10.20856/jnicec.3709

Opportunity or risk for higher education careers practitioners? An exploration of peer influence on career behaviours

Anne Delauzun

A proportion of higher education (HE) students appear to be taking careers and employability support into their own hands, organising workshops, employer talks and networking events. Perhaps it's time careers professionals stepped back and left them to it? Whether through transmittal of expectations or information, as 'flesh and blood' role models, collaborators or supporters, there is much to suggest peer influence could be better harnessed as a means of increasing and deepening opportunities for students' career learning. Drawing on this, implications for the design and delivery of HE careers and employability support are considered.

Introduction

Engaging students with careers provision in Higher Education (HE) continues to be a challenge for many HE careers practitioners (Purcell, Elias, Atfield, Behle, Ellison, Luchinskaya, Snape, Conaghan and Tzanakou, 2012). With constraints on resources growing tighter, do we need to rethink HE careers provision in order to meet the needs of students other than those who are 'confident, articulate and well-enough connected' as Law suggests (2009: 4)?

Law argues that instead of 'somehow getting them to pay more attention to our expertise' we should seek ways of better engaging the 'natural dynamics' (2009: 5) of learning that happens informally through communities, such as peer groups. As an HE careers professional I regularly encounter evidence of peer influence on career behaviour, e.g. students initiating careers-related events for the benefit of their peers (Delauzun, 2015; Leslie, 2015). Struck by this, and by Law's comment, I decided to investigate this theme further for my research project.

An initial literature review reveals that peer influence on career behaviour has been recognised in much existing research (Vinokur and Caplan, 1987; Wanberg, Glomb, Song and Sorenson, 2005; Kenny and Medvide, 2007; Greenbank and Hepworth, 2009), albeit with a focus on occupational choice and the job search process. Today's careers practitioners however, generally acknowledge a much broader definition of career behaviour, as exemplified by the life-design framework with its goals of adaptability, narratability and activity (Savickas, Nota, Rossier, Dauwalder, Duarte, Guichard, Soresi, Van Esbroeck and van Vianen, 2009). Research into student attitudes to extra-curricular activities, for example, suggests social norms amongst peer groups play a key role in take-up (Greenbank, 2015) - noteworthy given the positive relationship between participation in extra-curricular activities and entry into graduate level jobs (Pennington, Mosley and Sinclair, 2013). Similarly, a study of peer-led learning in an academic context reported participating students' deeper engagement with and greater ownership of their own learning (Keenan, 2014) – certainly positive behaviours in the context of career planning.

This article explores evidence from a range of contexts, including relevant literature and practitioner experience, of peer influence on HE students' career behaviour. Savickas et al.'s concept of career adaptability (2009) and Law's community interaction theory (2009) provide a means of linking references to

existing career theories, and implications for practice are considered throughout.

Peer influence and career adaptability

Using Savickas et al.'s components of career adaptability (2009) as a framework for categorising references identified in the literature, it appears that control, curiosity and confidence are the dimensions in which peer influence on career behaviours is perhaps most in evidence.

Control: Developing autonomy

According to Savickas et al., control is about using 'self-regulation strategies to adjust to the needs of different settings' and exerting 'influence and control on the context' (2009: 245-6). Young, Antal, Bassett, Post and DeVries suggest that it is the 'egalitarian and reciprocal' (1999: 528) nature of peer relationships that is key to the development of adolescents' autonomy, particularly when compared to other significant relationships such as those between adolescents and parents or teachers which are typically hierarchical (ibid.). They cite behaviours such as 'co-operation, collaboration, intimacy, and sharing' (ibid.) between peers as key to the development of this autonomy or independence. Student participants in a project to trial peer mentoring in the teaching of undergraduate research reported their rapid adaptation to a new way of working as a real benefit (Henderson, Buising and Wall, 2008). The authors also cite evidence to suggest that the peer support to adapt to new environments or approaches to learning continued beyond the immediate project, with several project alumni mentoring more junior students in the early stages of their careers (ibid.). This is perhaps unsurprising as many higher education institutions (HEIs) run programmes through which students are mentored by alumni as a means of supporting access to the graduate labour market. However, this example makes for an interesting comparison, suggesting that in this case the mentoring relationships were established at an earlier stage within a shared environment. In contrast, formalised mentoring schemes run by many HEIs typically initiate mentor-mentee contact after the mentor has left the HEI environment. It could be argued that Henderson et al.'s model offers a basis for a stronger, more productive relationship (ibid.).

