Challenging conventional thinking about ‘career’ in the higher education curriculum

Maura O’Regan

The International Career Studies Symposium at the University of Reading on 22 - 23 September 2009 brought together an audience of people from differing backgrounds all sharing an interest in careers. Practitioners, academics, researchers and students gathered to contribute to the discussion on ‘career’ as a subject within a higher education curriculum. The notion that we are all researchers into career was first posited by McCash (2006) and strengthens the perception that the choices we make around careers are after all amongst the most important decisions we make and are significant both for us as individuals and also the society as a whole (Gati and Asher, 2001). However, it is my view that career studies as a subject taught to undergraduates may not be feasible currently, given changes in higher education with debate on mass marketisation, variable fees, restructuring, cluttered curricula, a policy-driven employability agenda and constraints on resources generally. In the meantime, given that life-career and work feature in most peoples’ lives, we need to look at ways in which we can challenge the intellect of students enrolled in higher education by developing critical thinking whilst at the same time inspiring conversations around work and career.

This article will introduce a new way of looking at career within the higher education curriculum which takes a perspective on career that is more intellectual and less instrumental. The starting point is recognition of the relationship between human agency and social structures. It is an acknowledgement that people are participants in creating their own reality and thus responsible for their career ideas and career development at a time and pace that suits them. Undergraduates come to university for a variety of reasons not least to study and grow academically. This paper proposes that we present the concept of ‘education for learning’ to extend knowledge by using examples of empirical research to stimulate discussion around career and to offer undergraduates the autonomy to draw their own conclusions. My proposition is that by presenting career research in this way, we can challenge undergraduates on a variety of levels. Students will become aware of current research in the field of career, will be able to challenge methodologies and findings, will be able to discuss and draw their own conclusions from those findings and, importantly, take responsibility for what they do next with that information.

To illustrate this point, I will draw on two different approaches to understanding the career related behaviour of students (O’Regan, 2009; Tomlinson, 2008). The work of O’Regan is based on a longitudinal research study with 30 second-year undergraduates studying for degrees in a traditional arts-based subject and a business oriented course at a pre-1992 university. Tomlinson’s study is based on a qualitative research project with 53 final-year undergraduates from a variety of degree disciplines at a different pre-1992 university.

I will summarise the findings of these empirical research studies and present an argument for their use as a means to challenge undergraduates to learn about career in a more academically stimulating environment. I will propose that the findings of O’Regan and Tomlinson can be used to facilitate discussion on how undergraduates approach and understand their careers and educational credentials in different ways, and the role higher education plays in their expectation of career and future employment. I argue that using empirical research into career in this way will stimulate discussion and debate by highlighting the career interpretations and expectations of others in similar situations to themselves. In this way we can develop an alternative approach to thinking about career, develop career learning and address employability within a more academic and intellectually challenging environment. There is a lot more to the complex, idiosyncratic, and messy pursuit of career than conventional models of skills, competencies and employability allow for.

Four types of orientation to study and career (O’Regan, 2009)

I will start by introducing key elements of O’Regan’s (2009) research, as the students who participated in this project were at an earlier stage of their university and career progression than those presented by Tomlinson (2008). The findings of this study help us understand more about how undergraduate students approached thinking about their studies, their career, their futures and the compulsory credit bearing career management skills module undertaken in either their first or second year. Interpreting the stories the students told resulted in the emergence of four different orientations towards career and the future. These orientations are not mutually exclusive nor are they fixed. Students demonstrated elements of all four orientations at various stages although one tended to dominate at any one time.
• Those orientated towards learning represent a group of students who prioritised studying and were enjoying university life (Learners).

• Those orientated towards introspection represent a group of students who were anxious and sometimes quite stressed (Introspectives).

• Those orientated towards hesitation represent a group of students who were easy-going and inclined to procrastinate (Hesitators).

• Those orientated towards instrumentalism represent a group of students who pursued every opportunity and were focused on the future (Instrumentalists).

