

# How can we do this? An investigation of power constraints and other barriers to career development practitioners' innovation in higher education

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**This** article investigates the factors influencing career development practitioners' decisions in relation to innovation in a Higher Education context. Drawing on a dissertation research project, it presents an early substantive grounded theory of practitioners 'Constructing Empowerment' to overcome power constraints and other barriers to innovation. The article provides an argument that the sector is at a 'critical juncture' in which radical ideas can rapidly be implemented, and that a decision-making model to discern good, from bad or ambiguous ideas may be beneficial for maintaining quality standards and healthy professional boundaries.



## Introduction

Career development in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) has traditionally been supported by one-to-one career guidance interventions (Thomsen, 2009; Yates & Hirsh, 2022). As the Career Development Institute (CDI) celebrates its first centenary in 2022 and continues to professionalise the sector (Moore, 2021), this service model has been a constant and a pillar of training for Career Development Practitioners (CDPs). A model which is being scrutinised today, as universities are competing through the lenses of quality (Musselin, 2018), and customers and citizens (Sultana, 2011), with careers services targeting efficiencies to increase engagement (AGCAS, 2022) and scalability for better graduate outcomes.

A 'critical juncture' describes times of rapid change and innovation (Green, 2017). Typically, institutions have long periods of relative stability with brief phases of radical change (Capoccia and Kelemen, 2007). It could be said that career development in higher education is at a critical juncture with changes underpinning policies (Sultana, 2011) and emerging from a global pandemic (Hooley, 2022). Additionally, the 'lifelong' career service offer is a relatively new agenda that is stretching limited resources further (Grey, 2022). CDP teams with average careers staff to student ratios of 1:995 (AGCAS, 2021) are becoming further stretched by serving larger client numbers for longer and improving outcomes within existing resources.

As HEI careers services seek to address this changing context, some services are revisiting older ideas of one-to-many interventions and peer support (Moore, 2022) to achieve scale and an assumed cost reduction compared to one-to-one guidance (Meldrum, 2017). Yet the literature on group guidance says these innovations have not translated into practice. They refer to 'resistance and scepticism' among practitioners for guidance outside of the one-to-one model (Meldrum, 2019); practitioner 'risk and anxiety' with reflexive learning (Reid & West, 2016); and how a lack of literature on group work may indicate practitioner reluctance (Westergaard, 2013). The UK career development practitioner voice is missing from the debate.

This practitioner research aimed to investigate decision-making by CDPs in relation to innovation at a Cathedrals Group University. These were church founded universities, forming the only UK higher

education group based on ethical principles informed by faith-based values (Stone et al., 2018). The research considered which factors impact CDPs decision-making around innovation in this careers service and how the practitioner data compared to opinions of CDP resistance to group guidance expressed in literature. This study defined group guidance based on Carl Rogers (1970) approach where groups of 6-12 participants met intensively and took directional responsibility for their time together.

## Literature review

Innovation can be unambiguously good, unambiguously bad, or ambiguous (Mulgan, 2016), so what kind of theoretical insight and practice evidence do CDPs need to distinguish them? The research and evidence base for guidance practice draws from a wide range of contexts (Hooley, 2014b), and may not always be easily transferrable to different contexts (Preskill & Donaldson, 2008). According to Kettunen (2021) studies of innovation within the sector are rare. Burke & Christie (2008) argue that some CDPs lean more to the psychological theories which have historically informed the sector and may be less aware of power structures and the sociological theories. They noted (ibid p. 6) that 'A theory that can be sensitive to psychological, sociological and political contexts could have a significant practical application'.

Many of the studies on group guidance have been within international contexts outside of HE. They largely draw on the 'career constructivism' of Savickas (2012) such as in a study by Maree (2019) that measured changes in a national career adaptability score following an intervention. Other studies such as by Westergaard (2013), build on coaching models or integrate coaching with counselling models (Meldrum, 2019). There is therefore inconsistent language and definition for such processes which adds to the difficulty of identifying relevant literature.

Group guidance is rarely discussed as an innovation to practice (Thomsen, 2009), and more often as a cost efficiency, overlooking the benefit that group guidance can develop forms of social action to solve collective challenges (Hooley, 2014a). Geboers et al. (2014) link active participation in social action with

committed citizenship, thus, indicating that career guidance in groups has potential to develop active citizenship; a goal of many universities today. Liu & Yu (2019) showed that career adaptability leads to better citizenship outcomes and that this relationship is mediated by the ability to accept organisational values and goals (affective commitment) and the psychological resourcefulness to the stress experienced in working life (emotional exhaustion). This is particularly relevant in a post pandemic environment where stressors may be higher and increase emotional exhaustion, reducing career adaptability.

