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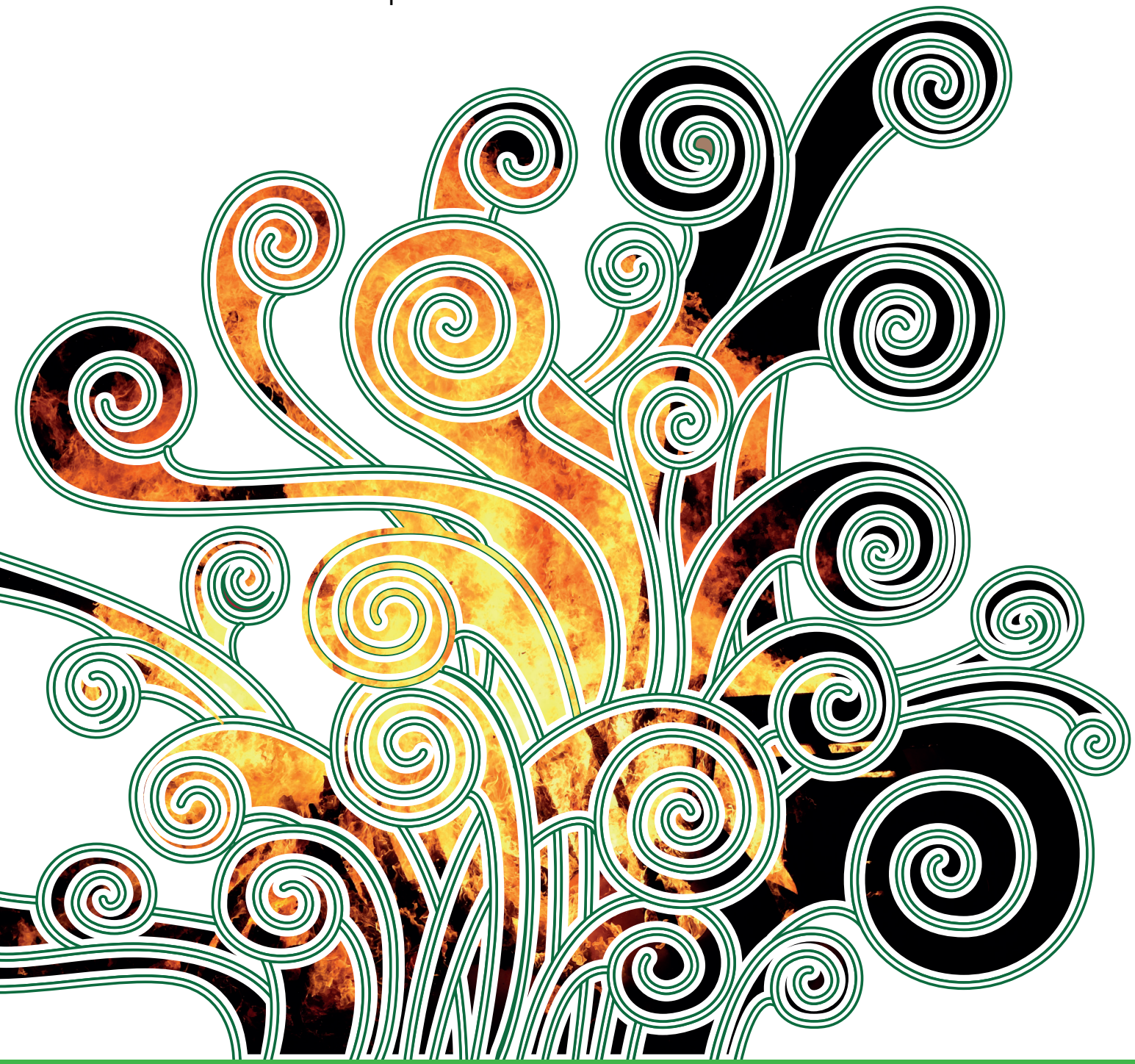

Promoting research and reflective practice in career development

NICEC

NATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR CAREER EDUCATION AND COUNSELLING

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Editorial

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Career education as a practice of social justice

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Welcome to the 55th issue of the NICEC journal. This issue contains a special collection on Justice, Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (JEDI) in career development. This issue brings together new voices alongside established scholars, reflecting the diversity of perspectives and lived experiences that shape the field today. When this special collection was planned over a year ago, we were unaware that global events would mean that this issue could not be more relevant or timely. Less than two weeks before our call for papers was released, US President Trump had signed Executive Order 14151, titled 'Ending radical and wasteful government DEI programs and preferencing' (The White House, 2025), whose wide-reaching implications include the obliteration of government funding for a range of progressive programmes and the rolling back of hard-fought freedoms within the US. By virtue of global interdependence, we must pay attention.

We chose to adopt the expanded framing of 'justice', not only as a quirky semantic nod to the fictional guardians of peace and justice from a space opera franchise, but as a necessary reorientation. Justice foregrounds the structural and systemic dimensions of inequality that are not captured in the acronym 'EDI' alone and calls attention to the broader socio-political context in which careers unfold. It reminds us that to speak of careers without also confronting power is to risk reinforcing the very inequities we seek to challenge. Each word in the acronym signals a distinct but interrelated commitment in the context of career development. Equity recognises that equal treatment does not suffice when starting points and systemic barriers differ, requiring instead differentiated support that levels the field. Diversity celebrates the richness that comes from having a multiplicity of identities, backgrounds, and perspectives within society. Inclusion insists that institutions, policies and practices actively enable participation and belonging. Taken together, JEDI foregrounds a vision of career development as an inherently political practice concerned with human flourishing and collective wellbeing.

The roots of career development as we know it today are steeped in values of justice, equity, diversity and inclusion. Sprouting from Frank Parsons' (1909) seminal work

Choosing a vocation, the sector sustains those nascent aims to improve the fates of those marginalised by society through the transmission of information, advice and guidance. Parsons' approach combined the scientific optimism of the Progressive Era with a moral imperative: that society *owed* its citizens meaningful work. In modern sociological terms, Parsons can be read as seeking to distribute cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986) more equitably, by transmitting the knowledge, skills and dispositions needed to navigate a stratified labour market.

A rich tradition of critical scholarship has since examined the extent to which those marginalised by society can ever really *choose* their livelihood. Debates have centred on the tension between individual agency and structural constraints, highlighting how the power and privilege bestowed by society combine to afford some people relatively more, or less, choice. The murmurs of the 'agency–structure' debate continue around the extent to which career guidance ameliorates the inequities of the social world or merely adapts individuals to unjust structures, despite many changes to the fundamentals of what can we call 'work', 'career', or 'vocation'.

The emergence, or increasing recognition, of the gig economy has transformed employment relationships and eroded associated protections. In response to this policy debates have begun to focus on what counts as 'fair', 'decent', or 'meaningful' work. At a global level, the International Labour Organisation (1999) articulated 'decent work' as a fundamental human right, linking it to poverty reduction, equity, and sustainable development. Building on this, Blustein (2019) extended the decent work agenda into career theory, arguing that precarious and unstable labour is not peripheral but central to people's career experience and must therefore shape how we theorise and practise guidance.

The career guidance for social justice movement extends this agenda by articulating how practitioners can actively resist and transform inequitable structures. Hooley, Sultana and Thomsen's (2018) work offers a set of strategies for embedding social justice into guidance, moving beyond the diagnosis of inequality towards concrete practices of solidarity, critical reflection, and structural challenge. The scholarship of this movement foregrounds ideas of education as an emancipatory practice, drawn from the pioneering work of Freire (1970). His central concept of *conscientização* can be roughly explained as the educational process by which learners move beyond surface awareness of their situation towards a critical understanding of the historical, social and political forces that shape it, and crucially, link that understanding to collective action for change. An understanding of this can frame guidance practice as an educational intervention that not only helps individuals make sense of their circumstances, but also to recognise the wider structures influencing them, and act in solidarity to transform those structures (cf. the first two articles in this issue).

Set against these emancipatory aims is the pervasive backdrop of neoliberalism. Since the 1980s, neoliberal policy regimes have reshaped education and employment across the Global North and South, privileging market logics of competition, privatisation and responsibilisation. In this view, individuals are cast as entrepreneurs of the self, responsible for investing in their own employability, marketing their skills, and weathering structural insecurities through resilience. Career guidance is often co-opted into this agenda, tasked with producing 'work-ready' graduates, increasing human capital, and smoothing labour market transitions. The epistemic violence of neoliberalism lies in its denial of alternative possibilities. As Freire (2004) warned, it causes a fatalism that implies there is no

alternative, thereby obscuring the fact that existing social arrangements are historically contingent and politically constructed.

The need to address systemic issues in addition to those operating at individual and organisational levels puts into sharp focus the stormy conditions that individual career trajectories navigate. Career practitioners support individuals through changes to the geopolitical landscape; the current or legacy impacts of war, conflict and displacement; widening inequality, poverty and precarity. The responsibility placed on practitioners to swim against this tsunami of systemic issues and pursue the noble aims of emancipatory career guidance – 'righting a wrong and bringing about a fairer society' (Hooley & Sultana, 2016) – might seem overwhelming. And yet, as attested by the articles in this special collection, there is clear evidence that the career guidance community can find ways to *resist* through creative practices designed to uphold justice and equity.

From theory to practice

The first set of contributions in this special collection exemplify how critical theory can be mobilised in practice, showing how career development can help individuals navigate opportunities by equipping practitioners and communities to interrogate the conditions that shape those opportunities. Working explicitly in a Freirean register, **Coney** and **Fitzpatrick** provide an example of innovative careers education, translating emancipatory pedagogy into an impactful, inclusive careers intervention for autistic learners. Dialogue, co-construction and problem-posing replace deficit framings; students are treated as epistemic agents whose voices shape aims and methods. The result is guidance as praxis, cultivating critical consciousness while removing everyday barriers to participation. **Ribeiro** and **Figueiredo** then take us on an important return to the Latin American origins of *conscientização* and critical consciousness, connecting Freire's educational philosophy, Martín-Baró's liberation psychology, and Bohoslavsky's career counselling. They argue that concepts forged through collective struggle in oppressive contexts must be critically contextualised when imported into Global North settings, lest they lose their transformative potential.

Sattler follows, proposing a 'social cluster' framework that surfaces how career stories are co-produced within wider discourses as a practical schema for holding agency and structure together in the guidance encounter. Through clustering individual narratives into shared patterns, Sattler contends that practitioners can name systemic forces, challenge exclusionary tropes and reopen foreclosed possibilities, suggesting a possible mechanism through which career guidance can create socially just spaces that resist neoliberal pressures. We next showcase the work of **Rowles**, this year's winner of *NICEC*'s 'Bill Law Memorial Award' for her interdisciplinary, linguistics-informed interrogation of where ideas about 'career' originate, underscoring how conceptual vocabularies themselves carry normative assumptions baked into everyday career talk, and how reframing them can expand what counts as a viable future in so doing, offering guidance discourse as a lever for social inclusion.

Marginalisation and the lived experience

The second set of articles focuses on how marginalisation is lived and negotiated within guidance practice, foregrounding communities for whom career development can be

unevenly supported, neglected or structurally constrained. Each of these offers a window into how guidance can reproduce exclusion and act as a site of recognition and solidarity. We see gaps in provision, blocked transitions, invisible labours of integration, and the fragile moments where new possibilities emerge.

McKenzie explores the 'guidance process gap' in multicultural Ireland, showing how migrant students encounter fragmented career provision. The analysis points to systemic shortfalls rather than individual deficits, underscoring the need for coherent, equitable guidance infrastructures that can address cultural and linguistic diversity. **Comer** examines refugee-background youth in Scotland, mapping the barriers they face in progressing from further education to university. Despite strong personal aspirations, structural hurdles such as policy restrictions, financial obstacles, and limited institutional flexibility serve to narrow horizons for action. Observations of where guidance and support can make decisive differences are elucidated. **Kekki** takes us inside the everyday practices of Finnish career practitioners working with migrants. He depicts them as 'invisible street-level integrators,' simultaneously constrained by assimilationist policy logics and negotiating space for recognition of clients' complex stories. His analysis reveals both the hidden labour of practitioners and the ethical dilemmas of balancing systemic demands with human needs.

Boyd shifts the lens to first-generation university applicants in England. Using Careership theory, she demonstrates how horizons for action are bounded not only by structural inequalities but also by the ways guidance and open days are experienced. For these students, in-person events often serve as transformative turning points, provided they are created to centre a sense of belonging and resonance rather than merely delivering information.

Rooney examines the influence of gender-based violence on women's career trajectories through the lens of higher education practitioners. Her findings illuminate how abuse reverberates across domains of confidence, aspiration, and progression. Career guidance, in this context, is not simply about information-giving but about holding space for healing, resilience, and re-authoring futures. **Roberts** shifts the focus to midlife women lawyers seeking to refocus their careers after a break. Her analysis reveals the structural and cultural barriers that continue to narrow women's professional possibilities, even in high-status fields. The article speaks to the dual pressures of gendered expectations in both family and workplace contexts, and to the resilience required for re-entry and progression.

Millar brings to the surface the often-unspoken impact of child loss on career decision-making. This moving study illustrates how grief and bereavement, which are often overlooked in career development, profoundly shape identity and have significant implications for a person's career trajectory. The paper shows how career guidance can become inclusive and affirmative by addressing a form of loss that is frequently silenced. This collection concludes with **Levett**, who uses Photovoice methodology to create spaces for resonance and reflection in career support. They centre participants' visual narratives, she demonstrates how career guidance can make visible the interior worlds of clients and generate new modes of understanding that transcend traditional models. Resonance here becomes both a research tool and a principle of socially just practice. These contributions foreground a community-focused ethical horizon of career development to include care, recognition, and resonance as central to just practice. Together, they show that when

practitioners attend to the profound embodiment of emotions that texture a person's career resulting from experiences of marginalisation, displacement, violence and loss, guidance can offer value for transformation at the individual level.

Global challenges and the future

Following the special collection, this issue also includes three general articles on career guidance, with a common theme of global challenges and future horizons. **Chen et al.** investigate the disruption of the COVID-19 pandemic on student career development, showing how crises exacerbate inequities while prompting adaptive forms of digital guidance. *Grant* addresses climate change, exploring how strategic leaders view the role of guidance in the face of ecological crisis. Her findings expose tensions in 'green guidance,' particularly concerns about neutrality, but also the emerging recognition that justice must extend to planetary futures. In the final article of this issue, and possibly the final article of his groundbreaking career, **Andrews** takes a historical lens to school-based guidance in England, drawing lessons from the past to envisage possible futures. His analysis highlights cycles of reform and retrenchment, reminding us that justice in career education requires both historical memory and forward vision.

The issue closes with three book reviews: *Decent work, inclusion and sustainability*, *Developing employability capital in university students* and *Navigating career options for a resilient and sustainable future*.

Conclusion

We hope this issue sparks further consideration and discussion about a future vision for the profession that is purpose-driven and which seeks the collective pursuit of dignity, decent work, sustainability, and justice. The collection featured shows that career development work is not neutral; guidance practice, theoretical contributions and policy interventions serve to challenge or uphold inequity. The authors urge us towards critical reflexivity, reminding us to question language, structures, and power. Through these contributions, we see how practitioners are empowered to act as agents of change, helping individuals recognise how they may internalise or embody dominant narratives as personal failings, to resist that responsibilisation and instead open spaces for solidarity and transformation.

Career development is a field caught in tension. We battle co-option into neoliberal logics of human capital and employability as a necessary condition for being able to have the privilege to serve others. Yet, we are still animated by our emancipatory roots, and this offers hope for the future that resists fatalism (without being too Panglossian). This hope is expressed through the contention argued here that career education is a practice of social justice. Every act of guidance involves questions of access, recognition, and dignity that signal whose knowledge counts and whose futures are imagined as possible. We can choose to expose that where neoliberalism frames freedom as competition, merit, and choice, it serves as a trap that narrows horizons while insisting upon their expansion, and instead delivers insecurity, precarity, and disconnection. In the act of naming the system as contingent and constructed, we create space to imagine alternatives. Career practice itself operates as a site where structural inequities are materialised and, therefore, where they can be disrupted, through affirming dignity, attending to trauma and grief, creating dialogical and participatory spaces, and situating careers within ecological and political contexts.

Of course, this issue could not capture every work emerging in response to our call. We are mindful of colleagues whose contributions lie beyond these pages and of important perspectives that await exposition. The strength of such a response suggests that there is scope to revisit this theme in future issues, ensuring that justice, equity, diversity and inclusion remain at the centre of our collective inquiry. While our work continues, this issue functions as a formidable reminder that career education and counselling offer a powerful site of resistance, recognition, and re-imagining. In this way, career education affirms that another future is possible, and that working towards it is both our professional mission and our ethical obligation.

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Special Collection:

Justice, Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (JEDI) in career development

Research Article

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Taking a Freirean approach: Applying transformative pedagogy to create inclusive careers provision

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Abstract

This article considers the application of Paulo Freire's philosophy of critical pedagogy to the work of developing careers and employability support for autistic university students. Drawing on Freirean principles of critical dialogue, co-creation and praxis, the authors describe their participatory approach to reflecting on inequalities that exist and engaging in transformative action to enhance inclusion. By sharing their reflections and evaluating their work through the lens of Hooley et al.'s *Five signposts to a socially just approach to career guidance*, they present a model for careers practitioners to engage with learners as equals and to develop emancipatory careers provision.

Keywords: Freire, co-creation, praxis, social justice, autism

Introduction and context

In his seminal text, *Pedagogy of the oppressed*, Freire asserts that, 'education is not the 'deposit' of knowledge but the praxis of freedom - a practice in which the oppressed become subjects, agents of their own liberation' (Freire, 2000, p. 78). What might this

mean for career practitioners situated in an educational context? Who are the oppressed, and how might they be liberated? In this article, we, a careers practitioner (KC) and a student collaborator (JF), will describe how we and others used a Freirean approach to develop inclusive careers and employability provision in a UK university.

Whilst higher education was initially conceived as a public good and a political and moral practice for the benefit of society, some believe that this has now been 'reduced to a private good' (Giroux, 2010, p. 715). Those who hold this view might conceptualise universities as the providers of skills and capabilities required by employers that will enable economies to maintain their productivity levels in neoliberal societies. Sennett (2025) warns that these higher education institutions, which previously may have supported the development of criticality and transformation of individuals and their contexts, are now at risk of being merely providers of training, measured on levels of employability and student satisfaction. Whilst these are not inherently harmful ambitions, this move potentially limits universities to producers of graduates who are workplace-ready, and is in danger of diminishing students to 'objects whose primary responsibility is reduced to meeting contemporary workforce needs' (Hyslop-Margison & Naseem, 2007, p. 347). Liasidou (2014) declares that certain groups of students, such as those who are disabled, are at risk of being excluded due to 'alleged inability to contribute to performance indicators and cope with the competitive 'human capital' marketplace of higher education institutions' (p. 123).

One example of the way in which the critical pedagogy tradition has been adopted within the field of careers is through Hooley et al. (2021)'s *Five signposts to a socially just career guidance*. These authors assert that in a world of power imbalance and injustice, career guidance (and therefore the educator/practitioner involved) has 'the capacity to intervene in this unequal world and support people to flourish' (Hooley et al., 2021, p. 59). However, Hooley et al. (2021) observe that 'the discourse of 'career management' and maximising 'employability' often serves to responsibilise failure' (Hooley et al., 2021, p. 61); this can lead to individuals considering themselves to be to blame for their lack of success, rather than to question the inequitable structures and attitudes that may exist. Some individuals may be disadvantaged both during their time at university and once in the workplace. One such group are autistic students and graduates.

Autism can be understood as a lifelong developmental disability which impacts 'how an individual communicates, processes information and makes sense of the world' (Vincent, 2017, p. 301). Contrastingly, using the lens of neurodiversity, which highlights neurological differences within the human race, autism is viewed as part of the range of natural phenotypic variation (Costley et al., 2023). Despite a growing understanding and acceptance of this neurodiversity perspective, Knapp et al. (2024) note that societal barriers and a lack of appropriate support exacerbate challenges experienced by individuals. Autistic students may be faced with barriers resulting from inaccessible elements of their university careers service, such as the format of careers information and the language used in guidance meetings, or simply perceiving that those who work there lack an awareness of autism (Pesonen et al., 2020; Shaw Trust, 2024). Perhaps it is unsurprising then, that one study found that autistic students were less likely to approach careers centres for input about their future career than family, friends or academic staff (Briel and Getzel, 2014). When it comes to the workplace, this experience of disadvantage may continue, as autistic graduates located in many countries of the world are reported to be less likely to be employed than graduates of any other disability type (Cheriyan et

al., 2021; Pesonen et al., 2021; Toogood, 2025; Vincent & Ralston, 2024). Those autistic graduates who are in work are often underemployed (Baldwin et al., 2014; Pesonen et al., 2020), or mal-employed: engaged in work that is not aligned to their skills and qualification levels (Remington & Pellicano, 2019).

Given the ways in which autistic students and graduates are at risk of being marginalised as described above, the Freirean label of 'oppressed' could well be applied to them. Aware of this context, KC, the careers practitioner, opted to conduct a study which sought to bring about change and justice for this group. The study was located within an emancipatory paradigm and influenced by critical autism studies, which encompass principles of neurodiversity, lived experience and disability justice (Freeman Loftis, 2023). Participatory action research was chosen as an approach, given its alignment with critical theory and aims of transforming not only activities, or the persons involved, but 'the social formation in which the practice occurs' (Kemmis et al., 2014, p. 17). This concept of a reflective type of research involving autistic students as equal members in the process, working collaboratively to seek to understand the current situation with the idea of eventual greater impact, was ideal for this study. What followed were a series of cycles of action research which adopted a Freirean pedagogy involving critical dialogue, co-creation and praxis. A brief outline of these key features of Freire's philosophical approach to education are given below.

A transformative pedagogy

For Freire, education could never be neutral: it always behaves in a way which fosters either conformity or freedom (Freire, 2000). He declared that education systems could be used to perpetuate social inequalities by reinforcing existing oppressive power dynamics (Freire, 1985). Against an educational background which he perceived as devoid of criticality, Freire proclaimed that education in its broadest sense should be about emancipation, offering students the opportunity to develop critical consciousness, where they deepen their understanding of themselves, their context and the oppressive political powers at work around them. For Freire, pedagogy was not something which should be forced on students, but instead ought to be a 'political and moral practice that provides knowledge, skills and social relations that enable students to explore possibilities of what it means to be critical citizens' (Giroux, 2010). If we are to follow Freire's philosophy, career practitioners working in an educational setting are presented with a choice: to integrate students into society in its current state, or to aid them to become active citizens engaged with self-determination and an awareness of their transformative agency (Escobar et al., 1994). Apple (2003) declares that it is not enough to become aware of the role that education can play in oppressing certain groups, although this is a necessary starting point; there must also be action. But what might this action comprise? Freire asserted that transformative pedagogy consisted of a series of philosophical principles: dialogue, co-creation and praxis. Each of these will be outlined in turn.

Firstly, engaging students in critical dialogue is a key concept of Freire's pedagogy. Through the sharing and debating of ideas, students can develop a deeper understanding of the world (Sennett, 2025). Freire affirmed that dialogue is crucial for human existence and transformation:

> To exist, humanly, is to name the world, to change it…Human beings are not built in silence, but in word… If it is in speaking their word that people, by naming the world,

> transform it, dialogue imposes itself as the way by which they achieve significance as human beings.
>
> (Freire, 2000, p. 88)

Freire maintained that this dialogue must be authentic, rooted in love and undertaken with mutual respect and humility, leading to trust between those involved. As noted by Sennett (2025), providing opportunities for those who have been disadvantaged is of particular importance: 'through engaging in critical dialogue, the oppressed are exposed to realities and perceptions beyond their personal experiences, enabling them to dissect, question and ultimately uncover the structures that maintain oppression' (p. 17). Some critics of Freire's notion of critical dialogue warn that educators could manipulate students by using teaching to impose their political ideologies on students. Whilst this is an important consideration to be mindful of, Vismara (2021) counters that Freire's strategies are in opposition to such an authoritarian approach, highlighting that his theories are based on open dialogue and discussion, starting from the perspective of the oppressed and with the aim of improving their lives.

Linked to critical dialogue is the concept of problem-posing. Freire argues that if education is to be truly liberating, it cannot apply a 'banking' approach: 'In the banking model of education, knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing' (Freire, 2000, p. 72). In this model, the students must passively accept the 'deposits' of knowledge from the teachers, who possess all the understanding. Instead, Freire recommends this 'problem-posing' approach, where teachers accept they possess just one view of the world and, similarly, students must recognise their experience and views of the world are equally legitimate. Freire (2000) argued that problem-posing education 'breaks the vertical patterns characteristic of banking education' (p. 80) and in this way can be a practice of freedom. When this occurs, Freire stated that the 'teacher-of-the-students and the students-of-the-teacher cease to exist and a new term emerges: teacher-student with student-teachers' (Freire, 2000, p. 80).

A second key concept in Freire's pedagogy is co-creation with students; as noted by Sennett (2025), this principle is at the foundation of Freire's anti-authoritarian approach to education. Here, 'all involved must be equal partners in this process of knowledge creation…no one person can dominate, and no one's voice is invalid' (Sennett, 2025, p. 16). Freire (2000) asserted that the inequalities in society could dehumanise people and that the role of education should be to rehumanise us. In order to achieve this, Freire wanted to re-model the teacher-student relationship to an 'egalitarianism marked with collaboration and partnership' (Morales, 2021, p. 216). As Sennett (2025) avers, co-creation is particularly important when educators are working with those who have been marginalised in the past. Freire highlighted that a challenge for those from oppressed groups can be that they have adapted to their position as marginalised, have internalised it, and therefore have to choose between conformity and becoming their 'authentic' selves (Freire, 2000, p. 48). Coming together to collaborate with others who have experienced this disadvantage can provide these individuals with a way to pursue freedom, to rediscover their authentic selves.

Finally, a third principle of Freire's critical pedagogy is praxis, defined as 'reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it' (Freire, 2000, p. 51). Engaging in critical dialogue whilst beginning to play a role in shaping the world around them 'fosters student

recognition that history is created by acts of human agency and can be changed in precisely the same manner' (Hyslop-Margison & Naseem, 2007, p. 350). This concept of praxis involves engaging students in reflection of their current situation and thinking about what can collectively be done to work towards transforming this, before acting and reflecting on this action. Freire proposed that participating in this praxis leads to a critical awakening, which Freire called '*conscientização*', or conscientisation (Sennett, 2025). Once students begin to develop this critical awareness, they have the awareness to continue to exercise agency, both individually and collectively (Hooley et al., 2021). Some critics of Freire's concept of '*conscientização*' state that there is a lack of clarity of the process involved in leading to change (Austin, 1995); however Vismara (2021) observes that Freire's adoption of this approach in Chile in the early 1960s, when he was first formulating his philosophy, led to the development of radical awareness. Indeed, Austin admits, '… formidable advances were made which were significantly driven by Freire's energetic team' (Austin, 1995, p. 48); perhaps the detail of the process involved must be determined by the co-creators themselves, as experts in their own contexts.

Putting Freire into action

Understanding the value of adopting a Freirean approach, we employed a co-creation methodology to develop tailored careers and employability provision for autistic students. The project took place over two cycles, comprising two academic years. Given that a key element of praxis involves utilising reflection of prior action to inform the next cycle of action, we have included summaries of our reflections at key points during the project. Reflexivity, the process of critically examining our values, positionality and influence on the various aspects of the project, proved to be an essential aspect and epistemological basis of our work (Cohen et al., 2018). The reflexivity at the heart of the project has helped to deepen our understanding of ourselves and increased the potential for the work to have 'developmental impact' (Somekh, 2013).

Co-creation cycle 1

To start, KC surveyed all autistic students at the university, seeking to obtain ideas about what types of tailored careers and employability provision might be preferable, the topics which might be covered by group provision and when these might occur. In this initial questionnaire, KC also included an invitation to be involved in the development of this tailored provision. These students would be called 'consultants', to reflect the expertise they would bring as autistic individuals with lived experience. Six students responded to this invitation, one of whom was JF.

A first step in the co-creation process was to provide opportunities for the six consultants to communicate with each other to consider the challenges and reflect on the issues that existed. It was important that this dialogue was as inclusive as possible; maximising choice can be a vital enabler of participation, allowing for the differing needs and preferences of autistic people (Haas et al., 2016). For KC, this meant finding out how each student preferred to communicate and providing options; of the six, three chose to participate in online focus groups, two by email and one in one-to-one conversations. Given that dialogue is a key part of a critical pedagogical approach, KC worked hard to share comments back and forth between the three groups, so that the consultants would be able to experience being part of a collective, 'problem-posing' together. In the various modes of dialogue, the

consultants and KC co-analysed the results of the initial questionnaire, discussed the issues including perceived challenges and injustices and decided on the next steps for the tailored provision for autistic students.

One of the key areas of injustice that emerged from the dialogue at this initial phase of the first cycle was employers' lack of autism awareness. Within this theme, the consultants described their negative experiences as a result of an employer's absence of understanding, the responsibilisation of the individual to bridge the gap in this understanding and the anxiety caused by this gap. A second area that emerged related to the lived experience of being autistic, in a world where they form a minority group. A third theme arising related to the mystery of the workplace for the consultants. The consultants had many suggestions for addressing this issue, including hearing from autistic graduates and from employers as a way of removing this mystery surrounding the workplace. As a result of the dialogue, a plan for the careers and employability programme for autistic students was co-produced. During this first cycle, this comprised three online workshops on topics determined by the consultants.

At the end of the academic year, KC invited all of the consultants to reflect together on the activities of the cycle and to consider what had been learned. There was positivity about the workshops and delight that tailored careers and employability provision had been offered for autistic students, due to our collaboration. One consultant noted that this was the first time that something she had been involved in had led to a positive change at the university. Another who had recently been diagnosed as autistic, said that working on this project had helped him accept his autism and to see that his differences related to being autistic could be viewed as strengths. Three of the consultants described the sense of belonging they felt as a result of being involved, describing being part of a community of like-minded people across the university with the combined objective of seeking to enhance inclusion.

Reflections on co-creation cycle 1:

> **JF:** Participating in this cycle was really interesting. It gave me an active role, a chance to co-produce with others inside the university and in this way to possibly impact the university community. It created a collective of people right across the institution, doing different courses and at different levels, but with the unified goal of trying to improve inclusion. I found the workshops themselves to be useful, giving me another level of understanding as I started to think about my future. I learned more about the support available and began to think critically about what inclusive organisational cultures could look like. Involvement in the project enabled me to realise that I wanted a career in the future which involved highlighting injustice for neurodivergent people in employment. This particular aspect helped to influence my subsequent PhD research, which is based on this topic of inclusive work environments.
>
> **KC:** As I came to the end of this first cycle, I was really pleased with what had been achieved. Using a Freirean approach of critical dialogue with the autistic student consultants had not only led to a series of tailored workshops for autistic students but had also resulted in the development of a community where concerns and experiences about employment and the future could be shared. There were even glimpses of transformation, in how the consultants viewed themselves and of a determination to challenge the injustice perceived in the recruitment processes

and workplace and to work to bring about change. As an educator, I felt that I too was beginning to be transformed by the project. Using this collaborative approach meant that I learned a great deal about the lived experience of being autistic and as a result, had more confidence in the careers and employability provision being offered to students. At times, this project had been difficult: systemic challenges in accessing contact details and permission to circulate information to autistic students; fearfulness of change from colleagues outside of the careers service who questioned my intentions in seeking to work with the autistic students; finally, issues with levels of engagement in the workshops from the wider autistic student body. As I reflected on these challenges, I was struck by the determination required by an educator to seek to work in this emancipatory way, when there may be resistance from systems and people to the changes this pedagogy may represent.

Between the cycles

Given the success of collaborating with the autistic students to develop careers and employability provision, KC invited several of the consultants (one of whom was JF) to join an institutional disability employability group that she chaired, which included key members of staff from across the university. KC observed how inviting JF and the other consultant to this group brought fresh enthusiasm and led to the organisation of a careers event for disabled students, to be held during Disability History Month. In addition, the other consultant had a role in the student union which meant that she knew the university's Pro-VC for Student Experience. Through this contact, the Pro-VC agreed to join the institutional disability employability group. His presence led to increased buy-in from other members and access to funding for the activities that followed. As with the workshops, ideas for ensuring the event was inclusive were suggested by the consultants, along with suggestions for marketing and for aspirational speakers.

As a result of the success of the first co-creation cycle, funds were found to create a diversity and inclusion internship within the careers service, which JF successfully secured. During this internship, JF provided feedback and insights on the provision offered by the careers service from a neurodivergent student lens, with a particular focus on the student webpages. KC and JF worked together on the creation of the first careers and employability webpage for disabled students at this institution, which was launched during Disability History Month.

Reflections on Between the cycles:

JF: I think that the activity between the cycles was crucial for launching our presence (both KC's and mine) within the university. The Pro-VC for Student Experience coming on board with the project through his involvement in the wider institutional disability employability group was pivotal and helped to create unique opportunities for KC, the other consultant and I to work together. It was great to get the chance to consult whilst at university, using my lived experience to try to bring about change. All of us involved in the collaboration have our own lived experience, we have all brought our own unique mark and perspective to the project and are on the same level as the practitioners. Co-organising and co-presenting at the Disability History Month event was a great way to champion the inclusion agenda across the university; together we caused a 'ripple effect' across the organisation in relation to neuro-inclusion and disability.

KC: At this point, nine months on from the start of cycle 1, I was delighted by the ongoing activities and the 'ripple effect', as we had started calling the ongoing impact of the work that had begun with our first coming together to engage in critical dialogue months before. I observed what a difference introducing the two consultants had made to the institutional group, in terms of energy, determination and also through introductions to a person who held power within the university. As I (along with these consultants) talked about our collaborative work, I noticed how the term 'co-creation' started to be used by colleagues within and beyond the careers service. Again, there were challenges; the greatest being the time required by these collaborative activities, all of which had to happen on top of my usual job. However, I was particularly pleased to see the consultants being given platforms to share their lived experience and to demonstrate their strengths. I noted how JF and two of the other consultants developed confidence, an assuredness that their voices had real value and a focus on making a difference. By this point, I was struck by how collaborating with the consultants was liberating me: this work was helping me to feel empowered, that I could make a difference and find ways to go beyond the boundaries of my role to provide ways to support disabled students.

Co-creation cycle 2

At the start of the next academic year, KC invited the consultants to reflect on the last cycle of co-creation and to use this to plan activities for the second cycle. Two of the consultants had graduated, but the remaining four were happy to continue to collaborate. Together, we considered that whilst the workshops had been well received, only about 10% of students who had informed the university that they were autistic had engaged with these. It was decided that this cycle would involve a 'multi-pronged' approach, still incorporating tailored workshops, but also developing specific online information for autistic students and offering inclusive one-to-one careers guidance appointments. The development of the inclusive career guidance appointments comprised KC providing disability and autism awareness training to careers colleagues, in addition to bringing about some of the alterations suggested by the student consultants.

Towards the end of the academic year, KC again secured funding to hire 'co-creation' disabled and neurodivergent interns. One of these interns was JF; during the internship he, two other autistic interns and KC spent time developing the careers and employability webpage for autistic students. The result of this is, to our knowledge, the most developed online resource for autistic university students. KC also arranged for JF and one of the other interns to deliver staff training to colleagues at a careers team meeting. Careers colleagues were later to share with KC that this was one of the most useful sessions they had received in a while.

During this cycle, we (JF and KC, and one other consultant) had the opportunity to speak at one internal and three external conferences about the co-creation project. Here we saw real interest in the work we were doing, with many people contacting us afterwards to ask for more information and advice on how to set up something similar at their own institutions. In this way, we saw the 'ripple effect' of the co-creation work growing.

Reflections on co-creation cycle 2:

JF: I particularly valued the opportunity to speak at conferences, to share what we have done and my recommendations for how things should be improved. On the project itself, I have enjoyed having the autonomy to work on the areas of the careers provision that I felt needed improving, in terms of enhancing accessibility. I think it's important to have freedom, to focus on the areas that you, as an expert by experience, consider to be the priorities. During the internship, regular meetings with KC were helpful and kept us on track through mixed methods of in-person and online meetings. I was able to work fully from home and this benefited me due to balancing my studies and the internship. KC supported each of us, tailoring aspects to our needs, enabling a collaborative and pragmatic approach which I do not think had been undertaken before at the university. The power imbalance was addressed through the interns deciding on the priorities for the project.

We have worked hard and have created some valuable resources which will help the careers team as it moves forward in its aims for inclusivity. Feedback from myself, and others I encountered whilst at the conferences, is that the careers service should continue to co-create with students, through paid internships. These paid internships communicate that the student is valued and are a way to remove some of the disproportion of power that exists between staff and students.

I have observed how this co-creation project and associated events and activities have led to real cultural change in the institution. There is now a raised awareness of neuro-inclusion, the role students can play and evidence of enhanced social cohesion as different teams within the university work more closely together. I have also had a chance to develop and learn a great deal – not just about the project and networking, but also about grasping what work can be like. Furthermore, this project opened substantial doors for me as through meeting the Pro-VC Student Experience, I learned about, successfully applied for, and was awarded the VC Bicentennial PhD Scholarship. My thesis is entitled: 'Modern Policing in the 21st century: time for inclusive cultural shift' and is looking at how neurodiversity can be promoted within law enforcement environments. Since embarking on my research, I have forged partnerships with some of the leading law enforcement agencies worldwide and this has enabled me to deliver neuro-inclusion training to government and law enforcement agencies in the UK, Europe, Canada and the US. These partnerships have led to invitations to sit on national committees including the National Police Chiefs Council Neurodiversity Working Group and Culture, Diversity and Inclusion peer support network of strategic EDI leads across the UK.

KC: Although we must be cautious about how much we claim that the work we have done has been truly emancipatory, there have definitely been glimpses, such as what JF has gone on to achieve since! For me, the collaborative work has developed me into a true autism ally. Whereas in the past I had sympathy and aspirations to do something to ensure my practice was inclusive, through listening to and working with autistic students, I now have a deeper respect, a clearer understanding and a stronger desire to ensure their voices are heard and that barriers are challenged.

> I have heard some of the consultants articulate the effects of the project, but one of my favourites has to be JF's comment at one of the conferences we spoke at together. When describing the impact the collaborative work has had at the university, he said: 'It's not a ripple, it's more like a tidal wave!'

In the time that has passed since the end of Cycle 2, the co-creation model has been adopted to develop inclusive careers provision for students from the LGBTQ+ community, care experienced students and black students and has been included in the institution's access and participation plan, as a way in which the university is working to eliminate gaps in progression to employment for these groups. In recognition of the work achieved, the careers service recently received an EDI award for work completed with and for under-represented groups. What started as just me, one careers practitioner seeking to develop critical dialogue with a group of autistic students, has grown into something which has had a transformative effect on those involved, our institution and even beyond.

Discussion: what did we achieve?

Aligned with the Freirean philosophy, Hooley et al. (2021)'s *Five signposts to a socially just career guidance* presents as a valuable tool to consider what has been achieved through this study. Hooley et al. (2021)'s five signposts are as follows: **building critical consciousness**; **naming oppression**; **questioning what is normal**; **encouraging people to work together**; and **working at a range of levels**. Our achievements will be considered against each of these in turn.

Firstly, '**building critical consciousness**' refers to the development of a critical awareness: Freire's '*conscientização*' described earlier in this article. To some extent, this was begun by bringing together the autistic student consultants to discuss what could be done to develop tailored careers provision and why this might be important as a method for supporting the wider autistic student community with the challenges they may face. Part of this involved a realisation of autism as 'difference' rather than 'deficit' (as autism has sometimes been viewed in society in the past) and an acceptance of this difference in themselves, through seeing strengths and similarities in their fellow consultants. In this, the consultants' perspectives of themselves were being changed, providing a glimpse of the transformation Freire asserts must occur: 'The weakness of the powerless must be transformed into a force capable of announcing justice' (Freire, 2021, p. 26)

The second signpost, '**naming oppression**', posits that career guidance can aid in the recognition of injustice for those who experience it and support people in coming together in solidarity. Through our co-creation work, we saw glimpses of this naming of oppression, when the consultants first engaged in critical dialogue, which resulted in several sharing their negative experiences of the workplace and fears for the future. This inevitably led to discussions relating to the third signpost, '**questioning what is normal**', where there was a recognition that those holding the power and possessing the opportunities in employment may be utilising recruitment methods that suited themselves, or the neurotypical majority of candidates, rather than the autistic candidates who may require alternative ways to demonstrate the strengths they can bring to the workplace. Another way in which the co-creation project questioned 'normal' approaches was with the careers and employability support provided by the service. Working collaboratively with the consultants to consider

the needs of autistic students highlighted many areas where the provision was not as inclusive as it could be; this included the language used, how careers information guidance was available for students and with some of the events offered. With this signpost, the project went beyond questioning what was normal to identifying these areas and then acting to bring about positive change, to enhance the accessibility of the service. In this way, our work echoed Freire's description of co-creation:

> Teachers and students … co-intent on reality, are both Subjects—not only in the task of unveiling that reality, and thereby coming to know it critically, but in the task of re-creating that knowledge. As they attain this knowledge of reality through common reflection and action, they discover themselves as its permanent re-creators.
>
> (Freire, 2000, p. 49)

The co-creation project clearly meets the goal of the fourth signpost, '**encouraging people to work together**'. The achievements of the project could not have been realised without the social interaction, critical dialogue and collaborative work of the group; however, this aspect was not without its challenges. For the consultants, there was the element of juggling involvement with their studies and other commitments; for KC, there were challenges in finding ways to ensure that there was effective dialogue, given the different preferences for communication. An additional, important issue that KC wrestled with as the member of staff in the institution where all other members of the group were students, was the potential issue of a power imbalance, and how to attain the type of working together that Freire envisioned: one that is a 'horizontal relationship of which mutual trust between the dialoguers is a logical consequence' (Freire, 2000, p. 91). Whilst steps were made to demonstrate dignity and value to all collaborators, it is difficult to ascertain whether this power imbalance can ever be fully removed.

The fifth and final of Hooley et al. (2021)'s signposts is '**working at a range of levels**'. As the authors note, there is likely to be more of an emancipatory effect if consideration is given to the existing structures that we work in and what can be done to go beyond the bounds of our immediate practice. As described using 'the ripple effect' term, this co-creation project did indeed work at a range of levels, having an impact at an individual level (for the collaborators involved), a local level (the careers service and the resulting enhanced provision), an institutional level (through colleagues adopting the co-creation model and the use of this approach in the university's access and participation plan) and even at a national level (through dissemination at conferences and sharing of practice with colleagues from other institutions).

What is perhaps not fully captured by using Hooley et al. (2021)'s *Five Signposts* as a tool for assessing what has been achieved by taking a Freirean approach to developing provision with autistic students, is the transformative impact *on those involved*. The positive, perhaps even emancipatory, effects on some of the consultants and the careers practitioner has been a delight to observe and experience. This echoes the Freire's promises of transformation: 'The teacher is no longer merely the-one-who-teaches, but one who is themselves taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach. They become jointly responsible for a process in which all grow' (Freire, 2000, p. 80).

Whilst we have highlighted many benefits of adopting a Freirean approach, it would be remiss of us not to acknowledge some limitations. First, in our context setting at the

beginning of this article, we could be criticised for presenting a polarising perspective, of neoliberalism versus liberation, with careers education using a Freirean approach presented as an emancipatory solution. Of Watts (1996)'s four socio-political ideologies in guidance, our approach would fit the 'radical' ideology, where careers guidance is used to bring about social reform. Watts (1996, pp. 227-228) observes that in practice, 'the extent to which it is feasible and/or legitimate for guidance to adopt a fully fledged social change approach is open to question'. We must be cautious about how much we claim to have achieved, and indeed, the extent to which social reform can be realised through this approach.

Secondly, we appreciate that we must also be careful about the degree to which we can claim that this approach was emancipatory. Whilst there were indeed glimpses of empowerment and transformation for those involved, and the careers provision at this institution has become more inclusive, barriers will still remain for autistic students seeking to transition to employment. In particular, whilst the students involved were made more aware of the challenges, the study did not have capacity to bring about change in the workplace, where many obstacles lie. Thirdly, we acknowledge that the approach described in this article requires resources, both in terms of time and money, for example to pay collaborators for their time and expertise. We are aware that many practitioners would not have the luxury of these resources and may be questioning how they could implement any suggestions made. This is an understandable challenge; for these practitioners, we would suggest that the most important aspect of the approach is the way that individuals are seen and treated. In all careers interventions, the practitioner can view the student/client as someone bringing expertise and can decide to communicate value to them. Practitioners can choose to amplify the voices of those they seek to support (see recommendations below) and in doing so can discover ways to empower them.

