

## Just Postponing the Evil Day? Understanding the Guidance Needs of Full-time, UK-resident Masters Students

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### Introduction

This article reports initial findings from a research project on career progression and employability for full-time, UK-resident Masters students, funded by the Higher Education Careers Service Unit (HECSU). We have now tracked 24 students through six taught Masters courses at both pre- and post-1992 universities. We have used semi-structured interviews with the students at the start and at the end of their course, with significant others (family members, partners, personal tutors, or careers advisers) who influenced their career decisions, with their course directors, and with several HE careers advisers. The data generated has allowed us to begin developing in-depth case studies. These tell us about students' life histories and social backgrounds, the processes of their career decisions and transitions up to and including entry onto a Masters course, their relations with the labour market, and their views on guidance provision.

### Focusing on Masters students

This may seem like an unusual area for research, at a time when guidance policy has become very sharply focused on those who are 'at risk' or excluded from education in the 14-19 age range. There are also large numbers of part-time and overseas Masters students, whose career decisions and progression are similarly under-researched. But there are three important reasons why this project has been commissioned:

- There is little existing research on career decision-making or progression for Masters students, so we know almost nothing about their experiences.
- The continuing growth in graduate numbers sets a premium on those who can demonstrate 'something extra', but paradoxically it is becoming more difficult for universities to recruit full-time, UK-based Masters students in some subject areas. This is reducing the pool of potential PhD candidates, which may have knock-on effects in recruiting future lecturers of a sufficiently high calibre.
- The bulk of funding for HE Careers Services is for work with undergraduates, and there is specific funding for services to work with PhD students and contract research staff, but there are (with rare exceptions) no dedicated resources to provide guidance for this group.

This article reports interim findings, based on the first round of interviews, about the guidance needs of Masters students. We describe how they perceive and use existing guidance provision, and how careers advisers view their work with this client group. We offer one possible framework for analysing their guidance needs, and some (as yet) tentative suggestions about how careers education and guidance provision might be enhanced for them. First of all, we begin with some more detail about the participating students.

### The students and their Masters courses

We began to select our sample (all details are anonymised to protect confidentiality) by seeking a range of courses from a pre-1992 and a post-1992 university, which are promoted as having varying degrees of vocational relevance:

- Interpreting, Applied Sciences (pre-1992 university)
- Graphic Art, Business (promoted as a 'conversion' course, not an MBA) (post-1992 university)
- Philosophy, Classics (pre-1992 university).

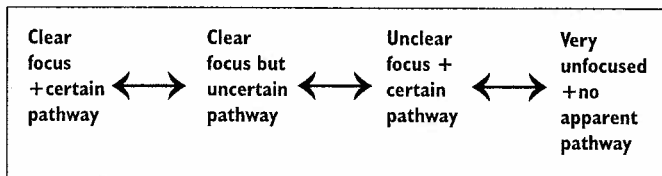
We have worked with four students from each course, aiming for a broadly representative sample in terms of age, gender and ethnicity, while also including some exceptional students. Almost all of the students come from middle-class backgrounds. They rely heavily upon their parents to fund them through the year of the Masters degree, with parents paying course fees (ranging from £2,700 to £4,800), and contributing towards living expenses in most cases.

Our analysis of their career decision-making, in choosing to do a Masters course, revealed three main patterns: 'staying on', 'moving on', and 'coming back'. (These are discussed in more detail in our first consultation paper.) Almost half of our sample, 11 students across all the courses except the Business conversion course, were staying on at the same university to study the same subject as their first degree immediately after graduation. Entering the Masters course has not felt like a major career transition to these students, and for some of them, it has partly been a way of deliberately postponing their transition into the labour market. This is not to suggest that their reasons are negative, though. Most of them had a powerful, intrinsic motivation to continue studying a much-loved subject, and this was often closely linked to their evolving sense of personal identity and desire for self-actualisation. A much smaller group of four students were moving on to a new subject and/or a new university straight after their first degree, and choosing a different career direction. A complex combination of social, cultural, economic and personal factors have influenced their decisions. The remaining nine

students were coming back into HE after a period of employment. Their decision to do a Masters course was often driven by dissatisfaction with their experiences in the labour market, and a desire to find more fulfilling and/or high-status work.