Group guidance is different from group work, in that it allows participants to use their agency to take directional responsibility for the purpose and actions within the group sessions, in alignment with Rogers (1970) work on 'group encounters'. Although the work of Rogers person-centred model (1961) has hugely influenced the career development sector, little discussion is given in literature to his later work on group encounters which were 'one of the two primary foci of [his] work - the other being the need for greater freedom in our educational institutions' (Rogers, 1970). Nor do studies refer to how Egan wrote of his early struggles with 'group experiences, discussions on theory and a good deal of abortive research' before writing his guide (Egan, 1970, p. 9).

Meta-analysis on guidance innovations by Drobnic (2019) discussed how a career in the whole life course renders former approaches insufficient. Phenomenographic practitioner conceptions of career development (Kettunen, 2021) categorised innovation as initiation of services, demographic targeting, sector professionalisation, and drawing from synergies across sectors. Yates & Hirsh (2022) examine practical approaches and challenges to one-to-one career guidance. This is relevant as it finds three aspects important: the relationship; the conversation structure; and the techniques used. It found that a key challenge for practitioners was not wanting to disappoint their clients, and it could potentially explain resistance to group guidance as innovative work could potentially disappoint clients.

Hasanefendic et al. (2017) examined the characteristics of academics who instigated transformation within HEIs, citing the importance of: motivation to change

institutionalised practices; interest in change; experience in the field; multi embeddedness; authority to act; and the strategic use of social networks. It highlights that these transformative academics did not innovate alone. It took a strong network of people, experience, personal interest and authority to act. Guest and King (2004) found that HR managers lacked the power to solve many of the changes they were facing in approaching the early 80's. Both studies point to the concept of power being necessary to enable innovation.

The researcher developed a definition that 'innovation is the creative process of putting ideas into action' based on Taylor's (2017) table of definitions. Innovation is a form of change. Change does not occur, argued Veneklasen & Miller (2002), unless strategies address power in the public, private, and intimate realms.

The work of CDPs has long been linked with advocating for social justice (Hooley & Sultana, 2016). Veneklasen & Miller (2002) state that such advocacy work often uses alternative sources of power to navigate and change the dynamics of power over time. Power can be visible, hidden or invisible which makes it challenging to confront. They discussed the phrase 'power over' as being linked to control, and the villainous kind of power so many think of when the word power is spoken. They suggested that 'power to' is the power to shape our world and that 'power with' is about collaborating around common causes.

In organisational innovation the same questions occur as in the career development sector, over whether people are economically or socially motivated. Innovation and policy label these concepts as 'public management' and 'democratic' perspectives in policy and leadership (Sultana, 2011). The former being individualistic and economically competitive in nature, the latter being community based and social in nature. Sultana (2011) warns that new public management policies are reframing state failures to manage the labour market as a problem inherent in the individual; particularly with the message that poor job outcomes are due to an individual lack of study; ability to market themselves, be entrepreneurial or committed to lifelong learning; rather than because of issues with labour market opportunities.

Career development interventions that enable active participation in social action could help address such issues (Hooley, 2014a). Solutions based on the individual as a productive element of society can perpetuate structural biases and conditional worth (Feltham and Dryden, 1993), rather than the unconditional positive regard of Rogers' (1961) person-centred counselling. This creates a culture where a person is more acceptable, loved, esteemed if their economic output and productivity is greater. It can perpetuate a single political paradigm that may not be in alignment with the client's concept of their social role in society and cultural representations, potentially affecting their self-worth. This sense of belonging can affect a person's perceived meaningfulness of life (Lambert et al., 2013).

## Methodology

A constructivist grounded theory method by Charmaz was selected as it offers understanding of how 'meanings, actions and social structures are constructed' (2006. p. 285). This qualitative approach provides insight into the social process of how decisions related to innovation are made, where no adequate prior theory exists. The richer analysis of the processes, actions and interactions of people, ruled out other qualitative methods such as thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and narrative research (Parcell & Baker, 2017). Grounded theory was necessary to understand how ideas are put into action.