Curiosity: Encouraging exploration

Savickas et al. identify 'curiosity about possible selves and social opportunities' as a means of increasing people's 'active exploration behaviours' (2009: 245-6) - a key component of many career theories. Increasingly HE careers practitioners work hard to engage students and stimulate curiosity at the earliest possible stage. Several references in the literature suggest peers have a positive influence on both self-exploration and also the seeking of external information. Kracke (2002) identifies a positive correlation between peer interactions on careers topics and exploration and information seeking behaviours and also the key role peers play in the process of self-exploration. In their small-scale study of peer interactions about career, Young et al. identify exploration taking place through discussion, reflection and comparison, which helped to 'elicit ideas and preferences', facilitating 'the maturation of adolescents' values' (1999: 532). Blustein (1989 cited in Young et al. 1999: 537) proposes that these kinds of 'supportive interaction' between peers can create 'success experiences', which themselves encourage further exploration activity. He also suggests that this process builds adolescents' self-confidence around career decision-making, which in turn also encourages further exploration (ibid.).

Confidence: Building self-assurance

In the context of career adaptability, Savickas et al. suggest that confidence 'includes the capacity to stand by one's own aspirations and objectives, even in the face of obstacles and barriers' (2009: 245-6). Young et al. propose that through careers-related conversations with peers, adolescents can 'take ownership of their beliefs and values' (1999: 531). They propose that it is the egalitarian nature of this peer relationship between adolescents which is a critical factor in promoting empathy, encouragement and unconditional support 'which resulted in the peers' mutual validation' (ibid.: 533).

Ford's study (2000) of under-employed graduates noted that peer support and the discovery of similar, shared problems contributed to helping to restore self-confidence - later supported by Frigerio's concept of the 'sideways glance' (2010: 18-19). This is the

suggestion that particularly during these key transition points, students frequently 'compared themselves with actual or perceived behaviours of their peers and defined themselves as similar to some and different from others' (ibid.). Frigerio cites examples of how this process affected confidence both positively and negatively (ibid.).

Peer groups as communities of influence

Expectations

Law suggests that 'expectations may be transmitted through the values of family or peer group', where expectations can refer to 'the cues, pressures, and enticements that are often embedded in membership of groups' (2009: 17-18). As Law points out, this is evident in Willis' (1977) study of adolescent male peer groups but is also evident in Frigerio's concept of the 'sideways glance' (2010: 18-19) and Greenbank et al. (2009, 2015) cited previously. Sax and Bryant (2006) also propose that the orientation of a peer group could influence student career choice into roles considered to be stereotypically masculine or feminine, whilst highlighting the question as to whether such expectations from peers are simply perceived or actual.

I have also observed this influence first hand, particularly in the context of student-led clubs and societies. Student organisers investing time in arranging guest speakers or building relationships with community organisations create an expectation that their peers will support them by attending or taking part. Indeed, students have openly admitted to me attending such events primarily out of loyalty towards their friend, the organiser. Surely then engagement with core careers support provision could be increased if we made better use of the draw of these peer organisers, unique to the peer relationship.

Support

Kracke identifies that 'peers have an important role as emotional support during adolescence' (2002: 21) and Jong, Cohen-Schotanus, Dekker and Verkerk report that 'the engagement of peers helps participants realize that they are not alone' and that support within the group structure 'makes them believe they can rely on each other' (2009: 510-11). Terrion and Leonard (2007 cited in Packard, Marciano, Payne, Bledzki and Woodard, 2014: 434) suggest that an added benefit to peer mentoring relationships (as opposed to supervisory mentoring relationships) is that they are more apt to include emotional support and friendship.