### Diagnosing students' guidance needs

In trying to understand these students' guidance needs, we analysed their first interviews again, looking through a more diagnostic prism at their accounts of deciding to do a Masters course. We drew on elements of one common model of guidance, Bedford's (1982) 'FIRST' approach (FIRST is an acronym for diagnosis of clients' vocational focus, information, realism, scope and tactics). Some patterns seemed to emerge around their degree of vocational focus, combined with the degree of relative certainty that they appeared to ascribe to the Masters course as part of a coherent career pathway. Such an analysis produces the following typology along a spectrum:



Before describing this classification in more detail, a number of cautions are necessary. Firstly, we do not wish to suggest that a concept like 'vocational focus' is a conscious consideration for these students. It is a construct of guidance theory and practice that we are applying, to try and illuminate ways in which guidance provision serves them or might do so better. Secondly, typologies always oversimplify the complexity of individuals' situations, and we should beware of them becoming stereotypes. Moreover, we anticipate that student beliefs and actions may well alter during their year on the Masters degree. Course contexts (including in relation to the labour market) may shift, happenstance may intervene, and initially clear plans may be re-focused or go out of focus. Thirdly, 'certainty' about the Masters course as part of a vocational pathway is, at this stage, only an aspect of the students' beliefs, often related to the way the course is marketed. Further data will tell us how certainly any of these courses might lead to any expected career, and how student dispositions and actions by them and others may shape their direction. Accordingly, the following 'diagnoses' are tentative.

#### *Vocationally focused, certain pathway*

Some of the students, particularly on the Applied Sciences course, are among those who are clearly focused on a highly specialised career, which is strongly associated with their academic and personal identity, and for which the Masters degree appears to offer a relatively certain pathway. Their career interests have focused progressively since choosing A Levels. They have considerable knowledge of the industry they wish to enter, acquired through their studies, through

effective careers research, and in some cases through previous employment. They are aware of the competitive nature and economic uncertainties of the industry. Their tutor controls the allocation of industry bursaries, and is well-connected with the industry. He claims to be able to provide networking possibilities, and even placement into jobs, through his personal contacts, many of whom are alumni of this Masters course. It remains to be seen how secure this vocational focus and apparent fast-track into the industry will be, particularly for the female students who are entering a very male-dominated occupation.

#### *Vocationally focused but less certain pathway*

Most of the students studying Interpreting and Graphic Arts also begin their Masters with relatively clear vocational focus, again closely bound up with their own sense of identity and non-traditional lifestyles. Both groups enjoy the creativity as well as the risk-taking element of their work. They appear to display well-developed career management skills, being aware of the need to profit from opportunities the Masters course presents for understanding and networking in their chosen field, as well as to showcase their work. They are well aware of the risky and uncertain nature of the freelance careers they are likely to enter. However, since their view of these difficulties results mainly in an intense determination to succeed, it is no surprise that they have not formulated alternative plans in case of failure to establish themselves.

#### *More certain pathway, but vocationally unfocused*

This group mainly comprises students taking the Business conversion course. Having chosen their first degree subject with little focus, or deliberately in order to keep wider options open, they perceive that 'business' is the largest single area of graduate employment. They have very little idea of what specific occupations it might entail, or of their own suitability for these occupations. They hope that the Masters course will provide them with specific knowledge of business management, which they believe employers require, and that this will lead them into employment. However, they have little self-awareness, cannot represent their experiences in terms of employability, and are unable to interpret careers information and guidance, or contacts with employers. They expect the Masters qualification will provide them with an advantage in the graduate labour market, but their obvious lack of career management skills may make it difficult for them to capitalise on their extra credentials.