Conclusion and recommendations for practitioners

Despite the limitations outlined above, for those considering adopting a similar approach in their own institutions, the authors of this article strongly recommend it. Our own experiences have shown us how rewarding it can be to work collaboratively to create inclusive careers provision. There can be challenges in seeking to bring about change in educational institutions, and you may well encounter resistance, but working together to realise greater levels of inclusion and acceptance has the potential to bring many benefits. In his foreword to Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Shaull (2000) avers, 'Education either functions as an instrument that is used to facilitate the integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity to it, *or* it becomes the practice of freedom, the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world'. Those of us who work as practitioners therefore have a choice: to contribute to the status quo, or to do what we can, with those who will join us, to use our practice to make a difference. We hope that this account of our transformative work acts as a model for other careers practitioners to adopt, as they seek to use their work to raise critical consciousness and enhance inclusion, for the benefit of the disadvantaged and perhaps even for all.

For those careers practitioners who are interested in collaborating with autistic individuals (or indeed, other marginalised groups) in their settings, a series of principles for practice are suggested below.

Appreciate the needs and strengths of the collaborators

A key element of this type of collaborative work is to understand the individual needs and abilities of those whom you are seeking to involve in dialogue and co-creation. Prior understanding of the marginalised group you will be working with will aid in this; however, the most important approach is to ask the collaborators how they wish to communicate, where they wish to meet, how they would like to contribute, etc. Using this understanding, a practitioner can seek to ensure that all activities are accessible and inclusive, in addition to looking for ways for individuals to use and develop their strengths. For example, when working with autistic individuals, this principle would entail understanding the need for clarity in language and tasks, in addition to asking about preferred working styles and settings.

Facilitate engagement

For many individuals, this will be the first time that they have been invited to participate in this manner and so it is to be expected that they will need support to fully engage in the collaboration, particularly at the beginning. For example, in the study described in this article, some consultants were initially daunted when asked open questions about what the careers and employability programme for autistic students should comprise. Creating structure for the interactions (and sharing this beforehand, so consultants knew what to expect) and providing reassurance and positive feedback were key. In addition, the practitioner sought to demonstrate Freire (2000, p. 80)'s 'teacher-student with student-teachers' approach by truly listening to and responding to the autistic consultants' sharing of perspectives and suggestions; this led to increased confidence and involvement from these individuals over time.

Address the power imbalance

Whilst the ideal is that all participating in this collaborative work are fully equal, in reality, this may be impossible to achieve. Given that the practitioner is likely to be a paid employee and the other members are likely to be service users (whether this as students in a school or university, or clients in an adult community setting), there will be a power imbalance that could prevent effective collaboration.

The practitioner should seek to remove this imbalance as much as they are able, by seeking to approach the collaborative project with no set agenda. Instead, the collaboration should begin with questions asked of all participants (including, but not beginning with the practitioner): what do they see as the priorities? What are the existing challenges? Where could the opportunities lie?

Following this, members should jointly decide on next steps. It should be noted that this approach can initially be uncomfortable for all involved. In the study described in this article, there were times at the beginning where the consultants appeared unnerved by being given so much control, and the practitioner found the experience of 'letting go' of a pre-determined plan a little nerve-wracking! However, this discomfort was short-lived; once

all developed experience and understood the freedom of their new roles as partners, there was general enthusiasm for the new approach and the freedom this brought.

Amplify their voices

Given that the individuals you seek to collaborate with in this participatory way may come from underrepresented backgrounds or are marginalised in society, it is particularly important that you find ways to ensure their voices are heard. This not only provides opportunities for empowerment of these individuals but can also educate others; recipients could include practitioners, senior management or policy makers. In this way, collaborative work can begin to have impact beyond the immediate project, to highlight wider issues such as where oppression exists and what should be done to resolve this. Examples of amplification of the autistic consultants' voices within this study included inviting them to contribute to the training on a staff away day and to co-present at local and national conferences.

If you would like to find out more, please contact the authors, or look at the other published articles about this project:

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Conceptual Article

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Conceiving conscientisation and critical consciousness in career guidance and counselling: A reflection from voices in the Global South

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Abstract

The concept of critical consciousness has been embraced by various approaches that advocate social justice within career guidance. In this context, we revisit the Latin American origins of the ideas of *conscientização* ('conscientisation') and *consciência crítica* ('critical consciousness'), primarily associated with Paulo Freire in education and Ignacio Martín-Baró in psychology. We also examine their application in the career counselling of Rodolfo Bohoslavsky to emphasise the significance of these concepts in a global framework. We conclude that incorporating critical consciousness into career guidance and counselling is vital. However, we argue that there is a pressing need for contextualisation to refine these concepts politically and conceptually.

Keywords: Critical consciousness; Global South; interculturality; career guidance and counselling; Latin America

Introduction

Hooley et al. (2021) posited that the personal is political, suggesting that career guidance and counselling should aim for social justice and advocacy as fundamental principles. Achieving these goals is crucial for addressing the political and existential crises faced by diverse populations and socio-cultural and economic groups in the education and work fields.

Moreover, expanding and diversifying the audience for career guidance and counselling, along with enhancing its social and political commitment, is crucial. That is regarded as an urgent endeavour for ensuring social justice and promoting dignified career trajectories (Duffy et al., 2016; Richardson, 2012).

The career guidance and social justice movement (Hooley et al., 2021), the psychology of working theory (PWT; Duffy et al., 2016), and work and relationship counselling (Richardson, 2012) exemplify efforts to make career guidance and counselling more inclusive, diverse, and committed to social justice. Each of these approaches is built on the foundation of *consciência crítica* (*critical consciousness*, as it was translated into English), drawing inspiration from the work of Paulo Freire (1970).

The PWT (Duffy et al., 2016) defines critical consciousness as 'a careful and systematic analysis of one's social conditions, the perceived capacity to change them, and individual or collective action to reduce societal inequality' (p. 129).

The career guidance and social justice movement (Hooley et al., 2021) uses the concept of *conscientização* ('conscientisation', as it was translated into English, or the development of critical consciousness) which refers to 'helping people to develop a critical awareness of their surroundings, not just seeing what is happening in their lives and in the world, but also considering why these things are happening and in whose interest' (p. 60).

Richardson (2012) states that 'a contextualised understanding of how market work trajectories are co-constructed by both personal and social forces will enable the kind of critical consciousness that is an essential ingredient for a social justice approach to vocational psychology' (p. 207).

Scholars studying critical consciousness, such as Diemer et al. (2015), Diemer and Blustein (2006), and Watts et al. (2011), identify three key dimensions: critical reflection (or critical social analysis), political efficacy (or sense of agency), and critical action. Their studies and strategies are based on these dimensions (Diemer et al., 2015; Duffy et al., 2016).

While the concept of critical consciousness is well-defined, it is crucial to integrate the contextual, historical, and cultural discussions surrounding its use, particularly in global career guidance and counselling. Paulo Freire first introduced this concept in Latin America during the 1970s, and later by Ignacio Martín-Baró in the 1980s. It emerged in contexts marked by oppression, repression, state violence, and poverty, which significantly influenced its ontological, epistemological, and ethical-political foundations. These conditions of classism, authoritarianism, exclusion, and inequality have profoundly shaped people's experiences and identities.

There has been significant discussion regarding the relevance of mainstream career guidance and counselling concepts and practices, primarily proposed by developed countries in the Global North, in the contexts of the Global South due to socioeconomic and cultural differences (Arulmani, 2014; Leong & Pearce, 2011; Ribeiro, 2021; Sultana, 2018). These authors emphasise the need to contextualise theories and practices to ensure they are appropriate for the Global South. However, what happens when the situation is the opposite? Specifically, when Global North applies concepts and practices from the Global South in their contexts, do associated questions arise? Do issues of inequality, social justice, and emancipation carry the same meaning in both contexts?

Considering this, we revisit the Latin American origins of the concepts of *conscientização* ('conscientisation') and *consciência crítica* ('critical consciousness'). Henceforth, we will use the English translation to facilitate reading. We begin with the educational contributions of Paulo Freire in Brazil and Ignacio Martín-Baró's proposals for psychology in El Salvador. We highlight the career counselling proposed by Rodolfo Bohoslavsky in Argentina to debate their relevance in the global field of career guidance and counselling.

Our main aim is to draw attention to the fact that every concept is forged in a specific socio-cultural, economic, and political context and carries history behind it. Thus, when we import a concept, the specific context does not come with it, and we must reconstruct it, considering the specificities of the context in which it will be used. However, we should analyse the specificities of the contexts of origin, both politically and scientifically, to assess the potential of the concept reconstructed in the new context.

Conscientisation and critical consciousness were shaped in collectivist settings. To serve as a conceptual basis in a more individualistic context, especially those in developed regions where career guidance and counselling theories originate, their foundational assumptions should be reconsidered. Turning these concepts into individual capacities may compromise their intended transformative power.

Therefore, our central reflective question is whether concepts grounded in collectivist and unequal contexts can be imported into settings with very different characteristics without losing their theoretical, analytical, and practical power.

Theoretical background

We will briefly and synthetically present the conceptual basis analysed to sustain our discussion: praxis, conscientisation and critical consciousness, according to Freire's original proposal. It will be further discussed below.

Praxis is the dialectical unity of theory and practice, encompassing both action and reflection (Freire, 1970). Critical consciousness is a person's reflective, transformative, and co-created possibility to analyse social reality, power relations, and the injustices that surround them. It goes beyond mere perception of the world to critical analysis and transformative action (Freire, 1975). Conscientisation, or the development of critical consciousness, is both a process and a product of becoming aware of social inequalities and the possibilities for transformative action. It is marked by the intersections of people's trajectories and projects. Conscientisation involves becoming aware, but is not restricted to

awareness alone. It only makes sense from the moment it informs action in the world and change (Freire, 1975).

Latin American contexts (1960s to 1980s)

In the Latin American context from the 1960s to the 1980s, several influential thinkers developed key educational and psychological concepts. Paulo Freire introduced the ideas of conscientisation and critical consciousness as the foundation of his educational project, *Pedagogy of the oppressed*, in the early 1970s in Brazil (Freire, 1970; 1974; 1975). In the 1980s, Ignacio Martín-Baró proposed the concepts of praxis and de-alienation, which are similar to Freire's ideas of critical consciousness and conscientisation, as part of his psychological framework known as *Liberation Psychology* in El Salvador (Martín-Baró, 1988, 1994). Additionally, Rodolfo Bohoslavsky, drawing inspiration from the social psychoanalysis of Enrique Pichón-Rivière and José Bleger (Tubert-Oaklander & Tubert, 2004), developed the concepts of consciousness and alienation in his career counselling initiative named as *Clinical-Social Strategy* in the 1970s in Argentina (Bohoslavsky, 1977, 1983; Ribeiro et al., 2015).

Despite the distinct contexts of Argentina, Brazil, and El Salvador, a common thread connects these countries. That supports the theoretical and practical development of these three authors, Bohoslavsky, Freire, and Martín-Baró, thereby creating a shared conceptual foundation (Diaz Genis, 2004).

In *political terms*, the three countries experienced totalitarian and undemocratic governments characterised by military dictatorships that generated political instability and hindered the establishment of democratic systems. Centralised power remained firmly in the hands of the government, and there were significant limitations on freedom of expression and political organisation. This environment led to human rights violations and the repression of political and social opposition, including the persecution of opponents amid the rise of left-wing movements and the struggle for social change.

Thinkers such as Bohoslavsky, Freire, and Martín-Baró contributed to the body of knowledge and professional practices aimed at promoting democratisation, social justice, and rights advocacy.

Economically, the region faced crises marked by rising inflation that resulted in significant foreign debt. Additionally, there was deindustrialisation, with a focus on the primary sector and a heavy reliance on agriculture. A large segment of the population experienced extreme poverty due to income concentration, particularly affecting the working class.

Socially, poverty, inequality, violence, and impunity dominated the situation, which fuelled cultural and protest movements. These movements sought changes in habits and behaviours, including both armed and peaceful political efforts aimed at restoring democracy and ensuring fundamental human rights.

The concepts of conscientisation and critical consciousness emerged in response to the oppressive realities of state violence, poverty, and repression, shaping their ontological, epistemological, and ethical-political foundations. There was a pressing need to develop knowledge and practices that would confront the classist, authoritarian, exclusionary, and

inequality-generating contexts that influenced people's lives. Consequently, this conceptual construction began in the social sphere, extended into academia, and eventually returned to social contexts.

In fields such as education, psychology, and career guidance and counselling, there is a tendency to overlook the socio-economic and cultural factors at play. Additionally, they uncritically adopt concepts and practices from different contexts. That became a pattern commonly observed in Latin America (González Bello & Ledezma, 2009). Thinkers like Bohoslavsky, Freire, and Martín-Baró aimed to create alternative approaches, but their proposals were often repressed, hidden, or delegitimised, whether directly or indirectly. Paulo Freire went into exile from Brazil, and Ignacio Martín-Baró was murdered by the government. Meanwhile, Rodolfo Bohoslavsky's ideas were rooted in psychoanalysis and lacked a perceived subversive or revolutionary power, particularly evident in his first book (Bohoslavsky, 1977), which became his most recognised work. In his second post-mortem book (Bohoslavsky, 1983), he brings a transformative power, but which, unfortunately, became an unfinished work because of his premature death at the age of 33 due to health problems in April 1977.

Critical consciousness and conscientisation

Inspiration from education

Freire (1970) views education as a political act aimed at liberating people from oppression and injustice. We will apply the author's insights, particularly in the context of popular education, as we believe they offer valuable elements for considering career guidance and counselling.

According to Freire (1970), both men and women are social and historical human beings shaped by their relationships with the world. That means they not only live in a society but also actively participate in and influence the reality around them, thereby transforming it. Therefore, we cannot consider people and society separately; there is no abstract person independent of the social structure, nor is there a society that can exist without the human beings who create and sustain it. Historicity and consciousness characterise human beings, which means they can reflect on their reality and themselves, gaining awareness of what their existence and actions in the world entail. This relationship with time encompasses three dimensions: the present, the past, and the future. Consequently, people are subjects of praxis, agents who act in the world, creating a culture and driving transformation. Human action is reflective and, as a result, critical. True critical reflection occurs only within praxis and is a praxis indeed.

Learning and working as core actions

For Freire (1970, 1975), learning involves taking critical ownership of the concrete situation in which one lives. Thus, learning and consciousness go hand in hand. The author takes culture and working as fundamental elements for the development of the learning process. In practice, it is less a question of discussing the history and different meanings of these concepts than of giving those who learn a place as subjects of their learning process and history. Subject, too, to the transformation of their daily reality and the world in which they live. The proposal is that students perceive themselves as co-creators of culture.

Work, therefore, has a fundamental place in this debate since it is through working that people act in the world - and, in this action, they also transform themselves. Culture is what people add to the world because of humans acting and working in their endeavour to create and recreate according to their needs (Freire, 1974).

'I know now that I am educated' (Freire, 2001, p. 144), said an elderly peasant emphatically. And when asked why he now knew he was cultured, he replied with the same emphasis: 'Because I work, and, by working, I transform the world' (Freire, 2001, p. 145).

Thus, work, understood in its ontological and historical dimension, emerges as a humanising and transforming activity (Freire, 1970, 1975). However, alienation intervenes as a process that negatively impacts the recognition of oneself as a historical subject, causing workers not to recognise themselves as responsible for the product that was the fruit of their activity. The role of the educator is to provoke curiosity in students about the context, creating room for problematisation and new ways of understanding social reality. Freire (1996) points to the need to break with the individualistic and competitive ideals characteristic of neoliberal thinking, which place the responsibility for the precarious and oppressive situation in which they find themselves onto the oppressed.

Self-devaluation, conscientisation and critical consciousness

In this sense, an important concept worked on by the author is self-devaluation. This notion is typical of alienation and concerns the introjection that oppressed people make of the oppressors' view of them. That results in feelings of incapacity and inferiority, which is why they can devalue their knowledge. It also results in the personal attribution of responsibility for domination. By recognising that they host conceptions of the oppressor in their consciousness, it is possible, through conscientisation, to act towards liberation.

In this context, critical consciousness is essential. It involves understanding the causal relationships between phenomena and seeking to unveil and demystify reality. Additionally, a thorough integration with social reality characterises it. The concept of critical consciousness challenges and interrogates the fatalistic view of the world, which perceives social reality as something external and, therefore, resistant to any possibility of transformation (Freire, 1974).

Freire (1996, p. 26) emphasises the importance of highlighting the oppressed and their journey towards emancipation, offering a strong critique of what he terms 'neoliberal fatalism', the belief that 'there is no alternative'. However, he argues that history is not fixed; instead, it is a space of possibilities rather than deterministic factors. This situation prevents people from becoming agents of their lives.

In this deterministic perspective, there is no room for decisions. If tomorrow merely continues what today has established, there is no space for choice, only a forced acceptance of what already exists and what is to come. The temporal dimension signifies that the unfinished state is an ontological condition of social beings, suggesting that the future should be viewed as a process and a problem rather than a fixed and predetermined state (Freire, 1970). By reflecting on themselves and the world, human beings can perceive themselves as subjects of inquiry, allowing them to question their existence and to acknowledge what they do not know. This consciousness can lead them to seek new questions and answers.

Furthermore, it emphasises the necessity for the oppressed to discover and assert themselves as active subjects of their historical destiny, moving beyond the limitations imposed by a culture of domination and processes of marginalisation. As Freire (1970, p. 10) states, 'conscientisation is not just knowledge or recognition, but choice, decision, commitment'.

It is essential to differentiate between conditioning and determination. While macro-social structures condition people's experiences, they do not determine them. This distinction highlights the potential for transforming these structures, which requires a process of conscientisation. People, 'being aware of themselves and their surroundings, live in a dialectical relationship between their conditioning and their freedom' (Freire, 1970, p. 125). Therefore, it is not the state of being unfinished itself that is significant, but rather the act of recognising this unfinishedness. This recognition creates opportunities for people to construct new ways of being, driving them to transcend their conditioning.

According to Freire (1975), consciousness evolves through distinct stages, each reflecting varying degrees of understanding of reality. Conscientisation is an ongoing process that moves people from naivety to critical consciousness. This journey leads to the realisation that the circumstances people face are not solely dependent on them but influenced by a context of oppression and inequality. Importantly, this realisation is just one aspect of the journey, which also includes an understanding of the historical context, recognising that these conditions are not absolute or unchangeable, and the commitment to taking potent actions to transform reality. Freire (1975) emphasises that the process of conscientisation includes recognising and denouncing oppression, as well as envisioning a utopia. It refers to a distinct reality apart from the existing one and can be co-created by social actors. Becoming aware means taking ownership of one's situation and actively working toward its transformation.

Conscientisation and praxis

The concept of praxis is vital for overcoming oppression. For Freire (1975), praxis represents the dialectical unity of theory and practice, encompassing both action and reflection. It is not merely about practice or theoretical/intellectual contemplation but instead occurs in the dynamic interplay between these two aspects.

Simply listening to a liberating discourse does not automatically lead to a deeper understanding of reality or a commitment to actions aimed at achieving liberation. It is the relationship between the unveiling of oppressive reality and critical insertion into reality that implies transformative praxis. Action and reflection are conceived as a unity that must not be dichotomised.

Conscientisation, therefore, is the process that offers people opportunities to know themselves by reflecting on their existence. It aims to critically integrate people in the transformative action of reality by implying, on the one hand, the unveiling of the oppressive reality and, on the other, action to change it.

The production of knowledge is always a continuous struggle between liberation and adaptation to oppressive logic. In this sense, Freire (1975) distinguishes between integration and accommodation to reality.

Accommodation implies the person adjusting to external prescriptions that are alien to him or her. It is the mark of a person as an object, not a subject; therefore, it is also the mark of dehumanisation. From this position, it is not possible to recognise oneself as capable of promoting changes in concrete reality. All that remains is to change oneself to adapt, to accommodate oneself to an inexorable reality. Integration, on the other hand, involves adjustment and transformation, which includes a critical dimension and the possibility of taking a position and making choices along the way. The subject integrates, ceasing to be an object. Taking the place of the subject implies becoming aware of one's humanity and acting in the world toward transforming situations of oppression (Osowski, 2018).

This process involves both personal and collective dimensions. It entails becoming aware of the world in which you live in an engaged manner and understanding yourself relating to that world. Critical consciousness is not simply an individual capacity; it is a dialogical result stemming from connections with both the world and other people. The process of conscientisation relies on others to initiate it.

Conscientisation refers to a 'presence that has the power to present; it is not representation, but a condition of presentation' (Freire, 1970, p. 14). This process is inherently collective; it does not occur in isolation from others. On the contrary, it is a space for encounter, a relational construction of consciousness.

Communication arises from the tension between self-consciousness and the consciousness of others. In other words, consciousness emerges through the dynamic of opposition generated during these intersubjective encounters.

> Conscientisation refers to a process of critically examining the relationship between consciousness and the world. This critical consciousness is essential for people to embrace their commitment to the social and historical context in which they exist. In the pursuit of knowledge, subjects often find themselves committed to social reality, which is a commitment intricately linked to meaningful human praxis. Through conscientisation, subjects acknowledge their historical responsibilities in the continuous process of shaping the world and, in turn, reshaping themselves (Freitas, 2018, p. 105).

Considering that the process of conscientisation addresses profound concerns about social reality, questions arise regarding its potential problems or risks. Is it worthwhile to confront people with the inequalities of material reality? When faced with a harsh truth, might individuals succumb to paralysis or even destructive fanaticism?

According to Freire (1970), if conscientisation evokes dissatisfaction, it is due to the oppressive nature of social reality. Conscientisation, in turn, enables individuals to engage in the historical process as subjects rather than mere objects.

Praxis and the process of de-alienation

Inspiration from psychology

Martín-Baró (1988) states 'all knowledge and doing are conditioned by the circumstances in which they occur and by the social forces that produce them' (p. 557). Thus, the foundation for any practice should be grounded, which must always be viewed as a contextualised practice.

It is crucial that these practices 'be oriented towards and based on reality' (1994, p. 10) within an epistemological framework that begins and ends with reality. If we want science to 'make a significant contribution...we have to redesign our theoretical and practical tools but redesign them from the standpoint of our own people: from their sufferings, their aspirations, and their struggles' (1994, p. 23). To do this, three elements are necessary: 'a new horizon, a new epistemology, and a new praxis' (1994, p. 26).

Praxis and the process of de-alienation

The three reasons that establish reality as the cornerstone of knowledge and practices: first, practices should be oriented towards everyday life and situated in the daily interactions of people's concrete relationships, illustrating the importance of daily life in scientific inquiry; second, reality emphasises the historical nature of people and communities; and third, it possesses an emotional quality that fosters critical thinking.

Ultimately, this perspective advocates for an epistemology that arises from the people, not for them, but from them. Changes cannot be made from our offices; they must come from a praxis that is committed to the people. 'All knowledge and practices are conditioned by the circumstances in which they occur and by the social forces that produce them' (Martín-Baró, 1994, p. 257).

For a new way of producing knowledge,

> it is not enough to place ourselves in the perspective of the people; it is necessary to involve ourselves in a new praxis, an activity of transforming reality that will let us know not only about what is but also about what is not, and by which we may try to orient ourselves toward what ought to be (Martín-Baró, 1994, p. 28-29).

De-alienation and the knowledge production

Martín-Baró (1988) conceives the idea of a process of de-alienation as 'the recovery of personal and social consciousness that requires, firstly, a change in in the nature of social relations, such as that sought by the process of consciousness proposed by Freire (1970)' (p. 567). 'Consciousness is the knowing or not knowing of self, through the world and through others, with praxis coming before mental knowledge' (Martín-Baró, 1994, p. 38). The belief that we should overcome alienation without a concomitant change in the structures of social exploitation is a dangerous form of scientific idealism.

It, therefore, proposes that all production of knowledge and practices should have four conditions to be a transformative work: (1) It must be conducted in an interdisciplinary way; (2) It must be based on a clear axiological and political option; (3) It must be practical, responding to people's issues and disorders that require immediate intervention; and (4) It must critically analyse the experience and develop a theorisation about it. These conditions would define the praxis of Martín-Baró's proposal (1988, 1994).

Consciousness and alienation

According to Bohoslavsky (1983), people do not achieve fulfilment in an unfulfilled country, which highlights the impossibility of considering personal projects – fundamental to career counselling – detached from collective projects.

In this way, the author emphasises the relationships between people and society, criticising the lack of importance given to structural issues in career guidance and counselling debates. The social aspect is seen above all as a backdrop in which the plot of social relations takes place, instead of being treated as an essential part of these same relations. The author made this criticism in the 1970s, and to some extent, it remains relevant, as Hooley et al. (2021) and Ribeiro (2021) have highlighted.

For Bohoslavsky (1983), context and structure formed the social reality. In the first case, it is the context in which people make choices, offering challenges and possibilities in the realisation of personal and collective projects. In the second, it refers to the broader social structure, which encompasses this context but is not restricted to it.

This scenario challenges career counselling, inviting a positioning that is, above all, political. Hence, the importance of 'constructing models that reveal the articulation between the social system imposed on men and the subjects that support it, maintain it, transmit it, but who – it is important to consider – also transform it' (p. 15).

The concepts of freedom of choice and autonomy are revealed to the author as misleading and ideologically driven, serving not to unveil reality but to obscure it, thereby preserving the status quo. Practitioners must pay attention to this construct, as ignoring the context in which choices are made can have significant consequences.

From this perspective, it becomes evident that personal fulfilment cannot be achieved without considering the underlying social structure.

As experts in matters of choice, we must reflect not only on what humanity is but also on what it has the potential to become. Considering freedom as a theoretical problem, we should question the type of freedom we are discussing, whether it is a metaphysical, context-free freedom, or a historically situated one, and what kind of freedom we truly advocate for (Bohoslavsky, 1977, XXII).

Alienation and identity crisis

Bohoslavsky (1983) revives the Marxist concept of alienation, emphasising that accounts from clients support his observations, which remain relevant today. Reports describe feelings of externalisation about the work performed as if it belonged to someone else. Additionally, there is a sense of meaninglessness in work, along with a lack of fulfilment and social contribution.

Work is viewed not as an intrinsic need but to satisfy other needs. Such statements reflect the experience of an alienated individual, who 'sees, behind the collapse of his illusory vocational images, the real conditions of production in capitalist society' (p. 49).

Bohoslavsky (1983), inspired by Marx, argues that the capitalist production system inherently leads to chronic alienation. He notes that it is not possible to eliminate this alienation through a career guidance and counselling intervention. However, it is important to explore the moments when alienation becomes an acute crisis when the chronic aspects of alienation emerge in consciousness.

The acute crisis of alienation is characterised by a profound sense of loss of meaning and estrangement in work or study life, as well as uncertainty about the future. This loss reveals what can be described as a pseudo-meaning, exposing fractures in the previously defensive system of a person, which relied on a working identity that seemed to harmonise with the social context.

During this crisis, the identity becomes unable to fulfil its functions due to a lack of autonomy in confronting alienated work and the inherent contradictions it involves. It is important to note that this crisis does not automatically lead to consciousness; in fact, it is often the absence of consciousness that intensifies the crisis.

While the crisis can create opportunities for greater consciousness, it can also strengthen the person's defensive mechanisms. The direction taken at this critical juncture is influenced by the practitioner, who must remain mindful of their role in the process and reflect on their own experiences of alienation.

The working identity allies the dominant ideological apparatus to protect the person from conflict with part of the social contradictions. However, for this to occur, a partial or even false working identity is necessary, which becomes possible through processes of denial, rationalisation, and ideologisation. An identity crisis occurs when this alliance is no longer able to protect the person. Due to a series of social issues, the crisis occurs when there is a 'clash between biography and history' (Bohoslavsky, 1983, p. 54).

The shock characterises the crisis as far as it brings to light the contradictions of the system that were not previously seen as problematic for the subject. Educational institutions and the family play a key role since these two systems act to conform the working identity to the ideology.

For people to feel integrated and adapted to the social context, a high degree of lack of consciousness is required: a) of the contextual and structural elements that shape the world of work itself, in a broader sense, and the development of a specific job; b) of the connections between work, the productive system and the teaching/educational systems.

Thus, Bohoslavsky (1983) understands that the crisis of alienation occurs not due to the lack of integration with the context but, on the contrary, because of the person becoming aware of the type of integration they have been making with their context.

Career counselling and the importance of consciousness

Acknowledging the significance of social structures does not imply that there are no fractures or opportunities for action. To truly experience freedom and autonomy, both of which are relative, consciousness is essential. Within this social context, career guidance and counselling inherently possess a political dimension. If the practitioner chooses to ignore the contradictions within the social system, they perpetuate the status quo. Therefore, it becomes crucial to reveal the various dimensions and factors that influence personal choices during the guidance and counselling process.

Consequently, career guidance and counselling must involve a consciousness of the determinants that contribute to the formation of working identity. Otherwise, it risks becoming an alienated practice that, rather than genuinely promoting the idea of freedom

of choice and autonomy, merely fits people into predefined roles while neglecting the social influences and complexities that play in their decision-making processes.

Bohoslavsky (1983) identifies two key elements for developing this consciousness: first, self-consciousness as a subject, and second, an understanding of the social and structural factors that shape people and societies.

The practitioner's role is linked to social deconditioning, which necessitates a critical examination of theories, values, and assumptions. Therefore, recognising the alienation that characterises the relationship with work under capitalism is crucial.

Career guidance and counselling involve navigating between personal aspirations and the influence of social structures. While practitioner cannot eliminate alienation, they can take initiative-taking steps to address potential crises of alienation. That requires a willingness to question rather than accommodate existing conditions, as well as helping the client to align their personal goals with broader social objectives.

Possible discussions: The need for contextualisation

Critical consciousness and conscientisation, concepts introduced by Freire in 1970 and 1975, emerged from Latin American contexts where a sizeable portion of the population was advocating for transformative changes. These changes primarily focused on increasing access to fundamental rights, including the right to life and dignified work. As such, these concepts emphasise reality as both a starting point and an endpoint, aiming for understanding and changing. That is why they are considered psychosocial and political concepts (Leong & Pearce, 2011; Ribeiro, 2021; Sultana, 2018).

These ideas were born from experiences of classism, authoritarianism, exclusion, and inequality, which have profoundly shaped people's lives and influenced possibilities for future change. Consequently, critical consciousness and conscientisation are deeply embedded in their contexts and carry the sociocultural and historical influences specific to those settings.

When developed contexts in the Global North import concepts such as critical consciousness and conscientisation, they must be analysed and reconstructed for relevance and coherence as the original situations are significantly different.

Considering context

First, it is essential to understand and explain the specifics, dynamics, and demands of the contexts in which these rights will be applied as both theoretical and practical foundations.

Second, it is essential to re-signify these concepts to understand their meaning in each context to evaluate their effectiveness.

Third, these concepts originate from collectivist settings, which assume that projects are always co-constructed. Therefore, they need to be re-examined to serve as a conceptual basis in more individualistic contexts. If treated merely as individual capacities, they risk losing their transformative power.

Fourth, these concepts arise from contexts marked by inequalities and ongoing crises, which necessitate an analysis of how to build critical consciousness in more stable contexts. They were constructed for unstable and unequal circumstances, requiring reconstruction to function in more equitable contexts, mainly from Global North, when compared to the average of Southern contexts in terms of financial status, security, stability, and social protection in general.

Finally, conscientisation opportunities in each context is a crucial factor in evaluating the power of these concepts, which bridge their scientific dimensions with their political implications.

One way to illustrate the entire argument is to analyse two examples of the use of conscientisation and critical consciousness in career guidance and counselling in both the Global North and the Global South.

Cadenas and McWhirter (2022) say that the use of the concepts of conscientisation and critical consciousness in the field of career guidance and counselling began 20 years ago. They pointed to the need for improvements, including the importance of contextualisation to empower the impact of these concepts on theories and practices in the Global North – the discussion proposed here. In much research, critical consciousness resembles an individual competence that can be measured in a similar way to other competencies (e.g., self-efficacy and career adaptability). We can say that this bears the mark of more individualistic cultures.

As discussed, conscientisation is a process of developing critical consciousness, but it depends on the relationship with context and others, as well as possibilities of transforming the current situation.

It is not a matter of gradation based on something expected, since what is expected depends on the relational context in which one lives and is not given a priori, just as it is not possible to anticipate the conditions for its development. In other words, the product (critical consciousness) is dependent on the process (conscientisation) that does not exist outside the dialogical relationship, as Freire (2001) advocates.

Thus, the inclusion of complementary strategies for the procedural construction of critical consciousness is necessary, as pointed out by Cadenas and McWhirter (2022) and Watts et al. (2011), since the result of any measurement is questionable or insufficient to understand and promote conscientisation.

The Global South, as the context in which these concepts were forged, has a collectivistic cultural tradition and more frequently employs communitarian and group strategies in its career guidance and counselling practices, enhancing the consciousness-raising process, as reflections, projects, and actions are collectively generated and co-constructed (González Bello & Ledezma, 2009; Ribeiro, 2021).

These strategies can be used in any context; however, in the Global North, they would encounter more resistance and difficulty due to a more individualistic mindset. Cadenas and McWhirter (2022) and Watts et al. (2011) suggest that group discussions and communitarian actions improve critical consciousness, although analysing the barriers and potential for their implementation is necessary.

Conclusion

Building a bridge with a contemporary emerging movement in career guidance and counselling, generically named green guidance by Plant (2015), we can say that conscientisation should be at the basis of any strategy that includes sustainability and dignified work as pillars for its practices. In conclusion, the concepts of critical consciousness and conscientisation are cornerstones for global career guidance and counselling that aim to foster social justice and rights advocacy. They contribute to a deeper understanding of lived experiences and facilitate the development of both personal and collective actions for transformative change.

Theorising in this area should be linked to a critical practice that challenges complacency and adaptation, fostering an environment where people can see themselves as agents of social change. To achieve this, we emphasise the importance of contextualising these concepts for meaningful conceptual and political refinement, as their concrete use requires a solid underlying framework.

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Contesting discourses and building narratives: A social cluster framework for socially just career practice

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Abstract

Career development practice can serve as a mechanism for social justice by enabling individuals to construct sustainable career narratives (Arthur, 2005). However, to support cohesive identity development, individuals - and the career development professionals who assist them - can attend to the language used in career discourse, as language can become a site of power that can expand or constrain perceived possibilities (Burr, 2015). The Cluster Approach to the Development of Identity (CADI) addresses this concern through a deliberately constructed sociolinguistic framework. This paper examines CADI's application as an example of socially just practice, with implications for career development theory and policy.

Key words: cluster approach to the development of identity, career development, sustainable careers, career narrative, social identity

Introduction

Since Parsons first established the foundations of vocational guidance in 1909 (Jones, 1994), the career development profession has maintained a vital role in supporting individuals to navigate their working lives. This foundational work positioned career

development as social justice, aimed at helping people access opportunities and overcome barriers to meaningful work (Brown, 2016).

The contemporary landscape presents challenges that intensify the need for career development support. Rapid technological change is transforming workplaces, with many jobs reshaped or made obsolete by automation and artificial intelligence (Aroles et al., 2021; Behrend et al., 2022). Global economic forces have also transformed how we seek, secure, and retain employment, and individuals often need to constantly adapt and market their skills in dynamic labour markets (Bisello et al., 2022). These shifts, combined with globalisation's influence on career trajectories, have altered how individuals navigate their working lives, making adaptable and inclusive career development approaches more crucial than ever (Viviers et al., 2021).

Recent theoretical advances have brought renewed focus to two key areas that enhance the profession's capacity to serve its social justice mission: Sustainable Career Ecosystem Theory (SCET) and narrative approaches to career development. SCET recognises that career development occurs within complex, interconnected systems where individual capabilities, organisational contexts, and broader societal factors dynamically interact to influence career sustainability (Donald et al., 2024b). De Vos (2020) proposed that sustainable careers are ones that allow an individual to continually adapt and adjust as their career unfolds and to meet their changing needs, characterised by '*mutually beneficial consequences* for the person and for their surrounding context, and should be considered by taking a *long-term perspective*' (De Vos et al., 2020, p. 10). The SCET framework moves beyond traditional individual-focused approaches to acknowledge the systemic factors that shape career possibilities and constraints.

Complementing this perspective, narrative approaches position individuals as active authors of their career stories, empowering them to construct meaning through their career experiences (Savickas, 2020). These approaches have been implemented in diverse ways to support career development, from facilitating narrative change in career construction counselling (Cardoso et al., 2021) to exploring dialogical self-processes that help individuals integrate different aspects of their identity (McIlveen & Healy, 2024). Career identity as a narrative practice enables individuals to position themselves within their chosen fields while maintaining agency over their professional development (LaPointe, 2010). This approach may reduce the overwhelm that can lead to premature career foreclosure or prolonged identity diffusion, which can limit career development (Skorikov & Vondracek, 2011), instead supporting individuals to develop adaptable and sustainable career identities that can evolve with changing circumstances.

The role of language in socially just career guidance

Career narratives are primarily linguistic constructions - the words we use become the vehicle for understanding our careers, and our narratives are constructed within the bounds of available vocabulary. From a social constructionist perspective, language is not merely a tool for describing pre-existing realities but can actively participate in constructing the social worlds we inhabit (Burr, 2015).

We can view language as an important factor in how we make sense of our experiences, relationships, and identities, including our professional selves. In this context, the process of narrative career development suggests individuals construct coherent life stories that

integrate their past experiences, present circumstances, and future aspirations through the linguistic resources available to them (McAdams & McLean, 2013). This ongoing process of meaning-making is deeply influenced by cultural norms and social interactions, with narrative development shaped by the specific linguistic and cultural contexts in which individuals are situated (Arulmani, 2014; Hammack, 2008).

It is also important to acknowledge the role the individual's social identity plays in influencing and guiding their decisions. Very few individuals work completely in isolation; for the majority, work is a social activity, and through our work we come to belong to specific social groups. For example, an apprentice baker is part of the 'food production' and 'apprentice' groups and sits on the outside of the 'baker' group; but once they become fully qualified, they will move further within the 'baker' group, and their membership of this group informs both their identity and their future career narrative. Social Identity Theory (SIT) explains how membership of social groups influences an individual's self-concept; both related to others within the same group, and compared to other groups (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Membership of these groups biases individuals positively towards their existing groups and negatively to other groups (Dunham, 2018), and over time group membership can blur the boundaries between individual and social identity (Brewer & Gardner, 1996).

The language commonly used to describe career-related social groups is often drawn from occupational titles and industry classifications. This means that when individuals encounter career language, they are not simply receiving information about job tasks or workplace activities - they are being presented with potential social group memberships. Terms like 'teacher', 'tradesperson', or 'executive' function simultaneously as job descriptions and social identity markers, carrying implicit messages about who belongs in these groups, and what characteristics members are expected to possess. This dual function of occupational language makes it particularly powerful in shaping career possibilities, as individuals navigate both the practical requirements of different work roles and the social implications of group membership when constructing their career narratives.

Individual words and phrases carry embedded meanings and assumptions that extend far beyond their dictionary definitions, bringing with them cultural, social, and contextual associations that shape how we understand possibilities and constraints (Burr, 2015). Career stories are shaped by the linguistic resources available to individuals, with language having the power to either limit or expand career possibilities (Arthur, 2024; Savickas et al., 2009). The autobiographical memories that form the foundation of our career narratives are themselves constructed through language (Reese & Robertson, 2019), with early experiences and influences becoming integrated into our sense of professional self through ongoing linguistic interpretation (Fivush, 2011).

Consider, for example, a secondary student who has long aspired to become a medical *doctor*. Through repeated exposure to this term, they have constructed rich associations with the word *doctor*; perhaps encompassing notions of prestige, intellectual rigour, service to others, and social status. They have begun to construct a career narrative which centres on doctor in the dynamic process of identity development (McLean et al., 2007). Should circumstances prevent them from pursuing medical studies, the student may experience significant difficulty realigning their identity with alternative career pathways, not because these alternatives lack merit, but because the available language has constrained their capacity to envision equally meaningful professional futures.

Language can help people articulate future career pathways when appropriate linguistic resources are available (Lent & Brown, 2020), but it can equally limit possibilities when such resources are absent or inadequate. The language we encounter and employ can do more than simply describe our career possibilities; it may participate in constructing them, enabling individuals to author their own career stories when flexible and inclusive linguistic frameworks are available (Winslade, 2011).

Language and its ability to expand or limit career possibilities

This capacity for language to carry meaning and construct understanding makes it potentially powerful, with the ability to either expand or constrain individual career possibilities. Returning to our aspiring doctor, the specific linguistic frameworks available to them will significantly influence their capacity to navigate career transitions; and if the student remains anchored to the specific occupational title *doctor*, alternative pathways run the risk of being perceived as failure.

However, if the student has access to more flexible linguistic resources that allow them to conceptualise themselves instead as *someone who helps others, cares about health, and works hard* - all traits commonly ascribed to medical doctors - this broader language instead expands their career possibilities. Rather than being limited to one narrow and competitive pathway, they can now envision themselves working across diverse roles, unified by the work preferences and values they have articulated (Cardoso et al., 2021).

Applied to a specific and often marginalised group, the experiences of neurodivergent individuals provide compelling evidence for language's power to both constrain and liberate career possibilities. Neurodivergent people, who account for an estimated 15 to 20% of the global population, have historically faced significant barriers to workforce participation compared to neurotypical individuals (Doyle, 2020). The evolution of language surrounding neurodiversity demonstrates both the potential and the pitfalls of linguistic change in career contexts; while shifting discourse has opened new opportunities and prompted organisations to develop targeted recruitment programmes for neurodivergent employees, these same linguistic changes risk reinforcing limiting stereotypes (Krzeminska et al., 2019).

As Krzeminska et al. (2019) suggest, contemporary neurodiversity discourse often characterises neurodivergent individuals as problem solvers and divergent thinkers with strong work ethics, subsequently channelling them toward roles aligned with these narrow characterisations while excluding them from positions involving interpersonal engagement. This linguistic framing can prevent neurodivergent individuals from accessing roles they may both enjoy and excel in, simply because dominant discourse suggests these positions are unsuitable. Evidence suggests that when neurodivergent individuals gain access to more flexible linguistic frameworks, they can construct more sustainable career narratives that integrate seemingly contradictory aspects of their identity (Chapman, 2020). When neurodivergent individuals can access language that helps them identify their preferred ways of working rather than being confined to traditional occupational categories, this enhances their self-efficacy and supports the development of adaptable career narratives (Lebrón-Cruz & Orvell, 2023). This evidence demonstrates that language functions not merely as description but as a mechanism that actively shapes the boundaries of what individuals perceive as possible within their career development, with particularly significant implications for those whose experiences have been marginalised by dominant career discourses.

The origins and co-option of career development language

Career development language is not constructed in isolation but emerges from specific historical, social, and institutional contexts that shape its meanings and applications. Understanding these origins reveals how contemporary practice has inherited linguistic frameworks that may not align with current professional aims or serve diverse populations effectively.

Many of the terms routinely employed in contemporary career development practice originate from occupational classification systems designed for entirely different purposes. These classification systems, such as the International Standard Classification of Occupations (International Labour Organization, 2024) and the Occupational Standard Classification for Australia (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2024), were primarily developed for statistical analysis, labour market reporting, and administrative coordination rather than individual career guidance. However, these categorisations have become deeply embedded in career development practice through a process of linguistic co-option. They now appear prominently in career guidance resources, such as the Jobs and Skills Australia Occupational Profiles (Jobs and Skills Australia, 2024), job search platforms including the European Union's EURES (EURopean Employment Services) website (Wójcik, 2023), and UK labour market information materials (Gatsby Charitable Foundation, 2021). This widespread adoption has occurred despite the mismatch between their original administrative purpose and the nuanced, individualised nature of career development work.

