a limited understanding, which then leads to an emotional barrier. Traditional taxonomies have unravelled the difficulties, treating each as an individual and discrete issue, where in this study the participants described them as inextricably interwoven. An understanding of these relationships could add to our understanding of the experiences of those struggling to make choices, and could be used to guide practitioners to more effective career programmes.

Implications for career practitioner training and practice

Our finding could be used in career practice in a number of ways. First, the themes could help career practitioners to understand their clients' needs better, to help them more readily identify where their clients are stuck and then to use this information to generate insights for the clients themselves and to identify useful suggestions for action. The benefits of using an understanding of career difficulties within career practice are well documents in the literature (Chuang et al., 2020; Gati et al., 2019; Kulcsár et al., 2020) and the findings of this study, grounded in the experiences of those working with the student body in the UK may expedite this process.

Second, the themes could be useful for services planning activities. The study has shown that some students start to think about their career development late in the time at university, and others seem reluctant to take ownership of their career planning. An argument could be made that the timing of career planning is entirely a matter for the individual, but there are some advantages in engaging with career planning whilst studying: certain opportunities are only available to students whilst they are studying (for example, access to Careers Service support, internships, extra-curricular activities) so earlier engagement with career planning may make the career planning process more straightforward. Services could redouble their efforts to reach out to students to explain the value of early contact with the careers service. Our findings could suggest that career education programmes might focus on techniques to help students to manage their anxiety, perhaps using cognitive behavioural approaches such as acceptance and commitment therapy (Kiuru et al., 2021), or might employ techniques from motivational interviewing to help get students more prepared for the changes ahead (Prochaska & DiClemente, 1982; Rochat & Rossier, 2016).

Finally, the themes could be used to support the training of career practitioners, particularly those considering working within HE in the UK. As a framework to help structure initial and CPD training programmes, the themes could ensure that courses equip career guidance students with the skills needed to address the aspects of career difficulties they are likely to face in their one-to-one career conversations.

Limitations and directions for future research

As a qualitative study, the findings cannot be generalised beyond the population of the HE career practitioners in the UK included in the study. The career practitioners were reporting on their analysis of the students' difficulties, and this process of interpretation is evidently subject to a layer of individual interpretation and bias, and cannot be assumed to accurately reflect the experiences of the student clients themselves. Participants self-selected so may have a particular interest in or views on one-to-one work and as such their experiences may not be representative of others within HE in the UK – this is particularly notable given that we only identified 22 suitable practitioners out

of more than 3000 careers service staff who may have received the email. The participants' levels of experience as HE practitioners ranged from 6 to 27 years. We did not notice any particular patterns related to this in our findings, but this could perhaps be an area to probe in a subsequent study. It would be interesting to find out whether practitioners feel that the difficulties the students are experiencing have changed over the years.

A useful next step would be to test the model quantitatively, to see whether it resonates with career practitioners more widely. It would also be useful to discuss this model with students themselves to see whether they recognise the different aspects of the model in their own experiences. It could be interesting to see whether this model is applicable to other career contexts, for example with career practitioners working in schools or with adults and quantitative analyses could examine whether particular types of students are more likely to experience particular difficulties. Finally, a follow up study, examining the techniques that career practitioners use within their conversations would be interesting to analyse with reference to this new model.

Conclusion

Identifying career difficulties is established as an important aspect of career practice but until now there have been no empirical studies establishing the aspects of career difficulties that HE students in the UK bring to their one-to-one career conversations. The data from this study supports existing taxonomies of career difficulties but suggests the possible inclusion of a number of additional aspects, including a category of behavioural aspects of career difficulties, and a focus on the relationships between different types of career difficulties. Our findings could be a useful aid for career practitioners, to help them to identify particular difficulties their clients are facing, and for those involved in the training and support of career practitioners in this context, to ensure that they are equipped to address the aspects of career difficulties that their clients most frequently bring.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, [author initials], upon reasonable request.

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