Turning to the four orientations in more depth, Learners were cognisant of the future but while at university resented having to think too far in advance and plan for their careers. They felt that career was something that would come later.

I just don’t think it is important enough for me to start worrying about what I want to do. I’d rather focus on other stuff that I think is more important like studying - focusing on that as opposed to what I want to do in the future.

Billy, a learner

Introspectives, the group of students who had not made a smooth transition to university, and were finding it difficult to settle in found that being asked to think about their future and their careers compounded their stress. As they did not know what they wanted to do, being asked to consider careers and planning for their future employment concerned or worried them.

It [career management skills module] just represents everything you don’t know.

Kate, an introspective

It's something I'm worried about – not passing this year. So I'm actually thinking when I think about my actual career, it will come after. I won't really think about what I want to do until after my degree.

Alice, an introspective

I basically dropped all ideas of a career until I had settled into university to see how life changed.

Paul, an introspective

Hesitators, the group of students who were inclined to procrastinate about making choices and taking action to realise their career aspirations, were conscious of the type of career they wanted but busy enjoying the university experience. Doris wanted a career with the possibility of advancement and extra training but as she was not sure what that career might be, she was postponing applying for jobs. While hesitators had the intention to do this, they tended to leave things to the last minute.

I won’t do anything until there is a deadline I have to reach and I won’t take action until the deadline is closing in…

James, a hesitator

Those orientated towards hesitation were the most positive about their career management skills module as they recognised that planning and action were required to realise their career aspirations but they admitted they were lazy about things like that. They did, however, appreciate the fact that the university was providing the career management skills module for their future benefit.

The instrumental group of undergraduates had made a smooth transition to university and they were very focused on their future career. Aaron said of career, ‘this is who I am. It does define you’. They took advantage of the opportunities available to them to realise their career aspirations. They attended open days, career fairs, skills workshops, and joined clubs and societies with the goal of securing a graduate job. Their time at university was seen as an opportunity to get started on pursuing their career.

[Your career] will become a major part of your life. So for a lot of people it is a dominating part of their life, isn’t it? So a career is sort of a life focus.

Johnny, an instrumentalist

Recently, I have chosen to pursue a career in accountancy. I chose this after having attended financial accounting modules, careers fairs and company presentations and also through a process of elimination… I am determined to get a summer internship within an accountancy firm… I’ve always been quite driven. If I’m doing something I might as well do it well. I've always been like that.

Phoebe, an instrumentalist

Miles commented on the career management skills module he took in his first year at university.

The pace of it was quite slow and like all we did was write a CV and take these tests about our abilities and I already felt that I knew my abilities… I don’t think I got anything out of it at all really. The function that I saw it as having for us as students was to force us to think about careers and stuff and I never needed a push in that direction. That’s why I didn’t really rate it at all...

Miles, an instrumentalist

When considering the life-career story the students told, I found that the key to interpreting these orientations lay in the importance the young people themselves placed on current experiences, the future and its possibilities and how relevant career was for them at that particular time. The orientations to the future and career are presented in diagram form in Figure 1 below. This visual representation shows a ‘focus’ axis which extends from the present into the future and a ‘relevance’ axis indicating how much significance students placed on pursuing their careers.
These findings are presented here as a possible stimulus for discussion. Students can discuss where they feel they are in the typology and whether they would like to move across types and what they might have to do to realise this. This visual representation can also be used to confirm for some students that being content studying and relatively unconcerned about having career ideas or plans for the future is acceptable. Using this framework can also reassure students that not everyone knows what they want to do nor is driven to pursue a graduate career or post-graduation employment. This view confirms that we must be mindful that not all students adjust to transitions at the same time and at the same rate nor pursue their futures in similar ways.