This co-option process extends beyond formal classification systems to include assessment frameworks and theoretical models developed in specific historical contexts. Some foundational approaches to career assessment and guidance were created decades ago within specific cultural and social contexts yet continue to be applied broadly and potentially without adequate consideration of how their embedded assumptions may limit their effectiveness (Athanasou, 2007). As one example, Holland's RIASEC Codes from over half a century ago (Holland, 1959) remain a staple in career assessment (Zainudin et al., 2020), despite the limitations and critiques of interest-based decisions within the literature (Arnold, 2010). Hoff et al. (2018) found only a modest correlation between interest congruence and job satisfaction in their meta-analysis, and Earl (2014) found that even when congruence does exist it is often not sufficient to predict job satisfaction. Interests are also typically the first factor discarded in the decision-making process (Athanasou, 2008) and correlate poorly with other key indicators of job satisfaction, such as skills or values (Dawis, 2005). The persistence of interest-based approaches, despite mounting evidence questioning their predictive validity for job satisfaction and performance (Arnold, 2010; Bowles, 2008; Hanna & Rounds, 2020), exemplifies how career development practice can become anchored to historical frameworks, rather than evolving with evidence and changing social contexts.

The implications of this linguistic inheritance become particularly problematic when considering equity and inclusion. Frameworks developed primarily within and for specific majority groups may not produce equivalent outcomes when applied to diverse populations. Research demonstrates potential for misalignment when traditional approaches are used with ethnic or cultural minorities, suggesting that seemingly universal frameworks may embed cultural assumptions that limit their effectiveness across different contexts (Garibay, 2020). Similarly, evidence indicates that established classification systems can reinforce gender stereotypes, potentially constraining career possibilities for women and non-binary

individuals (Ludwikowski et al., 2020; Su et al., 2009). The limited cross-cultural validation of many major classification systems raises serious questions about their universal applicability and highlights potential social justice concerns (Eyles et al., 2019).

Donald's (2024) analysis of academia as an exclusionary career ecosystem illustrates how inherited linguistic frameworks can systematically disadvantage particular groups, even when exclusion is not the intended outcome. These exclusionary effects may be unintentional consequences of using language developed for different purposes or within different contexts, but they are nevertheless impactful in creating barriers that prevent individuals from accessing their full range of career possibilities. Such systematic exclusion through language directly contradicts the social justice and empowerment aims that have historically motivated the career development profession (Brown, 2016). This analysis suggests that career development professionals should move beyond passive acceptance of inherited linguistic frameworks toward deliberate consideration of how language choices impact practice effectiveness and equity outcomes.

The case for deliberately chosen career development language

Given the power of language to shape career possibilities and the limitations of inherited linguistic frameworks, career development professionals, and policy makers should be aware of the language they choose to employ in their work. Inclusive language that respects diverse viewpoints, cultures, and identities supports equitable career development practices. Rather than defaulting to inherited frameworks that may embed exclusionary assumptions, professionals can actively choose linguistic resources that recognise the full spectrum of human experience and career possibility. This commitment aligns with the profession's social justice origins while addressing emerging workplace diversity challenges (Arthur, 2005).

Central to this approach is ensuring that individuals have access to diverse linguistic options when constructing their career narratives. When people can choose from flexible vocabularies reflecting their unique perspectives, they gain agency in authoring their professional stories and articulating their development authentically (McMahon, 2024). Those supporting career development could introduce multiple frameworks, helping individuals evaluate options within their specific context whilst developing critical assessment skills. Hooley et al. (2021) suggest that a truly socially just approach might involve exposing individuals to multiple language frameworks, enabling them to compare approaches and develop critical consciousness about linguistic resources.

Such empowerment through language directly supports the development of sustainable careers by enabling individuals to continually adapt and adjust their narratives as circumstances evolve (De Vos et al., 2020). By moving beyond passive acceptance of traditional frameworks toward active curation of inclusive language, professionals can create conditions for more equitable outcomes (Donald et al., 2024a). A socially just language framework could provide scaffolded understanding whilst offering flexible vocabulary for navigating contemporary work complexity. Such frameworks could enable people to challenge existing norms while authoring adaptable narratives reflecting their strengths and capabilities. However, all language frameworks, including CADI, are culturally situated and may not be relevant in all applications. This recognises that sustainable career development occurs within dynamic ecosystems where linguistic resources can constrain or expand perceived possibilities (Donald et al., 2024b).

The Cluster Approach to the Development of Identity (CADI)

CADI was designed to address the challenge articulated in the previous sections. Through accessible and flexible language, the framework allows individuals to identify and explore their preferred ways of working aligned with six social groupings (known as *clusters*). Even the choice of the word clusters was deliberate; rather than assigning specific groups, individuals are simply *clustered* together loosely with the option to move within and between clusters as they need.

The framework shifts the career development conversation in the early, explorative phase away from specific jobs or industries and from 'which jobs should I choose?' to 'how do I prefer to work?' (Sattler, 2024). As the framework can be understood by diverse populations without requiring specialist knowledge of labour market structures, it empowers individuals to adopt and adjust their individual understanding of their preferred ways of working, aligned with the clusters, as they construct their career narrative.

Essential to the framework's application is the principle that professionals retain discretion over which approach to employ with their clients and/or students (Athanasou, 2007). For this reason, CADI is positioned as one option amongst many, recognising that different linguistic frameworks will resonate differently with different individuals. Some professionals prefer models that focus on interests, such as Holland's codes (Holland, 1959), for example, or strengths-based frameworks that ask people to reflect on the things they do well (Littman-Ovadia et al., 2021). Additionally, individuals are at liberty to decide that the framework does not align with their existing identity structures, and there is no assumption that the framework will be suitable or preferred for all people.

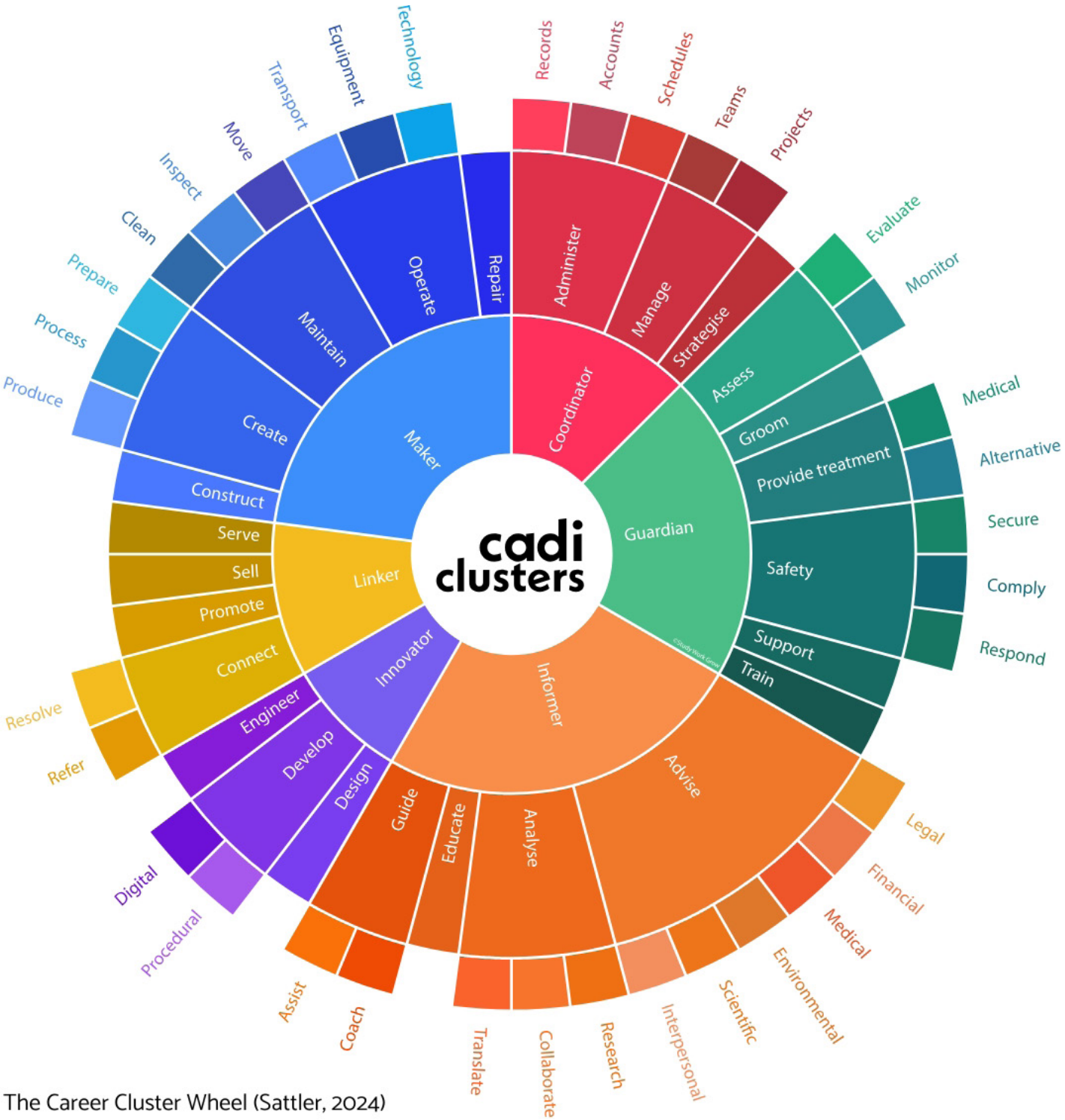
CADI combines a constructivist approach to career development (specifically Career Construction Theory), with SIT, and offers a framework that demonstrates how individuals construct their social identity *through* and *with* their career narratives. SIT explores how individuals naturally categorise themselves and others into groups, which reduces complexity and organises social information (Tajfel, 1974), and with the CADI framework individuals can identify with particular ways of working in clusters that resonate with their values, preferences, and self-concept.

The framework also incorporates thinking from SCET, recognising that career development occurs within complex, interconnected systems where individual capabilities, organisational contexts, and broader societal factors interact dynamically to influence career sustainability (Donald et al., 2024b). By acknowledging these multiple influences, CADI offers language that may accommodate diverse life circumstances and career trajectories within these dynamic ecosystems.

The six clusters

The CADI framework organises ways of working into six distinct clusters, each representing a different approach to contributing value in work environments. These clusters were developed by examining patterns across four key dimensions: the types of skills people enjoy using, the tasks they find meaningful, the work environments where they thrive, and the values that drive their engagement. The six CADI clusters can also be subcategorised into sub-clusters for further exploration, if chosen by the individual, and this framework is demonstrated through the CADI Career Cluster Wheel.

Figure 1: The CADI career cluster wheel



The Career Cluster Wheel (Sattler, 2024)

Makers are defined as individuals who prefer physical operation tasks, such as manipulating equipment, inspecting structures, operating vehicles, preparing food, and are skilled in these areas. They value consistency and clear procedures and are not often found working behind a desk.

Guardians are characterised by their focus on protective and caring functions, engaging in tasks such as monitoring health and safety, providing direct care to individuals, implementing

security measures, and responding to emergencies. They typically value service to others and demonstrate strong interpersonal skills in supportive environments.

Linkers specialise in facilitating connections and transactions, undertaking activities such as customer consultation, resource coordination, sales processes, and service delivery. They demonstrate strong communication abilities and typically thrive in environments requiring relationship building and problem-solving through connection.

Informers are distinguished by their engagement in knowledge transfer and guidance activities, including teaching, advising, explaining complex information, and helping others navigate systems and processes. They value intellectual engagement and typically excel in roles requiring communication of specialised knowledge.

Coordinators focus on organisational and administrative functions, engaging in tasks such as project management, event planning, budget oversight, and process development. They demonstrate strong attention to detail and analytical skills, typically preferring structured environments with clear objectives.

Innovators are characterised by their engagement in creative and developmental work, including designing new products or systems, conducting research, developing technological solutions, and creating novel approaches to problems. They value intellectual challenge and creative expression, typically thriving in environments that encourage experimentation.

Identifying cluster preferences

Individuals can identify their cluster preferences through several approaches, each drawing on Self-Categorisation Theory, which is the process by which people define themselves in relation to social groups (Turner & Reynolds, 2012). This theoretical framework explains how individuals naturally seek to understand their position within social categories, using these identifications to construct their sense of self and place within broader social contexts. The most structured approach involves completing the short 30-question forced-choice CADI assessment, which presents individuals with pairs of short 'I' statements and requires them to consider their preferences and natural inclinations. Individuals typically access this assessment through a web search for career-related terms or via direct referral from counsellors, and the assessment requires no registration or personally identifying information, and the only demographic data collected relates to their country of residence. Since initialisation in 2022, approximately 46,000 individuals have completed the assessment through the online platform (thecareerclusters.com). This process facilitates systematic reflection on values, work preferences, and the types of contributions individuals find most meaningful, and as such performs a reflective career construction function (McIlveen & Healy, 2024).

Alternative approaches include guided self-categorisation with counsellor support or independent self-categorisation. Guided self-categorisation requires the career development professional to introduce the cluster concepts and facilitate exploration of resonance and connection. Independent self-categorisation allows individuals to engage with cluster descriptions through personal reflection on their preferences and experiences. This method maintains individual agency over the identification process while providing a structured framework for self-exploration. Cluster identification is designed to be flexible and dynamic rather than restrictive or permanent. Individuals may identify with multiple

clusters simultaneously or experience shifts in preference as they gain experience or encounter changing life circumstances.

How are the CADI clusters used?

The CADI clusters provide a structural framework that functions as an occupational scaffold for the creation and delivery of career development materials and interventions. Rather than replacing existing career development practices, the cluster language offers a common vocabulary that can be integrated into established programmes and approaches. This scaffolding function operates at multiple levels: it provides professionals with a systematic way to organise career information, offers individuals a coherent framework for understanding work preferences, and creates shared language that facilitates communication between counsellors, educators, clients, and other stakeholders.

The framework's utility lies in its capacity to bridge the gap between abstract career development concepts and practical application. By providing clear categories that encompass diverse ways of working without being tied to specific occupations, the clusters enable professionals to design interventions that are both theoretically grounded and immediately accessible to clients and students. This approach has proven particularly valuable in contexts where traditional occupational language may be intimidating, unfamiliar, or limiting, such as with neurodiverse clients (Sattler, 2025). The evaluation process for the utility of the CADI framework is still in its early stages, however the following examples are drawn from interviews, case studies, and informal feedback provided by career development professionals and educators who have begun to make the framework their own within their individual contexts. In each case, professionals choose their methodology and implementation to suit their practice.

Development of career-related learning materials

Educational institutions and career development services have incorporated the cluster framework as a scaffold for creating and organising career-related resources. This application often involves using the clusters as an additional lens through which career information can be structured and presented. For example, a career guidance service for newly arrived refugees in Australia integrated cluster language into their job guides and occupational overviews, providing participants with multiple pathways to understand and categorise work opportunities. Multiple secondary schools have adopted the framework within their subject selection processes, offering students an additional perspective for evaluating educational pathways. Students often complete the online assessment prior to undertaking the subject selection process as part of a suite of evaluation methods chosen by the school and sometimes combined with additional assessments such as the Morrisby tool. Rather than focusing solely on academic requirements or specific career outcomes, students may then be guided by the school to consider how different subject combinations might align with their preferred ways of working. This approach has proven particularly valuable during transition points where students must make decisions about specialisation areas or post-secondary pathways, and the clusters have been incorporated into curriculum design to aid in this process (Jerrabomberra High School, 2023).

Integration into existing career development programmes

Established career development programmes have successfully incorporated the cluster framework as a complementary language system without requiring restructuring of their approaches. A youth-focused Tasmanian organisation supporting at-risk students through work experience placements has integrated cluster language throughout their existing programme structure. Staff receive training in the framework, and the organisation uses cluster identification to enhance the strategic matching of students with appropriate work experience opportunities. This integration approach demonstrates the framework's flexibility and compatibility with diverse programmatic approaches. Rather than requiring organisations to abandon existing methodologies, the clusters provide additional structure and vocabulary that can enhance the effectiveness of established practices.

Individual guidance and assessment

In one-to-one career guidance settings, professionals have found the cluster framework valuable for facilitating deeper exploration of career preferences and possibilities. A rehabilitation counsellor working with young people who have experienced career-limiting injuries described using the clusters to validate clients' previous career choices while simultaneously opening exploration of alternative pathways. When working with a young person who had been pursuing manual trades work, the counsellor helped them recognise their strong identification as a Maker, affirming their original career direction and building self-efficacy. The conversation then progressed to explore other cluster identifications, revealing potential career directions that could accommodate their changed physical circumstances while maintaining alignment with their core work preferences. The framework has also demonstrated effectiveness with neurodivergent individuals with whom traditional interest-based approaches may not adequately capture the complexity of their career development needs (Sattler, 2025). In these contexts, the cluster language provides a way to separate work preferences from specific occupational titles, reducing the likelihood that individuals will apply limiting assumptions or biases to their career exploration.

Workforce development applications

Industry bodies and educational institutions have utilised the cluster framework to create transparency and accessibility in workforce development initiatives. Industry organisations have mapped their workforce requirements to the cluster framework, enabling potential workers who understand their cluster preferences to identify relevant opportunities using familiar language. This approach has proven particularly valuable in industries where technical terminology or traditional occupational classifications may create barriers to entry or understanding; for example, the clusters were used as part of a Women in STEM project to highlight opportunities in the geospatial industry (She Maps, 2025). Universities have similarly mapped their degree offerings to the cluster framework, providing prospective students with additional ways to understand how different academic programmes might align with their work preferences. This mapping process helps bridge the gap between academic study and future work applications, supporting more informed decision-making about educational pathways.

Facilitating family engagement

The cluster framework has also been used to democratise career conversations within family systems, addressing concerns about overwhelming family influence on young

people's career development (Haywood & Scullion, 2018). When family members complete the cluster assessment themselves, they engage in reflection on their own career choices and work preferences, creating a foundation for more informed discussions about career possibilities. This approach has been undertaken in a variety of formats; in some cases, schools will ask family members and students to complete the online CADI assessment at the same time during an information session, which generally results in engaging and illuminating conversations between family and student. In other formats, educators will offer family members the option to take the assessment in their own time to increase confidence in the model and support robust career conversations. The shared language provides a structure for these conversations that focuses on work preferences rather than specific occupational outcomes, potentially reducing conflict and enhancing understanding.

How does CADI help professionals and individuals?

Professionals have shared their experiences of how the CADI framework has demonstrated its capacity to enhance career development practice through the provision of more flexible and accessible language, and through their feedback we have identified three key mechanisms through which this enhanced accessibility is achieved.

Reduced complexity and cognitive load

The cluster framework addresses a common challenge in career development: the overwhelming nature of occupational choice when presented with extensive lists of specific job titles. By condensing the complexity of career options into six key terms, CADI reduces the cognitive load associated with career exploration and decision-making (Guyan, 2014). This simplification may help prevent vocational identity foreclosure, where individuals make premature career commitments to avoid the anxiety of extensive exploration, and vocational identity diffusion, where individuals become overwhelmed and avoid making any career-related decisions (Skorikov & Vondracek, 2011). The reduced complexity particularly benefits family engagement in career conversations; as discussed in the individual guidance and family engagement sections, when family members can engage with six accessible concepts rather than navigating extensive occupational classifications, they are better positioned to contribute meaningfully to career discussions.

Enhanced visibility of background roles

Traditional approaches to career education often emphasise highly visible occupations while rendering support and administrative roles invisible. This is demonstrated in the persistence of visible roles ('doctor', 'lawyer', 'sportsperson') in the most quoted occupational expectations of teenagers (OECD, 2025). The cluster framework addresses this limitation by encouraging comprehensive representation of all ways of working within any given context. For example, when primary schools arrange visits from emergency services, the typical approach involves firefighters demonstrating equipment and discussing their roles. A cluster-informed approach might involve the fire station sending representatives from multiple clusters: a Maker (maintenance technician), a Coordinator (station manager), a Guardian (firefighter), and a Linker (community liaison officer). This comprehensive representation, as discussed in the workforce development section, helps individuals understand the full ecosystem of roles within industries and organisations.

Inclusive and person-first language

The cluster framework employs person-first language that positions individuals as the authors of their career narratives. Rather than defining people by occupational titles or institutional categories, the clusters describe ways of working that individuals can choose to identify with or move between throughout their careers, and this approach aligns with principles of inclusive career development that emphasise individual agency (Arthur, 2024). The person-first approach becomes particularly significant when working with populations who may have experienced exclusion from traditional career pathways. By focusing on how individuals prefer to work rather than what jobs they can access, the framework centres capability and preference over external constraints or historical limitations, and this positioning supports the development of authentic and sustainable career narratives that reflect individual strengths and aspirations.

The limitations of the CADI model

As a relatively recent development in career development practice, CADI requires further empirical investigation to establish its long-term effectiveness and optimal applications. The examples of framework application presented here are drawn from case studies provided by educators, counsellors, and institutions who have implemented CADI within their contexts, but systematic research is needed to examine its impact on career decision-making processes, identity development, and career outcomes over time.

Beyond research needs, several practical limitations warrant consideration. While CADI has been designed to be an inclusive framework, by its very nature it creates artificial groupings of individuals which may lead to the development of in-group bias, out-group exclusion, and the creation of new assumptions. The same aspects of SIT that simplify the process could inadvertently cause new stereotypes to develop, and this risk should be continually evaluated by those using the framework (Dunham, 2018). Additionally, situations may arise where individuals' cluster identification conflicts with existing career plans or family expectations, particularly when cluster preferences differ from culturally prescribed career paths, requiring careful facilitation to explore the complexity of career motivation beyond work preferences. The framework's emphasis on counsellor and educator discretion, while strengths-based, also presents challenges in ensuring consistent and appropriate application across different contexts and client populations.

As a practice-based framework developed through iterative implementation, CADI should be understood as a living model that can evolve in response to user feedback and emerging evidence. For instance, the current use of role-based nouns (Maker, Guardian, etc.) could potentially be reconsidered in favour of action-based language (e.g., 'making', 'caring', 'linking') to further emphasise dynamic ways of working rather than potentially fixed identity categories. This flexibility to adapt language choices aligns with the framework's core principle of responsive design that serves diverse populations rather than constraining them. Non-linguistic aspects of the clusters could also be developed to support those who rely more heavily on non-linguistic cognitive processes; these could, for example, include the provision of visual tools that align with the clusters and preferred ways of working which might be more suitable for non-verbal neurodivergent individuals (Fedorenko & Varley, 2016; O'Rourke & Coderre, 2021).

Implications for research and policy

This work presents several implications for career development research and policy. Future research could examine how professionals integrate linguistic frameworks into existing approaches, with particular attention to cultural adaptation and effectiveness across diverse populations. Longitudinal research examining relationships between cluster identification and career satisfaction, adaptability, and wellbeing would provide valuable evidence about long-term impacts. More broadly, researchers studying career development could benefit from greater attention to linguistic frameworks and social identity processes, investigating how language choices shape narrative construction and vocational identity formation across demographic and socioeconomic contexts.

For policy makers, this work suggests the importance of considering language framework choices in curriculum development and career guidance policy. This may require systematic review of existing language structures and occupational classifications to identify potential exclusionary effects and develop more inclusive alternatives. Similarly, professional qualification providers should consider incorporating linguistic awareness and inclusive language competencies into training frameworks for career development professionals. Such policy attention to language choice could support more equitable career development outcomes while advancing the profession's social justice mission across educational, counselling, and workforce development contexts.

Conclusion

This article demonstrates that language in career development practice shapes the boundaries of what individuals perceive as possible within their professional trajectories. Inherited linguistic frameworks, designed for administrative rather than developmental purposes, can systematically constrain career possibilities, particularly for marginalised groups. CADI offers a deliberate response to these limitations, providing an inclusive framework that prioritises individual agency whilst maintaining accessibility across diverse cultural contexts. The practical applications detailed in this article demonstrate that inclusive language frameworks can be implemented across diverse contexts.

The broader significance of this work lies in positioning career development as a political practice. By making visible how language can expand or constrain possibilities, this article challenges us all to recognise our role not as neutral facilitators but as active participants in either perpetuating or disrupting systems of linguistic exclusion. As the world of work continues evolving rapidly, the need for adaptive, inclusive language frameworks becomes increasingly urgent. The evidence suggests that inclusive language is essential for advancing the profession's capacity to serve its social justice mission, empowering individuals to author career narratives that are both sustainable and authentically representative of their unique engagement with the world of work.

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Research Article

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'Human life is useless without career!' Do individuals talk about career in the same way as business and parliament?

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Abstract

Findings from an interdisciplinary study using analytical frameworks from the field of applied linguistics suggest that conceptualisations of career currently dominant in business and parliamentary discourse are largely, although not universally, reproduced within individuals' everyday communication. The prominence of these dominant conceptualisations can be revealed through close attention to grammar and word choice, a reflective process enabling Career Development Professionals to comprehend and challenge, if necessary, unproblematised norms produced within a neoliberal social context.

Key words: career development learning; critical discourse analysis; interdisciplinary study; sociolinguistics; corpus linguistics

Introduction

Career development professionals (CDPs) look for ways of unearthing interpretations and expectations of the working world that their clients bring to sessions, to understand how to support their career thinking and actions. Drawing from this experience as a practicing

CDP, the purpose of my research is to examine the extent to which underlying messages that position career in particular ways (Discourses), from respectively the world of commerce and the State, appear in individuals' everyday chat. The study draws on a novel interdisciplinary approach of combining career development theory with analytical tools and principles from applied linguistics. I use language-based methodologies and frameworks to elicit dominant career Discourses from business media and parliamentary texts. This confirms that career is usually positioned as a socially esteemed phenomenon, although legislators additionally class it as an at-risk asset. For a sense of whether such Discourses are reproduced in speech and writing by individuals, I compare my findings with uses of the term 'career' in an online chat forum. Implementing language-based analysis, I notice that institutional career Discourses carry through overall, however, this assessment also shows evidence of some resistance from individuals to the dominant Discourses present in business and parliamentary texts.

The paper summarises the research, sharing some examples for illustrative purposes, along with learning points that contribute to existing studies related to the language dimensions of career development. Offering my research as an addition to ongoing investigations into the interface between social justice and career development practice, I also consider the potential correlation between my findings and neoliberal ideologies at large.

Literature review

It may not necessarily be front-of-mind in the full flow of a career-related interaction, but career development practice is at its core a meta-linguistic process in that CDPs are hearing and reading what their clients say and write, subconsciously (or consciously) analysing those word choices, and endeavouring to extract meaning and surmise the underlying mental models that produced them. Thinking about the words people use when discussing career is an established subject for study in the academic field of career development, with scholars reflecting on how career is represented in written texts or speech. There is not space here to list all reading conducted as part of my research, however it is evident that the career development profession takes a strong interest in language and this is attested by the frequency of articles in the Career Development Institute's official publication *Career Matters* that discuss such aspects as practice nomenclature (Rampling & Storey, 2023), decolonising guidance (Shakoor, 2023), and creating analogies for improved comprehension of career complexity (Howard, 2024).

Some research focuses on the specifics of language, namely how people speak or write about career, the lexicon they deploy, and what this might indicate about how career is positioned. Adamson et al., for example, examine the infiltration of career terminology from academia into 'everyday usage' (1998, p. 252), with Baruch and Vardi subsequently problematising unquestioned positivity towards representations such as 'protean' and 'boundaryless' careers and recommending what they call a more 'realistic discourse' (2016, p. 355). In a review of British print media, Vahidi (2021) discovers reluctance in non-academic communities to adopt terms derived from academia. Bergmo Prvulovic's thesis (2015) explores social representations of career at policy, practice and public levels, through studies that include a qualitative examination of texts and research conducted through group discussions with university students, drawing out mismatched perspectives between those domains. Mowforth probes how Gen-Z students conceptualise career, noting

that phrasing related to career is created through 'everyday social interaction' (2018, p. 30) rather than as a result of university careers service interventions. Moore and Hooley conducted schools-based research assessing the accessibility of 'career vocabulary' (2012) and find confusion about how to talk about career among students and teachers.

Other studies consider the extent to which how career is positioned could be implicated in maintaining 'unequal power relationships' (Gillings et al., 2023, p. 5) leading to benefits for some and disadvantage for others. This ties my line of enquiry into critical discourse analysis (CDA), a branch of applied linguistics that considers critically the role of language in society. Early but still authoritative CDA proponents include Fairclough, (1992), van Dijk, (1993), and Wodak, (2015). The connection between language use and indications of how people see the social world is something that critical discourse analysts have scrutinized in relation to the field of career development. Such perspectives look for a concealed rationale, with Vahidi finding, for example, that 'the notion of career is part of the cultural hegemony which aims to produce false consciousness among people' (2021, p. 158). Others propose that individuals are ignorant of obscured motives such as certain positionings of career being used as a method of maintaining the 'social order' (van Maanen and Barley, 1984, p. 290). Sultana (2022), whose work investigates the hidden power of specific words, has examined language typical within career guidance, identifying links to neoliberalism, and Bergmo Prvulovic (2017) also contemplates alternative meanings of career when the workspace is conditioned by a neoliberal outlook. Fotiadou carried out a corpus-based study of university careers service websites closely inspecting linguistic features to 'denaturalise' (2021, p. 304) commonly used words, finding yet more evidence of neoliberal influence on the provision of career advice.

Published literature indicates that although there is an ongoing scholarly engagement with the importance of considering language use when exploring meaning-making related to career, relatively few career development studies undertake comprehensive analyses of grammatical and word choices within written and spoken texts where 'career' is mentioned. An exception to this relates to the use of metaphor, a linguistic feature that is widely contemplated in career development research. For example, stemming from Inkson's influential work: 'Images of career: nine key metaphors' (2004), Creed et al. (2021), El-Sawad (2011), Smith-Ruig (2008), Mignot (2004), and Horton (2002) evaluate the salience of common career-related metaphors to both student and worker research participants. My project seeks to look more broadly into the affordances of language systems comprising word choice and grammar to draw out deep-seated thinking about career through the linguistic choices made by the speaker/writer.

Method

The study investigates how career is positioned and evaluated within different contexts where talk or writing mentioning 'career' occurs. In this instance, positioning means how people seem to encode meanings (Croft & Cruse, 2004) in uses of the noun 'career', in terms of its social status for example. Evaluation refers to the apparent attitude (Thompson & Hunston, 2000) of the language-user towards career. I adopt a corpus-assisted critical discourse analytical (CCDA) framework, meaning that I use corpora, which are 'searchable collection[s] of texts (written or spoken) stored in electronic form' (Jones, 2022, p. 126) to expose patterns of use, viewing them with a CDA lens to consider what they could

indicate about the social positioning of career. As Gillings et al. note, CCDA can surface 'a compelling account of how discourses solidify through repeated incremental usage' (2023, p. 6). The rationale for adopting a CCDA approach is that it deploys quantitative methodologies to enable the defamiliarisation of apparently typical phrasing related to career to reveal unnoticed Discourses within a societal context.

One of the main benefits of examining a large volume of data as part of this kind of study is that it helps to minimise (although not eliminate) researcher subjectivity (Baker, 2006) and to increase confidence in assertions about the findings, because overall trends emerge from thousands of texts that might not be visible in small-scale purely qualitative investigations. Another aspect of taking this big data approach is that it is possible to detect both dominant Discourses about career *and* resistance to those Discourses that instead refute stereotypical assumptions. Hence, the starting point is a review of the quantitative data first before triangulating my findings through a qualitative analysis that compares potentially hegemonic perspectives found in the business media and parliamentary texts with output from individuals contributing to an online forum.

The comprehensiveness and rigour of the analytical process comes from taking advantage of computerised data processing via a software programme called Sketch Engine (Kilgarriff et al., 2014) for pattern finding. I focus on word choice and grammatical selections made by speakers and writers when they mention 'career', particularly identifying the grammatical relationship between the noun 'career' and proximal words. Sketch Engine lists the most typical collocates (nearby words) and classifies them as modifiers or verb processes. Grammatically speaking, modifiers are words in a noun phrase which provide additional information, such as adjectives, for example 'stellar career'. Verb processes express different kinds of experiences or actions in language, for example 'ruin a career'. It is expected that surrounding words and grammatical structures in texts in which the word 'career' appears show up underlying connotations because adjectives are often evaluative and a transitive analysis (looking at verb processes and their impact) can indicate how career is being appraised by the language-user.

The term 'discourse' can be understood in two senses, and it is my contention that the distinction is important for CDPs who are interested in the difference between what people *say* about career and what they *think* about it. In the first sense, it is the process through which information about the thing that is being talked about is conveyed; thus 'career discourse' describes situations when topics related to career are being discussed, for example someone's work biography published in a magazine article or a conversation about promotion prospects in a particular industry. In the second sense, 'Discourse' - capitalised in this paper following Gee's (2010) recommendation to distinguish between the two uses – is where speech and writing are seen as a form of 'social practice' (Wodak & Meyer, 2016, p. 6) that both reflects social structures but also constructs them, expressing, as Eckert and McConnell-Ginet put it, 'particular sets of ideas' which carry weight in society' (2013, p. 28). In this sense, 'career Discourses' are taken to mean ideologies or beliefs and principles related to how career *should* be thought of in society, conveying, in other words, the dominant view. The popularisation of the 'protean career' concept (Hall, 2002, p. 4), which sees career as self-directed, is an example of this. Van Dijk describes the 'exercise of social power by elites, institutions or groups, that results in social inequality' (1993, pp. 249-250) as being facilitated by Discourses. The critical discursive elements of a CCDA approach keep in mind that power in interaction is often out of balance (Fairclough, 1995,

p. 1), therefore, when this paper mentions career Discourses, it is looking at potential social justice implications. My process nods to Fairclough's three-step analysis (1995). In other words, (1) textual (2) interaction (3) contextual, whereby I use the capabilities of CL to conduct micro analyses of the linguistic features of the text, I review the sources of language data that are being interacted with by readers/audiences and lastly, I theorise about the implications of revealed career Discourses within the overall social context.

Language data

Aligning with Fairclough's second analytical step of interaction, I assessed the most useful source of data to support my research goal. To look for career Discourses from external institutions that might penetrate everyday chat, I chose to examine language data from two sources that are significant forces in society, namely business, (that is, organisations that provide services, sell to us and that employ us, whether private, public or third sector) and parliament, (that is the apparatus of the State that makes our laws and allocates our taxes). The conceptualisations of career that emerge within the speech and writing from business and parliament can be known as institutional career Discourses, and although both producers and recipients of these Discourses may remain unaware of implicit values being conveyed (Deetz and McClellan, 2009), they are not neutral. Organisational communication, for instance, is often motivated by impression management (Forman and Argenti, 2005) and the desire to retain authority over where and how people work (Herriot, 1992) for the purposes of control and/or profitability.

Business corpus: business journalism is identified as a useful language data source because it has a 'close connection to industry' (Wells, 2024, p. 208) and therefore provides broad insights into organisational thinking. My business corpus, named *Buscor*, consists of 5676 UK-originating articles published between 2015-2021 and 4,934,392 words among which 'career' as a noun occurs 8089 times.

Parliamentary corpus: My second source is Hansard (2024), which documents speech in the UK's Houses of Parliament, available via a corpus named *Parlamint2.1* covering 2015-2021. This has 111,980,128 words, including 7299 uses of 'career' as a noun.

Obtaining big datasets of ordinary people talking about topics related to career is not easy, because, although there are increasingly large corpora available, it is problematic to exclude institutional sources and only include texts that have been produced as part of an informal interaction between individuals. Naturalistic language data where people happen to be discussing employment or work more generally is favoured rather than data produced through research surveys about attitudes to career, to eliminate the observer effect (Milroy et al., 1991). As a result, I developed a small corpus of language data from individuals, named *Forumcor*, out of user-generated communication from an open access social networking service, built by collecting posts from question-and-answer website Quora, where individual users from around the world can pose questions and have them answered by other users. Demographic data is not available for the users, so it is not possible to make claims based on age, socioeconomic status, gender, geographic location, ethnic background and so on. For my purposes, I treat *Forumcor* as a discrete dataset that can be used to test the extent to which the Discourses that I observe in the institutional texts are reproduced among this set of language users. Linked to this, I take into consideration that *Forumcor* is significantly smaller than the institutional corpora. This means that

direct comparisons of terminology frequency, for example, are not appropriate. Therefore, this part of the study deploys qualitative analysis, with manual examination and coding of each *Forumcor* text using linguistic labelling from an established theory of language called Systemic Functional Linguistics (Halliday & Matthiesen, 2014), to detect presence of institutional career Discourses. On this basis, I necessarily hedge claims about universal applicability of the findings but see this research as providing some hypotheses and a direction of travel to be explored in future study.

Individual corpus: This data set comprises 102 posts where opinions about work, employment and careers appear, constituting 12,698 words and spanning 2014-2022. The study was approved by a University of Nottingham Departmental Ethics Officer. All personal information elements from Quora were deleted before use of the data.

Results

The detailed examination of linguistic features in the texts maps onto Fairclough's first analytical dimension (textual analysis). In reviewing the most typical collocates in the two institutional corpora, a consistent Discourse emerges. Namely, that career is universally positioned as a positively evaluated social resource. Additionally, it is sometimes presented as a vulnerable asset, but this is only prominent within *ParlaMint2.1*.

Direct realisation of positive view of career

An example of the favourable positioning of career is directly realised in the top three most typical evaluative modifiers (adjectives) that co-occur with 'career' in both the business media articles and parliamentary transcripts. Sketch Engine scores the likelihood of 'career' appearing with these adjectives using a LogDice formula whose ratings range from 1 (low strength) to 14 (high strength), with scores above 7 taken to indicate medium to high typicality (Rychlý, 2008). *Successful, distinguished* and *rewarding* are expressions of positive appreciation indicating an approving attitude. Their LogDice scores in both corpora range from 8.5 to 10.4 so are considered to be strongly typical combinations.

A random sample of concordances (line extracts showing the key word + identified collocates) is generated by Sketch Engine, a selection of which appear in the following tables, chosen by me as illustrative of the patterns found in the overall data. In Table 1, concordances (1) and (2) illustrate how careers are objects of either pride or desire, and something to be aspired to. Presenting career as an entity that can be *distinguished* bespeaks attribution of high honour and in (3) this links to knowledge and power. Career is regularly described as being *rewarding* which in (4) connects with the intellectual satisfaction claimed to result from working in science and technology sectors. Another undertone could be economic, hinting that superior levels of financial compensation await those who take this step. In (5) however, there is an indication that satisfaction can come at a personal cost; in this case some of the desirability of career is mitigated.

Table 1. Sample lines from corpora – modifiers that position career as an esteemed social resource

#	Concordance	Corpus name
1	Before becoming an entrepreneur, I had a successful career in retail sales and as an attorney	Buscor
2	We as individuals have a real responsibility to encourage ambition and make sure that there are few roadblocks to a successful career	ParlaMint2.1
3	the advice of those whose long and distinguished careers confer on them unparalleled authority	ParlaMint2.1
4	A career in STEM can be hugely rewarding and stimulating	Buscor
5	My Lords, social work can be a very rewarding career but it can also be very stressful	ParlaMint2.1

Another example of expressions of enthusiasm towards career is seen within the most typical verb processes involving the noun 'career', which is depicted as a phenomenon that people *enjoy* (LogDice score 8.1). In line (6) (Table 2), A's happiness in their career is partially explained by it being *stellar*, in other words, metaphorically heavenly. The subtext in (7) is that the army is capable of generating contentment in serving women if conditions are improved.

Table 2: Sample lines from corpora - verb processes that position career as an esteemed social resource – direct realisation

#	Concordance	Corpus name
6	Ultimately, A's abrupt departure was unusual for a banker who had enjoyed a stellar career with the firm, and had stuck with it through several strategic iterations	Buscor
7	That flexibility should be particularly helpful in assisting women to enjoy full careers in the armed forces over a period of time, while reducing concerns female recruits may have	ParlaMint2.1

Indirect realisation of positive view of career

Positive evaluation of career is also realised indirectly (Table 3). For example, positivity is evoked through the metaphor where career is likened to a path, in *advance* (LogDice score 8.3) and *progress* (LogDice score 7.7), on the basis that formative embodied experiences teach us that forward motion is advantageous, (Atanasova, 2018, Charteris-Black, 2011, Hedblom et al., 2015, Mandler & Pagán Cánovas, 2014). This metaphor also suggests unidirectionality, implying a continuous, uninterrupted process. In (8), *advance* is seen as movement towards achievement of business entrepreneurship and in (9), *progress* of careers equates with metaphorical construction of a network of like-minded contacts. Both post-motion destinations are presupposed to be beneficial and part of ongoing journeys featuring positive outcomes.

Table 3: Sample lines from corpora - verb processes that position career as an esteemed social resource – indirect realisation

#	Concordance	Corpus name
8	We have been educating and helping individuals start or advance their careers and establish drug testing businesses for the past five years and are excited to be able to provide quality testing	Buscor
9	They should be able to progress their careers at the hospital and to build a community around their working	ParlaMint2.1

Suggestion that career is a vulnerable social asset

There are signs that career is viewed as a resource-at-risk in ParlaMint2.1. *Ruin + career* (LogDice score 7.8) occurs often enough to be worthy of attention, especially as such collocations do not appear in the most typical lists for *Buscor*. In (10) (Table 4), not only is career positioned as a social resource that can be permanently devastated, but this eventuality could blight the prospects of *this generation of children*, a sizeable ramification for the population. (11) prompts a mental model of something shattered beyond repair. The proximity of other adjectives such as *broken* and *wrecked* reinforces imagery of someone's life being demolished. This contributes to a sense that career has a rare value and once lost, it may be gone forever. Notably, the finality of *ruin + career* contradicts the continuous path metaphor because it brings the journey to a permanent halt.

Table 4: Sample lines from corpora showing verb processes that position career as a resource-at-risk – direct realisation

#	Concordance	Corpus name
10	in which case, we would not be possibly ruining the potential future careers of this generation of children	ParlaMint2.1
11	Seventeen years of investigation have broken this decorated soldier, ruined his career and wrecked his mental health	ParlaMint2.1

Comparing *Forumcor* with the institutional corpora

The second part of the analysis assesses the extent to which positive positioning and evaluations of career are reproduced in online posts that form *Forumcor*. Data were tagged as either reproducing, adapting or resisting career Discourses identified in the institutional corpora. (A neutral tag was allocated in indeterminate cases.) Almost 51% of posts overtly reinforce the institutional stances on career overall. Nearly a quarter (23.5%) of the total number of posts adapt aspects of the business media and parliamentary positions on career and 7.8% demonstrate resistance to institutional career Discourses.

Space does not allow integration of a full dataset into this paper, therefore, with acknowledgement of the potential for researcher subjectivity, the following examples have been selected as illustrative of posts where career Discourses are reproduced, adapted or resisted, visible through grammatical and word choices.

Table 5 displays extracts from posts that concur with institutional Discourses on the attractive benefits of career. Assertions include that it *enhances personal and social stature* (12), a verbal process that denotes the improving capacity of 'career', as well as being *much needed* (13), an evaluation that presents 'career' through the modulation of obligation in grammatical terms, demonstrating adherence to assessment of career as a worthwhile and indispensable social resource. Writing that existence is *useless without career* in extract (14), grammatically expresses a judgmental modality, and through this projects a belief that career constitutes the very essence of life, arguing that without it there is futility. The path metaphor seen in the institutional corpora is mirrored in *progress* (15), capturing similar connotations of the satisfaction of forward motion.

Although much of *Forumcor* presents career as worthwhile, this does not preclude some commentary that it is a precarious asset. 14.7% of posts are coded as indicating that career is considered a resource-at-risk in line with elements of *Parlamint2.1*. An example that endorses the high value of career while seeing it as vulnerable is seen in (15) (Table 5). The hyperbole of *devastated*, semantically related to *ruin* observed in *Parlamint2.1* (Table 4), is a potent reaction to its loss, accentuating the consequences for individuals of career susceptibility. The reproduction within (15) of a Discourse of risk around 'career' demonstrates the powerful influence of institutional discourse on everyday chat, establishing normed dimensions of career, (in this case its overall positioning as a positive social resource), that are not expected to be widely challenged.

Table 5: Sample post extracts showing reproduced institutional career Discourses that position career as an esteemed social resource

#	Sample extract	Corpus name
12	There is no exact definition of Career. However, according to me Career is your professional pursuit which enhances your personal and social stature in all the respects	Forumcor
13	A career is an occupation undertaken for a significant period of a person's life and with opportunities for progress. It is important to come up with your career planning as it gives you the much needed direction and makes it clear there where you see yourself in future. It makes you aware of your strength and weaknesses and the skills and knowledge that are required to achieve your goals in future.	Forumcor
14	Human life is useless without career. We can say that its incomplete if one is not dedicate to his/her career	Forumcor
15	My work is my job, my career is my life. My job is an enjoyable part of my life, however, the job supplements my life by providing funds and experience. If I lose a job, there is another waiting. If I were to lose my career, I would be devastated. This has happened twice, I picked up and went on	Forumcor

Celebrations of career across much of *Forumcor* are moderated in some posts in general terms (16) (Table 6) where using negation undermines the positivity of career, and specifically through assertions that career can take an unreasonable toll on individuals. For example, costs to wellbeing are visible in evaluative commentary that career is *stressful* (17), conditions that can bring people to a standstill, mirroring alternative messaging seen in *Parlamint2.1* (Table 1 (5)).