Modelling

Law suggests that modelling may be transmitted through communities of influence, in the sense of opportunities to meet and understand 'flesh-and-blood' (2009: 17-18) examples of ways of life beyond what a person may have otherwise encountered. In the context of peer communities, Young et al. (1999) confirm that this is the case. Drane, Smith, Light, Pinto, and Swarat (2005) reported that for ethnic minority students, the simple presence of other minority students as role models and leaders in the context of peer-led workshops had a positive impact on student retention. Delauzun (2015) and Leslie (2015) both cite cases of students as 'flesh-and-blood' examples of how to proactively source work experience or complete an effective application for a legal training contract. I've encountered many more examples of this, specifically students sharing their experience of placements or years abroad with those who are about to embark on such activities. Student feedback on these interactions consistently demonstrates their value. Occasionally I've also observed evidence to suggest the importance of the 'realness' of these role models. For some students, case studies of high-achieving alumni (written for the purposes of institutional PR) appeared to be demotivating, rather than inspiring, with some students feeling the perceived gap between their own positions and those of the alumni to be too large.

Information provision

Law uses the term 'information provision' to refer to 'the communication of impressions, images and data which people distil from conversations in the groups of which they are members' (2009: 17-18) and suggests that this is another way in which communities can influence an individual's career behaviours. Young et al. describe how students bring 'information about the world of work' (1999: 528) to their careers related conversations, and Delauzun (2015) and Leslie (2015) provide evidence of the communication of information

through peer groups. The latter of these deals with specific information about the legal sector and I have observed similar behaviour within some of the more vocationally focused student-led societies within my own institution. Research into peer co-mentoring undertaken within a music conservatoire found that students valued information and support from peers that helped them to better understand and integrate into the professional music community (Gaunt, Creech, Long and Hallam, 2012). These examples call to mind Lave and Wenger's concept of 'legitimate peripheral participation' to describe 'the process by which newcomers become included in a community of practice' (Wenger, 1998: 100). It could be argued then that at least some student-led clubs and societies operate as communities of practice themselves, offering their members considerable opportunity to learn from each other.

Implications for practice

Peers as accessible support

An interesting theme that emerged from the literature was students' apparent perception of peers as a more accessible source of support than staff. Walsh, Larsen and Parry (2009) propose that the way in which students access support during their time in HE is tiered, with peers effectively operating as a first line of support for pastoral issues and academic tutors for academic matters. They suggest that 'specialist' support services including careers, finance and counselling are only accessed as a second tier if needed, and used in general much less frequently. In research into a peer group mentoring programme in Finland, student mentors reported getting most support from other students (even those who were not mentors) rather than staff (Skaniakos, Penttinen, and Lairio, 2014) and in the context of lab-based research students reported greater levels of comfort in peer-led classes than with those that were staff-led (Henderson et al., 2008). This is consistent with Greenbank's finding that 'the fact that careers advisers did not 'know them' was seen by many students as a major barrier for seeking their help' (2011: 36) with many preferring to seek advice from 'people they know and feel comfortable with' (ibid.). Given this, basic training could be provided to student 'careers champions' within HEIs to enable them to more effectively support and signpost their peers. Students supported by peers with some of the 'basics', for example simple questioning to explore career ideas or CV writing, could then take greater advantage of the higher level professional skills of HE careers practitioners.

Recognising peers as knowledge-holders

Law (2009) makes a case for using the concept of franchise to enhance the effectiveness of careers support and harnessing the way in which people naturally learn from each other and elsewhere (1986) presents ideas for how this approach could be implemented. This theme was also identified in Carter and McNeill's research into student induction in which 'it was largely the peer guides who took on the mantle of the expert' (1998: 7). Young et al. offer evidence that peers can be 'resources to each other in a meaningful project in their lives' in contrast to the 'expert-novice dyad' (Rogoff 1995 cited in Young et al., 1999: 537) most often associated with careers-related activities for adolescents (ibid.). As careers practitioners we can do our best to understand and empathise with students' experiences of career management and job search, but should we do more to highlight to students the useful knowledge held by so many of their peers with first-hand, current experience?