Hour long semi-structured interviews took place with 5 CDPs from a Cathedrals Group University. Due to the limited project scope and timescale, a single institution was selected for ease of access to CDPs, with a view that it would be repeatable by practitioners at other institutions to further develop the theory and would minimise variations due to institutional factors. Participants were interviewed based on availability within the project timescales. The sample varied significantly in seniority, age, experience, and sex. Although sufficient to ensure saturation of the data and achievability of analysis within the timescale, a weakness of the study was the small sample.

According to the promotional site [cathedralsgroup.ac.uk](http://cathedralsgroup.ac.uk) (2022), the Group believe a Higher Education experience is worth more than what people earn

after graduating. They contest the Office for Students stance on what students look for in a university degree and how success should be measured, as too narrow. The small CDP team of participants has hybrid working patterns, offers hyflex delivery, and has seen student engagement reduce since the pandemic. Validity is limited to the context of the institution where interviews are conducted, although the description above may help the reader discern the generalisability of the presenting theory to other institutions. The researcher's preconceptions were set aside, participants selected on first availability, and briefed to reduce any bias in their responses.

Collection and analysis of the data took place concurrently as required by the method (Charmaz, 2006; Giles, de Lacey, & Muir-Cochrane, 2016; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The interview guide set out six 'domains of inquiry' (Karp, 2009, p. 40) with additional questions also arising spontaneously in response to the dialogue. Applying the beneficence principle (Beauchamp, 1990) of ensuring participants benefit from the research whilst also promoting their welfare and safety, interviews included reflection on the value of the conversation, and the research paper and a presentation were provided. Questions invited participants to discuss: what innovation meant to them, how they defined guidance practice, what they perceived as barriers and opportunities to innovation and why, what ensured quality delivery and outcomes, plus free space for any further comment.

Memos were made throughout the research interviews and analysis to track changes in thinking over time. This formed a memo bank (Clarke, 2005) that helped fill out the categories later on. My summarising to interviewees of the meanings I was taking from their words during the interviews was also a useful tactic for ensuring theoretical sensitivity (Glaser, 1978) and that the analysis was grounded and meanings interpreted accurately. The interviews were transcribed using line-by-line coding with 'gerunds'. These are verbs that end with 'ing' to name people, places, things and ideas. They are useful for keeping the researcher focused on the process and grounded in the data, as suggested by Charmaz (2006).

In the final two semi-structured interviews, additional questions were asked to build on and develop a

deeper insight and understanding of initial findings. These consisted of asking whether actions or processes observed in the first three interviews could explain their experiences. This theoretical sampling brought clarity and as Charmaz (2006, p. 199) says; it is 'strategic, specific, and systematic'. The interviews continued to the point of saturation, where no new codes were being generated. As reflected by Giles et al. (2016) constant comparison creates increasingly more abstract concepts through inductive reasoning, and Charmaz's urging to focus on the process and reasons behind actions led to theory construction with a core category.

## Key findings and discussion

The research revealed the core category impacting CDP decision-making around innovation was 'constructing empowerment'. This emerged from the study as an intentional process of gaining access to necessary resources and 'power with' others to meet institutional targets and act in the best interests of university citizens.

The presenting theory is that CDPs are 'constructing empowerment' in order to be effective and meet targets in the HEI sector. Interview data showed CDP decision-making was influenced by their power to effect change, and many decisions are not within the CDP's sphere of influence as their power is largely granted informally. Whilst this is useful, it needs to be complemented with appropriate levels of formal power within the organisation. What CDPs can control is whether they choose to fall into a competitive 'us and them' mindset or work towards establishing and maintaining coalitions around shared interests, in this case usually with academics.

The presenting theory of 'constructing empowerment' is summarised in Table 1. The core category of constructing empowerment constrains the power of the CDP to effect change in the three subcategories. Each subcategory has four domains in which this study found it could operate. Below those are the conditions that others have power over to decide the focus of the CDP (denoted by a uni-directional arrow) and the conditions that the CDP has power over within the organisational structure (denoted by a bi-directional arrow).