Table 6: Sample post extracts that position career as less than optimal

#	Sample extract	Corpus name
16	Not all careers are great	Forumcor
17	On another note you will think this career is so stressful and you can't continue	Forumcor

A small proportion of posts in *Forumcor* demonstrate explicit resistance to institutional career Discourses; posts may openly disapprove of career or question its existence. For example (Table 7), readers are warned that career is habitually misrepresented, duping the public: *tricked* (18), *hoodwink* and *fooled* (19) – lexical choices that metaphorically connect career to manipulative sorcery. This ties in with implications that vested interests – *elitist* (20) and *psychopath* (19) both evaluative noun selections – are deriving benefits from Discourse acceptance. Several Discourse-resistant posts take a meta-linguistic stance, classifying career as a social fabrication, a concept that exists in jargon form only, merely a re-branding of working life – a *buzz word* (20). Career is defined as being manufactured – a *construct* and *artifact* (21), with the suggestion that it serves requirements for collective productivity (rather than meeting individuals' needs). These constitute broadly negative judgements of career by posters whose texts confront Discourses in the institutional corpora, as well as much of *Forumcor*, that project career as an unadulterated social good.

Table 7: Sample post extracts showing resistance to institutional career Discourses

#	Sample extract	Corpus name
18	Sometimes career is a choice but other times it's a sacrifice of your life to survive the same. […] you might get tricked and spend a lifetime doing something	Forumcor
19	That concept is the worst creation of a psychopath to hoodwink the Gullible […] Even a dead-end job may turn into a career or point you to one that other people call career, but don't be fooled by it. […] Do it until it promotes your well being, when that is not a valid conclusion, then move on	Forumcor
20	career is a buzz word of elitist	Forumcor
21	Career is a construct – it is one more artifact to boost motivation, in a society driven by objectives	Forumcor

Concluding discussion

As previously mentioned, I see my findings as complementing and building on academic literature within career development that is informed by social justice values. Hooley et al., (2017) and Bergmo-Prvulovic, (2017) have speculated, as I do, on the adverse impact of neoliberalism to equitable and inclusive career development. Related to my study's focus on evidence that individual's absorb institutional career Discourses, I also see parallels with the work of Richardson, who relates how 'career discourse practices […] permeate and deeply affect [people's] experience in relation to work' (2012, p. 89). By comparing the language of ordinary online users with that of business and parliament, I explore similar ground to Bergmo-Prvulovic, who observes the 'conflicting perspectives of 'career'', between organisations, CDPs and individuals (2017: abstract). The findings also endorse challenges made by Baruch and Vardi to produce career Discourses that are 'more grounded in reality' (2016, p. 355) in a bid to find an equilibrium between benign and malign elements. In choosing a CCDA approach, I have worked with methodologies also adopted by Fotiadou (2021), who examines linguistic patterns in order to understand the effect of the word 'employability' found in higher education websites on students.

As a novel contribution to existing scholarship, this paper seeks to inspire CDPs who are motivated to engage with issues of social justice by providing empirical *linguistic* evidence of dominant career Discourses and how they are produced and disseminated through lexico-grammatical choices, which, to my knowledge, has not been done exactly in this way before.

Representing career as a positive social resource

In my research, in line with Fairclough's third analytical step, the political and economic ideology of neoliberalism provides social context for the data examined. In particular, its adherence to 'happiness as enterprise' (Binkley, 2014, p. 3), which is about overcoming all feelings of negativity in the service of individual success, supplies a paradigm for considering the research outcomes.

In contemplating motivations for production of dominant career Discourses, focus is given to relations of power, in other words, who might benefit from certain positionings of career. Construing career as an experience that produces felicity (*enjoy* + *career* (Table 2)) and is personally fruitful (*rewarding* + *career* (Table 1)) makes it an appealing prospect. This ties in with Young and Collin's remark: 'the message […] that careers are normal and desirable has been a strong one' (2000, p. 3). Projecting career in almost exclusively upbeat terms aligns with the 'political uses of happiness' (Duncan, 2007, p. 85), where assumed entitlement to pleasure is used to pitch societal systems that give advantage to some but not all. Grammatically positioning career as a goal that can be pushed through time and space (*progress* and *advance* + *career* (Table 3)) is consistent with the notion of moving forward and 'future-orientedness' (Marissa, 2021, p. 582); striving ahead is seen to be propitious and likely to lead to ongoing contentment, coinciding with the neoliberal value of aiming for perpetual motion (Rosa et al., 2016).

Benefits can ensue from reproducing a general belief in career as a good thing. Incentivising populations to aspire towards versions of career that are defined by societal institutions diverts attention from alternative work systems potentially founded on greater

egalitarianism and distributed power, effectively rigging career as a tool of social control (Wilensky, 1961). From this angle, the enticement to keep workers' attention on developing career in the form in which it is offered maintains authority in the hands of those with the power to determine the employment landscape.

Inducement of fear is implicated in the career-at-risk Discourse that emerges in *Parlamint2.1*. Panic encourages compliancy and an instinct for self-preservation (Lemke et al., 2011), rather than questioning whether societal anxieties have been manufactured. This links to the gratification principle in neoliberal societies where 'forms of desire and pleasure […] are intimately wedded to fear' (Hardt and Negri, 2000, p. 323) to maintain the cycle of consumption. Hence, career is both dangled as something to wish for and something that can be taken away. Employment legislation, work-related policy and other actions taken by government may therefore be presented as defensible on the basis that citizens need to rely on those in command to protect access to a valued social resource.

Within the small corpus of casual career discourse among individuals, there is overall adherence to positive evaluations of career that are prominent within the institutional corpora. Therefore, for users of *Forumcor* at least, the presupposition that both overt and covert messaging from business and the State is highly influential seems justified. While not all comments are as forthright as the assertion *Human life is useless without career* ((14) Table 5), relatively few disagree with the sentiment that career is something to aspire to. On the other hand, resistance to dominant Discourses identified in *Forumcor* confirms that people are open to contesting the accuracy of institutional positionings of career. The relatively small amount of verbal defiance against an assumed truth, however, reinforces recommendations that 'career conceptualization and research […] be less normatively biased and prescriptive' (Baruch & Vardi, 2016, p. 355), a steer from academia to help equip individuals to navigate both hope and disappointment.

Implications for career development professional learning and practice

Noting that workplace education focused on the specifics of language 'is often underrated' (Mautner, 2016, p. 9), there are opportunities to give curricular space to the convergence of career development and critically informed applied linguistics theoretical approaches within CDP professional learning programmes. As well as linguistic frameworks for conversation analysis that can accelerate training CDPs' effectiveness in comprehending client perspectives, there is benefit in further equipping practitioners in understanding how the 'social reality of work' (Chalupnik, 2024, p. 13) is moulded by language – including how people are recruited, how leadership is enacted and how day-to-day work happens. CDA recognises that 'reality shapes discourse, and discourse shapes reality' (Mautner, 2016, p. 11) and close linguistic analysis provides a vehicle for bringing this to light. In-depth knowledge of the contemporary workplace can be acquired through detailed language reviews of organisations' external presentation; as the findings of this study show, word and grammar choice are central to how surface level *and* underlying meaning-making occur. Following my research experience, I would encourage CDP trainers to promote students' exploitation of linguistic tools to analyse socially influential texts. Useful insights are gained by interrogating naturalised ways of speaking about career to identify different linguistic features through which language sustains power relations within career discourse, such as a normalised valorisation of aspiration for career that neglects to address whether it is universally accessible.

Returning to the CCDA framework that underpins my research process, I would argue that the findings of the study endorse CDPs' instincts for contesting taken-for-granted career Discourses, especially when dominant conceptions may disserve clients (Coupland, 2004). They validate career guidance models and practices through which clients are empowered to question normed assumptions, that, for example, there are no downsides to career, a Discourse that by countering their lived experiences could lead to confusion or unfounded self-blame. The findings suggest that while people have the potential to discern unrealistic positioning of career, there is a role for CDPs in supporting them with informed scrutiny, encouraging enquiry, and to avoid, as Richardson states, 'discourse practices of vocational psychology [that] mask the reproduction of structures of inequality and power' (2012, p. 92). The affordances of CCDA methodologies align with and provide additional layers for existing theoretical models such as the systems theory framework of career development proposed by McMahon and Patton (2020) that highlights the salience of context in the experience of career.

The value of using a big data approach with the assistance of corpus linguistics analytical tools is that it moves research towards greater levels of objectivity, increasing confidence in the results because of the volume and variety of data. As technology for carrying out quantitative research becomes more accessible, CDPs can engage in professional investigations without necessarily doing so from within university establishments. Examining linguistic features using recognised accounts of grammar such as Systemic Functional Linguistics, is a process that CDPs can adopt to authenticate intuitive hunches about what is going on during an interaction or in other career discourse. The introduction of linguistic labelling lends credence when CDPs, during communication with stakeholders, expose evidence of evaluative phrasing and exclusively positive images of career that are presented as fact rather than opinion. A practical example would be to apply linguistic literacy to helping clients understand how job descriptions frame idealised candidates and anticipate presentation of 'an acceptable identity' (Campbell & Roberts, 2007, p. 244) through written and spoken word/grammar choices, a process that marginalises those who have not been linguistically trained to interpret subtext.

From a personal point of view, this research has refreshed my commitment to (1) acknowledging inherent complexities in the terminology of my trade, (2) questioning tacit interpretations, (3) endeavouring to widen career's semantic scope and balance positivity bias (Baruch et al, 2015) while confronting unwarranted anxiety creation. Future ethnographic study would offer the opportunity to apply linguistics tools to longer stretches of text, such as transcripts from career conversations, for more qualitative insights.

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Research Article

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A guidance process gap: Exploring school guidance provision in a multicultural Ireland

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Abstract

This research explores the guidance needs of young people from immigrant backgrounds in Ireland *and* the competencies of guidance counsellors in schools to address those needs. Findings indicate that the traditional school guidance approach, developed for a homogeneous student group of the majority population, is not appropriate for this cohort of young people. The author proposes that a *Guidance Process Gap* arises when the relationship between the young person of immigrant background and the guidance counsellor is negatively impacted by various barriers to engagement and makes recommendations to address this gap.

Key words: school guidance, guidance process gap, multicultural, intercultural, guidance counselling, Ireland

Introduction

The Republic of Ireland has been known as a country of high emigration (Glynn, 2012; DFA, 2017). However, since the early 2000s, Ireland has been characterised by higher levels of immigration. Seventy-seven per cent of the population identify as White-Irish and 69 per cent identify as Catholic, which reflects what Tracy (2000, p. 15) described as the national identity of 'Irishness' or 'WHISCS' (i.e. White, Heterosexual, Irish, Settled [i.e. non-Traveller] and Catholic). But, by 2025, the national estimates of population report

that 16.3 per cent of the almost 5.5 million people 'usually resident' in Ireland identify as 'non-Irish' citizens (CSO, 2025). This means that Ireland has become a more diverse and multicultural society, where the 'new Irish' (Kamusella, 2008), tend not to fit into the traditional White-Irish 'WHISCS' category.

School guidance

Students attend post-primary school in Ireland between the age of 12/13 years and 18/19 years. To support all students to make decisions about their progression options, post-primary schools in Ireland are required, by law, to 'use their available resources: to ensure that students have access to appropriate guidance to assist them in their educational and career choices...' (Government of Ireland, 1998). Here, guidance is defined by the Department of Education and Science (DES, 2005) as:

> a range of learning experiences provided in a developmental sequence, that assist students to develop self-management skills which will lead to effective choices and decisions about their lives. It encompasses the three separates, but interlinked, areas of personal and social development, educational guidance, and career guidance.

Within this context, the author defines 'guidance needs' in this study as the individual learning experiences, assistance, and supports needed to help the young person to make effective decisions about their own personal/social development and their career and education choices.

Guidance counsellors (hereafter GC) in post-primary schools are required to hold a postgraduate qualification in guidance counselling in addition to a teaching qualification. The Whole School Guidance Framework (NCGE, 2017) outlines the role of the GC within the whole school guidance programme to support the students' personal, social, educational and career development, and to facilitate their wellbeing, career and education decision-making and life choices. Within this guidance programme, the student also has a responsibility to engage with the guidance activities and the GC in the development of the guidance counselling relationship (Maughan et al., 2016). Hence, as guidance is a process that involves the delivery of and participation in a range of activities and engaged interactions between the GC and the student, the outcomes of guidance for any young person will depend on both the inputs from the GC and the informed and active involvement of that young person.

National and professional body guidelines (DES, 2016; Maughan et al., 2016) outline the general competence development of GCs, noting a requirement for an awareness and understanding of cultural differences and multicultural values. Nevertheless, neither of these guidelines includes details of the multicultural or intercultural competencies required for GCs in schools.

Focus of the study

Given the increasing social diversity and the lack of guidance research in this area in Ireland, this study aimed to address two key questions:

1. What are the guidance needs (i.e., personal/social, careers and educational) of post-primary students from immigrant backgrounds in the Republic of Ireland?

2. What are the intercultural training and competences required of GCs in schools to meet those guidance needs?

Literature review

Smyth et al. (2009) identify 'newcomer students' as a specific group of the school student population, for whom both parents originate from outside of Ireland and who require additional academic, language, and social supports in schools. Although guidance counsellors were included within this study, there is a notable dearth of guidance research in Ireland focusing specifically on the future careers, education, and life plans of Young People of Immigrant Backgrounds (YPIB[1]) in post-primary school. Nor is there data available from the Department of Education's schools' inspection reports on the delivery of guidance to immigrant students in schools (DE, 2023c). Moreover, there has been no research in Ireland focusing on the competence of GCs in post-primary schools to offer 'appropriate guidance' to YPIBs. By contrast, international research includes many studies on areas of multicultural guidance counselling, (Byars-Winston & Fouad, 2006), the development of multicultural competences (Collins & Arthur, 2010), the migration effects on families (Kumar, 2019), and career guidance for refugees (Campion, 2018).

Career guidance

Historically, career guidance provision in schools in Ireland has been based on Holland's theory of vocational choice (Holland, 1959) and 'self-directed search' matching model (PAR, 2023). However, theories such as Super's (1980) life-stage development model, and the social cognitive approach where the GC assists clients in evaluating their self-efficacy, beliefs, and outcome expectations, impacting their career choices and aspirations (Brown & Lent,1996), suggest that there are multiple factors influencing an individual's career trajectory and that their interests and aptitudes alone are not sufficient to ensure that they will automatically access their chosen career. Furthermore, these theories recognise that the GC has a role to support the client or young person to explore any external or societal issues influencing or affecting their career decisions and planning.

More recently, the role of career guidance in promoting social justice has been emphasised internationally, with guidance reframed as an interaction that identifies and challenges injustices while supporting individuals and groups to learn more about work, leisure and learning and to plan for their futures (Hooley et al., 2018). This social justice approach recognises that the individual's life-story is impacted by both internal and external factors which can limit their life and career options and choices and that guidance supports the individuals' agency in making their own decisions, taking account of the intersectionality of clients' personal, biographical and societal factors (Vehviläinen & Souto, 2021). In addition, Souto and Sotkasiira (2022) highlighted the essential role of intersectional and anti-racist career guidance embedded within guidance practice and the importance of challenging policies that inform guidance provision.

The 'Systems Theory Framework' (STF) approach to career development and career counselling (McMahon & Patton, 1995) provides an overarching or 'metatheoretical

1 The young people participating in the focus groups and interviews agreed to the use of this term (YPIB) as they were not a homogenous group and other collective phrases did not adequately describe their individual differences.

framework' where any number of career theories could inform guidance practice (Patton & McMahon, 2014). Maintaining the individual as the core focus, the STF approach supports the client to construct their own understanding of career and to examine and describe the various '*Systems of Influence*', which can be personal, contextual, and dynamic in nature, impacting their career development and choices (Patton & McMahon, 1999). These intrapersonal influences (gender, age, ethnicity, sexual orientation, personality, identity, aptitudes, interests and values), and context specific organisational and environmental-societal influences (family, peers, education and work experiences, socio-economic status, geographical location, political and global environments), can change over time (Arthur & McMahon, 2005) and can be perceived as either positive or negative by the individual, thus potentially impacting in different ways on their career decision making.

Adopting the STF approach provides a framework for the guidance counsellors to reflect on, challenge and develop a clear understanding of their own systems of influence, including their cultural influences and career choices and how these may affect their guidance practice (McMahon & Patton, 2021). Addressing the interactivity of the guidance process, the development of the '*therapeutic relationship*' between the GC and the client develops when their two 'systems' maintain their individuality but are open to dialogue to create career decisions (Patton & McMahon, 1999). Here, the GC supports the individual to consider their guidance needs and explore their own '*social and environmental contexts*' in a process of '*life-career meaning–making*' when constructing his/her own career and life plans (Patton and McMahon, 2017, p. 13). Therefore, the GC would require an understanding of the range of personal, social, educational and careers guidance needs of the young person, as each contributes to and influences the young person's education and career decisions and cannot be considered as unconnected or isolated concerns. However, this proposed therapeutic system suggests that the GC and client/young person have experiences of, and are encircled within, similar organisational or environmental-societal influences.

Guidance needs of young people of immigrant backgrounds

Young people of immigrant backgrounds include those second-generation individuals for whom one or more parents are first-generation immigrants or born outside of Ireland (Machowska-Kosiack & Barry, 2022) and those who themselves are immigrants, who may have moved to Ireland at such a young age that they do not remember living in their country of birth. Rumbaut (2004) suggests that a life-stage approach to immigration classifications allows for better understanding of the experiences of these young people, which includes their personal memories of immigration, experiences of trauma and post-migration adjustments (Bemak and Chung, 2017). Studies carried out in Ireland (McClure, 2021; Devine, 2009; Bryan, 2009) indicate that the experiences of minority children and adolescents growing up and attending school in Ireland are similar to those in other majority white countries, in noting their ethnic differences to their peers and experiencing racism.

Children as young as 11 or 12 years old, born in Ireland to Nigerian parents, identifying as African *and* Irish, reported experiences of racism from peers and teachers within school and in their communities, and are acutely aware of their national identity and how they are viewed by white people in their communities (McClure, 2021). Further studies identified that students of ethnic minority backgrounds in Irish schools experienced racism and

discrimination from teachers and other students who determined that they did not 'look *Irish*' (Ní Dhuinn & Keane, 2023) and identified concerns about identity and belonging, managing different family, cultural and community relationships and value systems, and experiences of racial discrimination (Walsh, 2017). In addition, a key report from Dublin City University (DCU) and the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission (IHREC) highlights that young people have identified that discrimination, misrepresentation and racism is a 'normal feature' of their everyday experience, in broader society, online and within institutional structures such as schools and workplaces (Machowska-Kosiack & Barry, 2022). The report also details how young people describe their 'hybridised identities' (ibid), as they belong to several cultures and regularly face questions about their 'Irishness' while managing and navigating the challenges of cultural differences within intergenerational relationships within their families.

Many YPIB attend school through the medium of English which is not their first language which may impact their academic performance (UNESCO, 2008), their psychological and sociocultural development (Vedder, 2005), and on their mental health (Frabutt, 2006). Furthermore, in completing psychometric assessment through English, their test scores may reflect their English language proficiency rather than their actual ability (DE, 2023b), thus impacting their school subject choices and education progression options. When choosing their career options, the beliefs, values, and expectations of immigrant parents can influence the students' subject choices and career aspirations (Kewalramani & Phillipson, 2020), and their career choices may be affected by a greater risk of discrimination in recruitment and the workplace than White-Irish individuals (McGinnity et al, 2018).

Guidance in schools in Ireland includes the separate but interlinked areas of personal and social development, educational and career advice (DES, 2005) and is delivered through classroom group-based learning activities, and 1-to-1 guidance counselling (i.e. the therapeutic relationship advocated by Patton and McMahon, 1999), therefore the author considered that the STF provides a relevant theoretical perspective within which to frame this research as it allows for reflection on the variety of possible influences, delivery and experiences of guidance provision for both the GCs and YPIBs.

Methods

The STF provides an overarching approach to consider the theories and influences at play in guidance provision. As GCs support individuals through complex transition periods (NGF, 2007), an interpretive and constructivist approach to this process allows for consideration and understanding of these complex and multiple perspectives. The research aimed to understand and interpret research participants' own experiences and perspectives of guidance (Bryman 2016) and to understand and construct theories to explain these experiences through interpretations and analysis of the data gathered. To this end, a mixed methods research approach was employed, where the quantitative and qualitative data gathered were compared or merged to locate the findings. This research was conducted online during the national COVID-19 pandemic restrictions.

Guidance counsellors were contacted via their professional body, a national guidance agency and via social media platforms. YPIBs were contacted via NGOs supporting immigrants, student groups, and various social media platforms. Questionnaires, focus

groups and 1-to-1 interviews were conducted with participants from both group cohorts. Questionnaires distributed online to guidance counsellors and to young people included key statistical demographic variables informed by the census (CSO, 2017). The questionnaire for the GCs was developed by the author, based on concepts drawn from various validated scales (Gamst et al., 2004; O'Brien et al.,1997) and academic frameworks in the sector (Collins & Arthur, 2007; 2010; NCDA, 2009). It also focused on their employment role, number of years since qualification, years of professional experience working with YPIBs and any training completed on multicultural or intercultural topics. The questionnaire for the YPIB was developed by the author to reflect on their experience of guidance in post-primary school and on the personal, family, and cultural circumstances and influences on their career and education choices and planning. The questionnaire also addressed personal experiences of acculturation, identity, and adaptation, general adolescent development, issues of speaking English as a second language, parental influences and their experiences of issues relating to ethnicity and employment in Ireland (Joseph, 2018).

Tables 1 and 2 below outline the numbers in both cohort groups of questionnaires completed and participants in the focus groups and 1-to-1 interviews.

Table 1. Completed Questionnaires

Cohort Group	Questionnaires returned	Questionnaires elegible for analysis
Guidance Counsellors	121	97
Young People of Immigrant Backgrounds	42	23

Table 2. Focus groups and interviews

Cohort	Number of participants	Individual interviews
Guidance Counsellors Group A	4	3
Guidance Counsellors Group B	3	
Total	**7**	**3**
Young People of Immigrant Backgrounds Group C	4	6
Young People of Immigrant Backgrounds Group D	2*	
Total	**6**	**6**

**The third individual due to attend absented themselves too late in the process to invite additional participants.*

Responses from guidance counsellors not employed in post-primary schools and young people who had not completed post-primary schools in Ireland were not included in the data analysis.

The focus groups and 1-to-1 research interviews (which lasted 2 hours and 1.5 hours respectively) with each cohort group were conducted separately online. Participation was possible from a wider geographical range than would have been possible if they had been held in person at a centralised venue. Participants attended the focus groups and/or interviews from their own personal, comfortable, private spaces (Halliday et al., 2021), and several commented on the 'relaxed' atmosphere of the groups and interviews.

Ethics

Ethical approval was sought and granted through the Ethics Committee within the University (SSESW Ref: 053_2021). To ensure anonymity, pseudonyms were applied for all participants. GCs reported on their current guidance practice, and YPIB referred to their recalled experiences of guidance. Schools were not identified for either cohort group, as the research did not aim to connect the participant cohort groups in any way. All participants provided their consent to participate and/or withdraw from the study as appropriate.

Analysis

The author, as sole researcher, completed and reflected repeatedly on the notes and transcriptions of all the focus groups and interviews and reviewed all of the questionnaires' responses to ensure familiarity with all of the data gathered. Ensuring the accurate transcription of all participants' actual words and '*pronunciations, non-verbals and irregular grammar'* (Oliver et al., 2005) was particularly important for this cohort of young people, for whom English is not their first language.

The guidance process relies on the relationship built between the GC and the student, along with access to and provision of factual and impartial information, and the delivery of teaching and learning activities which support the development of personal and career decision-making skills (NCGE, 2017). Therefore, describing and measuring the number and type of guidance activities (i.e., quantitative data) must be balanced with understanding the interpretations of those involved within that interaction and relationship (i.e., qualitative data).

Using the Braun and Clarke's (2006) method, the researcher generated initial codes for the qualitative data gathered and identified, reviewed and defined the themes arising from the data. Further coding of the qualitative data in NVIVO reinforced the researchers' initial identification of the themes emerging in the study.

For both groups, the quantitative statistical data gathered via the online programme, provided an overview of the demographic information for each cohort. This includes activities of GCs' guidance practice and factors impacting that guidance provision and an overall description of the young people's reported experience of guidance provision and related issues.

Limitations

The limitations of this research are reflected in the small sample sizes of participants from both groups. However, there was consensus on issues across the survey responses and from those engaged in the focus groups and 1-to-1 interviews in both cohorts.

The sample of YPIB was drawn from those who were notified of the research through NGOs, students' unions, etc., and does not reflect the number of YPIB currently attending

post-primary schools. Given that the YPIB in this study were from different backgrounds, it would not be appropriate to generalise their experience to the entire population nationally of YPIB. Nevertheless, this small sample of young people referred to similar experiences of their friends and family members throughout.

The YPIB were reflecting, with hindsight, on their experiences of school at a time when there may have been less focused attention by national agencies and school management on issues of racial equality, diversity, and inclusion in schools. Yet their remembered experiences were reflected by the guidance counsellors in detailing their current practice and guidance delivery in schools.

Findings

The research findings reflect the data gathered from the combination of online questionnaires, focus groups and 1-to-1 interviews for both cohort groups.

YPIB were asked to think back to their general experience of post-primary school, their experience of career guidance, their engagement with the GC and to reflect upon the influences on their careers or education planning for after post-primary school. The young people who participated identified their or their family backgrounds as African, Arabic, Asian, East-Asian and Polish. A quote from one respondent summarises the comments from most of the participants, *'My nationality is Irish, but I am also Congolese by birth' (Young Person 'B')*.

Table 3. Young people of immigrant background – demographics

Variable	Category	n
Nationality (n = 23)	Irish	14
	Dual nationality	3
	Other nationality	3
	Other EU	3
Ethnicity (n = 23)	Black-Irish	7
	Black	5
	White	5
	Irish	2
	African	2
	Asian	2
Religion (n = 22)	No religion	7
	Other Christian	5
	Presbyterian/Baptist	4
	Catholic	3
	Islam	2
	Hindu	1
First language in home (n = 23)	English	12
	Other and/or English	13

Guidance counsellors were asked, to reflect on their guidance practice, their awareness of issues facing YPIB, and on their own experience of providing guidance to this cohort of young people. Results indicate that GCs who completed the questionnaires are mostly Irish, white, (i.e., reflecting the majority population (CSO, 2022) and female and Catholic.

Five core themes arise from the data.

1. Systemic issues in wider society and schools
2. Students' experience of guidance in school
3. Students' guidance needs and guidance counsellors' awareness of these needs
4. Guidance practice and delivery of service
5. Future competence development for guidance counsellors

Systemic issues in wider society and schools

There was consensus from all the young people participating in the research that living in a multicultural society impacts them daily on a personal level in a range of ways, including: growing up within two cultures; speaking different languages; feelings of being stereotyped; feelings of isolation and rejection that one does not fit completely into either Irish culture or the culture of their birth country, summarised by one survey respondent, '*… being a hybrid kid can be tough sometimes… [it's like] ...no man's land*' (Young Person 'B')

Participants in Focus Group C reflected on their collective experience of racism, describing how they use their '*customer service voice*' when in public situations, to deflect any possible negative interactions and prevent being called the '*angry Black lady*' (Deborah) or '*rude Asian person*' (Yenwei).

Both YPIBs and GCs reported that the policies placing young immigrant students into their relevant school class-year based on age and English language proficiency (which differs in every school) and attendance at EAL (English as Additional Language) classes can impact on subsequent subject choices and future career options available. As an example, one young woman Lela explained how she '*wasn't allowed to do like higher level English, even though I excelled at all the subjects already*' despite the fact that Lela reported that she '*could go sit in the science class in higher level and pass it.*'

GCs reported their awareness and understanding of multicultural issues as that of difference from the majority, i.e., different language, different religion, and different cultures to the majority Irish population. The majority of GCs also described their awareness of the multitude of intersectional issues facing young people and their parents. However, they reported limited knowledge of different cultural norms and as a result they learned about other cultures directly through working and interacting with students and their parents. Aoife said, '*we've something like 24 nationalities in the school and every day is a learning curve*'.

The majority of GCs are aware of the influence of their own cultural values on their guidance practice. Orla (GC, 1-1 interview) described how she provided a young student of immigrant background, who was dealing with an unplanned pregnancy, with contact and referral information for all the relevant agencies,

> So that's how I was, you know, like for me, I was delighted I didn't step back because I'm a Roman Catholic. I just step back in case the bias came out, but it was the best thing to do for her, if that makes sense.

Students' experience of guidance in school

Young people report that they are often faced with personal, social, and systemic experiences, both within school and across wider society, which negatively impact them and which stem from their immigrant backgrounds. Yet, it was very clear they were either not aware that they could discuss personal issues, or they were not willing to discuss such issues with the GC. There was little evidence to show an awareness of the scope of personal/social, careers and education guidance supports available for the young people within the whole school guidance programme.

Whilst psychometric tests for guidance (i.e., aptitudes and interest tests) required completion through English, none of the respondents who completed these tests (n=13) felt that completing the tests was difficult. However, a majority (n=10) of those respondents felt that the results did not accurately reflect their aptitudes and abilities.

YPIB reported (n=20), that there were no career guidance classes arranged in their schools for smaller groups of students who speak other languages at home and only two noted that the GC in their school provided smaller group guidance sessions for students interested in the same career options.

Students' guidance needs and guidance counsellors' awareness of these needs

Reflecting students' experiences listed above, 85 % of GCs reported that they issued the same psychometric assessments to *all* students, but less than half (47%), reported that they consciously considered cultural norms and language skills when choosing the appropriate psychometric assessments for students of immigrant backgrounds.

The data indicates a range of personal and intersectional issues affecting young people of immigrant backgrounds in school. These issues have influenced their education and careers aspirations and planning and include concerns about factors such as parental influence, pressure to succeed, religion and culture, issues of race, ethnicity, racism, and personal development and identity. YPIB report that the intersectionality of personal development and identity formation is inextricably linked to their experiences of racism in schools and the expectations placed on them by wider society. The young people participating in the focus groups and interviews noted that it was only upon reflection after leaving school, that they had identified past experiences as bullying, harmful and racist. Jessica (YP, 1-1 interview) explained how her experiences of discrimination influenced her decision to not attend Transition Year (i.e., 4th year) so that she could leave school as soon as possible.

GCs state that they are aware of the intersectionality of concerns and that issues cannot always be separated. For example, career plans may be informed by personal issues and family situations, which in turn will inform the students' subject choices in school. Several of the GCs suggested that the expectations of parents and families for the students can often be '*wholly unrealistic*' (GC #59). In addition, GCs report that there is often little acknowledgment from parents of students' mental health issues which require the support of the guidance counselling.

White GCs participating in the focus groups and interviews did not report the issue of race or ethnicity being discussed often during guidance counselling sessions, except at times where girls were considering careers deemed unsuitable by their parents.

Guidance practice and delivery of service

YPIBs reported various, but inconsistent, experiences of guidance activities, which depended on their school's facilities and their geographical location. Only 13 respondents indicated they had attended career guidance classes. The majority of young people reported that there were no career guidance classes arranged in their schools for smaller groups of students who speak other languages at home. The majority of the young people felt that they were 'treated the same' as their classmates, but that this was not appropriate,

> They didn't know what to do with me. They treated me the same, but the problem was that the overall system doesn't see me the same. Therefore, by ignoring my difference they were actually not helping' (YP- 'B').

Notably, the young people reported that they generally view the GCs as White, Catholic women who have little understanding of their (i.e., the students') immigrant background experiences. Only 1 respondent indicated that the 1-to-1 guidance session with the guidance counsellor helped them to make career / education decisions, and the majority indicated that they never discussed personal issues with the guidance counsellor.

GCs reported that their practice is dependent on the time (i.e., school hours) allocated to them within the whole school guidance plan and that they need more dedicated and allocated time for YPIBs. Moreover, GCs who are employed on a part-time basis or as subject teachers also noted serious concerns about the delivery of their service to all students irrespective of the students' background,

> if I'm rushed, it doesn't matter if you're Black, White, Asian, Irish. You know, my service to you as a GC won't be as strong. So, it's- it's not really a cultural or multicultural issue for me. It's more a case of just in my context of where I'm at in the school...' Con, (Focus Group B).

Sixty-six per cent of guidance counsellors stated that they provided the same information and guidance to YPIB as that of students from indigenous Irish backgrounds. In addition, only 37% reported that they provide translated information and guidance materials for students (and their parents) for whom English is not their first language.

More than half of GCs (55%) reported that they encourage students to discuss issues of race and/or ethnic identity and how this may or may not affect their career and education choices during class. Nevertheless, the data does not indicate that extra or targeted guidance classes are delivered to address these students' differing needs.

GCs report their fears and concerns about causing offence to students and their families, as well as their awareness of racism and systemic barriers to progression for these students. Despite these concerns, there is little evidence of the allocation of additional resources or a targeted approach to whole-school guidance activities to meet the specific guidance needs of YPIB and their families. One survey respondent succinctly expressed the genuine concerns of most GCs that they have a, '*lack of knowledge, understanding and fear of getting it wrong...*' (GC #4).

Future competence development for GCs

GCs report that it is not clear where or how they as practitioners should access appropriate support and information specific to the needs of YPIB. The majority of GCs in schools who responded (66%) have not completed any training in multicultural or intercultural guidance counselling skills, and many reported that their experience working with YPIB reflects the local population demographics and school enrolment numbers.

The key message from the YPIBs was that each student is different and comes with varying situations of family, cultural heritage, or religious beliefs. There was consensus that GCs should have better cultural awareness, understanding of different religions and the impact of racism on the students' future education and career choices.

Irrespective of current practice or previous training, 99% of the guidance counsellors who responded reported that they would welcome and benefit from further training / CPD in multicultural/intercultural issues for guidance counselling. Indeed, some GCs noted that participating in this research had helped them to begin to reflect on and review their own guidance practice with YPIBs.

> We see all students as individuals and must tailor our approach and information accordingly but I now realise that I could be missing a lot, not picking up on things due to my ignorance or lack of knowledge' (GC #10)

Discussion

To date, school guidance provision in Ireland has reflected the traditional 'matching' approach (Holland,1959) to career development, where students complete 'interest' and 'aptitude' tests to inform their education and training choices for further and higher education (Careersportal, 2023). This research suggests that the guidance needs of YPIB listed briefly above cannot be addressed through this matching process alone and that the delivery of appropriate guidance to this cohort of young people cannot be seen as a ''one-size-fits-all' approach, where all students in the classroom are treated the same out of a sense of fear of being accused of being racist.

The Systems Theory Framework (STF) approach provides a lens through which it is possible to understand the influences which inform both GCs and YPIBs. The guidance needs of the YPIB can be explored through reflection on the various influences relevant to their situation. The impact of these influences on the GC's personal lives and professional practice can also be explored. The guidance outcome for any student emerges from the interaction between the GC and the YPIB and is shaped by how they interact with guidance activities and processes (Maughan et al., 2016). Hence, where guidance is an interactive process, i.e., a 'working alliance' (Collins & Arthur, 2010) or 'therapeutic relationship' (Patton & McMahon, 1999) the interactions and experience of both parties are inextricably linked.

The demographic information gathered highlights core quantifiable differences between the two groups, informing these interactions. GCs report in the main to be White, Female and Catholic, a very small number of whom speak second language in their homes. By contrast, YPIB are a group of heterogeneous individuals, from a variety of minority groups,

immigrant or Irish-born, with diverse familial and personal circumstances, cultures, and religions. Many of these young people view GCs as representatives of the majority White Irish population from who they have previously experienced discrimination. They would like the GCs to have a better understanding of the experiences of individuals with immigrant backgrounds. For these YPIB, the term 'multicultural' does not epitomise an abstract societal or community ideal but symbolises their everyday lived and personal experiences, which can be both positive and negative, including within schools. Whilst Guidance Counsellors report that they are aware of the issues facing the young people, the majority have limited personal or professional experience of such matters. Notably, both the YPIB and GCs reported that training for the guidance counsellors in this area would be beneficial to address this limited experience.

Identifying the guidance process gap

Patton & McMahon (1999) propose that within the Systems Theory Framework, the 'therapeutic system', or congruent guidance relationship (Maughan et al., 2016), develops when the GC and client meet to explore the career plans and decisions of the client. However, this 'therapeutic system' as described presupposes that the GC and YPIB have similar experiences of and are similarly impacted by the wider environmental-societal, organisational, and individual systems and influences within which the guidance is provided.

This study finds that the interactions or 'working alliance' between the YPIBs and the GC do not yet occur within the sphere of this 'therapeutic system' or 'congruent relationship.' These data point to a fundamental mismatch in the development of a 'working alliance' or guidance relationship between these two separate individuals, as cross-cultural issues arise where the guidance counsellor and the young person do not share similar experiences of the environmental-societal, organisational and individual systems of influence.

Here, both individuals are bound by their own influences, experiences, and expectations, which can in turn create barriers to engagement in the guidance process. These barriers include a range of intersectional issues arising which include, but are not limited to the following: the lack of guidance resources (DE, 2023a) and school guidance activities; the GCs' lack of formal training (DES,2016), or lack of knowledge and understanding of cultures, racism, religions etc; the YPIBs' ethnic /family/cultural/ religious background; the YPIBs' experiences of racism and discrimination from and mistrust of the 'majority' white population (Ní Dhuinn & Keane, 2023), including school staff, and the young persons' lack of understanding of the GCs' role.

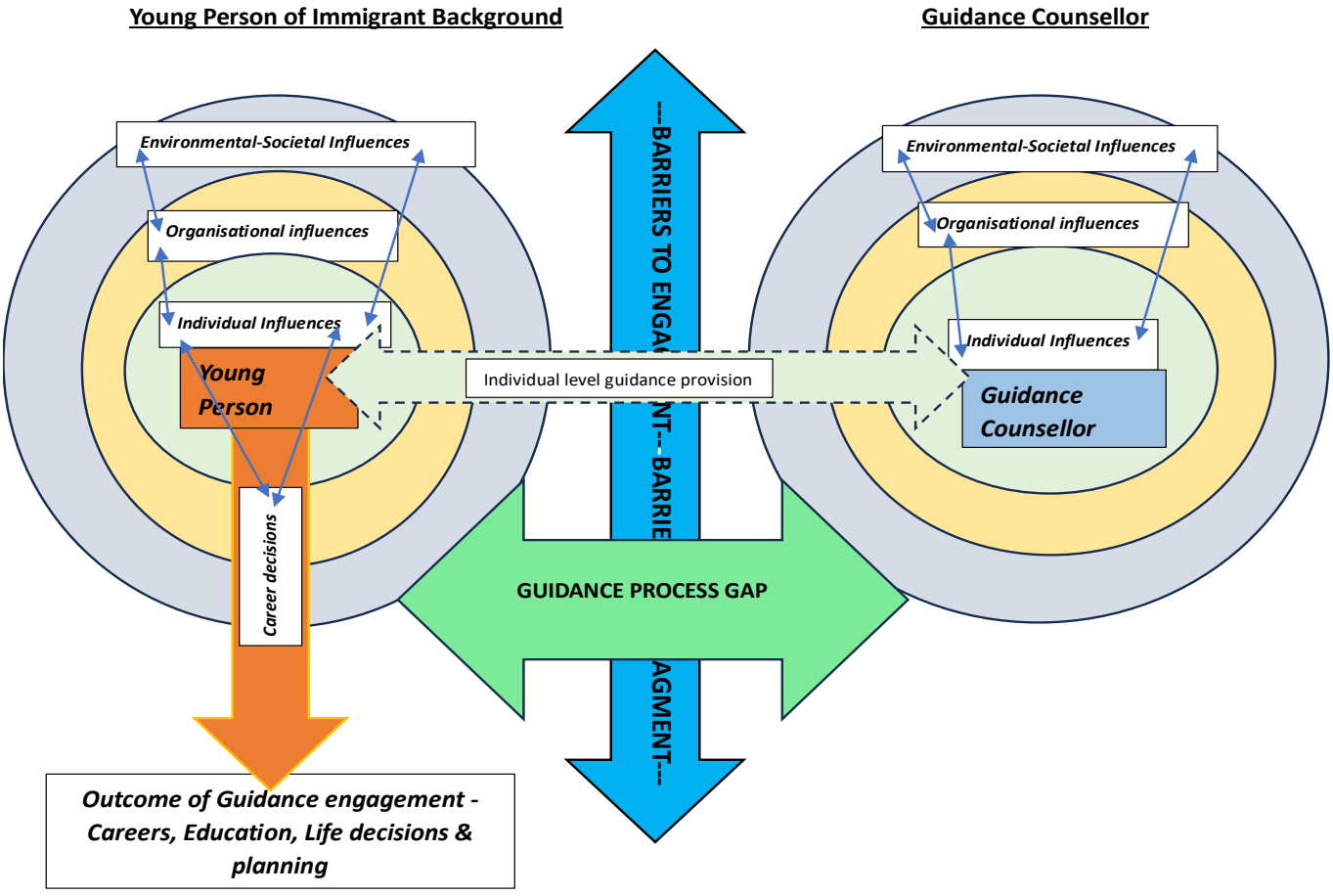
Finally, barriers to progression due to systemic national and local school policies affect both the opportunities available to the YPIB and the GCs' practice. As a result, these barriers to engagement serve to prevent the development of the necessary congruent guidance relationship for both individuals, thus creating a gap in the guidance process. 'The Guidance Process Gap', proposed by the author based on the findings of this research (McKenzie, 2025), is adapted from Patton and McMahon's (1999) therapeutic system. This research finds that, in the main, the GC and YPIB do not share similar experiences of organisational or environmental-societal influences. In most cases, the YPIB do not see their experience of guidance in schools as having any impact on their careers, education, or life choices. Also, although 1-to-1 guidance was being provided, this was not well-known nor available to all YPIB participating in the research. Due to the disconnect in the guidance process,

the YPIB reports that they are making their education and career decisions based on their own personal influences, rather than as a result of engaging with guidance activities or the guidance counsellor in their schools.

Based on the reported experiences of the YPIB and GCs, (such as young peoples' experiences of racism in schools, and the GCs fear of being accused of racism), and the reported differences in cultural backgrounds (i.e. most GCs are members of the majority population, whilst YPIB are mostly from minority groups), their own individual systems of influence can create barriers to engagement with guidance, which can in turn impact on the development of a trusting cross-cultural guidance relationship and therefore on the delivery and experience of appropriate guidance, thus creating a gap in the guidance process. The GC can address the *guidance process gap* identified in this research with targeted interventions for YPIB and their parents to tailor the information and guidance provided to their specific needs, thus encouraging participation and active engagement with guidance activities. It is envisaged that such targeted interventions will develop or improve the working alliance or guidance relationship necessary for 1-to-1 guidance counselling, to support the young person to make their education, career, and life choices.

Within Figure 1, the YPIB and GC are separate individuals who have their own experiences of the STF systems of influence.

Figure 1. Guidance process gap diagram © J McKenzie, 2025, adapted from Patton and McMahon (1999).



Implications for guidance policy and practice

This research proposes that adapting the STF approach to guidance provision provides a model for the GC to support the YPIB to consider all the various influences on their career decisions. This research also proposes that the STF approach allows for an understanding of the gap arising in guidance provision due to possible cultural differences between the guidance counsellor and the young person. The findings of this research indicate several implications for guidance policy and guidance practice in post-primary schools in Ireland, for which the following strategies and model of practice are proposed.

Policymakers might consider:

- A review of the allocation of guidance hours needed to address the additional supports required by YPIB and their parents/guardians, and adjusting the school allocation of guidance hours accordingly.
- Development of a whole-school guidance programme of careers and education information sessions and targeted interventions tailored to parents/guardians of immigrant students and/or those availing of classes in English as an additional language (EAL).