#### *Vocationally unfocused, no apparent pathway*

Some of the students with least vocational focus are those studying the academic Masters degrees – Philosophy and Classics. As we have already noted, most of them have a deep intrinsic motivation to continue studying their subject. They have few clear career ideas for the future, and many explicitly resist pressures to make a definite career decision. Two students refer to the 'dreaded question' – 'What do you do want to do?' – posed by parents and (they assume) careers

advisers. Given their generally negative perceptions of the graduate labour market, one element of their decision-making is to delay their entry into employment and find more fulfilment through further study. Some are considering future options such as an extended period of travel, voluntary work, or playing in a band. They are often anxious that their decision to study a non-vocational subject for an extra year will be seen as frivolous or hedonistic by family, friends and employers. However, their parents are usually supportive of the Masters option, believing it will give them enhanced prospects in the labour market. The students also express this hope, along with the hope that they will discover rewarding occupations to enter, but their lack of career management skills may limit their ability to generate more focused career ideas or to 'cash in' their extra credentials.

We suggest that this range of attitudes – which overlaps with particular courses, but by no means precisely – implies a variety of guidance needs among the students, rather than a blanket approach to Masters students in general. (If anything, our simplified typology underestimates the variation in needs.) This in turn has implications for guidance provision. Let us turn next to different views of the provision on offer.

### **Masters students' perceptions of career guidance provision**

In our interviews with the students, we explored their perceptions and use of career guidance provision, which we interpreted broadly. Most students had used the Internet as their major source of careers information, although none had used their university careers website or the Prospects website (of which the large majority were unaware). This had been effective for those searching for specific Masters courses, and some then made further decisions based on the nature of e-mail responses from course tutors. As part of a broader 'guidance community', tutors' encouragement was often a crucial factor in deciding to do the Masters, although academic, personal and institutional interests may be at play here. Parents were highly influential, too, both in financing the Masters year, and in valuing postgraduate study as an option. Friends' and siblings' positive reports of postgraduate study, and negative reports of employment experiences, could also be influential.

Within course-based provision, different subjects offer different levels of access to careers education and guidance within the first degree and the Masters course. This is also related to their location in a pre- or post-1992 institution. In the technical Masters degrees, such as Applied Sciences and Interpreting (both based in the pre-1992 university), employers may recruit directly from these courses without advertising publicly, and tutors have close links with the industry. Moreover, the pre-1992 university enjoys privileged access to major employers in comparison with the post-1992 university. In courses such as Graphic Arts

and Business, tutor liaison with the sector may again be crucial, fostering opportunities for students to network if it is effective. These are both located at the post-1992 university, where careers education and guidance are thoroughly embedded in the curriculum of first degrees, thanks to various academic and resource-related incentives. However, there are no such drivers at Masters level. The data suggests that the Graphic Artists, who are all 'staying on' in the same department after their first degree, are benefiting from the career management skills they developed earlier. Some Business conversion students, on the other hand, are less well equipped, three of them having 'moved on' from other institutions.

We were struck, however, by students' very different perceptions of the guidance on offer at their university careers service. This seemed to relate partially to our diagnosis of their 'vocational focus'. Of the students with little vocational focus, several explain that they deliberately avoid any contact with career guidance services or careers fairs, while others describe their contacts as desultory, perhaps picking up leaflets but avoiding conversations. They tend to see the careers service as a placement service geared to graduate careers in business – opportunities they do not wish to pursue. One of the Classics students provides a comment that is typical among this group:

I have never been to the careers service. I went once when my girlfriend went, and even then I just stood outside [laughs]. I get a nervous twitch when there is a careers fair in the union. It terrifies me.