Constructing Empowerment		
Influencing the experience	Solving social justice issues	Prioritising achievability
Purpose Language Price Image	Design measurement Network Information	Personal motivations Value judgements Leadership Policy driven KPIs
Micro → Macro Confusion ↔ Clarity	Structure → Agency Current ↔ Innovative	Excluded → Included Conforming ↔ Agentic
Informal ←		Formal
Competition ←		Coalition

**Table 1: Early substantive theory: 'Constructing Empowerment'**

There were three subcategories of additional barriers shaping CDP's decisions around innovation:

- The power to influence the experience - is the capacity to have an effect on the engagement and experience of 'university citizens' using the service that produces a positive impression. It requires clarity of purpose, language, place and image of the role and sector. The career development practitioner tasks may be focused on the micro of interventions, meso of service design or macro of the institution.
- The power to solve social justice issues - is developing ideas and strategies that enable 'university citizens' to play a full, active and responsible part in society, and to restore equity and equality in our own services and institutions. It requires innovative design of solutions, measurement, a network beyond practitioners, and academic research and sources of information, in particular considering the scope to create solutions that engender greater agency in all areas of delivery.
- The power to achieve success in their actions - is prioritising workload based on the ability to successfully bring about a visible effect of some desirable experience within the social and structural power constraints of the institution. This is impacted by CDPs personal motivations

such as life-career stage, interests and past experience. The perceived value of the service by stakeholders and clients affects engagement. Leadership influences the power of CDPs to be effective through visible authority in hierarchy, by ensuring practitioners are at key decision-making tables, and by empowering careers teams to work strategically and define the language of the service. In turn, this can impact the targets within the institution. Others such as academics can ensure practitioners' inclusion in strategic decisions, and practitioners can decide how agentic they wish to be.

In respect to the innovation of group guidance - the presenting theory emerged from analysis of the data, revealing that clarity of language and meanings is one factor necessary for innovative ideas to gain traction. The interviews showed there is confusion over the definition of group guidance, it being discussed as group work which doesn't offer students directional responsibility. A shift to group guidance may be beyond the power and authority of individual practitioners to implement as it is a change from the existing service structure, therefore the resistance may be based in structures rather than the CDPs themselves. Since CDPs focus on achievability and not disappointing clients, there are several factors that make group guidance seem a risky innovation. Hence, there were requests for specialist groups where group guidance



can be observed in practice. Data indicated curiosity and interest among CDPs, with resistance based in structural biases, power constraints and unclear definition of what is meant by the term group guidance.

## Conclusions

This study found an unexpected story. Rather than practical barriers to innovation that are solvable by CDPs or resistance to change, it found a highly creative and purposeful group who were ‘constructing empowerment’ to deliver increased engagement and better outcomes in the broadest sense. There was interest in group guidance and desire for innovation that makes a difference, as well as power constraints limiting the achievability of applying group guidance and other forms of innovation in practice.

This is an early substantive theory, and further research would help corroborate the presenting theory. Further interviews with a wider sample and comparisons to other institutions would enable this. This theory in relation to the specific scope is valid, as steps have been taken throughout the process to mitigate researcher bias and reactivity, and respondent bias (Cypress, 2017).

Although this research was developed within a single institution, the role of CDPs can be quite similar between institutions. Therefore, the subcategories and core category may be consistent in other HE careers services. There may be a weaker scope for generalisation in the scaling factors of the theory. Further studies may show what the CDP does and doesn’t have power over changes between institutions and it would be possible for additional domains to occur in different institutions.

The recommendations from this study which would need exploration of their viability are:

- CDPs could take a systems view of their work, in order to consider how to gain the leverage necessary for the scale of change that HE targets now require.
- CDPs could note which forms of power they lack in the theory, and which they can use more of to deliver the kinds of services needed, discussing these ideas with colleagues,

and considering which unusual collaborators could be helpful.

- Managers could provide strategic thinking time for CDPs to develop improvement plans based on the theory, working through the dimensions of each category and considering what it means at the micro, meso and macro levels of the service experience. It can also be applied to projects within the service.
- Leadership has a significant opportunity to support CDPs in delivering the goals of institutions by increasing the CDPs power to shape solutions. It needs effective strategies to be sought from CDPs rather than assuming or dictating what is necessary. Establishing long term goals as well as quick wins, restructuring, informal coalitions, and ensuring CDPs are at all key decision-making tables (even if this is not in line with hierarchy) may help.
- Professional bodies such as the CDI and AGCAS may benefit from advocating for organisational structures that place CDPs where they can be most effective. This would complement the professionalisation of the sector, and reduce micro aggressions that overstep professional boundaries and hierarchy that diminishes the CDP professional voice and excludes their seat at decision-making tables.
- Campaigns to educate academics about what CDPs roles involve (more than job search, CVs and interviews) and develop mutual goals to collaborate over, may support a shift in social norms and be an enabler of student engagement.
- Researchers could use the presenting theory to determine where to pitch their innovations towards. The more macro the shift in practice, the more likely the idea needs to be pitched not just to practitioners, but to senior and executive leadership teams in HEIs.



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