Guidance counsellors might consider the following model of practice:

- Accessing and using resources online to develop translated career and education information for some students and their parents/ guardians.
- Offering targeted career and education information sessions for parents/ guardians of YPIB to address their specific concerns.
- Ensuring that the whole school guidance plan provides scheduled group and 1-to-1 guidance counselling sessions targeted to the needs of YPIB. These group and individual sessions would include explanation and use of the STF model, to encourage positive interactive participation in the guidance process and to support the young person to consider their own circumstances, systems of influence and education, career, and life plans.
- Encouraging active involvement of and input from young people of immigrant backgrounds and their parents/guardians, including past pupils, to explore, document and advocate for their guidance needs and inform the future development and delivery of targeted guidance interventions in the school.

Professional bodies and institutions could consider a model of training to include:

- Training in the Systems Theory Framework (STF) Systems of Influence model (ibid) for GCs to utilise in guidance counselling sessions with the young people.
- Initial training and continuous professional development (CPD) for GCs, focusing on issues such as self-awareness of cultural values/biases, examining their own systems of influence, and their worldview of self and client, learning about non-Western career development theories, understanding of dominant (i.e. majority) and non-dominant (i.e. minority) groups, cultural identities, anti-bias and anti-racism.
- Initial training and CPD for GCs focusing on developing skills for confident intercultural and cross-cultural relationship building and guidance provision.

Conclusion

This research identifies a complex constellation of personal, social, career and educational guidance needs of YPIB, requiring a multifaceted collection of guidance interventions delivered by interculturally competent school guidance counsellors, operating within a more diverse and inclusive society. The author proposes that a guidance process gap arises where the relationship between the guidance counsellor and the young person is impacted by various barriers to engagement, including intercultural issues. The research highlights the need for specialised intercultural competence training for guidance counsellors and the development of a national model of guidance policy and practice, to address the complex guidance needs of young people of immigrant backgrounds in all schools. Further consideration of the guidance process gap and how this approach could be applied will require additional research, development, implementation, review and evaluation with all stakeholders involved, but most importantly, with the young people of immigrant backgrounds, both currently in schools and former school students. Finally, where guidance is provided in any cross-cultural context in schools, this guidance process gap approach, may provide the guidance counsellor with the model to examine their own guidance service and consider the wider guidance needs of the specific groups of young people in their school (for example with Traveller students or students from disadvantaged areas where family history of education and employment is limited).

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Research Article

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The world is their oyster? The factors that help and hinder refugee-background young people in Scotland to fulfil their career potential

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Abstract

This qualitative study, based on interviews with nine participants, explores the post-secondary education and career pathways of refugee-background youth in Scotland. A key finding is that Scotland provides unique supports from state and voluntary sectors. However, these must contend with significant barriers, including academic challenges, and constrained progression from Further Education colleges to university. This exploratory study, while identifying examples of best practice, concludes that significant structural barriers continue to limit career potential for refugee-background youth.

Key words: refugee-background youth, Scotland, further and higher education, career guidance, widening participation, opportunity structure

Introduction

The world is currently witnessing the most significant displacement of refugees in modern history, with the number of forcibly displaced people surpassing 123 million at the end of 2023 (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 2024). While UNHCR

data does not offer a specific breakdown by age range, it can be inferred that a significant proportion of first-time asylum applicants are aged between 18 and 34, the age range most closely associated with Further Education (FE) and Higher Education (HE) (Crosier & Kocanova, 2019).

The term refugee-background youth (RBY) encompass two distinct legal statuses. Under international law, a 'refugee' is someone who owing to a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons such as race, religion, or political opinion is outside their country of nationality (UNHCR, 1951). An 'asylum-seeker' is seeking international protection and is awaiting a government decision on their claim (UNHCR, 2006). In the United Kingdom (UK) while adhering to this international framework, in practical terms 'refugee status' means an individual who has been granted five years 'leave to remain' (Home Office, 2023). These distinctions impact entitlements in the host country but it is important to acknowledge, regardless of legal status, that RBY are not a homogenous group and do not share a common experience (Baker et al., 2019).

For RBY, access to education is the primary mechanism through which they can rebuild their human capital, gain qualifications, and access professional pathways. Although individuals from refugee-backgrounds often demonstrate a strong motivation to pursue education (Refugee Support Network, 2012; Walker, 2011), only five per cent globally have access to tertiary education (UNHCR, 2022b). This stark gap between aspiration and attainment highlights a pressing social justice issue. In Scotland, the refugee-background student population is not officially counted. As recently as 2021, their exact numbers were unknown, making them a largely invisible group within the higher education system (Universities Scotland, 2021).

Research from England shows that barriers, such as disrupted education, insufficient language skills, financial constraints, and uncertainty about immigration status hinder progression into tertiary education (Lambrechts, 2020; Morrice & Sandri, 2018; Stevenson & Willott, 2007). These challenges are not unique to the UK and align with international studies that identify similar patterns (Arar, 2021; Baker et al., 2019; Bajwa et al., 2017). In Scotland, however, the context differs. The Scottish Government's New Scots Refugee Integration Strategy, adopts a rights-based approach that diverges with Westminster (Mulvey, 2018), and its Career Information Advice and Guidance (CIAG) service is unique in the UK. Research on refugee issues has mainly focused on policy and integration matters so it is not known how this distinct environment affects RBY aspiring to enter tertiary education. This exploratory study begins to address this gap by examining the lived experiences of RBY and the stakeholders (SH) who support them.

Following a review of the relevant literature, this article presents the study's methodology and findings, before concluding with a discussion of the implications for practice and policy.

Literature review

As the global refugee crisis continues unabated and immigration policy shifts, there is a growing body of scholarship addressing access to FE and HE for the refugee-background population. This review draws on literature across education, migration, social policy, and career guidance. While Scottish specific studies are scarce, relevant insights can be drawn from wider UK and international contexts. Within career guidance literature, there is

growing recognition that the barriers encountered by RBY are not merely individual but are embedded in structural and systemic conditions (Hooley et al., 2018; Morrice et al., 2021; Murray & Gray, 2021).

The literature makes a strong case for anchoring career guidance in social justice principles, arguing for a more explicitly emancipatory role that challenges structural inequalities. To situate the reviewed barriers and supports within a theoretical framework, this review will use Roberts' (1977) concept of 'opportunity structure'. This framework is useful for understanding how young people's educational and career trajectories are shaped not only by their personal aspirations and agency but also by the surrounding structural conditions. For RBY, these constraints are particularly pronounced, encompassing immigration policies, socio-economic disadvantage, interrupted education, loss of social capital, and inflexible institutional practices.

The Scottish post-secondary context

While the terms FE and HE will be used interchangeably in a global context, it should be noted that the Scottish post-secondary system differs from the rest of the UK in its much greater use of FE. Riddell and Blackburn (2018) note that over 20% of higher education in Scotland, primarily sub-degree programmes, occurs in colleges, compared to only about 7% in England. This means many RBY will first attend an FE college to gain qualifications, such as Higher National Certificate (HNC), and Higher National Diploma (HND), before attempting to 'articulate' or transfer to a university. While this widens initial access, it can also create a more convoluted and less certain route to a degree (Watson et al., 2020).

This review will now examine the key barriers and supports for RBY identified across the literature.

Barriers to education and career development for refugee-background young people

Education is widely recognised as holding transformative potential for RBY; however, there is a consensus among scholars that refugee-background students encounter distinct difficulties in furthering their education and face unique challenges in transitioning to university (Arar, 2021; Baker et al., 2019; Lambrechts, 2020). While other groups may experience similar disadvantage, RBY barriers do not exist in isolation but aggregate and exacerbate each other (Lambrechts, 2020). To illustrate the potential range of supports required, the barriers emerging from the literature are split into individual ones of skill and local/cultural understanding, and wider structural ones of policy, and legal issues.

Individual and structural barriers for refugee-background young people

At the individual level, RBY face several interconnected challenges that erode the capital necessary for equitable participation in FE and HE. Primary among these is language proficiency (Shakya et al., 2010; Stevenson & Willott, 2007), a barrier made more significant as available language programmes, like English as a Foreign Language (ESOL) are often inadequate preparation for university (Lambrechts, 2020; Stevenson & Baker, 2018). This linguistic deficit is further exacerbated by interrupted education, a hallmark of forced migration, that leaves many RBY with significant gaps in their learning (Arar, 2021; Stevenson & Willott, 2007).

These 'newcomer' factors compound to create significant informational barriers that make the UK's complex HE system difficult to navigate. This means that opportunities, even when they exist, can remain effectively invisible (Détourbe & Goastellec, 2018; Lambrechts, 2020). Underpinning all this are the profound challenges to mental and emotional wellbeing that can accompany forced migration (Refugee Support Network, 2012; UNICEF, 2020). The resulting loss of agency and control can lead to internalised barriers and a diminishment of the self-belief required to pursue educational goals (Bajwa et al., 2017; Magos & Margaroni, 2018).

Immigration status also impacts how RBY access educational opportunities and is highlighted throughout the literature. In the UK, a two-tier system exists where asylum seekers are classified as 'international' students and are not eligible to access statutory funding (Karyotis et al., 2021; Lambrechts, 2020). Even for those with recognised refugee status, the UK system has replaced the automatic right to remain with permission to stay for 5 years, with no guarantee of remaining long-term. This creates uncertainty for both RBY and institutions, and narrows the range of what RBY can perceive as attainable (Gladwell et al., 2021). This precarity has worsened due to the UK government's 'hostile environment' policy, reflected in legislation such as the Nationality and Borders Act (2022).

Scotland's divergence is notable here. While the New Scots strategy does not set rules for the asylum process, the government is using its powers to facilitate integration through education (Scottish Government, 2018). RBY in the asylum process in Scotland are eligible for part-time FE courses and ESOL at no cost. This said, the limited availability of part-time programmes restricts the range of educational pathways open to them.

The legal framework around immigration status results in socio-economic disadvantage as government policy creates insurmountable financial hurdles for asylum seekers, who as well as being subject to international tuition fees are also restricted from employment (Lambrechts, 2020). An additional financial barrier arises at the institutional level through inflexible processes. For example, the requirement for expensive English language proficiency tests, such as the International English Language Testing System (IELTS), was found to be prohibitive for many, creating a financial barrier in addition to a linguistic one (Morrice & Sandri, 2018).

Supporting factors for refugee-background young people

While the barriers facing RBY are significant, the literature also highlights a range of interventions designed to help them navigate unfamiliar educational systems, make informed choices, and develop a sense of agency. These include targeted support, advocacy, and systemic interventions like Widening Participation (WP) and scholarship programmes, all of which are underpinned by the critical role of career guidance.

The literature is clear that the intersection of interrupted education, language barriers, and precarious immigration status creates a state of 'super-disadvantage' (Lambrechts, 2020, p. 804). This means generic provision is often insufficient, and that targeted, holistic support that understands these unique, overlapping challenges is crucial for enabling RBY to access education (Arar, 2021; Baker et al., 2019).

Provision across the UK illustrates contrasting approaches. In England, support can be ad hoc and refugees are not formally recognised as a distinct group within national higher

education policy (Crosier & Kocanova, 2019). By contrast, Scotland has pursued a more coordinated strategy, evidenced by good practice at the institutional level. A key example is the collaboration between Universities Scotland and the Scottish Refugee Council to produce guidance for admissions staff on issues like documentation and entitlements (Universities Scotland, 2021). However, Ramsay and Baker (2019) caution that such support must be sustained throughout the transition into tertiary education to be truly effective, and should not be confined to the application stage.

The literature further underlines that access to education cannot be isolated from wider social and economic conditions, as RBY are not able to prioritise education when basic needs like housing are insecure (Doyle & O'Toole, 2013; Gately, 2015). This is an area where the New Scots strategy, by adopting a holistic model, has again created a marked divergence within the UK. Comparative research underscores this distinction, showing that young Syrian refugees in Scotland report higher levels of state support and better living conditions than their counterparts in England (Karyotis et al., 2018).

A growing range of initiatives are now aimed at broadening participation in HE, including outreach programmes and partnerships with community groups to support disadvantaged populations, such as RBY (Détourbe & Goastellec, 2018; Dunwoodie et al., 2020; McKenzie et al., 2019). Despite these positive developments, scholars argue there is significant room to enhance the impact of WP initiatives. Stronger collaboration with third-sector organisations, more inclusive outreach, and direct engagement with RBY themselves are recommended to ensure programmes reflect lived experience (Lambrechts, 2020). Practical measures such as cross-departmental coordination of English language provision and financial support (Lenette, 2016) or culturally sensitive peer mentoring (Bajwa et al., 2017) are also identified.

A growing number of UK Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) now offer scholarship support, with Murray (2022) identifying 72 university-led initiatives during the period 2008 to 2018. These 'sanctuary scholarships' aim to mitigate the financial barriers faced by forced migrants, who are often classified as international students and therefore excluded from access to mainstream student finance. While such initiatives demonstrate a clear commitment from HEIs and open routes for individuals, Murray argues they do not dismantle the structural barriers that produce the problem in the first place.

Career guidance is recognised as a crucial supporting factor, however, the literature highlights that engaging with diverse groups, such as RBY, introduces complexity to guidance provision (Sultana, 2022). In a related point, Vehviläinen and Souto (2021) contend practitioners tend to avoid discussing important aspects of the lives of their refugee clients if they themselves are confused or deterred from digging too deeply by perceptions of social insensitivity.

A key challenge is that many conventional career guidance models rest on assumptions of high personal agency that do not fit the lived realities of RBY. For example, a concept like Bandura's (1977) notion of self-efficacy - a belief in one's ability to exercise control over life events - is central to many theories. However, for an RBY in the asylum process who must wait for the Home Office to decide their future, the personal agency required to develop self-efficacy is severely stifled. This aligns with a social justice critique which argues that true inequality arises not from the choices people make, but from their fundamental ability to make choices in the first place (Kabeer, 1999).

To be effective, scholars argue that guidance for RBY requires a shift from individualistic to social justice frameworks, which prioritise contextual issues (Abkhezr et al., 2015; Hooley et al., 2019). This reframing positions practitioners not just as advisors, but as potential advocates for systemic change, working across multiple levels to influence both individual outcomes and the institutional structures that shape them (Hooley et al., 2019). The necessity of this advocacy is powerfully illustrated by Murray's (2022) critique of sanctuary scholarships. This critique suggests that by focusing on individual forms of rescue, practitioners can inadvertently reinforce the idea that education is a conditional gift rather than a right, leaving the underlying unjust structures unchallenged.

Methodology

This study used a qualitative, exploratory design to investigate the perceived factors that hinder and support RBY in accessing post-secondary educational pathways in Scotland, an area with little specific research.

The research adopted a social constructivist approach, which holds that knowledge is produced through sense making and meaning in social contexts rather than through objective measurement (Jackson, 2013, p. 54). This perspective was therefore chosen to prioritise participants' lived experiences and subjective viewpoints, which directly informed the use of semi-structured interviews.

A purposive sampling approach was used to recruit a sample of nine participants. This comprised five RBY and four SH from key support organisations in Glasgow and Edinburgh. RBY participants were aged 18-24, resident in Scotland for 1-5 years, and either currently enrolled in FE or aspiring to enter HE. To facilitate recruitment, the researcher contacted intermediary organisations, including state and voluntary agencies, as well as FE colleges and universities, to request introductions to potential participants. A specific criterion was that RBY participants needed a good command of English, as a translation service was not used. The potential for this gatekeeper-led approach to introduce selection bias is acknowledged and will be discussed further in the Limitations section.

The semi-structured interviews, conducted both face-to-face and online, used a mix of open-ended questions and prompts. As a safeguarding measure, a stakeholder remained present but non-participating during three of the online interviews with RBY. To ensure transparency in the presentation of findings, participants are identified as RBY, SH or RBY-SHP (Stakeholder Present).

The study employed reflexive thematic analysis, following the framework of Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 6). An inductive approach was taken, meaning that themes were developed directly from the participants' accounts. Visual mapping was a critical part of this analytical process as it helped to identify underlying patterns between codes and refine the final themes.

Limitations of the research

This study has several limitations that should be noted. The modest sample size means the findings are not generalisable. This is compounded by the potential for selection bias introduced by the gatekeeper-led recruitment method. As intermediary organisations identified participants already engaged with support services, the sample may have been more motivated, and their accounts more positive, than the wider RBY population.

Furthermore, the sample's scope was limited geographically to Scotland's central belt and linguistically to those with a satisfactory level of English, meaning the perspectives of those living elsewhere, or who required a translator are not represented.

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was granted by the University of the West of Scotland, where the researcher was an MSc student. The study followed the ethical guidelines of respect, responsibility and integrity, outlined by the University of the West of Scotland (University of the West of Scotland, 2020). Participants gave informed consent with a clear right to withdraw. To protect this vulnerable group, a person-centred and culturally sensitive approach was adopted (Clark-Kazak, 2017), and direct questions about mental health were deliberately avoided with RBY to prevent distress. Confidentiality was maintained through anonymisation, and consent was treated as an ongoing process with the researcher attentive to any signs of participant discomfort.

Findings

The thematic analysis identified two themes reflecting significant barriers: academic readiness and an uncertain future, and two on supports: being aware of opportunities and targeted support and advocacy.

Academic readiness

RBY in this study reported high educational aspirations.

> It's like my childhood dream to become a doctor (Participant 7, RBY-SHP)
>
> I hoped to become a pharmacist (Participant 1, RBY).

This was contrasted by SH participants who reported that going to HE was not typical,

> I think young people who have refugee status going directly to university is probably the exception rather than the rule, most of them are going to end up in FE (Participant 9, SH).

Both RBY and stakeholder participants identified significant academic gaps in core subjects such as English and Maths, as well as general literacy barriers.

> I went through UCAS, it's very difficult... they need me to talk about myself. I can't talk about myself in academic writing (Participant 6, RBY-SHP).

For reference, UCAS stands for Universities and Colleges Admissions Service and is the organisation that manages applications to HEIs in the UK (Universities and Colleges Admissions Service, n.d.).

Maths was highlighted as a critical gap with limited availability of National 5 courses for those requiring a formal qualification. For reference, in Scotland, National 5s are formal qualifications taken by secondary school pupils at around age 15–16 and are the academic equivalent of General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) in the English system.

> Maths is an absolute nightmare, you can only do a National 5 at college […] in Glasgow only 1 or 2 colleges do a National 5 […] so for an asylum seeker or refugee coming in and trying to catch up and get some basic maths, it's practically impossible (Participant 2, SH)

Literacy was reported as a factor, not just in English, but for those RBY who have not had a formal education, in their native languages. This means reading and writing can be a huge barrier even for RBY with good verbal skills.

> […] they can speak brilliant English but translating that into writing essays or these kinds of things are real barriers […] they never learned to read before so they are starting from square one in that process (Participant 3, SH)

RBY and SH noted the inadequacies of ESOL provision in preparing students for the academic language required at higher levels.

> You won't study anything like maths language and science language […] if you want to keep going to further education […] you need physics language, chemistry language, all those words (Participant 7, RBY)

Being under-prepared academically negatively impacted confidence and, for some, a forced lowering of aspirations.

> Some people don't have the confidence to do a degree. […] I have a student who feels she didn't have the ability to cope […] because of the writing skills and the analytical skills (Participant 2, SH)

> In science, we used big words and I couldn't understand them […]. My lecturer on that campus told me I had to leave the course and find something that suited me. This is how I ended up on a business course (Participant 1, RBY)

Mental health issues were seen as being an additional barrier to academic achievement hindering a person's ability to study.

> Obviously mental health […] we don't always talk about it but it's there in the background […] to be dealt with first before you move on to the next stage, you are not ready (Participant 2, SH).

It should be noted that mental health was only discussed with SHs who raised the issue. For ethical reasons, the researcher did not discuss this topic with RBY.

An uncertain future

Immigration status uncertainty was consistently reported as a structural barrier to educational progression and future career planning.

> When I try to apply to them (the universities) they say I haven't got my status yet […] (Participant 6, RBY-SHP).

> We had some cases where people applied to university when they had two and a half years to remain and halfway through their course their immigration status ran out […]

> When you renew your status you have to pay, it's about £1,200 […]. How are you going to find that money? (Participant 4, SH).

The frustration of prolonged uncertainty was evident in participant narratives with both RBY and SH participants repeatedly using the words 'wait' and 'waiting'.

> But they (the Home Office) said no, wait, wait, wait (Participant 6, RBY-SHP)

> If you want to do a course next year and your claim gets rejected then you are not going to be able to do that […] it's hard to think beyond this decision you are waiting for […] what your future is going to be (Participant 3, SH).

Being aware of opportunities

The findings indicate that the RBY participants demonstrated a high degree of awareness regarding the educational pathways and opportunities available to them.

> Because I am in Scotland, I have a chance to complete my education. Why not? I can do a Masters or PhD […] (Participant 6, RBY-SHP).

> At any age for the people, he can study […] the opportunity I mean it stays (Participant 8, RBY-SHP).

Awareness of opportunities appears to be facilitated primarily through supporting organisations, including third-sector agencies and for some participants, formal career guidance provided by Skills Development Scotland (SDS, n.d.).

> I did some research with SDS on courses and they helped me find the course I am doing. SDS helped a lot with everything (Participant 1, RBY)

Scotland was perceived as a place of opportunity both by RBY and SH.

> Anything you want to know in Scotland you can tell to the college and they will teach you […]. What is your dream? Just say that to them and they will work on it […] (Participant 5, RBY).

SHs noted an increasing range of educational and training pathways available to RBY.

> I think there has never been a better time […]. There are so many courses, so many different forms of access, so many pathways […] (Participant 9, SH)

Conversely, disciplines like medicine and law were perceived as being extremely difficult to access by both RBY and SHs. In particular, the absence of preparatory routes into these fields was viewed as a significant barrier.

> The University of Glasgow they have access courses for everything […] and the only thing which they don't have access to is medical science […] (Participant 7, RBY-SHP).

It should be noted here that these programmes are also extremely competitive for native-born students as the number of fully-funded 'home' places is tightly controlled by the government funding agency, the Students Awards Agency for Scotland (SAAS, n.d.).

Targeted support and advocacy

The findings demonstrate that tailored support and advocacy are central to RBY accessing the educational opportunities on offer in Scotland. RBY participants reported receiving assistance from a range of sources, including third-sector organisations, ESOL teachers and SDS. SHs confirmed the support provided.

> The range of support that I give them is directing them to SDS if that's appropriate, X (their colleague) helps folk complete CVs, personal statements, that kind of thing. Between the pair of us we help people apply for funding for bursaries […] point them towards HNC, HND courses […] solve problems (Participant 9, SH).

Guardianship Scotland (formerly the Scottish Guardianship Service) was singled out for providing valuable tailored support. For reference, this service is a partnership programme between the Scottish Refugee Council and Aberlour children's charity offering one-to-one support to RBY who arrive in the country unaccompanied below the age of 18. Once enrolled, support continues indefinitely (Scottish Refugee Council, n.d.). The individual help offered by the service was highlighted by both SHs and RBY as leading to direct, positive outcomes.

> I didn't have any idea, I can continue studying here like in formal education place […]. I got a place in college as well […]. It all happened because of the Guardianship (Participant 7, RBY-SHP).

However, the role of stakeholders extended beyond these practical processes. From the perspective of RBY, this involvement was central to fostering trust and confidence.

> They (the supporting organisation) did everything for me, they are always supporting me, they are like my family (Participant 6, RBY-SHP).

This relational aspect was also evident in the warm, inclusive language used by stakeholders, with one SH consistently referring to RBY as 'our young people'. (Participant 3, SH). SH participants also highlighted how crucial tailored support is in navigating the HE system.

> I have spoken to young people who have gone on to university […] there was always a person who helped them do it [...] someone came to them and said this is the process and we can help you to do it (Participant 3, SH).

In addition to direct support, findings reflect the significance of advocacy in addressing structural barriers. SHs described cases where they intervened with FE colleges and universities.

> In the past, some colleges didn't know the rules and were still applying the two-year rule to refugees […] I had to point out to the student services this was not the case […].I said to that girl (the young person they were helping) the university shouldn't be saying no to you at all (Participant 2, SH)

The findings indicate evidence of targeted support from SDS, as well as interagency collaboration, demonstrated by referrals from other SHs to SDS.

> […] they could get careers interviews, career guidance, a work coach they would get that […] (Participant 2, SH).

> We have got SDS here as well. I can put in a referral to them […]. (Participant 3- SH).

SH participants perceived Scotland as offering a more structured and supportive environment for RBY compared to the rest of the UK.

> The English career service is ad hoc, not really a universal system, there is no Guardianship, that's quite unique, there is no advocacy […]. Scotland is much more favourable for refugees (Participant 2, SH).

Discussion

This discussion analyses the findings by contextualising them within the relevant literature. Using Roberts' (1977) opportunity structure as an analytical lens, it explores the unique landscape encountered by RBY in Scotland. The analysis firstly outlines the structural constraints that hinder educational and career pathways, focusing on systemic barriers related to academic readiness and immigration status. It then examines the crucial structural enablers, showing how tailored support and access to information empowers RBY to navigate these challenges. This approach reveals a system where vital supports can help compensate for significant structural barriers.

The constraining nature of the opportunity structure

The most profound constraints identified are those that undermine both a young person's academic horizons and their future legal certainty.

The themes of 'academic readiness' and 'uncertain immigration status' illustrate the structural constraints within the Scottish opportunity structure that limit RBY pathways. Consistent with the literature (Ferede, 2010; Lambrechts, 2020) language barriers were a significant finding. However, this study adds a critical layer of nuance by identifying how the structure of provision itself creates a mismatch that fails to expand opportunity. Participants reported that ESOL provision omits the very academic and scientific language needed to access higher-level courses, meaning their potential is not being capitalized upon as the system is not tailored to their aspirations. The participants' critique of ESOL reflects a wider systemic failure identified by The Bell Foundation, whose research in England highlights the critical mismatch between ESOL focused on daily life and the need for dedicated transition programmes that teach the academic language required for FE and HE progression (The Bell Foundation, 2022). As a caveat, since this research was completed, several Scottish colleges have introduced ESOL transition courses to support access to FE and HE. This development is a positive step toward addressing the issues identified.

This study also identifies a previously overlooked structural barrier in the Scottish context: the very limited number of colleges offering maths catch-up programmes. As a foundational subject for all science-based courses, it is reasonable to argue this institutional gap actively forecloses entire career pathways, showing how the opportunity structure can be restrictive not by intention, but by omission. The way Scotland's post-secondary system is structured can also function as a constraint to university-level education. The findings suggest that RBY are channelled into the FE college system, with one SH noting that going to university

was 'the exception, rather than the rule.' This is evidenced by a report from the University of Edinburgh (Blackburn et al., 2016), who note that the access gap to universities for disadvantaged groups in Scotland is wider than in the rest of the UK, with growth in HE largely achieved through the expansion of sub-degree programmes in FE colleges. This raises important social justice implications. While appearing to widen access, this can place RBY on what Watson et al. (2020) describe as a more convoluted and less specific route to a university degree, suggesting the opportunity structure may systematically divert disadvantaged groups from elite institutions.

The most profound structural constraint, however, is an individual's immigration status, a point well-established in the literature (Murray & Gray, 2021; Gladwell, 2018; Stevenson & Willott, 2007). The UK-wide asylum system largely excludes RBY from higher education by classifying them as international students ineligible for home fees or loans. While the Scottish context offers comparatively better provision, allowing access to part-time FE college courses, this still results in a severely limited set of options, leaving individuals in a state of limbo where long-term career planning is impossible. This research found that RBY are therefore obliged to adapt their preferences to what is available, a situation described by Fedrigo et al. (2021, p. 235) as the formation of adaptive preferences where choices reflect environmental constraints rather than genuine aspirations. This imposition limits RBY's agency and demonstrates how a restrictive opportunity structure, defined by legal status, can stifle the self-determination essential for career development.

Structural enablers and unique Scottish supports

Contrasting with the systemic barriers, the findings also reveal crucial structural enablers within the Scottish context. These enablers are explored through the themes of 'Being Aware of Opportunities' and 'Targeted Support and Advocacy', which illustrate how RBY are empowered to navigate the opportunity structure.

The findings indicate that RBY participants were well-informed about the educational pathways available, allowing them to make strategic decisions and retain a sense of optimism even when their preferred choice was not immediately accessible. This finding is significant when viewed through the lens of opportunity structure, which Gately (2015) defines as including not only the choices available but, crucially, an individual's awareness of them. A lack of clear information is a well-established barrier in the literature, affecting every aspect of a refugee-background student's journey into higher education (Lambrechts, 2020). This research suggests that the informational barrier is being actively mitigated in Scotland by a network of supportive organisations. The findings show a variety of support is available from both state and voluntary agencies, a context that differs from the situation described in the rest of the UK where RBY must rely primarily on the informal voluntary sector (Doyle & O'Toole, 2013). A key finding of this study is the evidence of inter-agency partnerships steering individuals towards available opportunities. This collaborative network appears to function as a key component of the enabling opportunity structure, making the system more navigable and compensating for the 'newcomer factors' identified in the literature (Détourbe & Goastellec, 2018; Lambrechts, 2020).

The findings demonstrate that tailored, individualised support is central to RBY accessing the opportunities on offer. The importance of the relational nature of this support was illustrated by an RBY participant, who described a supporting organisation as being 'like family' and by

a SH who referred to RBY as 'our young people'. This provides a real-world example of what Ramsay and Baker (2019, p. 75) term 'warm' support offered by 'trusted people'.

The experiences of the participants demonstrate the critical role these support organisations play as mediators. For example, participant 7's ability to secure a college place was, by their own account, directly attributable to the intervention of the supporting organisation, which demonstrates how such organisations can actively open up pathways that would otherwise remain closed.

Moreover, this support often moves beyond guidance into direct advocacy. The findings show stakeholders actively intervening with universities and colleges to challenge incorrect interpretations of eligibility or funding rules. This aligns with the literature on socially just career guidance, which frames advocacy as an essential practice for working with marginalised groups (Hooley et al., 2021, Abkhezr et., 2015).

A significant finding of this study is that the structure of the support system for RBY in Scotland contains unique elements that could be considered a model of best practice. Unlike in the rest of the UK, the findings show a robust, inter-agency model that formally connects third-sector organisations with the state-run careers service, SDS. This segmented approach, as noted by Watts (2008), allows for disadvantaged groups to be specifically targeted with dedicated resources. The existence of a universal careers service specialised third-sector bodies, like Guardianship Scotland, and the evidence of formal collaboration between them constitutes a distinctive Scottish opportunity structure. While not without challenges, this integrated network functions as the most significant structural enabler for RBY, actively compensating for the systemic barriers they face.

Conclusions and implications for practice

This study reveals a key tension in the Scottish opportunity structure for RBY: unique structural enablers, such as a collaborative support network, must contend with significant structural constraints. The core relationship identified between systemic conditions and RBY agency is a powerful framework for understanding their pathways. It is important to note the context of the data collection in early 2022, a period marked by the recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic. The subsequent arrival of large numbers of people displaced by the war in Ukraine would have exerted additional pressures on service provision in the period following this research. Despite this evolving context, the study's core findings on the structural relationship between systemic conditions and RBY agency remain relevant.

The findings give rise to some key implications for career guidance practice, most notably the need for practitioners to embrace an advocacy-based role. The research illustrates that direct advocacy is a crucial tool that can open up pathways that would otherwise remain closed. In line with a social justice approach to guidance (Hooley et al., 2021), this requires practitioners to be equipped with specific knowledge of the structural barriers RBY face, including the nuances of immigration policy and gaps in academic provision. Alongside this, the findings confirm the importance of building warm, trust-based relationships (Ramsay & Baker, 2019). In practice, fostering such relationships requires a substantial time commitment from practitioners, which may be at odds with the constraints of many service delivery models.

For policy, the findings point to two priorities. First, the unique Scottish support system, including the inter-agency model, should be recognised as best practice and protected. Second, specific structural barriers must be dismantled, including the lack of maths catch-up programmes and the convoluted pathway from FE colleges to university. Finally, this study highlights opportunities for future research. Larger quantitative studies are needed to assess if these findings are generalisable. Future work should broaden the sample to include RBY in rural areas and those with lower levels of English proficiency, while longitudinal research is needed to track long-term career outcomes and inform the evolution of socially just career guidance practice.

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Short Article

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Career practitioners as invisible street-level integrators

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Abstract

What is the most important task of career practitioners when working with migrants? Furthermore, who can define this task? Can career practitioners aim at changing people's stories and lives? In my doctoral thesis, I studied Finnish career practitioners from three viewpoints and analysed how they use power, how they see their professional agency and how they use discretion in their work. In this short text, I discuss what all this means for the profession and how we could support career practitioners to assume a more visible role in migrant integration.

Key words: migrants, integration, career guidance, street-level work, Finland

Introduction

In 2007, I attended the International Association for Educational and Vocational (IAEVG) conference in Italy. One of the keynote lectures was given by Professor Salvatore Soresi from the University of Padova. During his lecture, he said that '*the most important task of career practitioners is to change the endings of stories that have already been told*' (Soresi, 2007). For a long time, this sentence intrigued me, first working as a government bureaucrat dealing with career guidance issues, then later, working as a career practitioner myself. I suppose I took it as a personal guideline, or as one of them in my own work. I appreciated the challenge included in Soresi's idea, and the perspective it opened: career counselling can make a difference in people's lives. As time has passed by, I notice I have a more critical view of Salvatore Soresi's idea than I used to. But I do still think that there are several interesting points included in his sentence. In this article, I will discuss this in relation to my doctoral thesis.

In my thesis, I studied Finnish career practitioners working within the national integration programme for adult jobseekers with a migration background (Kekki, 2024). This is a programme that local programme providers run, which means both private companies and public training institutions, such as, for instance, schools or colleges of vocational education and training. The programme providers were selected through regional tender processes, and according to guidelines established by the employment administration, which at the highest policy level means the Ministry of Employment and the Economy. In other words, the integration training programme is one of the employment measures of the Finnish employment policy. The main contents of the training programme are language studies and so-called civic skills, which means getting acquainted with the Finnish education and employment system, labour markets, pensions, taxation, etc. Yearly, roughly half of the migrants moving to Finland participate in this programme, so it has a central role in the Finnish integration practices.

The two main employee groups working in the programme are language teachers and career practitioners. Career guidance included in the programme consists of individual career counselling and lessons in civic skills: the educational and employment systems, labour market, etc. There are no formal national requirements for career practitioners regarding qualifications. Therefore, the practitioners' experience and background vary. The practitioners I interviewed all had higher education degrees in some field, but none of them had a career guidance degree or diploma.

My thesis was based on qualitative analysis of two interrelated datasets collected in 2019-2020. The first dataset consisted of 18 video-recorded counselling discussions between career practitioners and their migrant clients. The second dataset, with 18 semi-structured interviews, was collected by using the stimulated recall method (Bloom, 1953): showing each practitioner their own discussions from the first dataset and then interviewing them on what they saw happening during those discussions. Both datasets were analysed by reflexive thematic analysis (Braun et al., 2019).

The most important task of career practitioners

Let us go back to the beginning of Soresi's sentence, referring to '*the most important task of a career practitioner*', and stop for a moment to think who gets to define what is the most important task of these professionals?

For the career practitioners working in the integration training programme, it is the employment administration together with the Finnish integration policy, and the employment and integration legislation together. In this context, the most important task is not changing the endings of any stories, told or untold, but first and foremost to ensure the fast employment of migrants. The official Finnish integration policy – in a similar way to many other European countries - emphasises employment as the utmost goal of integration of people with a migration background (Ministry of the Interior, n.d.). This reflects a development where the emphasis is on assimilation as the dominant form of integration (Grzymala-Kazlowska & Phillimore, 2018; Waal, 2021).

The career practitioners I studied in my thesis were in a difficult situation: despite their own possible ideas or approaches, whatever they chose to do needed to align with this overarching goal set by the employment and integration policies. In other terms, they

represent one type of a street-level bureaucrat (Lipsky, 2010), a public services worker who needs to balance between policy ideals and client work and deal with a gap and a tension between these two. Another important feature of the street-level bureaucrat position is that the career counselling practices within the programme were not regulated or managed in any explicit way (Lipsky, 2010), leaving the practitioners to navigate their way through the daily tasks. Watts (1996) has described this situation when discussing career practitioners assuming different roles in their work, such as a facilitator, a gatekeeper or an advocate. Depending on whether the practitioner chooses to emphasise the client's or the society's viewpoints and whether to maintain the existing status quo or strive for change, they end up in different roles and positions in relation to their clients.

Career practitioners using power

According to Soresi, the career practitioners should '*change the endings of stories already told*'. If we take this task as granted and assume that the practitioners need to change something that exists, should that be considered as an act of power? Changing something personal or individual or influencing it requires indeed power. In my thesis, I was interested in what kind of power can be recognised in the current career practices, which often are considered as neutral, client-centred, humanistic, meaning well, and considering a person's whole life in all its complexity. I was curious to explore whether there were other aspects of career guidance that could be observed in the daily career practices of career practitioners and their counselees by studying video-recorded career discussions (Kekki, 2022). What often happened in these discussions was that the practitioners took over, particularly when their clients wished to bring up a discussion topic. Practitioners often brushed these openings aside, ignored them, or downplayed their significance. In other words, they used a very definite and precise power when deciding which topics belonged to the career discussions and which did not.

Career practitioners negotiating their professional agency.

In another study, I also interviewed career practitioners and examined how they experience their professional space, or professional agency (Kekki & Linde, 2024). Here, I cooperated with a Swedish researcher, who approached me with the same question about the data that was collected in Sweden. Both the Finnish and Swedish career practitioners saw their professional agency as crossing several so-called normal boundaries: they felt they needed to consider larger and more complex issues when working with people with a migration background. They also thought that they needed to go further back in time regarding people's life experiences to better understand their situations. Furthermore, they also thought that their professional tasks overlapped with those of other professionals, for instance, in issues like mental health. The career practitioners were working in a position where they needed at the same time try to enable things to happen, for instance a job application to be successful, or some of their counselees to get a study place, but also to constrain things: to stop so-called unrealistic career plans to find work in fields where there weren't necessarily a lot of vacant positions, or to tell people that they couldn't get for instance a lawyer's degree in only a couple of years' time as they thought – and then explain how many years getting a law degree would in fact take and what it would require.

Career practitioners using discretion and stereotyping

A third topic I examined was what kind of discretion the career practitioners are implementing (Kekki & Souto, 2025). In this exercise, I examined my data together with data concerning career practitioners working in basic and secondary education in Finland. We interpreted discretion as meaning what kind of decisions the practitioners would make regarding their counselees and deciding where to direct their focus in their work, how to cope with complex situations and how to solve unexpected new situations and problems (see also Zacka, 2017). What we found out is that there are several situations where the practitioners needed to use their discretion. Primarily, there are the tricky or difficult ones where they need to relate to some ethical pondering, value-related decision-making, or professional codes. In these situations, the practitioners needed to find suitable coping strategies, both to get forward with their work and to make the situation professionally manageable for themselves. One of the obvious coping strategies used by the practitioners was stereotyping, to consider the migrants as one homogeneous group and thus to ignore the individual specialities involved.

Career practitioners aiming to change things

So, based on these findings, I now look at Salvatore Soresi's statement with a fresh perspective: is it acceptable to assume that career practitioners should aim at changing things, and if yes, changing on whose terms and how? Potentially, the practitioners I have studied could be seen as trying to change things for their counselees but also trying to understand them and see how they could be supported to go wherever they wish to go. Often it is not the practitioners' choice how to go about their work, and they may in fact end up in complex situations where they need to figure out the best solution or the way forward, despite their own intentions, ambitions or aspirations. The last part of Soresi's sentence speaks about '*the endings of stories that have been told*'. Listening to people's stories in career guidance is vital. Especially people with a migration background, too often feel that no one is interested in their stories. It may well be that a career practitioner is the first one to be interested in hearing them. Nevertheless, listening to people and hearing them out would be vital also for their integration and for them to experience something we can call social justice.

Career guidance as a space for recognition

Nancy Fraser (2005) has stated how social justice is built on three dimensions: distribution, recognition and representation. Here, distribution refers to how socio-economic resources should be allocated so that they enhance, rather than jeopardise, social justice and representation, for instance, ensuring that people with a migration background can participate in the political structures and institutions of their new environment. With the third dimension, recognition, Fraser refers particularly to how people should be allowed to participate in social interaction fully. With recognition in mind, we can also consider whether and how people with a migration background can feel accepted as part of their new environment, and whether they feel they belong there. Here, listening to their stories might be the first step, even if the stories may be strange or complex or difficult to understand or sometimes even scary. We should make sure that the career practitioners, who hold a unique position regarding integration, have the resources, and especially time,

to listen to the stories and find ways to weave this listening into their career counselling practices.

The changing Finnish integration landscape

The Finnish integration policy is currently facing significant changes. A new legislation on integration took effect from the beginning of 2025 (Ministry of the Interior, n.d.). One major reform was that the municipalities will assume a bigger role in the integration practices, including a responsibility in arranging integration programmes. Another reform is that a new system of information courses on Finnish society was introduced. In this new system, people should be able to receive the information in their own first language, or in any other language they know well, instead of Finnish and Swedish as it has been so far. What remains the same is the idea that the integration programme for adult jobseekers remains at the responsibility of the public employment services, but now at the municipal level.

One thing that is not changing, at least not immediately, is the role and work of career practitioners. That remains invisible within the new legislation and the new responsibility structure, even though career counselling is mentioned for the first time in the new law as one of the contents of the integration training programme. For the career practitioners, the status quo thus remains: neither the current nor the new legislation nor the integration programme curriculum specifically mentions these professionals, although their role within the integration structure is unique. When these practitioners work with a marginalised group of people, namely unemployed and job-seeking people with a migration background, it marginalises the practitioners themselves. Neither are these professionals always included in the bigger picture of Finnish career guidance services.

When going back again to Salvatore Soresi's statement and looking at the very last word in it: 'told', it seems quite innocent. However, when one starts thinking about it more closely, there are at least two questions that come to mind: told by whom, and told to whom? People with a migration background are very often seen as objects, as empty vessels that can be defined by the system and the society they are entering. This system and this society quickly tell them who they are, and especially who they should become: an obedient, flexible and humble labour force that needs to adapt to their new environment. They also expected to be assimilated into it, in terms of this new environment. In this telling, the background and earlier experiences of these people are not valued in our eyes. However, through the means and practices of career guidance, and the expertise and knowledge of career practitioners, their side of the situation could be heard better. Their skills and cultural and cognitive capital could be recognised much better than now, again strengthening their integration process and ensuring that they have a real chance to contribute to our system, our society.

Conclusion

Most of us agree that, especially during the past decade, integration and migration have become more and more politicised overall in Europe. Like many other elements of our societies, integration is also assessed by short-term outcomes, gains and losses. Integration is deemed a failure if a person moving to a new country doesn't quickly become

employed and stay employed. There is little room for understanding and recognising how long a successful integration process may take, and how important things like belonging, feeling as part of a new society, participation, and being met as a proper human being are. What we would therefore need is a renewed way of discussing integration: both what we mean by it and what we want from it. We also need to raise the visibility of career guidance and particularly career practitioners, and start talking about what kind of role they could have in the integration and integrative practices. For long enough, they have been the invisible street-level workers who nevertheless carry a lot of weight on their shoulders, and who can make a difference in what integration looks like, what outcomes it can have and how sustainable it can be. They deserve our joint support for their work, instead of being left alone to do the tasks they are assigned to.

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Research Article

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The influence of career guidance and open days on first-generation students' university choices

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Abstract

This article sets out to investigate the role of career guidance and university open days in shaping the higher education choices of first-generation students. Using Careership as a theoretical framework (Hodkinson, Hodkinson & Sparkes, 1996; Hodkinson & Sparkes, 1997; Hodkinson, 2009), it draws on qualitative data from surveys conducted across three post-16 education providers and semi-structured interviews with first-generation students and staff. Thematic analysis reveals that while university is often viewed as a natural next step for these students, opportunities for career guidance to expand their horizon for action are frequently missed or not recognised. In-person open days emerge as pivotal moments in a first-generation student's decision-making by offering critical 'turning points' that influence both what and where they choose to study.

Key words: career guidance, careership, open days, first-generation students

Introduction

In recent decades, the number of young people attending university has increased significantly. Recent data from the University Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) (2025) indicates that nearly two-thirds of graduates are first-generation students, defined in this study as individuals whose parents did not attend university. This study focuses specifically on first-

generation students, while acknowledging that many may also come from low socio-economic backgrounds and reside in areas with historically low participation in higher education (HE). Despite growing numbers, evidence of inequality remains in the types of universities first-generation students attend. Admissions data show that these students are more likely to enrol in local institutions and less likely to access elite universities (Coombs, 2022).