Scope and longevity of peer support

Consistent with Savickas et al.'s (2009) assertion that a holistic and life-long approach to life-designing is required, it could be reasonably expected that peers provide support with life roles beyond those of student and worker and that peer relationships may continue beyond the HE environment, in likely contrast to those between students and staff. A key argument of Law's community interaction theory is that 'students' and clients' career management is more influenced by what happens between them and the people they spend most time with, in whose company they feel most at home, and whose opinions they take most seriously' (2009: 2). Whilst many HE careers services continue to serve alumni, few are able to offer all students the same level of consistency or longevity in terms of the practitioner/s supporting them. In order to capitalise on this, a means should be found of helping students to learn how to critically evaluate information and support available from their peers.

Engaging new audiences

Given this evidence, perhaps careers practitioners could do more to encourage student-led careers and employability initiatives which could reach different audiences? Similarly, co-delivered events (students and careers practitioners) could perhaps offer 'best of both' – where the presence of a peer leaders increases engagement whilst involvement from careers practitioners acts as a mechanism for quality control, as exemplified in Leslie (2015). Many HEIs are already using peers as a form of informal referral market through student ambassador/buddying schemes, and de Jager and Ntlokwana (2011) reported an increase in referrals to student counselling services as a result of peer helping programmes. However, there is insufficient evidence to determine whether this approach would be effective in increasing impact (i.e. engaging with those not already accessing services) or whether it would simply generate more service demand from those already engaged.

Conclusion

The results of this study suggest that there is evidence of peer influence on career behaviours in a range of contexts, operating in a range of ways. Also, there is scope for HE careers services to recognise and/or harness this more explicitly in order to better meet the needs of all students they serve. Encouraging and supporting peer-led careers and employability events would be a relatively straightforward first step. Certainly if a significant repositioning of career-work professionalism (Law, 2009) is required, perhaps one in which other students and non-careers professionals play a greater role, the implications of this would be wide-ranging.

References

Carter, K. and McNeill, J. (1998) Coping with the darkness of transition: students as the leading lights of guidance at induction to higher education, in *British Journal of Guidance & Counselling*, 26, 3, 399-415.

de Jager, M. and Ntlokwana, N. (2011) The prevalence and characteristics of higher education peer helping programmes: Managerial perspectives, in *South African Journal of Higher Education*, 25, 4, 680-695.

Delauzun, A. (2015) Reaching the Ritualists: supporting student-led activities, in *Phoenix*, 145, 5. http://viewer.zmags.com/publication/561ec328#/561ec328/1 (accessed 29 September 2015).

Drane, D., Smith, H., Light, G., Pinto, L. and Swarat, S. (2005) The Gateway Science Workshop Program: Enhancing Student Performance and Retention in the Sciences Through Peer-Facilitated Discussion, in *Journal of Science Education & Technology*, 14, 3, 337-352.

Ford, G. in association with Leeds Careers Guidance (2000) *Career Development of Under-Employed Graduates*, NICEC Briefing, Cambridge: NICEC.

Frigerio, G. (2010) *Narratives of Employability: Effective Guidance in a Higher Education Context. https://www2.warwick.ac.uk/study/cll/about/cllteam/gfrigerio/frigerio_effective_guidance_report_21_4_10-1.docx* (accessed 10 August 2015).

Gaunt, H., Creech, A., Long, M. and Hallam, S. (2012) Supporting conservatoire students towards professional integration: one-to-one tuition and the potential of mentoring, in *Music Education Research*, http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14613808.2012.657166

Greenbank, P. (2011) 'I'd rather talk to someone I know than somebody who knows' – the role of networks in undergraduate career decision-making, in *Research in Post-Compulsory Education*, http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13596748.2011.549726

Greenbank, P. (2015) Still focusing on the "essential 2:1": exploring student attitudes to extracurricular activities, in *Education and Training*, 57, 2, 184–203.

Greenbank, P. and Hepworth, S. (2009) *Working Class Students and the Career Decision-making Process: A Qualitative Study.* http://www.hecsu.ac.uk/hecsu.rd/research_reports_278.htm (accessed 29 November 2014).

Henderson, L., Buising, C. and Wall, P. (2008) Teaching Undergraduate Research: The One-Room Schoolhouse Model, in *Biochemistry & Molecular Biology Education*, 36, 1, 28-33.

Jong, M.A.S., Cohen-Schotanus, J., Dekker, H. and Verkerk, M. (2009) The role of peer meetings for professional

development in health science education: a qualitative analysis of reflective essays, in *Advances in Health Sciences Education*, 14, 4, 503-513.