The few vocationally unfocused students who actually have made use of their university careers service describe it as 'unhelpful'. They perceive careers interviews, or referral to computer-aided guidance packages such as Prospects Planner, as an unwelcome 'matching' process, directing them towards jobs they do not want.

By contrast, those students with clearer vocational focus see formal guidance provision as irrelevant to them now, as they have a clear goal, regardless of the certainty of their chosen career path. However, they generally have a more positive view of their previous experiences of careers education and guidance, and have found it helpful. One Applied Sciences student in particular benefited from highly specialised information and guidance provided by a careers adviser with inside knowledge of the industry, who was able to identify the Masters course as the only route into his chosen occupation.

This leaves us with a paradox. Students who have little vocational focus believe careers services are irrelevant to them, since they only provide a matching and placement service for those who know what they want to do. Students with clear vocational focus think careers services are irrelevant, because the service is there to help people who are still unsure what they want to do.

### Meeting the guidance needs of Masters students

Careers advisers we interviewed were emphatic in their views that most Masters students do not have fundamentally different guidance needs from undergraduates. They argue that most will be entering the same sectors of the graduate labour market as those holding first degrees, and therefore the same provision and approach in careers guidance is appropriate for both client groups. The Prospects website also carries numerous references to this issue, advising students that a Masters qualification in itself may not carry any advantage in the eyes of employers.

There just isn't a generic market for Masters. People that recruit graduates of any discipline, they recruit graduates of any discipline at whatever level.

*(Careers adviser, pre-92 university)*

So if Masters students are reading the careers press, they may feel that they've been there, done that as an undergraduate, so don't bother with that. I don't know if that's their view or not. But the graduate press is as relevant to them, by and large, and they should be looking at our regular jobs bulletin.

*(Careers adviser, post-92 university)*

With the exception of highly technical courses like Applied Sciences and Interpreting, the careers advisers do not generally believe that a Masters degree gives students the advantage they hope for in the labour market. They are aware that Masters students see themselves as distinct from undergraduates. But they believe that, like any other graduate, Masters students will have to demonstrate that the Masters degree has developed their employability. A 'gap' year after the first degree might be equally useful, and a poorly-presented Masters year might actually be a disadvantage.

Careers advisers are concerned that they are reaching only those students who already have the focus and career management skills to know they need help, and that those who are unfocused – and in greatest need of guidance – are not being attracted to use the available provision. This concern seems to be borne out by the evidence we have already presented. Together with the lack of course-based careers education provision or specific careers service resources for taught Masters students, these issues pose an important question: can the guidance needs of Masters students be better met simply by 'badging' existing (undergraduate) provision for them?

I suppose what I am saying is: I don't think that Masters students really need anything different [from undergraduates]. They need help and support to help them to be autonomous decision-makers in the same way that anybody else does. But as a group they think they need something different. Now, if we badge it differently, is that confirming their idea that they need something different, and are they then disappointed if they don't get something very different? And if they are right and

they do need something very different, then we need them to tell us and we need to work on it from that angle rather than the assumptions I am making at the moment.

*(Careers adviser, pre-92 university)*

The problem with focusing on such an analysis of Masters students' needs is that it centres on the point of transition into employment, reflecting the instrumental notion of the purpose of career guidance which has come to dominate UK government policies on both HE and guidance. It is an approach which views guidance as a 'market-maker', facilitating interactions between the supply and demand sides of the labour market. However, the ethical base of career guidance since the 1970s has been a more person-centred approach, embracing much looser purposes of assisting clients to pursue self-actualisation in their own terms. The careers adviser at the pre-1992 university, where 'pure academic' courses are predominantly located, expressed the dilemma this creates:

A lot of them are postponing the evil day, they quite like being at university, they are enjoying what they are studying, so they thought they might as well carry on for a year... I suppose in a professional sense I tend to feel that there *should* be something later, but why? I mean, it is their prerogative, and if that's what they want to do and that fits in with their current objectives, then, you know, that's fine... We tend to put decisions into a long-term plan, and sometimes there isn't a long-term plan, and why should there be?