The young people in this study were all first-generation students making university choices in a higher education landscape that has undergone significant changes. This landscape is not only focused on fair access but has also become increasingly marketised and consumer-led, with a growing emphasis on value for money (Furedi, 2010; Molesworth, Scullion & Nixon, 2010).

The relationship between career guidance and university open days in students' decision-making processes remains under-researched. Existing studies have primarily focused on conversion, how effectively universities turn open day attendees into applicants, rather than exploring the broader role open days and career guidance play in shaping students' educational choices. To address this gap, this research applies Careership theory (Hodkinson et al., 1996; Hodkinson & Sparkes, 1997; Hodkinson, 2009) to offer a unique perspective on how career guidance and open day experiences influence first-generation students within the current higher education landscape.

It is important to note that partway through this research, the UK was placed under restrictions due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This inevitably had an impact on the direction of the study and the subsequent findings. This has been acknowledged where appropriate.

Careership theory

Careership theory (Hodkinson, et al., 1996; Hodkinson & Sparkes, 1997; Hodkinson, 2009) was developed as a response to gaps in traditional theories around career decision making. They argue that many career guidance practices in the UK are underpinned by what they refer to as a 'folk theory of careers'. They claim that folk theories often include many of the following assumptions:

- Career decisions involve matching a person with a career opportunity
- Career decisions are, or should be, cognitive and rational
- Career decision-making is a process which results in an event (career decision)
- Career decisions are solely made by the person making the decision.
- Career decisions are made at the start of a linear career
- Career progression is usually straightforward if a good decision has been made.

However, Hodkinson and Sparkes suggest that folk theory is flawed because actual career decision-making is not rational in the ways assumed. That career progression is often non-linear and is strongly influenced by actions, events and circumstances which lie beyond a person's control.

Hodkinson (1997) critiques several earlier career theorists, including Holland (1997) and Super (1957), for portraying career decision-making as a purely rational process. His central criticism is that these theories treat the individual as the sole agent in career

decisions, largely ignoring the social and cultural context in which such decisions occur. For instance, Holland's RIASEC theory emphasises the alignment between personal traits and job characteristics, assuming that individuals have the freedom to choose careers that match their traits. However, Hodkinson argues that this assumption is often unrealistic. Career choices are not made in a vacuum; they are shaped by the cultural, social, and economic contexts surrounding the individual.

Drawing on concepts developed by Bourdieu (1986), Careership Theory comprises three overlapping themes: the individual's position (habitus), the forces within the decision-making field, and the ongoing career journey. Bourdieu's notion of 'field' adds a deeper dimension to what is often referred to as the external environment. Field theory suggests that the external environment is dynamic, complex and consists of interacting and, often, unequal forces. This made this an appropriate theoretical lens to investigate the university decision-making process of first-generation students.

When conceptualising higher education as a distinct 'field', it is important to consider its position relative to other fields, such as employment or alternative training pathways like apprenticeships (Thomson, 2016). For young people from working-class or disadvantaged backgrounds, the decision to pursue higher education is often shaped by perceived risks and uncertainties (Callender, 2008; Esson & Ertl, 2016). The benefits of attending university may appear ambiguous, particularly when weighed against examples of low-earning or unemployed graduates, or jobs that do not require a degree (Watts & Bridges, 2006). In such comparisons, higher education is frequently viewed as offering poor value, with no guaranteed return on investment (Jones, 2016). First-generation students often approach higher education with a sense of uncertainty, lacking familial templates to guide them. In contrast, second-generation students, those whose family members have previously attended university, tend to engage with the process with greater confidence and clarity (Reay, 1998). This contrast suggests that for first-generation and disadvantaged students, the decision to enter higher education is significantly more complex than it is for their more privileged, middle-class peers.

A central concept within Careership theory (Hodkinson, et al., 1996; Hodkinson & Sparkes, 1997; Hodkinson, 2009) is that career decision-making is bounded by an individual's 'horizons for action.' This suggests that what individuals perceive as possible is shaped by their position within a social field. Their location influences a person's horizon for action in a particular field, the characteristics of that field, and their embodied dispositions. These elements interact to form a framework within which choices are made. Horizons for action define the scope of what is visible and conceivable to the individual, while obscuring possibilities beyond that scope. This research explores explicitly the extent to which careers education and guidance can influence a young person's horizon for action, particularly in relation to university choice.

Another key element of Careership theory relevant to this study is the concept of 'turning points.' Traditional views of career progression often depict it as a linear and predictable trajectory, where deviations are seen as occasional anomalies, merely shifts from one career ladder to another (Hodkinson & Sparkes, 1997). However, earlier theorists have argued that such models fail to capture the lived experiences of individuals. Turning points refer to moments when individuals reassess, revise, or redirect their career paths. While the concept itself is not new, Hodkinson and Sparkes sought to classify the different

types of turning points encountered in career development. They identified three main categories: structural, self-initiated, and forced. Structural turning points are shaped by external systems, such as the need to choose between further education, employment, or training at the end of compulsory schooling. Self-initiated turning points arise from personal decisions to instigate change, often in response to life events. Forced turning points, by contrast, result from external pressures or disruptions, such as redundancy. These moments can be planned or unanticipated and may not consistently be recognised as significant until viewed in retrospect. This challenges trajectory-based models of career development, which often overlook the unpredictable nature of individuals' lives and the labour market. Turning points can lead to dramatic shifts or gradual transformations, ultimately altering an individual's habitus. In the context of this study, the concept of turning points was central to exploring whether events such as university open days could serve as catalysts for change. These events, along with careers education and guidance, represent structured interactions between the education system, labour market, and individual dispositions. While the significance of such moments is often subjective and may have been oversimplified in previous research, they hold the potential to be transformative, particularly for first-generation university applicants.

Traditional theories of career decision-making often assume that the ideal process is one of technical rationality; logical, objective, and based on the comprehensive analysis of all available information. In the context of university choice, this would involve applicants systematically comparing data such as league tables, graduate outcomes, and student satisfaction scores to make an informed decision. These models also imply that a good decision leads to a stable, long-term career and that such decisions are singular, pivotal events. Hodkinson (1997), however, challenges this view by introducing the concept of 'pragmatic rationality.' His research found that young people often make career decisions that are not purely logical but are shaped by practical, emotional, and cultural factors. Many participants were unable to clearly articulate their preferences or provide rational justifications for their choices. Instead, decisions were frequently based on partial information, often obtained from trusted individuals, referred to as 'hot' sources, rather than official or impersonal 'cold' sources. This highlights the importance of understanding how different groups access and interpret information, a theme explored further in this study. Careership theory also emphasises that career decisions are rarely made in isolation; they typically involve input from multiple people and are influenced by chance and serendipity. This broader, more nuanced understanding of decision-making is particularly relevant when examining how young people, especially those from underrepresented backgrounds, navigate the complex process of choosing a university.

Methodology

This study employed an interpretive approach to explore the career decision-making behaviours of first-generation students, with a particular focus on their university choices and the role of open days in shaping these decisions. Data was collected from three separate post-16 institutions:

- A school sixth form college
- A sixth form college
- a further education college

A survey was sent out to all three institutions aimed at all students who were in their first year of post-16 education. The survey received 96 responses, with the proportion of responses being relatively equal across all three schools and colleges. It is essential to note that, although the survey was open to all students in the year group, each of the providers had a high number of students who fit the profile of first-generation students and were located in areas classified as Quintile 2 in the POLAR4 data. POLAR measures the proportion of young people in a particular area who participate in higher education. POLAR4 is the most recent version of this data. POLAR classifies local areas into five groups based on the proportion of young people who enter higher education aged 18 or 19 years old. Quintile one shows the lowest rate of participation. Quintile five shows the highest rate of participation.

As part of the survey, respondents were asked to indicate if they would be willing to participate in a follow-up interview. For a student to be eligible for an interview, they needed to be classed as a first-generation student and be planning on applying to a university. As a result of this criterion, two students per institution were identified as being suitable for a follow-up interview. In addition to the student interviews, the named Careers Leader for each institution was interviewed, and the published careers programme was used as documentary evidence. The research and any decision-making involved were framed by the guidelines and principles laid down by the British Educational Research Association (BERA). Informed consent was built into the survey, and a consent form was given to all interview participants before any interviews took place. I also obtained permission from the schools and colleges to conduct the research project.

As the research took place during the COVID-19 pandemic, my research questions were also adapted to understand the initial impact of the pandemic on university choice. My methodological approach was also modified to consider issues surrounding a series of national lockdowns. The introduction of surveys, in addition to semi-structured interviews, added another layer of data, which allowed me to refine my interview approach. To generate a rich dataset, I employed a qualitative research strategy that allowed me to delve deeply into an individual's perceptions and interpretations, while offering sufficient flexibility to address any unanticipated issues that arose. The data was analysed using a thematic analysis, which allowed me to identify themes and analyse these using the theoretical lens of Careership theory (Hodkinson, et al., 1996; Hodkinson & Sparkes, 1997; Hodkinson, 2009).

Findings

The influence of career guidance

Participants in this study were asked to reflect on their experiences of career guidance throughout their time in education. Still, there was a specific focus on the support they had received while making their post-16 and post-18 choices. The survey inquired about students' experiences with career guidance interviews, as well as careers support more broadly, and these themes were explored in more detail during the interviews. A consistent theme emerged: young people expressed a desire for more frequent and meaningful career guidance. However, the definition of meaningful appears to differ between students and staff. From a student perspective, meaningful refers to a career intervention that focuses on information rather than an intervention that allows students to engage in the wider career guidance process.

It appears that opportunities for career guidance to influence a young person's horizon for action are either being missed or not fully recognised by the students themselves. This finding aligns with Hodkinson's (2001) argument that the impact of career guidance is often limited, not due to its potential, but because it operates within restrictive policy and funding frameworks. This was evident in the study, where all participating educational institutions employed qualified careers advisers to conduct one-to-one interviews, in line with the Gatsby Benchmarks (Gatsby Charitable Foundation, 2014). However, it became clear that this provision was insufficient to meet the needs of the student population. The findings suggest a disconnect between policy intentions and the lived experiences of students, raising important questions about how career guidance can be better resourced and structured to expand young people's horizons for meaningful action.

In this study, the term 'careers support' encompasses more than just the one-to-one careers interview, often referred to as personal guidance. Staff participants emphasised that personal guidance represented only a small component of their broader careers programme, which was structured around achieving the Gatsby Benchmarks (Gatsby Charitable Foundation, 2014). Staff reported that these benchmarks were well embedded within their provision and that their performance aligned with national data from the Careers and Enterprise Company. However, the findings suggest a need to reflect on the quality and purpose of the guidance being delivered. Echoing the findings of Moote and Archer (2018), students in this study described personal guidance sessions that primarily focused on information delivery and subject choices, rather than offering space to explore their interests, values, and future opportunities. It became clear throughout the study that the students not only expected the interaction to focus on information, but it was also the aspect of guidance they rated most highly. This was clear in the responses from the survey, which was open to all students, not just those who were considered first-generation. This highlights a potential disconnect between a guidance practitioner's perception of career guidance and the expectations of young people.

Following on from this was the widespread misunderstanding amongst the first-generation students regarding the purpose and timing of personal guidance. These students articulated in the research interview that they believed that career interviews were intended only for those who had already decided on a career path, rather than as a space to explore potential options. Given this misconception, it is perhaps unsurprising that students were not actively requesting interviews, even when they were available. In addition to not knowing how to request an interview, students were often unclear about when it would be most appropriate or beneficial to do so. Because personal guidance was perceived primarily as a means of acquiring information, rather than as an opportunity for reflection or exploration, it is reasonable to conclude that the students did not view it as a mechanism for expanding their horizons for action. These findings support recent research by O'Regan and Bhattacharyya (2022), which suggests that career interviews are often viewed as instrumental rather than transformative processes.

It is important to acknowledge the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the availability and accessibility of career guidance. During this period, career interviews were moved online, which had two notable consequences for students. First, many students reported feeling uncomfortable or awkward during virtual interactions, with some lacking the confidence to engage effectively in an online setting. Second, there was confusion around how to access these services. While students were previously familiar with the physical

location of the careers office and could easily request an in-person interview, the process for arranging an online appointment was not clearly communicated. As a result, many students missed out on receiving guidance altogether. These findings highlight the need for more accessible and clearly structured systems for delivering career support, particularly in times of disruption.

The emphasis on information continued to be a prominent theme, with students noting a strong focus on higher education compared to alternative pathways. Although the education providers involved in this study were compliant with the Provider Access Legislation (2023), higher education was consistently promoted as the preferred and expected destination for Level 3 students. Opportunities to explore apprenticeships or other vocational routes were limited. As in previous research, parents were identified as the most influential source of advice regarding university (Youthsight, 2014). First-generation students in this study acknowledged that their parents had limited personal experience with higher education. Still, they described their parents as viewing the decision to apply to university very positively. Notably, none of the participants reported being encouraged by their parents to consider alternatives to university. This suggests that higher education now firmly resides within the horizons for action not only of students and staff, but also of their parents. These findings challenge earlier studies (e.g., Norris, 2011; Bailey, 2021), which suggested that parents without higher education experience were more likely to support non-university routes. The perceived link between university attendance and future employment success underpins this shift in outlook for both the students and their parents, echoing the conclusions of Purcell (2008). Subject choices were also influenced by employment considerations, with some students referencing the COVID-19 pandemic as a factor shaping their decisions. Students stated that the pandemic had made them more interested in health and media-related careers and less interested in careers in education, specifically teaching. Staff interviews supported this data as they noted an increase in students being interested in health-related subjects and a decline in those looking at teacher training.

While attending university has become an expected destination for a growing number of young people, their choice of institution remains shaped by traditional horizons for action. All participants in this study chose to apply to a local university. Although future employability was cited as the primary motivation for pursuing higher education, this rationale did not appear to influence the specific choice of university. None of the participants reported using league tables or graduate outcome statistics to inform their decisions. Instead, they emphasised factors such as proximity, the availability of their chosen subject at the local institution, financial considerations, and the ability to remain at home. When discussing finance, the students were referring to the cost of living rather than the tuition fees charged by the university. They expressed concerns about the cost of accommodation and linked this directly to their choice to choose a local university and live at home. Students also valued the support offered by local universities and expressed a sense of gratitude that their preferred course was available nearby. Staff participants highlighted the role of cultural capital, noting that students often selected universities where they felt a sense of belonging or familiarity. These findings suggest that while higher education is firmly within the horizon for action of students, staff, and parents, the decision-making process remains bounded by local, cultural, and economic factors.

Although the primary focus of this research was not the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, it became evident that the pandemic influenced participants' university choices. Concerns

about the potential return of restrictions and lockdowns led many students to view local universities as safer and more practical options. Studying locally offered the reassurance of being able to remain at home and continue learning remotely if necessary. This behaviour aligns with the concept of pragmatic rationality as described in Careership theory (Hodkinson, et al., 1996; Hodkinson & Sparkes, 1997; Hodkinson, 2009). Rather than making decisions based solely on objective data, such as league tables or graduate employment statistics, students made choices grounded in emotional, cultural, and practical considerations. These findings further illustrate how career decisions are shaped by context and lived experience, rather than by purely technical rationality.

The role of open days

Both staff and students in this study identified open days as influential in the university decision-making process. All the first-generation students who were interviewed had visited a university in person either for an open day or a taster day organised by their school, and they had all attended at least one virtual open day. However, there were notable differences between the experiences of attending in-person versus virtual open days. This research explored whether open days could act as a turning point for university applicants, an aspect of open days which has previously gone largely unacknowledged. The findings suggest that in-person events held on campus often act as a turning point. These events allow prospective students to experience the university environment firsthand, offering a sense of the institution's character and culture. They also provide an opportunity to explore the surrounding area, helping students assess whether they feel a sense of belonging, an important factor in university choice. These findings align with research by The Student Room (2023), which highlighted the importance of open days in shaping applicant decisions.

The concept of student–institutional fit (Reay & Ball, 2010), though difficult to quantify, is central to this process. It reflects how students feel about a university and contributes to the kind of pragmatically rational decisions described in Careership theory (Hodkinson, et al., 1996; Hodkinson & Sparkes, 1997; Hodkinson, 2009). Rather than relying solely on data such as league tables, students make decisions based on emotional and cultural resonance. In-person open days foster this by enabling unplanned interactions, such as meeting student ambassadors or staff or witnessing campus life, which can significantly influence both university and subject choice. These experiences support the idea that 'seeing is believing,' as noted in the work of Pampaloni (2010) and Raven (2020), and demonstrate how such events can serve as meaningful turning points in the higher education decision-making journey.

In contrast to in-person events, virtual open days were perceived by both staff and students as less likely to act as turning points in the university decision-making process. While feedback on virtual events was generally positive, often accompanied by the caveat that universities had no alternative during COVID-19 restrictions, participants consistently described the experience as fundamentally different. Unlike in-person open days, which evoked emotional responses and a sense of connection to the institution, virtual events were seen as functional and information-driven. They were highly structured, with applicants self-selecting sessions rather than encountering spontaneous or unplanned experiences that might influence their decisions more deeply.

Participants noted that virtual open days did not effectively convey the personality of the institution, with many describing them as indistinguishable from one another. Although

some universities offered virtual campus tours or opportunities to meet current students, these features were often underutilised. As a result, virtual events lacked the immersive and affective qualities that contribute to a sense of belonging or institutional fit, key elements in the formation of pragmatically rational decisions and potential turning points, as described in Careership theory. These findings underscore the limitations of virtual formats in replicating the transformative potential of in-person engagement.

Additionally, young people's confidence in interacting and participating in an online event played a part. Participants spoke of not engaging with staff during online talks, even if they were supposed to be interactive, as they did not have the confidence to speak as part of a large online group. Given the timing of the study and the fact that online events were relatively new, it is difficult to say whether this was an issue just for first-generation students or an issue for young people more broadly.

Discussion

This research highlights an apparent disconnect between the perspectives of young people and career guidance practitioners regarding the role and purpose of career guidance. As a result, the potential for guidance to expand first-generation students' horizons for action is often unrecognised by the very individuals it aims to support. To address this gap, it is essential to explore student perceptions more deeply. Do these views stem from a lack of clear communication from the sector about the aims and scope of career guidance? Or do young people hold fundamentally different expectations, perhaps viewing guidance as a more directive, instrumental process focused on practical support rather than exploration and reflection?

These questions have important implications not only for how career guidance is delivered but also for how practitioners are trained. If young people do not perceive guidance as a space for expanding their aspirations and exploring possibilities, then its transformative potential is diminished. Understanding and addressing this misalignment is crucial for ensuring that career guidance can fulfil its broader developmental role, particularly for those whose horizons for action may already be constrained by social or cultural factors.

This research highlights the central role of information in student career decision-making. Student participants raised concerns about its type, volume, and frequency. While staff viewed information provision as a strength, students often felt overwhelmed and disengaged due to a lack of personalisation. This appears to contrast with the students' expectations of career guidance interviews. The findings suggest that personalisation is key to effective information delivery, calling for more tailored, student-centred approaches.

Students noted a strong emphasis on higher education, with limited exposure to alternative pathways such as apprenticeships or vocational training. Although all student participants indicated that the university was their intended destination, many expressed a desire to learn more about other options. These findings support previous research highlighting concerns about the narrow focus of information provision and the promotion of higher education as the default route.

This study suggests that higher education now sits firmly within the horizons for action of students studying Level 3 qualifications, more so than previously recognised. While this

reflects the success of widening participation initiatives, it also signals a need to shift focus. Future efforts should not only aim to increase access to higher education but also ensure that students, particularly those from non-traditional backgrounds, are supported in making informed choices about what and where they study.

Although this group of first-generation students viewed university as a natural progression, their choice of institution was primarily influenced by location. All participants chose to apply to local universities, with proximity emerging as the most significant factor in their decision-making. While employability was consistently cited as the main reason for attending university, this was often expressed in general terms. Students did not typically link their choice of institution or subject to specific career outcomes. Instead, subject choices were primarily determined by what was available at nearby universities. This supports the concepts put forward by Careership theory, which relate to young people making pragmatically rational decisions, as opposed to technically rational decisions. The findings in this study demonstrated that first-generation students were making pragmatically rational decisions, which were driven by culture and emotions rather than data.

The educational institutions involved in this study were in areas with a relatively high density of universities, offering students a broad range of subjects and institutions to choose from. However, this raises important questions about how location might influence decision-making in areas with fewer higher education options. Further research into the experiences of first-generation students in rural or geographically isolated regions would provide valuable insights into how location and subject availability interact in shaping university choice.

These findings have clear implications for both professional practice and policy, not only within career guidance, but also in the realms of higher education marketing and the use of consumer data. Notably, none of the students in this study reported using consumer data such as university league tables, institutional rankings, or Graduate Outcomes statistics in their decision-making process. This suggests a disconnect between the data-driven strategies employed by universities and the actual behaviours and priorities of prospective students. It raises important questions about the effectiveness of current marketing approaches and the assumptions underpinning them. If students are not engaging with this type of information, institutions may need to reconsider how they present and personalise data to better align with how young people make decisions about their futures.

Conclusion

The suggestion that university applicants are making pragmatically rational decisions is further supported by the findings related to open days. This study found that open days can act as significant turning points in the university decision-making process, particularly when experienced in person. In-person open days provide institutions with a unique opportunity to convey the ‘personality’ of the university, something that is difficult to replicate in a virtual format. This sense of personality contributes to a student’s ability to assess whether they feel a sense of belonging, which is a key factor in pragmatically rational decision-making.

In-person events also allow for unplanned or serendipitous experiences, such as informal conversations with staff or students, or spontaneous encounters with aspects of campus

life, that can influence both university and subject choice. While feedback on virtual open days was generally positive, they were perceived as more structured and information-focused, offering limited opportunities to develop an emotional connection with the institution. As the sector continues to operate in a hybrid environment, with virtual open days remaining a feature of university marketing, particularly for international applicants, there is a need for institutions to consider how they can better convey their identity and foster a sense of belonging in virtual formats.

Recommendations

The findings from this research and subsequent recommendations offer career development practitioners, universities and policy makers opportunities to reflect on the decision-making journey of first-generation students and the role of both career guidance and open days on university choice.

- There needs to be a clear definition of career guidance and personal guidance, which is clearly communicated to staff and students. This should be driven by the sector's professional body to ensure consistency across the profession.
- Schools and Colleges should be held accountable for their approach to the Provider Access Legislation (2023) to ensure that career guidance activities can focus on all available options, including apprenticeships and employment.
- The sector should review the use of consumer data, as it is not being used as extensively as policymakers and universities believe. There is scope for policymakers and universities to work more closely with the career guidance sector to ensure that the information being presented is meaningful in supporting decisions relating to higher education choice.
- Universities would benefit from acknowledging the potential for a university open day to act as a Turning Point in the decision-making process of applicants and to work with career guidance professionals in ensuring that the information presented is helpful for those young people making decisions about where and what to study.
- Applicants attending virtual events would benefit from support when booking the event and prior to attending to ensure they are making the most of the opportunity to speak to staff and students.

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Research Article

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The influence of gender-based violence on women's career development: Perspectives from higher education career guidance practitioners in Ireland

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Abstract

Women and girls are disproportionately subjected to gender-based violence (GBV) and the effects for victim-survivors are multiple and long-lasting. An under-considered dimension is the profound influence GBV has on the careers of the women who experience it.

This small exploratory study aimed to explore this issue from the perspective of career practitioners. The research set out to understand how career practitioners working in Irish Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) understand GBV, how they identify this in a career context and the professional competencies they require to support female clients who may be affected by it.

Key words: Career guidance, gender-based violence, higher education, Ireland

Introduction

Gender-based violence (GBV) is a pervasive global problem with wide-ranging consequences at both the individual and societal level. The World Health Organization estimates that approximately 1 in 3 women have experienced physical or sexual violence, either from an intimate partner or a non-intimate partner during their lifetime (WHO, 2021).

GBV is rooted in unequal power dynamics and is disproportionately perpetrated against women and girls. It is 'both a cause and consequence' of gender inequality (EIGE, 2024).

GBV takes multiple forms and is not limited to sexual and physical violence. GBV can be 'conceptualised as a continuum whereby seemingly 'innocent' or 'mild' forms of misconduct when not addressed tend to gradually escalate into more severe and grave forms of violence' (UniSAFE, 2024).

There has been increased focus on GBV in Ireland in recent years. Recent legislative reforms include the right to paid employment leave for victims of domestic violence and the criminalisation of coercive control, stalking, and the non-consensual sharing of intimate images (Kelly, 2023).

In the 2022 Central Statistics Office (CSO) Sexual Violence Survey, 52% of women had experienced sexual violence in their lifetime. Young women, aged 18–24, experienced the highest levels of sexual violence (CSO, 2024).

Education and awareness campaigns are seen as fundamental to the prevention of GBV. The Student Sexual Experiences Survey (SES; Burke et al., 2020), based on a sample of 6,026 students, shed light on the scale of GBV in Irish Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). The survey found that 29% of female respondents, 28% of non-binary respondents, and 10% of male respondents had experienced non-consensual penetration. Experiences of unwanted sexual attention and sexist hostility were also high among female and non-binary students. Formal reporting of incidents was low among all students.

The publication of *Safe, respectful, supportive and positive: Ending sexual harassment in Irish higher education institutions* (Department of Education, 2019) introduced a framework for Irish HEIs to reduce occurrences of GBV in the sector through education and awareness campaigns, robust reporting and support mechanisms, and working in partnership with internal and external stakeholders. All public HEIs are required to develop action plans in response to the framework, and funding has been provided to employ designated Sexual Violence Prevention and Response Managers to implement institutional action plans and respond to complaints of GBV.

GBV in all its manifestations is the focus of much scholarly work, with particular attention given to the physical and psychological effects on victim-survivors. An under-explored dimension is the influence of GBV on the careers of women subjected to it. Existing literature on this dimension is predominantly from studies in North American contexts, which are not wholly transferable to Irish settings. Given the recent developments relating to GBV in Irish HEIs, this study aimed to establish to what extent these efforts have reached career guidance practitioners in HEIs.

Literature Review

GBV has been found to hinder women's opportunities for career development and advancement, shape or constrain their career choices, and often push them out of their chosen profession.

Lantrip et al. (2015) and McLaughlin et al. (2017) both highlight the detrimental impact of GBV on women's career progression. Focusing specifically on intimate partner violence

(IPV), Lantrip et al. found that the workplace can simultaneously serve as a site of abuse and a potential refuge for survivors. Their study revealed that the negative effects of IPV on career trajectories often persist long after the abuse has ended. Survivors reported that IPV 'affected every dimension of their career development over time including, but not limited to, their work and career search, performance, planning, identity, and advancement' (Lantrip et al., 2015, p. 602).

Ballou et al. (2015) focused on the experiences of women returning to work following interpersonal violence. They observed that this can be empowering and important for recovery from trauma, but workplace sexism and harassment can also reinforce trauma. They noted that dependency on employment for financial and health security can replicate the dynamic the women experienced with their abuser.

McLaughlin et al. (2017) found that women frequently exited the workforce following experiences of sexual harassment, either as a means of escaping the hostile environment or in response to the employer's inadequate or harmful response. Loya's (2014) study demonstrated that single incidents of sexual violence can have enduring and disruptive effects on women's employment trajectories, significantly diminishing their lifetime earnings. These findings illustrate how initial experiences of GBV perpetuate long-term economic and social inequalities.

Infrequent but severe forms of workplace harm such as gendered harassment and sexist organisational culture were found to be as detrimental to women's occupational wellbeing as less frequent but more severe forms such as sexual coercion (Sojo et al., 2016).

Survivors of childhood trauma are sometimes motivated to pursue careers in helping professions (Maree, 2024; Bryce et al., 2022; Bryce et al., 2021). They may have high levels of empathy and altruism because of their experiences, which would be well matched to helping professions, but puts them at risk of re-traumatisation, vicarious trauma, and burnout.

Despite the harm GBV causes to the health, wealth, and wellbeing of the women who experience it, employers, academic institutions, media reports, and legal judgements often focus more on the potential career damage of the men who perpetrate it. In her study of institutional responses to reports of sexual violence in Western United States campuses, Bedera (2023) found that administrators equated the trauma of the victim-survivor with that of the accused. Leniency toward perpetrators was justified on the basis of protecting their future careers.

Experiences of GBV in higher education can lead to dropping out of studies or research careers (Humbert & Strid, 2024). Gunby et al. (2025) note the frequency of sexual violence in UK universities, the low reporting via formal institutional routes such as counselling services, limited staff confidence in responding to disclosures, and the risk of causing additional harm by not responding supportively.

Given the high prevalence of GBV and the well-evidenced effect on career trajectories, how can career practitioners work with victim-survivors? Bimrose (2004), focusing on workplace sexual harassment, suggested that career practitioners can support clients to make informed choices by raising awareness of sexual harassment laws. She argued that career guidance provision should be equally engaged in supporting individual clients and challenging structural inequalities.

Trauma-informed career guidance practice is an emerging area. Powers and Duys (2020) recommended that career practitioners should develop knowledge of trauma effects on the brain, focus on instilling hope with clients, and engage in multi-agency work with allied professionals and services. Cardello and Wright (2024) drew on the work of Powers and Duys and others to propose a framework to work with trauma, the HEART framework: (a) instilling hope, (b) establishing safety, (c) recognising and responding to chronic stress, (d) building resilience, and (e) the importance of engaging in ongoing training.

GBV is so prevalent that for many women it has become a normalised part of their experience and considered something to put up with in work and education (Bates, 2023; Spiliopoulou & Witcomb, 2023). Clients presenting to careers services may not be traumatised, but their career development may be affected by structural and systemic gender violence. This presents a challenge for career practitioners in situations where GBV may be present but not acknowledged by the client.

Social justice approaches to career guidance are highly applicable to practice with clients at high risk of GBV. This approach acknowledges that unequal opportunity structures shape career development (Hooley, Sultana, & Thomsen, 2021) while also maintaining that enhancing individual agency remains an emancipatory goal.

Sultana (2014) identified three levels of social justice intervention: micro (individual), meso (institutional), and macro (structural). Career practitioners often work at the micro and meso levels, but their practice should be informed by an understanding of broader inequalities.

These principles are especially relevant when supporting victim-survivors of GBV. Wikstrand (2018) introduced norm criticism, drawing on feminist and queer theory to challenge gendered career norms and support informed client choices. This approach could be utilised by practitioners to explore more subtle forms of GBV.

Methodology

This research was conducted as part of a dissertation for the MA in Career Development (Top-Up) programme at Nottingham Trent University. The research proposal received a favourable ethical opinion from the Nottingham Trent School of Social Sciences Research Ethics Approval Committee in March 2025. Given the sensitive nature of the research, contact details of local GBV support services were included in the participant information sheet, consent form, and screening questionnaire, and participants were offered a debrief at the end of the interview. To protect participants' privacy, pseudonyms are used, chosen by the participants themselves.

The primary aim of the study was to identify what career practitioners in Irish HEIs understand about the influence of GBV on women's career development. Three secondary research questions emerged from this primary question:

1. How does GBV present in career guidance interventions with women in higher education?
2. What skills and competencies are required of practitioners to support women with experience of or risk factors for GBV?
3. What are the support and development needs of career practitioners working with young women in the context of high prevalence of GBV?

Data were collected from in-depth, semi-structured interviews with four career guidance professionals providing career guidance or coaching with adult clients. All four participants were employed in careers services in Irish HEIs, with one also working in private practice. Table 1 provides further detail about the participants.

Table 1: Participant characteristics

	Sarah	Brian	Rika	Helen
Gender	F	M	F	F
# Years Relevant Experience	5+	20+	20+	10+
Sector	HE	HE	Multiple, including HE and corporate	HE

Note: F = female; M= male; HE = higher education.

An interview guide was developed and incorporated eight areas for discussion. These included exploration of the participants' background; their understanding of GBV; how GBV might emerge during career interactions; any experiences of disclosures by clients; how the practitioner worked with female clients where GBV may have been present; any relevant training they had completed; and their thoughts on the relevance of knowledge of GBV for career practitioners.

Interviews took place over MS Teams during March and April 2025. The interviews were recorded with live, AI-enabled transcription used with consent of the participants. The AI-generated transcripts were then cross-checked against the interview recordings for accuracy and manually updated where inaccuracies were found. Interview transcripts were analysed using reflective thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-stage framework. Three main themes were identified: (1) constructions of GBV in careers work; (2) career drivers and inhibitors for GBV victim-survivors; and (3) applying and adapting guidance competencies in relation to GBV.

Findings and discussion

Constructions of GBV in careers work

All participants expressed a conception of GBV as extending beyond physical or sexual violence to include coercion, emotional harm, and verbal abuse. Some participants cited strong parental influence over their children's careers as constituting a form of GBV. In most instances, GBV was framed by the participants in terms of interpersonal harmful acts, with limited reference to wider organisational and structural harm and cultural norms.

Only one participant, Brian, constructed GBV in a broader sense, positioning occupational gendered norms and outdated working practices as a form of violence. Referring to technological advances that have paved the way for increased women's participation in some traditionally male occupations such as veterinary care, he observed evidence of GBV:

> … I hear it from them when they go into working situations, and they are having to continually stand up for themselves.

Of the four research participants, all but one felt they had not had direct experience of disclosures of GBV in their work. However, all then recounted situations disclosed to them or that they were aware of that would constitute GBV. These included unwanted sexual attention, male students photographing female students without consent, and workplace hostility towards a transgender student.

Rika identified four instances over the course of her career in which GBV was directly disclosed to her, and additional instances where she had a strong conviction a client was under the influence of coercive control. Rika referred to the four direct disclosures as 'the most memorable.' This would suggest that the participants may be less attuned to the 'less intense' forms of GBV Sojo et al. (2016) referred to, and that were reported by women and non-binary students in high percentages in the SES (Burke et al., 2020).

Career drivers and inhibitors for GBV victim-survivors

Participants saw experiences of GBV, and in some instances proximity to it, as a powerful force that both held back clients from realising their full potential and strongly motivated them to seek career change or progression.

Helen considered that in some cases, someone experiencing GBV may not want to be defined by this. Work or education could be:

> … a space that is theirs, where they are not undergoing coercive control or abuse.

She stressed that where 'the abuse is very strong' it may not be possible to do this, and the desire not to be defined by abuse could further isolate or close off avenues of support. Helen felt that realising career goals could also provide a pathway out of abuse for some, such as young people under parental coercive control. Both Lantrip et al. (2015) and Ballou et al. (2015) noted that achievement of career goals can support recovery from IPV, but this is contingent on the quality of the work and the supports in place.

When asked how they felt GBV influences career, participants often focused on decision-making difficulties. The language used – 'stuck,' 'stuck on repeat,' 'cycling', could be seen as stigmatising and holding the client accountable for the situation they are in. As Hooley et al. (2021) have argued, the language used in career guidance can 'implicitly trace problems and deficits back to individuals.'

Rika discussed a client who had survived physical abuse by an ex-partner. Although her partner had been imprisoned, she was motivated to seek job prospects abroad due to fear of his future release. She successfully secured a job offer abroad but hesitated to accept it. Rika saw the experience as simultaneously pushing the client forward and pulling her back:

> But now that the opportunity is there d'you know what I mean, the, the drag, it's almost like there's an anchor you know or the anchor is getting caught in something, d'you know what I mean? They're going to lift the anchor up and suddenly something just in here just pulls them right back, you know.

In this account, Rika attributed the client's hesitance to internal factors but did not acknowledge the injustice of her circumstances. Relocation may have left the client

dependent on her employer, reminiscent of Ballou et al.'s (2015) observations, but interview time constraints prohibited further exploration of this point.

Applying and adapting guidance competencies in relation to GBV

Participants were asked how they would work with GBV. In the main, this was addressed in the context of one-to-one guidance interactions and where GBV was disclosed or strongly implied by the client. The participants were able to apply the professional competencies of career guidance, coaching, and career counselling to these scenarios to respond to a client with empathy. Core guidance competencies such as active listening, reflecting feelings, attending to verbal and non-verbal signals, signposting, and setting boundaries were evident, and these align well with recommended approaches to responding to disclosures widely rolled out to staff and students in Irish HEIs.

All participants had completed some training related to GBV or responding to disclosures of GBV, and this was provided by their HEI. In most instances, the practitioner was personally motivated to complete the training but not mandated to by their service. Sarah was aware that colleagues had been disclosed to and was motivated to complete disclosure response training to be prepared for this possibility herself. The training helped her understand how her guidance skills could be applied to a disclosure:

> …what I learned from that is that actually it's about asking the student what they want and you know, letting them know the supports that are there for them if they choose to proceed with anything, and I suppose that was very reassuring because you know, that's something I can do very well, because that's what I'm doing in my job anyway.

Sarah's warmth and empathy are apparent in this observation and could be seen as instilling hope, as per Cardello and Wright's (2024) framework.

Participants all expressed strong adherence to professional boundaries and concern not to stray into committing to support they were not trained to provide. This at times manifested as a reluctance to follow up with a client in situations where GBV may have been a factor but was not directly disclosed. Only Rika expressed confidence in directly asking a client whether there may be 'something else going on' and had adapted her style of contracting based on a non-GBV-related disclosure. By explaining her process to the client and emphasising the voluntary nature of any disclosure, Rika powerfully demonstrated Cardello and Wright's (2024) concept of establishing safety.

The participants' concern about transcending boundaries may also be attributed to the existence of institutional supports such as student counselling and wellbeing services. All participants acknowledged close working relationships with colleagues in these services and showed no hesitance in referring students on where necessary. These services are often co-located with HEI careers services, reducing barriers to referral. Victim-survivors will not always disclose through formal channels, and minoritised students may seek out staff with shared identity characteristics to disclose to (Gunby et al., 2025). This reinforces the value of practitioner preparedness to respond to initial GBV disclosures and confidently refer for ongoing support.

Participants did not share examples of responding to GBV beyond individual guidance, such as in group work activities or career education programmes. Brian felt that it was difficult to incorporate this into group activity in a safe way and without getting 'into the abstract,' and he felt it then lost impact and meaning. Here, Brian maintained awareness of structural inequalities even when not feeling he could influence at the meso or macro levels (Sultana, 2014).

Conclusion and recommendations

This study set out to explore what career practitioners in Irish higher education institutions understand about the influence of GBV on women's career development. Participants demonstrated awareness of GBV and the ability to draw on their guidance skills to respond sensitively to direct disclosures of GBV in a guidance interaction. However, the tendency to frame GBV primarily as interpersonal rather than structural harm limits a more socially just disposition towards career guidance. The reticence of some participants to directly ask clients about potential GBV may mean that more subtle forms of GBV are missed by practitioners and the career implications unexplored.

This was a small exploratory study focused on career practitioners operating in a specific setting. Several recommendations for career guidance practice in Irish HEIs and future research can be made based on these findings.

Trauma-informed approaches to career guidance practice emphasise the value of ongoing training, particularly in relation to trauma. This would support practitioner confidence in recognising signs of trauma in clients and how this may affect career management skills. Practitioners in this study found disclosure response training particularly effective. This is widely available in Irish HEIs, and it is recommended that careers service management enable practitioners to avail themselves of this training and monitor uptake. Bystander intervention training is also widely available and would benefit HEI career practitioners to effectively challenge harmful gender norms and bias in both one-to-one and group interactions.

Practitioners should maintain awareness of the scope of GBV, particularly more frequently occurring forms such as street harassment which can result in cumulative harm. Awareness of groups at high risk of GBV is also recommended, as such groups may face additional barriers to reporting and accessing support. It is important that training and support expectations are clearly contextualised in accordance with professional boundaries.

Practitioners could embed awareness of GBV into career education to adopt a more proactive stance towards GBV prevention and response. This could involve the visible display of internal and external reporting procedures or routinely including safety information in printed careers information materials such as study-abroad and placement opportunities. Trauma-informed and socially just approaches to career guidance both place value on working in partnership with allied professionals. In this respect, careers practitioners in HEIs could work in collaboration with Sexual Violence Prevention and Response Managers in addition to equality managers, counsellors, and student support staff.

Gender equality-related themes can be integrated into group learning activities, encouraging students to critically engage with topics such as gender pay gaps, equality policies, and gender representation in the workplace. The toolkit to reduce gendered educational choices

developed by Lux et al. (2025) and *Training for Exploitation?* (Precarious Workers Brigade, 2017) are resources that could be drawn upon for this purpose.

Practitioners in this study did not always recognise some manifestations of GBV. Future research might incorporate techniques such as case studies or vignettes to explore understandings of GBV. Longitudinal study could enable further exploration of trauma-informed or socially just approaches to individual or group guidance, which was not feasible for this study. Future research should also go beyond HEIs to include practitioners working in a wider variety of settings. Finally, further research might address the career implications of GBV on other groups known to be at high risk, such as transgender and non-binary people, LGBTQ+ people, and disabled people.

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Research Article

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The draw of the law: Midlife women lawyers seeking to refocus on their legal careers after a break

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Abstract

This paper explores the drivers and experiences of midlife women lawyers seeking to refocus on their legal careers after a break. Studies suggest professional women rarely return to previous roles and research on the careers of midlife women is limited. Using reflexive thematic analysis, a qualitative study involving 11 midlife women lawyers identified three main themes - 'It's (all) about time', 'Expectations, roles, and identity', and 'Finding a new path-bridging the gap' - and an overarching theme of 'Emotions'. The research expands literature on women's careers at midlife providing a new model to support their career development.

Key words: women; identity; career break; midlife; return; law

Introduction

The underrepresentation of women at senior levels of the legal profession, despite its increasing feminisation, is well documented (SRA, 2023). Statistics show there are a significant number of women who are 'lost to law'. They leave the profession and do not return (The CEPLER, 2022; Miles & Fielder, 2017) many departing before partnership due to challenges in balancing work and family (Ganguli et al., 2021). While much research focuses on why women leave legal careers, there is little exploration of those who buck the trend and seek to return.

Further, the careers of midlife or 'older' women are understudied (Bimrose et al., 2014). Instead, research often involves younger women with children still at home (Atkinson et al., 2015; Ford et al., 2021). Given that family responsibilities can persist until children leave, many women seeking to refocus on their careers do so in their 40's or 50's as they are entering the realm of midlife. Infurna et al., (2020) suggest midlife is generally considered to span from 40 to 60 years of age, with some definitions extending this by a decade either side. Midlife represents a pivotal moment when individuals choose between 'generativity', a desire to contribute to society, and 'stagnation', a lack of purpose (Erikson, 1950; cited in Infurna et al., 2020). This suggests it is an ideal time to transition back into the workplace and a life stage worthy of more attention.

Given the current social and political landscape of increasing lifespans and Government campaigns to encourage older individuals back to work (DWP, 2022) coupled with The Law Society's pledge to support women returning to law (The Law Society, 2022) it makes sense to gain an understanding of what motivates this group and what their experiences are. My own background as a midlife woman lawyer who, in line with the findings in this research, left the profession and changed occupation, made me curious to explore these questions further. This research therefore examined the drivers and experiences of 11 midlife women lawyers between the ages 41 and 63 who were seeking to refocus on their legal careers after a break.

Literature review

Women's careers frequently deviate from traditional linear career paths. They work flexibly, have career breaks, and make compromises (Zimmerman & Clark, 2016). This is often due to carrying out undervalued and unpaid domestic responsibilities in accordance with societal expectations (Schultheiss, 2013). Theories explaining careers as developing throughout life stages, such as Levinson's (1986) and Super's (1980), are considered inadequate to explain this lack of structure and criticised for being based on middle-class men. Boundaryless (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996) and Protean (Hall, 2004) models, where individuals work flexibly across different organisations to free themselves of the rigid structures of organisations or in a way that accords with their own values, have been put forward as useful. However, these models assume a degree of agency which may not exist for women facing societal pressures or discrimination.

The Kaleidoscope Career Model (Mainiero & Sullivan, 2005) explains women's career patterns of 'opting-in' and 'opting-out' of the workplace as reflecting evolving values and needs. It suggests that, over time, there is a shift in focus from challenge to balance, and ultimately to authenticity. Other frameworks use terms like 'frayed' (Sabelis & Schilling, 2013) and 'careerscapes' (McKie et al., 2013) to portray career fluidity and lack of structure. Patton & McMahon (2006) suggest that the complex challenges women face in negotiating their careers can be understood through a Systems Theory Framework ('STF'). This approach highlights the multiple factors influencing women's career paths, including family pressures, societal expectations, personal choices, time considerations and even individual concepts of future possibilities (Ibarra, 1999; Markus and Nurius, 1986). These perspectives underscore the multifaceted nature of women's career paths, shaped by internal values and external influences.