Keenan, C. (2014) *Mapping student-led peer learning in the UK*. https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/sites/default/files/resources/Peer_led_learning_Keenan_Nov_14-final.pdf (accessed 10 August 2015).

Kenny, M. and Medvide, M.B. (2007) Relational Influences on Career Development, in Brown, S.D. and Lent R.W. (eds) *Career Development and Counselling*, Hoboken, New Jersey: John Wiley and Sons.

Kracke, B. (2002) The role of personality, parents and peers in adolescents' career exploration, in *Journal of Adolescence*, 25, 19–30.

Law, B. (1986) *The Pre-Vocational Franchise*, London: Harper & Row.

Law, B. (2009) *Building on what we know: Community-interaction and its importance for contemporary careers work*. http://www.hihohiho.com/memory/cafcit.pdf (accessed 10 August 2015).

Leslie, C. (2015) If you can't beat them, join them, in *Phoenix*, 145, 5, 6-7. http://viewer.zmags.com/publication/561ec328#/561ec328/1 (accessed 29 September 2015).

Packard, B.W., Marciano, V.N., Payne, J.M., Bledzki, L.A. and Woodard, C.T. (2014) Negotiating Peer Mentoring Roles in Undergraduate Research Lab Settings, in *Mentoring & Tutoring: Partnership in Learning*, http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13611267.2014.983327

Pennington, M., Mosley, E. and Sinclair, R. (2013) *AGCAS/AGR Graduate Success Project: an investigation of graduate transitions, social mobility and the HEAR*. Sheffield: AGCAS. http://www.agcas.org.uk/assets/download?file=3960&parent=1519 (accessed 2 January 2015).

Purcell, K., Elias, P., Atfield, G., Behle, H., Ellison, R., Luchinskaya, D., Snape, J., Conaghan, L. and Tzanakou, C. (2012) *Futuretrack Stage 4: transitions into employment, further study and other outcomes*, Coventry: Warwick Institute for Employment Research/HECSU.

Savickas, M.L., Nota, L., Rossier, J., Dauwalder, J.P., Duarte, M.E., Guichard, J., Soresi, S., Van Esbroeck, R. & van Vianen, A.E.M., (2009) Life designing: A paradigm for career construction in the 21st Century, in *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jvb.2009.04.004

Sax, L.J. and Bryant, A.N. (2006) The Impact of College on Sex-Atypical Career Choices of Men and Women, in *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jvb.2005.01.004

Skaniakos, T., Penttinen, L. and Lairio, M. (2014) Peer Group Mentoring Programmes in Finnish Higher Education– Mentors' Perspectives, in *Mentoring & Tutoring: Partnership in Learning*, http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13611267.2014.882609

Vinokur, A. and Caplan, R.D. (1987) Attitudes and Social Support: Determinants of Job-Seeking Behavior and Well-Being among the Unemployed, in *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 17, 12, 1007-1024.

Walsh, C., Larsen, C. and Parry, D. (2009) Academic Tutors at the Frontline of Student Support in a Cohort of Students Succeeding in Higher Education, in *Educational Studies*, http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03055690902876438

Wanberg, C.R., Glomb, T.M., Song, Z. and Sorenson, S. (2005) Job-Search Persistence During Unemployment: A 10-Wave Longitudinal Study, in *Journal of Applied Psychology*, http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/0021-9010.90.3.411

Wenger, E. (1998) *Communities of Practice,* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Willis, P.E. (1977) *Learning to Labour: How working class kids get working class jobs,* Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Ltd.

Young, R.A., Antal, S., Bassett, M.E., Post, A. and DeVries, N. (1999) The joint actions of adolescents in peer conversations about career, in *Journal of Adolescence,* 22, 4, 527-538.

For correspondence

Anne Delauzun,
Senior Careers Consultant and Deputy Head of Royal Holloway Careers and Employability Service,
The Careers Group, University of London

anne.delauzun@gmail.com

Research Project:

A conceptual model of peer influence on career behaviours, completed as part of the PGDip Careers Information, Education and Guidance in Higher Education at the University of Warwick.