Higher education credentials and the labour market

Tomlinson (2008) investigates final year undergraduates’ perceptions of the relationship between their higher education credentials and labour market outcomes. He presents a paper that highlights the confusion, tensions, concerns and contradictions arising from being sold the university dream. Students came to university expecting their degree to give them positional advantage in future employment opportunities but realised that this was not the case. Tomlinson found that the students regarded their higher education qualifications:

- as a significant boost to their human capital
- as positional goods
- as a key dimension of employability
- would open up a wide range of economic, occupational and social opportunities
- were vital commodities in the pursuit of well paid, high status, rewarding graduate employment.

However, the students also believed that the labour market was congested, competitive and ‘cut throat’ making it more difficult to have an advantage as they were in a positional competition. The students said they would need to add value by considering their:

(a) institutional profile
(b) degree classification
(c) soft credentials – extra curricular activities, achievements and skills development
(d) postgraduate credentials.

Tomlinson concludes the students in his study believed that their higher education qualifications were not enough, and that they placed a heavy emphasis upon the need to develop a ‘narrative of employability’ that encompassed experiences and achievement outside their degree.

Figure 1 Undergraduates orientation towards their future and their prospective career
Discussion

I have deliberately presented research studies that pose as many questions as answers. As participants at the symposium workshop pointed out, empirical research is not without its flaws and is therefore open to debate. It is my view that the chance to develop a critical perspective on the knowledge that is presented to us is exactly what is required in the higher education career studies curriculum. For example, O’Regan (2009) presents a typology of career pursuit which stimulates questions about the usefulness and desirability of categorising people. Tomlinson (2008) focuses on end outcomes which stimulate observations around the strategic nature of higher education in the twenty-first century and discussion on who benefits; students, stakeholders, or institutions seeking advantage in university league tables.

There are also implications for those engaged with career learning and employability within higher education. I suggest that career education in the higher education curriculum can be based on empirical research and presented to students in theoretical terms. This then allows students to draw their own conclusions from what they have learnt and choose for themselves if and how they might apply this knowledge to their own situation. This approach contrasts with traditional approaches to career management skills, and I have summarised the differences in Table 1 above.

Students who engage in more research orientated career studies content can be encouraged to see their development in pedagogical terms, for example by considering what they know after the session that they did not know before and in what way that information might inform or change their thinking. The empirical studies presented here take a qualitative approach and use small samples of participants in a particular situation. There are further opportunities to stimulate discussion on the use of quantitative data and the possible interpretations and conclusions that can be drawn for these. This approach, the use of empirical studies to generate discussion around career, may perhaps align more easily with social science and scientific disciplines. Consequently, course designers in universities will need to develop institutional and subject specific solutions to suit their needs, the student body and the existing curriculum.

Conclusion

Career studies can be seen as a new interdisciplinary, trans-disciplinary or multidisciplinary subject in the higher education curriculum. I believe that by presenting students with opportunities to internalise and understand career through empirical research which presents the experiences of others, we will provide them with the opportunity to draw their own conclusions about their approach to career. We will also provide a learning opportunity: a forum to analyse and critique the work of others. This approach to teaching career studies will mean that those with responsibility for delivery will need to engage with, and understand, a wide range of research into career. I believe that for both staff and students, the work will reap rewards and intellectual stimulation previously not encountered.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Career Studies</th>
<th>Traditional Career Management Skills</th>
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<tr>
<td>Outward looking</td>
<td>Inward looking</td>
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<tr>
<td>Stimulate discussion and debate</td>
<td>Based on individual experience and motivation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opportunity for social comment, personal opinions</td>
<td>Opportunity for self reflection which can be self-indulgent and for some threatening</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus on the intellectual challenge</td>
<td>Focus on competencies and skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encourage critical thinking based on research</td>
<td>Encourage performance and outcomes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Students draw own conclusions and take responsibility for what they do next</td>
<td>Students are expected to plan action and take next steps</td>
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Table 1: Overview of what career studies can offer as an alternative to traditional career management skills/career education
References


For correspondence

Maura O’Regan
University of Reading
m.oregan@reading.ac.uk