Linked to this is the 'relational' nature of women's careers (Mainiero & Sullivan, 2005; Motulsky, 2010). Decisions are made in the context of other people including husbands,

children, and parents (Etaugh, 2013). Forming connections throughout life, particularly with other women (Hurst et al., 2017), is a key source of support (Motulsky, 2020). Notably, women expect more support from women managers than male ones (Hurst et al., 2017). Further, the quality of women's hierarchical relationships at work affects not only work life but personal and family as well, especially when they are perceived as unsupportive (Hurst et al., 2017).

Women's careers at midlife

Existing studies on the careers of midlife women, although limited, suggest the reemergence of the desire for challenge as women get older (August, 2010; Cabrera, 2007). O'Neil and Bilimoria (2005) describe a focus on 'reinventive contribution' after 45 which reflects a 'reclaiming' of career. This may relate to the choice of 'generativity' over 'stagnation' (Erikson, 1950; cited in Infurna et al., 2020).

Other studies explore the support required for midlife career transitions. Motulsky (2010) highlights the importance of relationships during this period. Bimrose et al., (2015) suggest coaching may be a particularly helpful intervention to help clarify career goals through the reflection on past, present and future events (Infurna et al., 2020). The HERO framework (Luthans et al., 2007), which highlights the psychological resources of hope, efficacy, resilience, and optimism, may also offer a valuable lens through which to support individuals facing career transitions in midlife.

It is worth noting that women who have taken extended career breaks to take on domestic responsibilities are often excluded from studies. It has been suggested that they face unique pressures and a potential 'loss of themselves' (Locke & Gibbons, 2008). This points to the need for further research on the salience of career roles for this group (Grady & McCarthy, 2008) and the potential benefits returning to work could have on personal identity.

Factors influencing women's decisions to return to the workplace

While financial need factors into the decisions of women to return to work, the need to develop confidence, a desire for intellectual stimulation, and children becoming more independent are also influential (Bian & Wang, 2019; Zimmerman & Clark, 2016). Interestingly, research indicates professional women rarely return to previous roles, shifting instead to more altruistic careers, suggesting a change of values during the break (Cabrera, 2007; Lovejoy & Stone, 2012). This could help to explain evidence that women lawyers rarely return to their legal careers.

In the absence of research on women who seek to return to law, studies indicating they join the profession for its intellectual challenges and growth opportunities (Ballard, 1998 as cited in Patton, 2005; Webley & Duff, 2007) may provide some insight into their desire to go back. Further, research on women returning to science, engineering, and technology ('SET') professions, similarly gendered and therefore providing a useful reference point, highlights connectedness to their profession as a motivator to go back (Herman, 2015). This suggests a link between career and identity. Other matters which affect original career choice, such as societal influence (Gottfredson, 1981) and family norms or 'inherited' careers (Inkson, 2004), may also factor into the desire to remain in a particular profession and highlight how occupation, identity and both internal and external expectations are intertwined.

Experiences and emotions of returners

In considering the experiences of women returning to work after a break, studies indicate women encounter several barriers to career development (Bian & Wang, 2019; Lovejoy & Stone, 2012; Zimmerman & Clarke, 2016). These include a lack of key resources identified by research as necessary to pursuing new opportunities and reintegrating into the workplace. Among them are confidence (Savickas,1997), self-efficacy or self-belief, (Bandura, 1977), and social networks (O'Neil et al., 2008) but not necessarily legal technical skills which can be updated through appropriate training (Sommerlad & Sanderson, 2019 p209). The intersection of gender and age exacerbates the challenges faced and can result in a sense of diminished identity and voice (Ford et al., 2021).

Negative emotions are common in individuals job hunting after a break (Lovejoy & Stone, 2012) as well as in those subject to ageism (Chasteen, 2012). Significantly, but often ignored, strong emotions have been identified as an important driver in transitions (Kidd, 1996). The fear and uncertainty experienced when in a state of transition, or 'liminality', may be necessary for personal growth and to facilitate the movement to a more stable phase of life (Ibarra & Obodaru, 2016).

Methodology

The study involved 11 women solicitors aged between 41- 63 who had taken a break from the legal profession at some point during their careers and had returned or were seeking to return. The focus was on understudied 'older' or 'midlife' women and their decisions to and experiences of seeking a re-entry to the gendered, linear career structure of law. 'Break' was defined as a break from the legal profession rather than from work entirely. All of the women had children, but this was not a requirement for the study. The timing, length and number of breaks and ages of their children varied. Participants were identified through personal contacts and agencies for women returners. See Table 1 for participant demographics.

Table 1. Participant demographics

Participant	Age at interview	Age range of children	Length of break from law	Type of work/ current situation
P1	51	Secondary school to over 18	Over 5 years	Commercial/in a legal role/private practice/ contractor/looking for a new role
P2	56	Secondary school to over 18	Over 5 years	Mix of commercial and non-commercial/ private practice/ contractor/looking to expand role
P3	60's	Over 18	Over 5 years	Commercial /in a legal role/in-house/ possibly leaving
P4	48	Secondary school	Over 5 years	Commercial/in a legal role/private practice
P5	54	Over 18	Over 10 years	Commercial/in a legal role/private practice

Participant	Age at interview	Age range of children	Length of break from law	Type of work/ current situation
P6	44	Unknown	Under 5 years	Commercial/in a legal role/private practice/ contractor
P7	54	Over 18	Over 5 years	Commercial/in a legal role/private practice/ non-fee earning
P8	60's	Over 18	Unknown	Non-commercial/ non-legal/contractor/ looking to move to legal role
P9	41	Primary to secondary school	Over 10 years	Non-commercial/in a legal role/private practice/looking for new role
P10	55	Unknown	Unknown	Non-commercial/ private practice/left a legal role
P11	48	Secondary school	Over 10 years	Commercial/in a legal role/private practice

A qualitative research approach was adopted to '[give] voice' (O'Neil et al., 2008) to women's experiences, aligning with calls to study women's career development beyond a positivist paradigm (Patton & McMahon, 2006). To support this, semi-structured interviews were used to collect 'descriptive data reflecting lived experiences' (Gill, 2015). Reflexive thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke's 6-stage guide (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

Themes and patterns were identified by both immersing myself in the data and standing back from it. In this process, I was mindful of my own similarities to the participants as a midlife woman solicitor and tried to avoid the expression of personal views and thoughts. At the same time, I remained aware that my subjectivity was a 'primary tool' in analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022). I was surprised by the emotional demands placed on me through hearing the stories of the participants which at times resonated with my own. I received supervisory support throughout the process to help me put distance between myself and the data and facilitate the critical reflection needed.

Findings

The participants' career paths were characterised by career breaks and flexible work. Usually, this was to accommodate caring roles and husbands' jobs. Sometimes it was due to health reasons - their own or those of a family member. This compromise was often supported by the view that taking responsibility for the domestic role was '*the right thing to do*' (P5).

The duration of the breaks from law varied. The longest was 20 years and the shortest, 18 months. The timing and number of breaks also differed. Many had taken several breaks. Some took breaks when children were young and others when children were teenagers. The latter often related to a belief, sometimes expressed as a realisation, that older children still need a parental presence.

All participants had spent a period or periods without paid work to take on domestic responsibilities. However, the majority found non-legal and, in their view less demanding,

work which still allowed them to accommodate these duties. Whilst over half the participants were practising as solicitors at the time of the study, this did not always represent a refocus on career. Many were still seeking alternative roles with better career progression. Those returners whose roles did represent a return to career had usually found them through returner programmes or professional contacts rather than though legal recruiters. Two participants who had returned to a career-focussed legal role anticipated, or were already taking, a further break to manage domestic responsibilities, this time, unrelated to children.

Drawing on Herman's (2015) study of women returning to SET professions, three storylines reflecting the participants' differing stages of transition were identified: 'Made it back!', 'Unfinished business', and 'Made it back – possible retreat'. These are illustrated in Table 2 below.

Table 2. Participant narratives illustrating stage of transition

STAGE	NARRATIVE	PARTICIPANTS
Made it back!	Women who had re-entered the legal profession in a role they saw as providing career progression. All returns through returner programmes, specialist returner recruiters or back to previous firms (through networks).	P4, P5, P6, P7, P11
Unfinished business	Women trying to refocus on legal career through changing job, increasing client base, finding a permanent role or internal promotion.	P1, P2, P8, P9
Made it back – possible retreat	Women who had returned to law after a break but had since left or were thinking of leaving again.	P3, P10

Whilst not identical to the narratives in Herman (2015), which were labelled 'Rebooting', 'Rerouting' and 'Retreating', as in that study, these stages of transition give context to the data obtained.

Through thematic analysis, key themes were identified across the narratives which reflected the lived experiences of the group.

Drivers

The first research question explored the drivers for midlife women lawyers to refocus on their legal careers after a break. Two themes and six subthemes were identified (Table 3):

Table 3. Themes relating to research question 1: What are the drivers for mid-life women lawyers to refocus on their legal careers after a break?

Theme	Subthemes
It's (all) about time	The past matters/matters of the past Time for action Imagined futures
Expectations, roles, and identity	Great expectations Shifting roles and reclaiming my identity 'Being' a lawyer

It's (all) about time

Time was identified as a central theme and drove choices. References to past, present, and future permeated the narratives of the participants.

Past decisions to scale back on or depart from legal careers due to life events, including own and others' health, and husbands' jobs taking priority, had impacted careers and were often looked on with regret. P1 used the negative metaphor of 'stepping out of the picture' to describe her departure from law, highlighting her feeling of absence or invisibility, and positioned it as 'a big mistake'. Negative experiences and associated feelings often added clarity and impetus to the desire to return to the law to complete something unfinished.

Participants expressed urgency to act in the present - 'It's either now or never' (P4) - due to age and diminishing opportunities. P9 envisioned her career as a sailing ship if she left it any longer to return. Imagined futures were regarded with fear of lack of purpose, structure, or ambition:

> Having nothing between now and death, like no structure…. felt a bit…existential. (P7)

> I'll be pretty good at cupcakes and that's about it. (P11).

On the other hand, P2 saw future possibilities and expressed hope and yearning for the 'glittering prizes' a career could offer and which she still saw in her reach:

> I think I could be so much better, I could do so much better..., I've got a good few years left. (P2)

Expectations, roles, and identity

Participants had expectations of themselves to work and have a fulfilling career, in contrast to a 'job', as well as to take on the domestic role.

However, they devalued their domestic role, describing it as 'plodding around' (P2), 'messing around' (P4), 'doing nothing' (P5), and being 'stuck' (P5). Some voiced guilt about not working and 'relaxing with a baby' (P7), 'not bringing money in' (P7), or 'wasting qualifications' (P2). At the same time, disapproval of women lawyers who worked full time 'never [seeing] their children' (P1) and employing 'wrap around childcare' (P9) was expressed, suggesting conflicting values and expectations of other women.

For those with older children, roles shifted, and work became more accessible offering an escape from domesticity. P10 described the 'freedom [it gave her] to work full time'. Returning to law resulted in a reclaiming or reconnection with an old self and a feeling of 'time…collapsing' (P7) and 'coming full circle' (P4) linking back to theme 1 – 'It's (all) about time'. For P3 returning to work meant getting back to her authentic self. She described an intense feeling of 'this is not me' whilst washing up at the kitchen sink one day, suggesting her identity was suspended whilst she was at home.

Work was frequently framed as a physical escape and something better than being at home. P11 said it was 'almost like going to the spa' and P1 stated bluntly, 'I just wanted to get out of the house'. P9, on the other hand, who had young children at home, saw the ability to

work at home as offering greater opportunity to balance career and family, suggesting it is the age of children, and therefore stage rather than age, that determines professional needs and choices.

Participants were ambitious to find a role which reflected their skills and qualifications, allowing them to pick up their career path where they had left off. P11 described a friend's decision to train as a Pilates teacher as 'not really career moves, but just things to occupy time', demonstrating her expectations around what constitutes a career. Being a lawyer was important to the women and provided an identity offering 'status' (P4) and belonging, like being part of a 'club' (P4). It also demonstrated intellectual ability - 'not being a blonde bimbo' (P9) - and was considered 'a proper job' (P5), offering job satisfaction - 'what I love to do' (P5).

Some participants came from backgrounds described as 'difficult' (P10), 'rough' (P3) and 'deprived'(P9), for whom law offered prestige, opportunities, and security. Those who did not fall into this category often had professional parents whose expectations they were subject to: 'lawyer...doctor... accountant, but anything else was probably a bit too flowery' (P6). Perhaps the identity offered to both these groups through being a lawyer was the driver to return to the profession rather than choose an alternative role.

Experiences

The second research question examined the participants' experiences in refocusing on their legal careers. One theme and three sub-themes were identified (Table 4):

Table 4. Themes relating to research question 2: what are the experiences of midlife women lawyers in refocusing on their legal careers after a break?

Theme	Subthemes
Finding a new path – bridging the gap	Finding ways to fit in Dealing with perceptions – mine and other people's Conflicting selves

Narratives revealed barriers relating to the participants' ages and career breaks and the strategies and resources which helped them move forwards.

The difficulty in fitting back into the linear career path of the legal profession was frequently voiced:

> There were a lot of conversations about, "oooh, how do we treat you? Where do we put you?" (P10)

Relationships were important for re-entering the legal world. Participants found their way back into roles through connections. These included friends, old colleagues and other women at the school gates. P4 explained 'I just worked my contacts really'. They also developed links with specialist recruitment agencies focusing on women returners. Once in work,

participants formed relationships with other women returners, younger women lawyers, and administrative staff, to help them reintegrate. Strikingly, they did not regard senior women lawyers who had continued to work as a source of support. P1 said they 'made it tough for me' and P4 suggested these senior women felt 'judged' by those of them who had stayed at home.

Participants were frustrated by what they felt other people's perceptions were about their age, abilities, and desire to return to law. Their assumption was that recruitment consultants saw them as old and incompetent ('irrelevant, just irrelevant' and 'out of date' P5). They referred to other women lawyers in their social circles who had not returned thinking they were 'mad' (P4) for wanting to go back. However, there was a determination not to allow this to influence their commitment.

The women had their own perceptions about the age and gender of recruiters. P5 called them 'useless' with their 'young preconceptions' which 'made me more determined really'. P4 said:

> The recruiters I spoke to were men…. I could be judging them wrongly… They sounded very young…I felt really [pause] dismissed, I suppose, by them.

Not least, participants battled with conflicting feelings around confidence. On the one hand they felt out of touch with the workplace but on the other, recognised a confidence which came with maturity. This suggested a reframing of the negative narrative of 'past it' (P5) with a positive one of wisdom:

> that sort of slight lack of confidence [but] on the other hand, more comfortable... more confident in your abilities. (P8)

> I am a grown up and I know what I'm doing. (P11)

Those who had returned to work felt their legal skills came back quickly which in turn increased their confidence. P1 felt it was IT skills that were lacking rather than legal knowledge which you can 'swot up on'.

Overarching theme: Emotions

Emotions, both negative and positive, ran through the participants' narratives, highlighting the complexity of the transition back to work.

Negative emotions included 'regret' (P1) over taking a long career break, guilt for not 'working and [being] productive' and 'bringing money in' (P7) and fear over going back to work - 'terrifying…really terrifying' (P1). Self-doubt often arose from feelings of vulnerability caused by having to explain the career break (P1). P5 expressed her anger and frustration towards recruiters, rejecting what she saw as ageist assumptions with a defiant: 'F*** you and your young preconceptions about stuff'.

Positive emotions were less prevalent but did exist, for example excitement about re-entering the professional world: 'I was like, oh my goodness. Like, I'm in the City again…how do I sit

on a bar stool?' (P7) and satisfaction about being back at work: 'most of the time …I'm really glad that I did it' (P4).

Participants sometimes expressed gratitude for example when receiving support from specialist recruiters ('She was so lovely' [P7]). Occasionally this was expressed negatively:

> I think the risk is, you feel so grateful that anyone will look at a person of your age who's not worked. (P1)

Patterns across participant narratives and demographic factors

There was no clear pattern in how the themes applied across the three participant narratives. The sub-theme 'Finding ways to fit in' was more prominent among participants who had secured a role. This is unsurprising as they had often demonstrated flexibility through, for example, accepting a junior position or working as a contractor, to facilitate a return.

A range of emotions appeared across all narratives. Those who had secured a role conveyed feelings of pride in their achievement and in acting as role models for future generations. However, they also, along with those who were still searching, expressed disillusionment and lack of confidence in relation to their experiences resulting in associated emotions such as anger and anxiety.

Significantly, length of break and age of children did not appear to determine a participant's success in finding a role. Two out of the three participants who had taken a break of over 10 years had 'Made it back!' and there was a range of children's ages for those in that group. This highlights the importance of resources both internal, such as adaptability and determination, and external, for example professional networks or support from recruitment agencies, rather than demographic factors.

Thematic map

The findings were arranged in a thematic map (see Figure 1) showing theme 1 (It's (all) about time) and theme 2 (Expectations, roles, and identity) as driving the decision to refocus on a legal career. Theme 3 (Finding a new path – bridging the gap) illustrates the internal and external resources drawn upon by the returners once the decision was made whilst at the same time navigating a range of negative perceptions, including their own. The overarching theme of 'Emotions' sits above the themes to highlight how they permeated the transition process. Further, the three narratives are listed at the bottom right-hand corner of the map as a reminder that individuals were at different stages of their journey.

This model can be used in career coaching to explore the multiple influences on women's decisions at midlife when deciding to refocus on a previous career and the resources needed to deal with challenges faced.

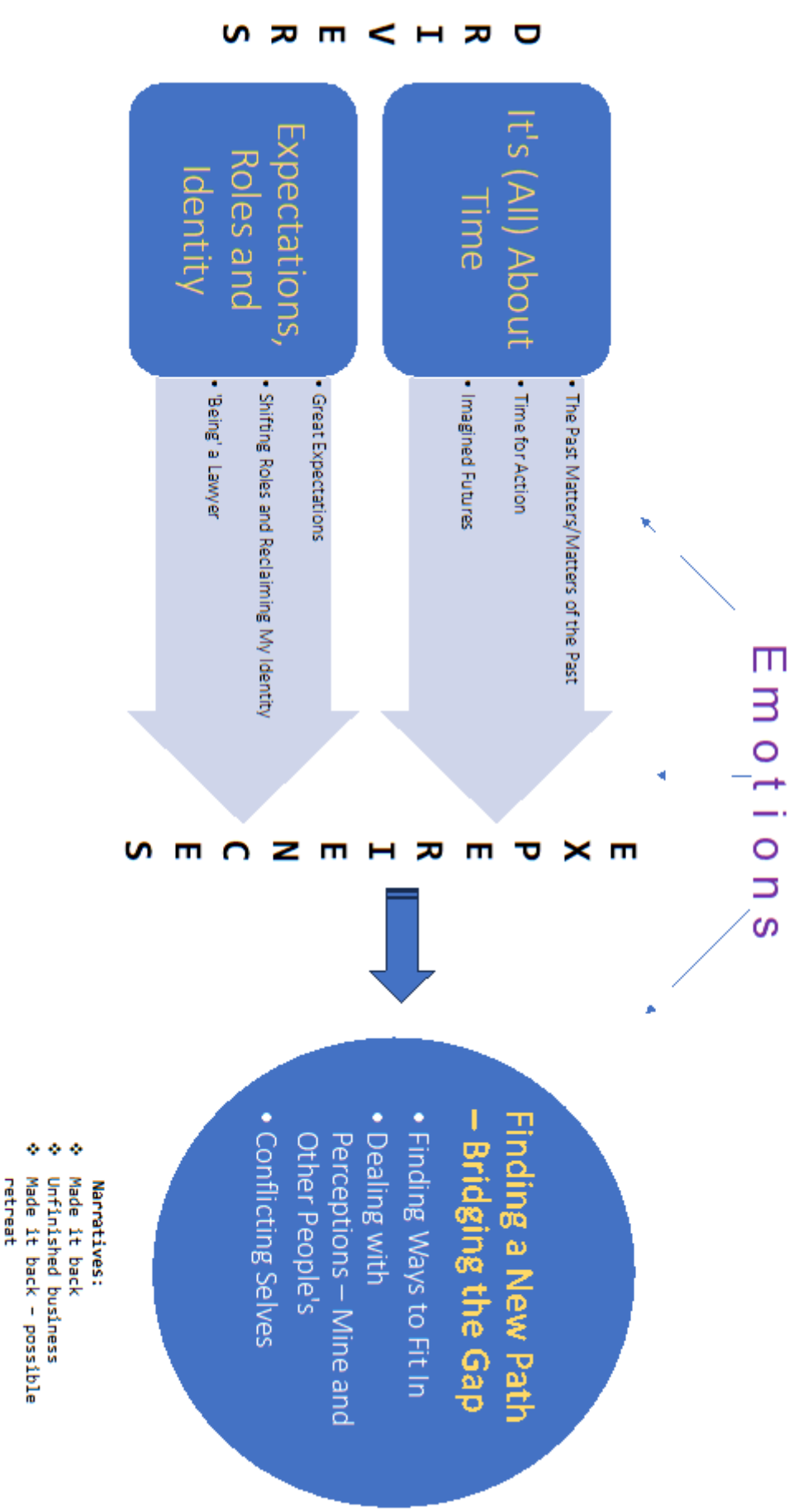

Figure 1. Thematic map – model for use in career coaching

Discussion

The non-linear career paths of the participants in this study aligns with research on the complexity of women's careers (Zimmerman & Clark, 2016). Descriptions by participants that returning to law felt as if time was circular or had collapsed, rather than as a straightforward progression, is in stark contrast to the linear career structure still offered by the profession, illustrating the difficulties faced by women looking to re-enter the field.

As emphasised in earlier studies and theoretical frameworks, temporal considerations were important in decision making. This reflects systemic theories recognising the holistic nature of women's careers and the multiple influencing factors (McKie et al., 2013; Patton & McMahon et al., 2006). Further, participants' interconnection of earlier and later life periods and the corresponding sense of urgency to act in the present, supports theories that see midlife as a pivotal moment (Infurna et al., 2020). Reflection on past experiences clarified future goals supporting career construction theory (Savickas, 2012), while imagining potential 'future selves' drove individuals to act, confirming the connection between cognition and motivation (Markus & Nurius,1986).

Perceived and often conflicting expectations imposed by others, including family, society, and the legal profession, as well as self, dominated narratives. These included the need to have a challenging career (in contrast to a 'job'), being a role model to children and other women lawyers, and taking responsibility for the domestic role. This is consistent with midlife being a period of role multiplicity (Infurna et al., 2020). High self-expectations to re-establish careers as childcare responsibilities lessened indicated a developmental need for challenge (August, 2011). The findings support models that position career needs as relating to life stage rather than age (Super, 1980). However, in contrast to Super's model which refers to midlife as a period of 'maintenance', this study suggests a desire for progression during this time.

Research highlighting women's lack of confidence when returning to work was confirmed (Lovejoy & Stone, 2012; Zimmerman & Clark, 2016). However, narratives in this research suggested that legal technical skills return quickly helping it to develop. In addition, the emergence of maturity-based confidence was evident, which may explain the desire for challenge at this life-stage. This new self-belief corresponds with the central role those at midlife hold in society, including as a link between generations (Infurna et al., 2020). Notably, there were no references to menopause which, given the ages of the participants and the current societal focus on its effects, including on career, is surprising but may reflect a desire to project resilience

Many participants were looking to reestablish themselves in a similar role to the one they had left. This contrasts with research suggesting that midlife women seek to 'reinvent' themselves at work (O'Neil & Bilimoria, 2005) or take up a different more altruistic role (Cabrera, 2007; Lovejoy & Stone, 2012), both of which imply some form of change. The refocus on career was framed as a reclaiming of identity and felt more assertive, focussed, and proactive than a straightforward return. This 'taking back' may indicate a loss of identity whilst in a domestic role driving a desire to regain a previous self (Locke & Gibbons, 2008). It may also represent the strength of professional identity (Herman, 2015) and a corresponding need for authenticity, where the authentic self relates to 'being'

a lawyer. The role of lawyer was often expressed as having been earnt through hard work suggesting it was an entitlement and something to be fought for.

Participants used different strategies to facilitate their return. Several relied on personal contacts to find job opportunities, consistent with research on the significance of connections in midlife transitions (Motulsky, 2010) and the importance of social capital in career development (O'Neil et al., 2008). For some, the support from recruitment firms targeting women returners was key. The fact that very few of the participants found a role through regular legal recruitment agencies was striking.

The importance of relationships in the careers of midlife women, particularly in the workplace, was confirmed (Motulsky, 2010). The effect negative hierarchical relationships with other women can have on women's career confidence and the expectations women have of women managers (Hurst et al., 2017) was clear. Support and mentorship from senior women lawyers is potentially a key factor in the reintegration of women into law.

The expression of strong emotions linked to job search challenges, such as anger and frustration, appeared to serve as a driver and a resilience-building mechanism, supporting research by Kidd (1998) on the central and often ignored role emotions play in transitions. Career coaching would provide a helpful space to explore and channel these emotions (O'Neil & Bilimoria, 2005).

Conclusion, practical implications and limitations

This study contributes to the literature on women lawyers and, more generally, professional women re-entering the workforce at midlife.

Midlife emerged as a period of reflection and role shifts, linked more to life stage than biological age, with temporal considerations providing a key influence. For this group, returning to law served as a way of obtaining the challenge they needed and reclaiming their deserved identity, rather than a reinvention. Being a lawyer had been earned through hard work and was worth fighting for. It also allowed them to contribute to society through work and role modelling therefore satisfying individual expectations, confirming their choice of 'generativity' rather than 'stagnation' (Erikson, 1950).

Use of personal resources, including social capital, the ability to connect with others, and mature confidence were key to surviving the challenges. Specialist agencies, unlike regular agencies, were able to provide external support through empathetic and targeted advice. This highlights their role as a crucial link between individuals and law firms to champion midlife women and provide them with a voice. The research suggests the need for a change of attitude from regular agencies if more midlife women are to re-enter the profession, particularly given the extent to which they are used by organisations to fill legal vacancies.

The research clearly shows that midlife does not signal the end of career and even more significantly, does not close the door to picking up where you left off – life can circle back. Technical skills can be revived and updated through relevant training and careers can be pursued with a new sense of confidence gained through age and life experience. This can be achieved with the help of personal resources and external support to navigate emotions and challenges.

Practical implications

Based on these findings, the thematic map (Figure 1) provides a coaching framework to support a return to work at midlife. Exploring past events and influences in a coaching relationship can help individuals reflect on their future expectations and envision their 'best possible self' (Markus & Nurius, 1986). Further, coaching can focus on building confidence, self-efficacy, and support networks to aid job searches. Narrative approaches (Savickas, 2012), 'provisional selves' (Ibarra, 1999), emotional exploration through an STF lens (Patton & McMahon, 2006) and practical goal setting as well as the HERO framework (Luthens et al., 2007), are suggested tools.

Law firms and the recruitment agencies they work with, as well as organisations in other industries, can benefit from this research by rethinking traditional career trajectories and recognising the value of life experience and maturity. Recruiters are often the first point of contact for job seekers in the legal industry and are therefore in a unique position to influence the hiring decisions of law firms.

Support through mentoring, specialist returner programs, and flexible working arrangements can help firms leverage the capabilities of midlife women. Additionally, firms should address unconscious biases that may discourage women from re-entering the field. This research suggests that support and mentorship from senior women lawyers may be particularly important.

Limitations and future research

This study was limited by a small, socioeconomically, and culturally homogenous sample. Further research could focus on women from diverse backgrounds, men who take breaks from law, and the role of support from senior women in reintegrating midlife women back into work. Further, research relating to the attitudes of legal recruitment agencies towards midlife women lawyers would be beneficial. Longitudinal studies could explore experiences post-return.

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The impact of child loss on career decision-making and trajectory

Research Article

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Abstract

This small-scale mixed methods research project sought to explore the impact of child loss on career decision-making and trajectory, through an online survey completed by bereaved parents. The findings highlighted that grief is unique, but there were considerable, shared experiences amongst survey participants which impact on career trajectories, notably an ongoing emotional response to bereavement. Detailed analysis of the data revealed three key themes – the depth, intensity and longevity of grief symptoms; inconsistent employer support; and changing perceptions of career. The longevity of grief symptoms, and the lack of engagement with formal careers support, were the most surprising findings, which have not been adequately researched previously.

Key words: child loss; impact on career; career decision-making

Introduction

Child loss is a significant and catastrophic event, impacting every aspect of a parent's life including career decision-making and trajectory. Very little has been written about the relationship between bereavement, working, and career, in the career guidance literature. My MSc research was a starting point to fill that gap, generating discussions about the impact of child loss specifically on career decision-making and trajectory, and what this in turn could mean for career practitioners.

In 2020, 8,397 people aged between 1 day to 30 years died in the UK (ONS, 18 January 2022), often the children of working age biological parents and stepparents. In England and Wales, the average age of having a first child is 29, and the average age of retirement is 66 (ONS, 8 April 2024), suggesting a bereaved parent could be actively employed for another 30 plus years post-loss. With newly bereaved parents and stepparents joining this group each year, the cumulative impact on employers and the economy could be significant, the loss of engagement with work and career a potential outcome following the loss of a child.

As a bereaved parent, I have been on my own journey of career exploration, making the decision post-loss, to train as a career guidance practitioner. Through my own training programme and talking to other bereaved parents, I became more alert to the difficulties and challenges experienced by bereaved parents in relation to work and career following the death of their child. Anecdotal stories were shared regularly in bereavement support groups and online forums, with bereaved parents, including myself, experiencing a mix of both supportive and unsupportive responses from employers and careers advisers. Many described the loss of career as a secondary loss to the primary loss of their child.

Literature review

An initial literature search on child loss and career development generated no direct results, so I switched focus to researching child loss; bereavement and work; and relevant career theories. I specifically focused on literature written about the Western World, from the late 20th and early 21st century, which provided the foundation upon which I developed an overview of child loss and the potential resultant impact on career decision-making and trajectory.

For this research, work is defined as a specific position or task that you do in exchange for pay, whereas the word 'career' is used to reflect a coming together of all parts of our life – our work, our values, our learning – which is continually changing and evolving (Hooley et al, 2024). Redekopp (2017) argues that every decision we make in life is a career decision, reinforcing the idea that career is not one finite thing, but an amalgam of all aspects of our lives.

Almost all of the literature reviewed discussed returning to work post-loss as a subsection of a wider paper, with a paper written by Wilson et al (2021) noting that there had only been four previous reports written about generalised bereavement and the workplace. What these four previous reports highlighted was the ongoing and wide-ranging impact that child loss can have on workplace behaviour, from going to work and underperforming, to resignation and using work as an escapism. A report by Sue Ryder, published in 2020, noted that in 2019 24% of the working population had experienced a bereavement in the previous twelve months (Sue Ryder, 2020). Wilson et al (2021) flagged that more research on the potential impact of bereavement on workplaces needed to be done, as these impacts go largely unrecognised or unrecorded.

The literature signals that for bereaved parents, the impact of grief on employment can be prolonged. Macdonald et al (2015) stress that a return to work is not straightforward, as the bereaved parent is fundamentally changed. They have an unwanted new identity that has no end point or predictable course to follow. Further, in their 2010 study, Gibson et al note

that of the parents that had been bereaved for two to six years, none of them felt that their concentration and memory had reached pre-bereavement levels. Consequently, my research focused on the impact of child loss on career, and what that means for the employment of the bereaved parent, now and in the future.

It is said that the death of a child goes against the norm (Bekkering & Woodgate, 2021). Parental bereavement is known to be multi-dimensional with simultaneous affective, cognitive, behavioural, social and marital changes occurring (Murphy et al, 2003). Arnold and Gemma (2008) found grief in bereaved parents to be 'complex, ongoing, and non-linear' regardless of how long it had been since the child died. It is also the case that many bereaved parents demonstrate higher levels of complicated grief (Alam et al, 2012; Bekkering & Woodgate, 2021; Wonch Hill et al, 2017). Suttle et al (2022) found that 52% of bereaved parents tested positive for moderate or severe depression, and 44% for PTSD, 13 months after the death of their child. In a study by Murphy et al (2003) nearly 70% of participants said that it took three to four years to assimilate their child's death and continue with their own lives, regardless of reason for death. These parents also reported higher levels of mental health conditions, compared to the general population in the same age range, five years post-loss.

Given that there is a clear body of evidence that psychological illness including depression, anxiety and PTSD all have a negative impact on career decision-making (Marks et al, 2021), it is highly likely that child loss will have a significant impact on career development too. However, there is almost no literature that focuses on the topic. This is particularly surprising given that bereaved parents are often in their prime earning and productivity years, and that there is clear evidence that bereavement can impact on working experiences. Some parents for example may have stopped working to care for a sick child (Macdonald et al, 2015; Randall, 2017). Others may have taken time off work immediately following bereavement but may find it difficult to resume their normal work activities when they return to work (Fox et al, 2014). There is also some evidence that men and women grieve the loss of a child differently, with men more likely to use work as a distraction technique in the early years, and women more likely to stay at home caring for other children (Alam et al, 2012). Wilson et al (2020) conducted a study of 14 bereaved parents and the impact of grief on their employment. Parents reacted in very different ways, with some returning to work three weeks post-loss and others absent for more than a year. Returning to work may also raise significant fears, such as facing work colleagues, being the subject of gossip and receiving little support, with the offer of workplace adjustments being a key driver determining if, or when, the bereaved parent returns to work (Macdonald et al, 2015; Wilson et al, 2020). This demonstrates that although it is likely that child loss will impact career development, the ways in which it impacts can vary between individuals and depends on their circumstances.

Despite the clear impact of child loss on workplace experiences, there is almost no research on career development more broadly, including how bereaved parents may feel about their careers and the career decisions they might make. This current project aimed to address this gap by asking two key questions – firstly, how does the loss of a living child or children impact on career decision-making and trajectory? And secondly, how does this reflect or challenge existing career theory and practice, and add to the limited academic literature currently in circulation?

Methods

Acknowledging concerns about the sensitive nature of the topic, the ethics of undertaking this research were considered at every stage of survey development – in particular confidentiality, duty of care, and informed consent. All data generated was anonymised to protect individual family identity, and individual personal data was aggregated to identify themes and patterns in the descriptive statistics.

To explore the impact of child loss on career development, a single stage, mixed methods, online survey was conducted. A survey approach allowed for the research to develop an initial evidence base of the scale and type of impact child loss could have on career development. As the research was emotionally demanding and as my own experience so closely mirrored that of the participants (Johnson, 2009) an online survey also enabled me to better manage my emotional response, and limit any potential researcher bias, to the information provided.

The survey contained a series of multiple-choice questions with free text boxes to provide more detail, plus two stand-alone qualitative questions focusing on the impact of grief-related symptoms on career, and perception of career and work post-bereavement. Adopting this approach enabled me to create baseline quantitative data, layered with rich insight from the personal stories of child loss and career. Questions were grouped by subject including optional questions about the deceased child; career and work experience prior to the loss of their child/children; impact on work, career, workplace adjustments, finances and health at both six months and two years/present situation post-loss; and experience of career guidance and perceptions of work. The two qualitative questions asked participants, 'If you feel able, please can you provide details of how these grief experiences impacted on your working life/career two years after the loss of your child/children?' and 'In your own words please could you describe how your career, and the way you feel about your career, has changed over time since the loss of your child/children, up to the present day?' The deliberate choice of survey questions allowed me to focus on any changes to work and career, and the potential impact on career theory and practice, without getting drawn into discussions about employer and HR practices.

The survey was open only to those who had been bereaved six months or more, recognising that early bereavement can be intense and disorientating. The Participant Information Sheet which explained the purpose of the research, clearly explained that some questions may be distressing and that participants could exit at any point. Participants had to check a tick box to confirm understanding and consent.

Participation was endorsed by the CEO of a bereavement charity, The Compassionate Friends (TCF), and recruitment to the survey was initially via the TCF closed Facebook group pages. A snowball approach was adopted, encouraging participants to share the survey link with other bereaved parents, recognising that members of the TCF groups were likely to be members of other child-loss groups.

The survey debrief document included contact details for a number of bereavement charities and support groups with immediate access to online support resources and helpline numbers if required.

Results

The survey was completed by 101 participants. Ninety-two selected their gender as woman, and most were of working age when their child died. The child's age at death was between 1 day to 46 years, with more than half aged between 17–27 years old. The age of the child appears to make no difference to the intensity and emotion of the loss (Schiff, 1978).

I used descriptive statistics for multiple-choice answers, as there was no previous research in this field to compare my results with. Similarly, as there had been a high percentage of participants identifying as women, this also made it difficult to generalise the results to the population as a whole.

Qualitative Content Analysis (QCA) (Vaismoradi & Snelgrove, 2019) was used for all free text and qualitative question answers. QCA and thematic analysis are similar approaches in that both focus on interpreting data; considering content and context; and identifying themes that emerge from the analysis. Where the two approaches differ is that within thematic analysis a theme is thought to be latent – to have symbolic meaning underlying the behaviours observed. QCA can be considered to be a more simplistic approach, whereby the researcher chooses how much information to include within a category or theme. The focus is on looking for trends in the data, and using frequency of a theme or code, to find meaning (Vaismoradi & Snelgrove, 2019).

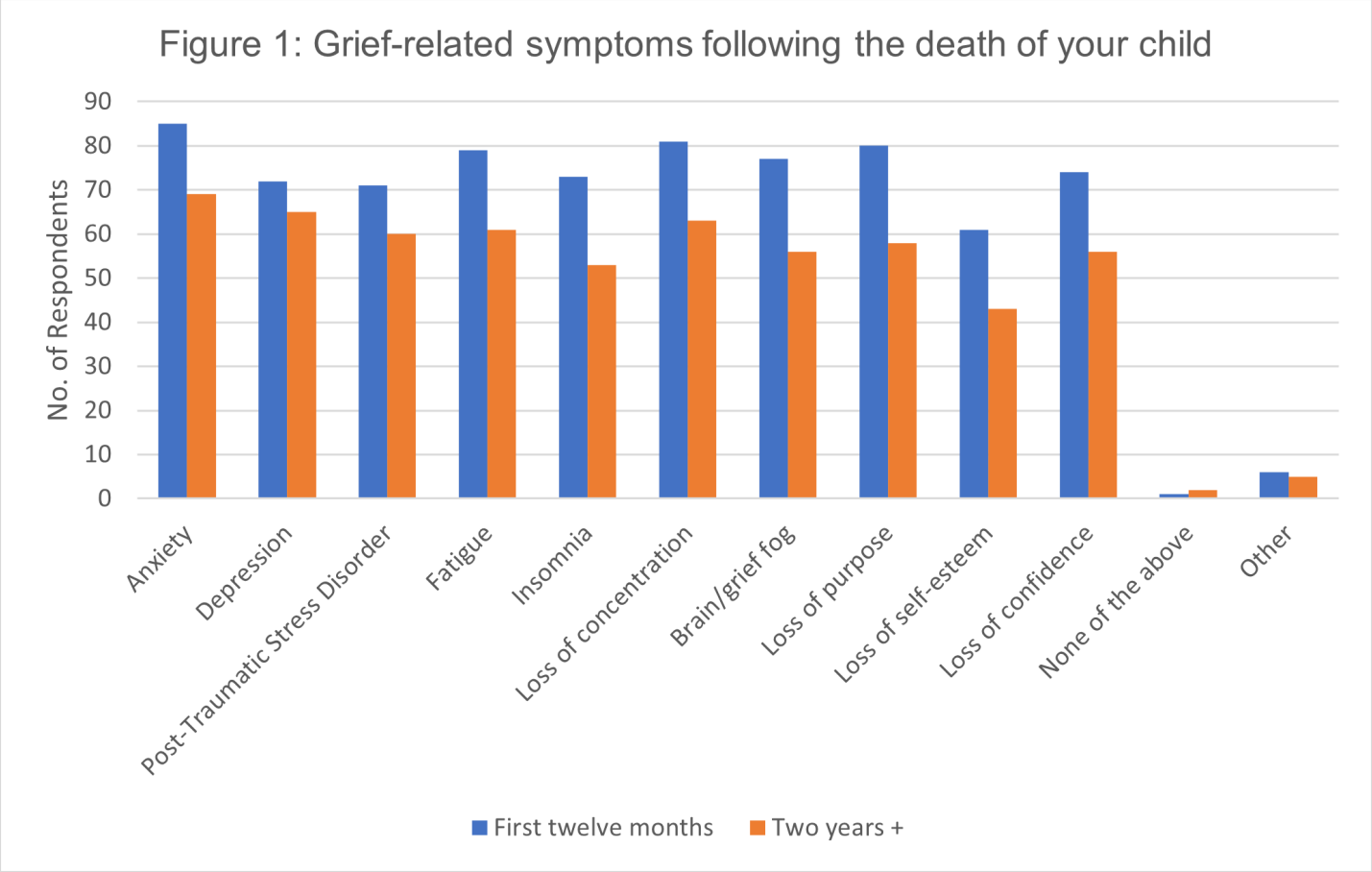
Adopting QCA as my analysis approach for all free text and qualitative answers enabled me to identify broad themes from all free text and qualitative question answers, identifying frequency of words used, emotions expressed, and interpreting meaning from the context of the questions asked. From this analysis I gained a holistic insight into bereaved parents' career experience post-loss, with three key themes emerging: the depth, intensity and longevity of grief symptoms; employer support; and perceptions of career.

Grief symptoms

Figure 1 illustrates the grief symptoms experienced in the first twelve months, and after two years. Participants selected from a pre-defined list of twelve symptoms commonly experienced by people following a bereavement, compiled from those most frequently mentioned during the literature review and from published online resources from two charities – Child Bereavement UK and The Compassionate Friends UK.

It was found that nine of the twelve symptoms listed were experienced by over seventy participants in the first twelve months, and over half of the participants after two years, with anxiety being the highest reported at both points. Only two participants did not select any grief symptoms after two years.

Figure 1. Grief-related symptoms



Emotional responses could vary, and different feelings of guilt emerged in the verbatim comments. One participant felt guilty that she had been focused on career while their child was alive and now regrets the time lost. Conversely another felt guilty that since she was no longer caring for her disabled daughter, her career had flourished. For some, their emotional experiences created significant barriers to returning to work such as panic attacks and anxiety. Highlighting the impact on career, one participant said:

> …there is no difference between the work person and the person you are at home. Both impact and so more help is needed when personal circumstances tragically overwhelm and will forever, note forever (even after nearly 13 years) every aspect of my life.