*(Careers adviser, pre-1992 university)*

The issue of delaying labour market entry needs careful and non-judgemental consideration. Hodkinson et al's (1996) previous work on careership, together with the data from our project, suggests that decision-making is a complex process embedded within the social and cultural lifecourse of the student. Career decisions are neither narrowly economically rational nor irrational, but pragmatically rational as they express the ongoing interplay between students' dispositions and their 'horizons for action'. Positive decisions to pursue Masters level study for its own sake may coincide with uncertainty and doubt about perceived opportunities in employment, and these are in turn entwined with students' perceptions of what courses of action are possible for them, and how these fit their own developing identities.

A technician approach to guidance, which primarily offers matching or placing, is likely to alienate such students. Guidance that acknowledges the positive decision-making entailed in delaying employment and choosing the Masters might at least encourage these students to seek guidance in the future. At best, they might acquire more career management and transition skills, and increase their ability to meet the challenge of moving on from full-time education. However, we acknowledge that adopting such non-technician approaches would represent a significant challenge for guidance providers in the current climate. We

end by considering a few of the questions this raises for policy and practice.

### Issues for policy and practice

Our findings so far indicate that there may well be a marketing issue for HE guidance provision, which goes beyond the question of specific 'badging' with the Masters label, and is rooted in more profound issues about the nature of guidance. Policy-makers need to re-think their emphasis on the placement role of HE careers provision and the economically instrumental purposes they ascribe to guidance, given the way that this can impact negatively on both the perceptions of potential clients, and upon practitioners' ethics. The lack of resources for careers education and guidance for Masters students also needs to be addressed by government and universities.

Guidance providers – local HE careers services and national services such as Prospects – might better address the needs of vocationally unfocused students in particular by explaining more clearly the relevant help they can offer, taking into account students' rejection of what they perceive to be a job-search facility for the already-focused. Questions relating to how students feel about leaving university may be more appropriate introductions to the service than questions about occupational choice and labour market entry. Egan's (1994) staged problem-solving approach is highly relevant to this group: beginning by getting clients to 'tell their story', then helping them develop their own preferred scenarios, and finally devise strategies to 'get there'. For some clients, this need will be best met by an in-depth face-to-face interview, with an element of counselling, although it is becoming increasingly hard for under-resourced services to offer this.

There are, however, other ways in which new modes of guidance delivery in HE might be adapted to incorporate a more person-centred approach. In particular, ensuring a strong needs-based element in career guidance websites (see Offer, 2003) might be helpful. For example, 'further study' sections in websites generally do not address the complexities of the decision-making process that our study reveals. They appear to assume that the decision has already been made, and therefore simply provide information about available provision. A needs-based element could also take advantage of new 'narrative' approaches being developed in careers work with younger clients (Law, 2003), where clients are invited to think through careers issues raised through others' stories. Our research project data could provide useful material in constructing such narratives.

### Where does the study go from here?

We are currently nearing the end of the first phase of the project, which has concentrated on the students' decision to do a Masters degree, their experiences on the course, and their perceptions and experiences of the labour market so far. We hope to obtain funding for a second phase, which

would allow us to track our sample of students beyond the Masters course. We already know from our latest round of data collection, as students complete their Masters degree, that some difficult transitions and major changes of career decision are in store for some, while others appear to have achieved their immediate ambitions. Most importantly, we hope that pursuing a longitudinal aspect will tell us much more about the impact of the Masters degree on their career trajectories than our initial study can show.

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### Notes

We are grateful to Phil Hodkinson and Marcus Offer for their helpful comments on an earlier version of this paper.

Readers can obtain a more detailed consultation paper and/or short briefing papers about the project findings from Helen Bowman at the address below or via [www.leeds.ac.uk/lli/](http://www.leeds.ac.uk/lli/).

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