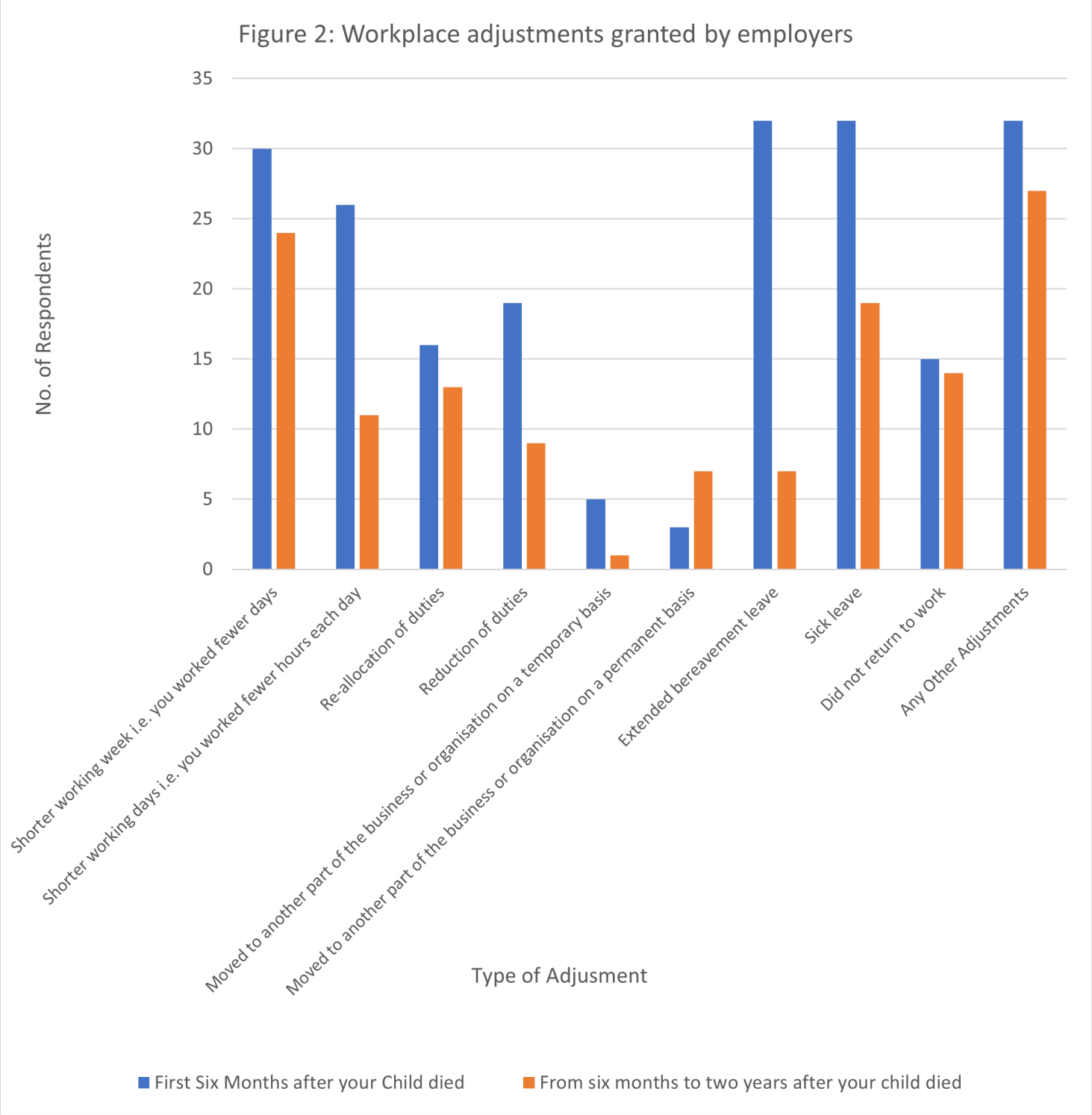
Another said:

> Some days it was hard to even get out of bed, let alone leave the house to work.

Employer support

Workplace adjustments such as extended leave, shorter working week/day and re-allocation of duties were utilised in the first six months by 80 participants. Thirty-two participants also selected any other adjustments, verbatim comments indicating that these included not having to answer or make phone calls, phased returns and home working.

Figure 2. Workplace adjustments



Between six months and two years, the number of participants granted adjustments dropped slightly to 75 participants. Verbatim comments indicated that most support was withdrawn after one year, despite ongoing grief symptoms being experienced.

Despite workplace adjustments being in place for the majority, 95 participants still felt their employer had been unsupportive after their child loss and in need of training. Free text comments highlighted issues such as changes of line management not being handled

well and having to tell their story to someone new; work colleagues not knowing how to speak to them; and managers not understanding the need, fifteen years post-loss, to be on holiday on the date of their child's death. One participant said:

> Think people try to support in the first year, but after that – people move on, or 'forget' and the ability to stand up and ask for support gets harder.

Perceptions of career

In the survey two questions were asked relating to perceptions of career. Firstly, participants were asked if there had been a change in their view of the importance of work and career since their child died. A majority – 74 participants – felt there had been a change in their view of the importance of work and career, but 49 had not made changes to their employment up to two years post-loss. A review of the free text answers highlighted two years post-loss was considered early in recovering from the death of a child, and for many the severity of grief emotions resulted in them making very few changes in the early years. Rather, some individuals made changes to career much later, up to 14-years post-loss.

> 9 years after losing X I changed my job completely. It was very hard and scary to move somewhere where no one knows my daughter.

The kinds of changes made included working fewer hours, retiring early or retraining in a different field. Two participants retrained as teachers to allow them to work with young people; another trained as a grief counsellor ten years after the death of her child; and another dedicated her time to writing a book on child loss, and now runs grief support activities. These survey participants needed to find work with meaning and purpose, and this very much mirrors my own experience, leaving a successful career in human resources to retrain as a career guidance practitioner, eighteen months after my daughter died.

Additionally, five participants shared that the death of their child had a positive impact on their career, with charities being set up, and new career opportunities that honoured their child, becoming available.

Participants also described feeling differently about work, seeing it as a distraction or financial necessity, with 46 stating work and career were no longer important. For example, one participant left their job as a Director of Finance and is now working for her local council as an administrative assistant. Another left her role as a teacher and is now working in a shop. One participant said:

> I have only continued working because I've had to for financial reasons…Since my daughter died, I have had the attitude of 'nothing really matters' towards most things, work included.

While another reflected on the loss of their career:

> I previously managed 3 teams and was on a talent management programme…I was incredibly career focused... My career plan is completely out the window. I guess I'm grieving my career as well.

The second question focused on engagement with a career practitioner, and despite many participants stating that their views of work and career had changed, only one of

the 101 survey participants had sought formal career support after their child had died. However, 62 participants had discussed career and work options with family and friends, demonstrating that career discussions are taking place, but not with a national careers service, private career coach, or supported by career guidance practitioners.

Discussion

The research findings unequivocally showed the catastrophic impact of the death of a child on a parent's career, not just in the immediate aftermath but for many years thereafter. Grief symptoms continued to impact the bereaved parent for several years post-loss, having a direct impact on participant experiences in the workplace.

However, the research also suggested that employers often did not have the resources to provide the necessary support to staff over the longer term. Participants stated that they needed time to adjust; flexibility; and to feel supported at work when their confidence was low, and anxiety high. Yet employer support was often withdrawn after 12 months.

Blustein (2013) suggests that work is an essential component of life and mental health, yet over half of the participants reported that work and career had lost all meaning for them post-loss. Some participants engaged in new forms of work (often in some kind of honour of their child) which could provide new meanings and a sense of purpose, but this was not the experience of the majority. This is important because although different career theories attempt to explain the role of emotions or trauma response in career guidance, such as life-design counselling (Savickas, 2012; 2013), these theories can often focus on finding new narratives and moving on. In contrast, in this research no participants talked about recovering from their loss or moving on – the death of their child is something they are unable to reframe as something positive or leave behind. It is not something to recover from, but to try and assimilate into their lives going forward.

A more useful perspective is offered by Corso (2015) who argues that as individuals reflect on their trauma, they will construct a narrative to help them make sense of what has happened. She believes that career practitioners have a clear role to play in helping clients write a narrative that gives meaning to their suffering. Unlike Savickas, Corso (2015) explicitly points out that people who have an unexpected career change need significant emotional support. The implications of this current research are that career practitioners working with bereaved parents should not seek to minimise or gloss over experiences of child loss, but to acknowledge the depth and intensity of grief symptoms and emotions, including anxiety, low confidence, and self-esteem. They should also be equipped to support the bereaved parent to investigate, navigate and work with their loss, helping them identify ways in which they could move forward with meaning and purpose, and recognising that for some the traumatic event could be the catalyst for career change in many different guises.

However, to be able to do this may require careers professionals to access specialist training and be provided with the support and structures necessary to work with clients at this kind of depth. With the majority of participants seeking careers support from friends and family, there is an evident need for careers support, but at the moment there is a risk that bereaved parents do not know where to access professional career guidance, and that they will not be able to access the level of support they need.

In this research, 73% of participants reported a change in the importance of work, with most stating that work and career were no longer important to them. It is clear from the survey results that bereaved parents would benefit from career guidance at some point post-loss. Participants are making career decisions based solely on the views of family and friends, rather than engaging the help of impartial career guidance professionals, either through government funded bodies or private career coaching. All of the UK Home Nations have website resources for adults with an option to make an appointment, but this does not appear to be widely promoted. If adult guidance services were more visible and positively promoted in the community, it is worth considering whether more bereaved parents would engage with them. This also brings up another issue – that of missed opportunities for employers to work in partnership with local career guidance services, including private career coaches, to provide a service to any employee needing career guidance. From the findings, we know that bereaved parents are looking to their employers to do more to support them, and engaging the services of career guidance practitioners has the potential to be viewed by bereaved parents as another support service, like counselling and bereavement groups – a valuable resource to be utilised.

Conclusion and recommendations

This study has created a starting point for further research into career decision-making and trajectory for bereaved parents. The results highlight that grief is unique, prolonged and complex, with bereaved parents experiencing a range of intense emotions over a significant period of time leading to disillusionment and disengagement with work and career. Most participants did not make significant changes to their career in the early years of loss, yet 73% stated their view of the importance of work and career was adversely changed.

The perceived lack of support from employers, coupled with low visibility of career guidance services resulted in very low engagement with career services. This population of working age adults have faced a significant challenge in finding meaning and purpose in their work and career since the loss of their child. Career practitioners have an important role to play in helping them re-establish a positive relationship with work and career. For some it will be about re-engaging with their current employer or workplace environment; for others it may be about making changes in career direction; and for others it could be the opportunity to engage in activities that reflect the relationship they had with their child. Briefly reflecting on my own bereavement experience, I have embarked on a career change, retraining as a career guidance practitioner, and subsequently completing the MSc Career Guidance and Development. Through this research, I remember my daughter Rachael and all the other deceased children and give a voice to their parents who are often a hidden population in society.

Several career theories attempt to explain the role of emotions or trauma response in career guidance, yet they focus on finding new narratives and moving on. Not one participant talked about recovering from their loss – their deceased child remained central to their career decision-making. As was highlighted by Corso (2015) career counselling for bereaved parents needs to be done slowly and thoughtfully, with career practitioners acknowledging the depth and intensity of emotions. The practitioner will also need to be expert in helping the bereaved parent explore, navigate and possibly reframe career options, and in recognising and considering any dysfunctional or self-limiting beliefs.

There were two primary limitations of this study. Firstly, those who participated were mostly members of bereavement support groups, used to sharing their experience of child loss generally. This could be considered a sub-group of all those bereaved of a child, which in turn could skew the survey results towards a particular sub-group of bereaved parents. Secondly the survey was completed by predominantly white, educated women. A handful of men did complete the survey but a higher number of male and/or ethnic minority respondents may have generated different results. That said the survey has provided a baseline starting point from which further research could be conducted.

From the findings of this research, it is possible to conclude with some recommendations for careers services, and practitioners:

- That all career practitioners are provided with the opportunity to undertake bereavement training, to enable them to work with bereaved individuals either directly, or through referral to a specialist practitioner.
- Career guidance practitioners are impartial professionals whose practice should be informed by ethical principles. The role and value of the career guidance practitioner, as a trusted ally in career decision-making, should be actively promoted to bereaved parents through various channels such as employers, bereavement charities and community engagement.
- Trauma-informed practice recognises and understands that exposure to trauma can impact a person's psychological, biological, neurological, and social development. In line with the growth of trauma-informed practice in education and health care provision, career guidance should also be a space in which being trauma-informed is central to our practice; that career practitioners are alert to grief emotions and recognise the importance of acknowledging experiences of grief, including child loss, where appropriate in career guidance interventions. Practitioners should handle grief emotions with patience and empathy and recognise the significance of grief in career decision-making.
- That employers and career practitioners should seek opportunities to work in partnership, offering services to bereaved employees that supports them through this traumatic life event. Adult career services are not actively promoted, so participants were unaware that such a service existed.

The bereaved parents in this study were a small population of working age adults in the UK, most of whom faced significant challenges in finding meaning and purpose in their work and career following the loss of their child. This research has explored some of these career challenges, and provided a baseline for further research into career decision-making and trajectory for this group. As career practitioners we have an important role in helping the bereaved parent re-establish a positive relationship with work and career, whatever shape that takes.

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Short Article

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Creating space for resonance: Supporting career development through photovoice

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Abstract

This reflective article explores the use of photovoice, a participatory visual practice, to support international students navigating the emotional and relational challenges of transitioning into employment in the UK. Drawing on a small-scale project, it considers how participatory practices can foster inclusion and agency in career development. The reflection is situated within Hartmut Rosa's account of social acceleration, using resonance as the conceptual lens to examine how shared dialogue and storytelling can counter alienation and create conditions for connection. It highlights the potential and limitations of creative methods to deepen relational engagement in career education.

Key words: international students, social acceleration, resonance, photovoice, career development, inclusion

Introduction

The transition from university to employment is a pivotal stage for all students, yet international students frequently encounter distinctive barriers that shape this experience. These include language difficulties, unfamiliarity with UK workplace culture, visa restrictions, financial pressures, and, in some cases, discrimination (Nygren, 2025). Such challenges are not simply practical but can produce a deeper sense of alienation and disconnection. Students' confidence, motivation, and sense of self-worth are often

undermined when repeated rejection or silence follows their applications for part-time or graduate work (Levett, 2025). For many, the anticipated ease of securing employment in the UK contrasts sharply with the realities of the labour market.

UK universities have seen increased and sustained international recruitment in recent years. International students bring enormous benefits to academic communities and to the wider economy, as highlighted by national reports (HEPI, UUKi, & Kaplan, 2023). Yet with high numbers of international students come more complex and diverse support needs, particularly in relation to career education. Universities UK International (2020) stresses that while many institutions have adapted services, more must be done to address the mismatch between international students' expectations and their actual experiences in UK labour markets. Without careful attention to these differences, international students may face practical barriers and suffer diminished wellbeing, confidence, and belonging. More recent data shows the UK may be facing a reversal in the upward trend: the number of sponsored study-related visas granted in the year ending June 2025 was 4% lower than the previous year (House of Commons Library, 2025). This dip may increase pressure on institutions to adopt more inclusive, meaningful approaches to engagement and retention, such as participatory methods like photovoice.

This article offers a reflective exploration of photovoice as a creative and participatory practice that can respond to these challenges. Photovoice invites students to express their lived experiences visually and verbally, encouraging both individual reflection and collective dialogue. In doing so, it has potential to create the conditions for what Rosa (2019) calls *resonance*, a sense of meaningful connection and transformation that counters the alienation generated by life in accelerated societies. The aim of the article is to explore how practices such as photovoice can shed light on the emotional and social dimensions of career development. This reflection is particularly relevant for readers seeking ways to make career education more inclusive and attuned to the lived realities of diverse student groups.

Approach: A reflective lens

This article is written as a reflective piece, drawing on my experience of facilitating a photovoice project with international students seeking employment in the UK (Levett, 2025). Photovoice, developed by Wang and Burris (1997), is a participatory visual method that invites participants to document aspects of their lived experience through photography and then reflect on their images through captions and group discussion. The process is designed to surface hidden stories, foster dialogue, and generate collective insight. While often used in community-based health and social research (Catalani & Minkler, 2010), photovoice has growing relevance in educational and career contexts as a way of supporting inclusion, reflection, and shared meaning-making. The process prompted me, as facilitator, to reflect on the wider role of participatory and creative practices in career education, and how such practices might support inclusion in contexts often dominated by outcome-driven measures.

A useful way to frame this reflection is through Kolb's (1984) experiential learning cycle. The cycle has four stages: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation, and active experimentation. This article echoes that pattern: it begins with the experience of facilitating a photovoice project, reflects on what emerged, connects the insights to Rosa's theory, and ends with implications for practice, policy, and research.

Reflections and insights

Photovoice as a resonant practice

In my project, photovoice created a slowing down effect, where students paused to reflect on the deeper significance of their experiences. By combining images with personal captions, the process opened opportunities for meaning-making and dialogue, laying the groundwork for resonant connections.

One participant explained:

> This project has opened my horizons and made me see things from another angle. See opportunities where before I only saw challenges. Moreover, I can realise that those opportunities were always there waiting to be discovered.

Another described how the photovoice process built confidence and belonging:

> The project helped me gain confidence and helped me become a part of like-minded people. I faced my fears of public speaking and got guidance by the experiences of my peers.

These examples echo wider findings in photovoice research, which show that the method can provide participants with a language (visual, emotional, and collective) for expressing experiences that are difficult to articulate verbally (Catalani & Minkler, 2010; Latz, 2017). Photovoice has previously been used to surface hidden stories of marginalisation in healthcare (Wang & Redwood-Jones, 2001) and in education (Latz, 2017) but is less common in the career development sector. Previous research has found that the practice not only generates insights but also fosters new relationships and shared understandings.

Social acceleration and alienation

Rosa (2013) describes social acceleration as the speeding up of technological innovation, social transformation, and the pace of everyday life. Although often celebrated as progress, acceleration can paradoxically lead to what he terms a *frenetic standstill* (Rosa, 2013, p. 89): constant activity without a sense of meaningful forward movement. For international students navigating UK labour markets, this description resonates strongly. Time itself can become a scarce and stressful resource, with visa deadlines and financial pressures intensifying this sense of urgency. Balancing academic responsibilities with job hunting can heighten the strain, leaving little room for self-care or social connection, and deepening the sense of alienation despite their efforts.

Participants expressed this sense of alienation in different ways. One caption read:

> I have never had to look for work like I currently do in the UK. It's a new terrain, culture, CV format or even unspoken code.

Another student described the disorientation of stalled progress:

> I am stuck in the middle not knowing if I am going forward or backward, waiting for the necessary impulse to move.

A third reflected on the repetitive grind of rejection:

> One gets to apply for many jobs that you feel and know that you're qualified for and then 9 out of 10 times, you get a rejection mail mostly because you do not have UK work experience.

These reflections illustrate not only the practical barriers of visa regimes and unfamiliar job markets, but also the psychological toll of acceleration. As Bandura (1997) argues, repeated experiences of failure undermine self-efficacy, the belief in one's capacity to act and influence outcomes. The diminished self-efficacy expressed through participants' captions and discussions suggests that alienation is not only structural but also deeply personal and affective: a sense of disconnection from agency, belonging, and meaningful participation.

Resonance as an antidote

In contrast, Rosa (2019) proposes resonance as the counterpoint to alienation: a mode of relating to the world in which people are both affected and respond in ways that are meaningful and transformative. Resonance is dynamic and relational, not static. Rosa (2019) identifies four characteristics of a resonant connection: affectiveness (attuning and listening), self-efficacy (experiencing empowered voice), transformation (reciprocal change), and openness to unpredictability. Crucially, resonance cannot be forced (Rosa, 2019); it emerges unpredictably when individuals and their environments enter into a responsive relationship. This process was visible in the project. One participant reflected:

> Being a part of Photovoice has given me a form of hope, enlightenment and camaraderie. It has given me a lot more insights into solutions that may exist through shared experiences with fellow researchers. Knowing that I'm not alone in my challenges has in some way motivated me to keep pushing towards my goals and dreams.

This illustrates how collective storytelling, and shared recognition can reframe experiences of struggle into opportunities for mutual support and growth. In career development contexts, such resonant encounters suggest that effective support is not only about building job application skills but also about fostering environments where students can experience recognition, belonging, and transformation through dialogue and connection. These relational and affective dimensions are often overlooked in employability-focused discourse. Such experiences, in turn, underpin the confidence, persistence, and agency needed to sustain efforts and engage more meaningfully with career development.

Discussion

Strengths

The photovoice project created a space where international students could pause, reflect, and share experiences that might otherwise remain hidden. For many, the process was empowering. They were able to represent themselves not only as job seekers but as whole people, with emotions, histories, and aspirations. This recognition is vital in a context where employability discourse can reduce students to CVs, competencies, or visa status.

By interpreting the photovoice experience through the lens of Rosa's (2013, 2019) social acceleration and resonance, we can better understand both the pressures international students face and the potential of participatory practices to foster connection and belonging. The synthesis of sociological theory with participatory method demonstrates how career development can benefit from engaging affective and relational dimensions alongside skills and labour market knowledge.

Beyond the project group, photovoice often culminates in exhibitions or presentations designed to raise awareness and influence decision-makers (Catalani & Minkler, 2010). Such acts of sharing can themselves create possibilities for resonance, as audiences encounter participants' stories visually and emotionally. In this way, photovoice not only documents life but offers participants a way to resist the alienation of social acceleration, becoming a method through which individuals reconnect meaningfully with themselves, others, and the world. This wider engagement highlights photovoice's potential not only to generate reflection within groups but also to foster connection and recognition between students and the broader communities and institutions that shape their experiences.

While Rosa's (2019) concept of resonance offers a powerful interpretive lens, it is not without critique. Susen (2019) points out that resonance is often described mainly as the opposite of alienation, which makes it vague and hard to pin down in practice. Johnsen (2025) argues that Rosa sometimes treats resonance as if it were the essence of human life, which can overlook inequality and the messy realities of social conflict. He also suggests that Rosa focuses too much on human relationships and does not fully consider our connections with the non-human world. In this reflection, I use Rosa's work not as a fixed model but as a way to spark thinking about how moments of connection and recognition might emerge in career development, and how creative methods like photovoice could help to respond to experiences of disconnection.

Challenges and limitations

Photovoice is not without its challenges. The practice can be resource-intensive, requiring careful facilitation, group sessions, and, ideally, exhibitions to disseminate findings. In busy career services with limited resources, such commitments may feel unrealistic. Furthermore, not all students may feel comfortable sharing personal images or stories, raising questions of consent, cultural sensitivity, and ethical safeguards (Wang & Redwood-Jones, 2001). Career practitioners must be prepared to adapt the method to diverse comfort levels, perhaps by offering options for anonymous contributions or by blending photovoice with other reflective tools.

A further limitation lies in scope. Photovoice can surface personal and collective experiences, but it cannot by itself dismantle systemic barriers such as restrictive visa regimes, labour market discrimination, or the financial structures of higher education. Without attention to these broader forces, there is a risk of over-claiming for what photovoice can achieve. It should therefore be seen as complementary to, not a replacement for, institutional and policy reforms that address structural inequities. However, photovoice offers a great deal of flexibility and can help raise awareness of structural inequities, which in turn can encourage others to take positive action.

Implications

In closing, I offer three practical recommendations for career development stakeholders:

For practitioners in career services, this reflection suggests that career education should not only build employability skills but also create reflective, dialogical spaces. Photovoice is one example, but the broader principle is that students benefit from opportunities to slow down, to share, and to feel heard. Even small-scale interventions, such as integrating image-based reflection, storytelling, or peer dialogue into workshops, may foster resonance and belonging.

For policymakers, the case of international students underscores the importance of inclusive career support strategies. Employability policies often prioritise speed, efficiency, and graduate outcomes, yet these may unintentionally exacerbate alienation. Investment in participatory approaches that centre lived experience could help institutions move beyond narrow metrics and towards more holistic definitions of success, including wellbeing, agency, and belonging.

For researchers, photovoice offers a methodology that bridges empirical data and affective experience. It encourages us to take seriously the emotional and social dimensions of career development, which are often marginalised in traditional research. Comparative studies could explore how resonance is experienced differently across settings, or how photovoice might intersect with digital storytelling, art-based methods, or other participatory approaches.

Conclusion

Finding employment can be demanding for all students, but for international students it is often intensified by the forces of social acceleration: fast-changing labour markets, financial and visa pressures, and the relentless demand to compete and adapt. These pressures not only affect practical career outcomes but also erode confidence, belonging, and wellbeing. Rosa's (2019) theory of resonance offers a way of reimagining career education as more than preparation for work, it is about fostering meaningful connection, recognition, and transformation.

Photovoice, as a participatory practice, provides a concrete way of enacting this vision. By inviting students to express their experiences visually and verbally, it creates a reflective pause in the midst of social acceleration. In group dialogue, students encounter one another not just as competitors for scarce jobs, but as peers with shared struggles and aspirations. This collective recognition creates a space of resistance. It is not resistance in the sense of protest against the system, but in the sense of resisting alienation; making space for presence, reciprocity, and human connection within accelerated contexts.

The potential of photovoice also extends beyond international students. It may be particularly valuable for other groups who face systemic disadvantage in education and employment, such as first-generation students, care leavers, and racially minoritised groups. For these populations, photovoice can surface hidden stories, challenge deficit-based assumptions, and build confidence through collective reflection.

By enabling students to slow down, to share meaning, and to be recognised, photovoice is not just a methodology, it is a way of practising career education that is inclusive, humanising, and socially just. In doing so, it responds not only to the needs of international students but to the wider challenge of supporting all students to thrive authentically in accelerated societies.

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General articles

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Conceptual Article

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Career development for university students: Lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic

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Abstract

Within the diverse worldwide population of university students and graduates, those who experienced global lockdowns due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the transition to work might encounter particular challenges in their career development and job-seeking issues. These challenges include psychological impacts, career uncertainty, changes in academic and social life, and a lack of job opportunities due to the disruption of the labour market. This article discusses these career challenges and focuses on two primary theoretical strategies to help students explore available resources, benefit from unplanned events, and construct and enact meaningful career narratives. The Happenstance Learning Theory and Narrative Career Counselling approach are applied to helping clients with their career development challenges. These theories address the challenges faced by university students who encountered the unplanned event of the pandemic, especially around career anxiety and uncertainty.

Key words: career development, university students and graduates, happenstance learning theory, narrative career theory, COVID-19

Introduction

In March 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared a newly discovered COVID-19 virus a global pandemic, as it had spread to over 100 countries and continued to develop (Ghebreyesus, 2020; World Health Organization, 2022). In order to prevent infection and slow the transmission of this epidemic, many countries' public health agencies required people to keep social distance (i.e., stay 6 feet away from others), wear a mask in public areas, and avoid unnecessary travel (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), 2021). At the same time, WHO (2022) and the CDC (2021) recommended the necessity of a lockdown as one of the measures to prevent COVID-19 virus transmissions. People in numerous regions, such as India (Gopal et al., 2021), China (Clark et al., 2021), Turkey (Manuoğlu & Güngör, 2023), Serbia (Stevanović et al., 2021), Greece (Salta et al., 2022), Italy (Colombo et al., 2022), Canada (Conrad et al., 2022), and the United States (Zheng et al., 2021), shifted their academic and social activities online.

The pandemic directly disrupted students' lives, leading to the closure of schools and universities and enforcing a sudden shift to online learning and remote work from home. Among the influence of the pandemic and the lockdown policy, university students and graduates were two of the most vulnerable groups in the job market as they were facing psychological distress and the uncertain future, challenges of the school-to-work transition, and the lack of job opportunities due to the disruption of the labour market (Kwok, 2018; Mahmud et al., 2021; Svabova et al., 2020). Usually, students approaching or after their graduation would inevitably encounter the transition from school to work. However, the pandemic disrupted the job market, creating employment uncertainties and reducing high-quality recruitment positions, particularly in tourism, aviation, hospitality, and small enterprises (Wang & Wang, 2024). While emerging industries like information technology, logistics, online education, telemedicine, and e-commerce expanded, their recruitment demand did not fully offset losses in traditional sectors (International Labour Organization, 2024; Wang & Wang, 2024). Recovery has been uneven, with low- and middle-income countries lagging due to limited fiscal resources and weaker social protection systems (International Labour Organization, 2024). As such, students seeking their first formal job or training opportunities could be disproportionately affected by the different economic realities post-pandemic (Svabova et al., 2020). It is essential to focus on recent and soon-to-be graduates and facilitate their access to job opportunities and help empower them to face employment challenges.

This article will discuss several main challenges faced by university students and graduates regarding career development due to the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic, including psychological distress (e.g., depression, anxiety, stress, self-esteem) and career uncertainty, changes in academic and social life, and the disruption of the labour market and individual work opportunities in the following sections. Subsequently, the current article will apply two career development concepts of Krumboltz's (2009, 2011) Happenstance Learning Theory and Cochran's (1997) Narrative Career Theory to understand the mentioned challenges and explore related interventions to facilitate students in dealing with these challenges with sufficient research support.

Career challenges

Psychological impacts and uncertainty in future career

The COVID-19 pandemic had an unprecedented influence not only on individuals' daily lives, such as wearing a mask in public, living in isolation, losing jobs, and the risk of death from infection, but also created a negative impact on people's psychological wellbeing, including anxiety, depression, and fear (American Psychological Association, 2020; Mahmud et al., 2021). The pandemic halted people's lives and challenged economic growth as many individuals and industries tried to survive this unusual event (Bakker & Wagner, 2020). Among these multi-layered challenges, it was not uncommon that university students and graduates who were facing the uncertainty of their future and the fear or worry of not getting a job would be the vulnerable group for encountering psychological distress or related mental health challenges (Mahmud et al., 2021).

A study conducted by Cao and colleagues (2020) explored university students' psychological pressure in a medical college in China during the COVID-19 pandemic and found that economic effects, the change in daily life routine, and delays in academic activities were positively correlated with anxiety symptoms. Moreover, having friends or relatives infected with COVID-19 was a risk factor leading to increased anxiety in college students (Cao et al., 2020). Consistent with Cao et al.'s (2020) study, Liu et al. (2020) further supported that university students' anxiety and depression levels increased significantly during the epidemic of COVID-19 and were significantly higher than the national norm level.

Likewise, Mahmud and colleagues (2021) explored the relationship between the 'Fear of COVID-19' and career anxiety among university students who were unemployed and anticipated to join the job market within a short time. The symptoms and severity of the COVID-19 virus resulted in people's fear, fueled by social media and other forms of misinformation, the lack of control over rumours, and misleading resources that increased people's fear of COVID-19 (Tsang et al., 2021; Weir, 2020). Furthermore, economic growth has been negatively influenced, resulting in widespread layoffs and difficulties in securing new employment, along with the quarantine policy that prevented people from working in the office. These factors have contributed to the future workforce's career anxiety (Chowdhury et al., 2022; Gopinath, 2020; Pappas, 2020; World Health Organization, 2022). In addition, depression, which included insomnia symptoms, feeling hopeless and worthless, and recurrent thoughts of death, was one of the major psychological impacts of COVID-19 (American Psychological Association, 2020). Studies found that the 'Fear of COVID-19', intolerance of uncertainty, and depression significantly impacted career anxiety among university students who would face the labour market soon (Mahmud et al., 2021; Zhou et al., 2022). Furthermore, researchers revealed that depression derived from the 'Fear of COVID-19' worked as a mediator between the 'Fear of COVID-19' and career anxiety in future workforces and that the anxiety and depression might have a long-term negative influence on individuals' wellbeing (Mahmud et al., 2021).

Regarding the implementation of the lockdown, several negative influences had resulted from this method to prevent the transmission of the virus. Brooks and colleagues (2020) reviewed the psychological impact of quarantine using electronic databases. The review found that most studies showed negative psychological consequences of quarantine on

individuals, including post-traumatic stress symptoms, confusion and anger from a lack of clear information from public health authorities and unclear purpose of quarantine, frustration, boredom, and a sense of isolation due to the loss of regular daily routine and social interaction (Brooks et al., 2020). Even before the presence of the pandemic, Kwok (2018) found that university students were facing critical challenges associated with the uncertainty of their future careers, including the unpredictability of the external environment, lack of sufficient executive function among emerging adults, and the negative impact of uncertainty on their psychological wellbeing. Therefore, under the lasting impacts of the pandemic, the pandemic might have worsened university students' and recent graduates' psychological wellbeing.

Changes in academic and social lives

By April 2020, schools in over 190 countries were temporarily closed down, marking the beginning of an online, digital learning era (Daniela & Visvizi, 2022; Reuge et al., 2021; UNESCO, 2023). A study conducted in Ghana showed several critical challenges for students who had to switch their study format to online study (Owusu-Fordjour et al., 2020). These challenges included low efficiency in studying at home, lack of supervision from others that leads to lower performance, inability to learn effectively by individuals, lack of sufficient support to access the internet, and insufficient knowledge of technical knowledge in the e-learning platform (Owusu-Fordjour et al., 2020). Similarly, Sava (2020) reported critical challenges of online learning during the pandemic, including a lack of personalized support for students with special learning needs, actual human interaction, monitoring of the learning study process, and immediate feedback.

Concerning the change in social life, De Vos (2020) showed that the implementation of social distancing reduced individuals' chance of social interaction with one another. Moreover, avoiding social gatherings reduced the frequency and types of outdoor activities, such as reducing travel demand or travelling by public transport, no gathering or parties with friends, and no travelling or remaining trapped abroad (De Vos, 2020; Nguyen & Balakrishnan, 2020). In addition, the negative influence of limited social contact might have resulted in social isolation and reduced physical activity (De Vos, 2020; Radwan et al., 2021), which could be detrimental to both psychological and physical health. Although there was an increased frequency of online entertainment, including watching TV shows, reading, finishing academic works or writing, and playing computer games, individuals still found their lives more isolated than before (Pan, 2020). The disruption of academic or social lives could be a barrier for university students and graduates to maintain their everyday lives and prepare for their career planning.

Unemployment and the disruption of the labour market

The COVID-19 pandemic and shutdown measures disrupted business activities worldwide, resulting in significant personnel changes, including workforce reductions and rising unemployment rates (Svabova et al., 2020). In Slovakia, the registered unemployment rate began to rise sharply in March 2020 due to lockdown measures, with the highest number of new job seekers recorded in April 2020 (Svabova et al., 2020). The majority of industries, such as food services and administrative and support service industries, were heavily affected by a reduced employment capacity (Svabova et al., 2020). Before the pandemic, youth unemployment was already a significant issue across the European Union, with some countries like Greece and Spain reporting particularly high rates (Lambovska et

al., 2021). The implementation of pandemic-related restrictions led to further increases in youth unemployment, disproportionately affecting young workers under the age of twenty-five (Lambovska et al., 2021). Even countries with historically low youth unemployment (e.g., the Netherlands and the Czech Republic) experienced notable spikes (Lambovska et al., 2021). Globally, surveys conducted in 2020 revealed that a significant proportion of respondents worldwide felt their jobs or businesses were threatened by the pandemic, with many reporting high levels of financial concern (Elflein, 2021; Hirschmann, 2021). These findings highlight the pandemic's far-reaching consequences on job security and economic stability across diverse regions, deteriorating not only business operations and development but also individual job confidence and security, especially challenging for new workforces seeking their first jobs.

Since the peak of the pandemic in 2020, the labour market has shown signs of recovery. According to the most recent report published by the International Labour Organization (2025), global employment growth remained steady, keeping the unemployment rate stable at 5%. However, this growth has been insufficient to address persistent decent work deficits, particularly for young people, whose unemployment rate remains high at 12.6% (International Labour Organization, 2025). Young workers remained overrepresented among the unemployed and discouraged workers, with the rate of young people not in education, employment, or training rising above historical averages, particularly among young men in low-income countries (International Labour Organization, 2025). Even among new workforces holding formal or informal employment, their real wages have yet to recover from pandemic losses, and some of them faced limited opportunities for career advancement, precarious job conditions, poor working conditions, and inadequate social protections due to imbalanced labour market power (International Labour Organization, 2025). Furthermore, gender gaps and disparities remained salient, with young women disproportionately represented in informal and low-paying work, especially in low-income countries (International Labour Organization, 2025). The International Labour Organization (2025) has called for targeted policies and greater investments in education, skills development, and quality training programs to support new workforces in securing decent employment.

Aside from psychological distress and career uncertainty, academic and social changes, and unemployment and disruption of the labour market, students might encounter additional difficulties due to the increasingly blurred boundary between family and work, work loss and trauma, and inequality in the workplace (Autin et al., 2020; Linnekaste, 2021). Unfortunately, disparities in race, gender, social class, and occupation gave rise to inequality so that some workforce populations were disproportionately and more severely impacted by the pandemic, such as workers of colour, women, immigrants, and persons with disabilities (Cubrich et al., 2022; Dang & Nguyen, 2021; Mishra & Cousik, 2021; Perugini & Vladisavljević, 2021). On top of all the challenges faced by the workforce and its influence on economic development, there were positive sides of the pandemic, such as paying more attention to a positive lifestyle (e.g., doing more exercise and choosing a more healthy diet), taking care of one's health psychologically and physically and of one's friends or relatives, saving travel time due to working from home, exploring the meaning of work, and actively searching for more job opportunities (Akkermans et al., 2020; Di Renzo et al., 2020; Elmer at al., 2020; Khaira & Sari, 2022; Parola, 2020).

This article will address the challenges faced by university students by applying the Happenstance Learning Theory (HLT) and the Narrative Career Counselling approach

(NCC). These career development theories are particularly relevant in the context of the post-pandemic job market, as they offer unique perspectives for navigating unplanned events and constructing meaningful career narratives. HLT emphasizes the importance of embracing uncertainty and leveraging unplanned events as opportunities, making it highly applicable to the unpredictable job market and disrupted career trajectories caused by the pandemic (Krumboltz, 2009). NCC provides a framework for students to reframe their experiences, construct coherent career identities, and find meaning in their career journeys (Cochran, 2011). Together, these theories offer complementary approaches with HLT equipping students with an open mindset and skills to adapt to chance events and NCC helping them make sense of their experiences and envision future possibilities.

Career counselling interventions for university students in the post-pandemic world

In helping university students deal with their career challenges and needs in a job market still recovering from the impact of the pandemic, career development approaches supported by theoretical research would be advisable. The following section proposes using Krumboltz's (2009) Happenstance Learning Theory and Cochran's (1997) Narrative Career Counselling approach to support university students' current challenges under the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic, especially regarding transforming happenstance as an opportunity and seeking the meaning of work. The goals of these career counselling interventions aim to improve university students' vocational wellbeing and self-efficacy to benefit from unplanned events in their lives (Krumboltz, 2009, 2011; Cochran, 1997). Among the major career psychology theories, Krumboltz's (2009) Happenstance Learning Theory and Cochran's (1997, 2011) Narrative Career Counselling approach provide strong contextual relevance and address unique challenges in these unprecedented times. HLT is uniquely positioned to help individuals address issues that are outside their control, such as economic downturns, labour market disruptions, and unplanned career setbacks (Krumboltz, 2009). For students and graduates grappling with the economic and psychological aftermath of the pandemic, HLT provides a situation-sensitive and non-judgemental perspective to help university students and graduates create a distance between themselves and unplanned events, reflect on their career challenges, and develop alternative coping strategies for their job-seeking difficulties (Krumboltz et al., 2013). Similarly, NCC's dual purpose of engaging individuals in crafting a larger story of their career life and strengthening their sense of agency closely aligns with students' need to rekindle hope and make sense of their experiences, values, and career identities through narrative construction in the face of uncertainty (Cochran, 2011; Kaliris & Issari, 2022; Maree, 2021, 2022). University students with relatively limited real-life work experience, internships, or training opportunities may be especially vulnerable to economic disruptions (Blokker et al., 2023). Career counselling interventions informed by these career theories, coupled with their emphasis on openness to unplanned events and strength-oriented perspectives, can help students explore opportunities based on their unique circumstances and adapt to evolving demands.

Helping with Krumboltz's Happenstance Learning Theory

Krumboltz's Happenstance Learning Theory (HLT) is one of the advisable methods to work with individuals who encounter unplanned events every day in the rapidly changing world (Krumboltz, 2009, 2011). This theory evolves from the Social Learning Theory (Krumboltz

et al., 1976) and attempts to explain why people behave the way they do, deriving from genetic influences, environmental conditions and events, and different types of learning experiences (Krumboltz, 2009). HLT claims that since unplanned events are unavoidable and constant in life, people need to learn to accept these happenstances and be alert and sensitive to them to recognize potential opportunities. As such, the HLT is a suitable choice for career counsellors to work when addressing university students' influence of the unplanned event of the COVID-19 pandemic in their personal and vocational lives. Krumboltz (2009) emphasizes four fundamental propositions in the HLT: (1) Helping clients learn to take action to achieve more satisfying career and personal lives, rather than making a single career decision. (2) Assessment should stimulate learning rather than matching personal characteristics with occupational characteristics. (3) Clients could learn to engage in exploratory actions to benefit from unexpected events. (4) Clients' accomplishments outside of the counselling sessions indicate the success of counselling. This theory is an action-oriented approach that aims to help clients engage in self-discovery, be open-minded and alert to potential opportunities, and benefit from unplanned events (Krumboltz, 2009, 2011).

HLT typically starts with setting clear expectations about the counseling process (Krumboltz et al., 2013). For students and graduates who feel overwhelmed by the uncertainty of the post-pandemic job market, the counsellor may emphasize that counselling goals are exploring actions and creating opportunities rather than finding a single 'perfect' job. By doing so, counsellors can help students adopt a proactive mindset, reduce anxiety, and foster a sense of control, thereby addressing the psychological impacts and uncertainty they have felt. For students facing unemployment and labour market disruptions, emphasizing action over rigid planning aligns with the need to adapt to a rapidly changing environment. By framing uncertainty as a normal part of career development, counsellors can help students feel more prepared to navigate the challenges ahead.

Students and graduates may feel discouraged by setbacks caused by the pandemic, such as internship rejections or gaps in their resumes. Highlighting past successes helps them reframe their experiences, build confidence, and recognize their strengths and resilience, countering feelings of self-doubt commonly experienced (Krumboltz et al., 2013; Mahmud et al., 2021). For students who experienced disruptions in their academic and social lives, focusing on achievements since the pandemic, such as adapting to online learning or managing remote collaborations, can demonstrate their readiness for the workforce (Owusu-Fordjour et al., 2020). By drawing on these experiences, students can more objectively make sense of their experiences and articulate their skills and accomplishments to potential employers.

Counsellors need to be mindful that although unplanned events are inevitable in individuals' lives, each person may have a different perspective of what is considered a chance. To this end, Ulas-Kilic and colleagues (2020) conducted a study in Turkey to understand university students' perception of chance events and how they viewed the influence of these events in their careers. Results revealed that there were three themes from university students' perceived chance events: social factors (e.g., family impacts from the immediate environment), individual factors (e.g., test anxiety), and political or legal factors (e.g., educational policies). 67% of students indicated numerous unplanned events in their career development, while 33% of them did not recognize any chance events in their lives, although Turkey's legal and educational policies have changed frequently. Participants who

did not recognize chance events in their lives might be less conscious about the unplanned events and lose the potential opportunities to learn from these events. Thus, career counsellors could assist these students to become more conscious and sensitive to chance events in their lives to benefit from these events. In addition, researchers suggested that most of the chance events perceived by university students in Turkey were controllable factors, which indicated that students might consider themselves passive when making career decisions (Ulas-Kilic et al., 2020). Researchers recommended that actions aiming to improve students' open-mindedness, self-efficacy, and competencies to transform unplanned events into opportunities should be prioritized (Ulas-Kilic et al., 2020). Similarly, research has shown that remaining optimistic, being productive, and re-evaluating new opportunities despite facing career uncertainty were particularly important during the pandemic (Mouratidou & Grabarski, 2022). In HLT, Krumboltz (2009) introduced three steps to prepare individuals to capitalize on unplanned events: (1) before the unplanned events, clients should take actions that position them to experience the unplanned events, (2) during these events, clients should remain alerted and sensitive to recognize potential opportunities, (3) after the events, clients should initiate actions that enable them to benefit from the events. With the help of this procedure, counsellors could assist students to increase their consciousness about unplanned events while improving their career competencies to benefit from future chance events before, during, and after the events occur.

Fear of failure, lack of confidence, or uncertainty about skills can prevent students from taking action toward their career goals (Krumboltz et al., 2013). Counselors can help students identify and challenge negative thoughts while breaking down goals into small, manageable steps and overcoming blocks to actions (Krumboltz et al., 2013). The attitudes of being acceptable, open-minded, curious, and exploratory are crucial elements for the success of students' transition to work. Peila-Shuster (2016) illustrated how HLT, integrated with other theoretical approaches (i.e., Life Design Counseling, Career Construction Theory, and Hope Theory), could be a helpful resource that provides potential avenues for career counsellors to support students in higher education in their transitions from the school to professional lives. In this integrated theoretical approach, HLT played a role in facilitating career counsellors to help students learn to accept unplanned events, reframe students' indecision to open-mindedness, improve career curiosity, and explore the potential opportunities from unplanned events actively (Peila-Shuster, 2016). Additionally, HLT provides career counsellors with a direction to help students develop action plans and encourage them to implement their plans in real life to benefit from the happenstance and further build up their competencies of career confidence (Peila-Shuster, 2016). Peila-Shuster's (2016) study showed the advantages of HLT in helping students prepare and benefit from unplanned events and its effectiveness as a complementary tool.

Reyes (2019) studied what skills and strategies Latina women used that contributed to their career success in higher executive roles in higher education institutions. The purpose of the study was to use these participants' successful experiences as a reference to develop a career development program to help other Latinas and minorities improve their competencies in future career goals. The study comprehended and analyzed participants' experiences through the lens of HLT and found that these women used all the five skills that were central to HLT during their career paths, which were curiosity, persistence, optimism, risk-taking, and flexibility (Reyes, 2019). Among these skills, flexibility (i.e., adapting to the environment by changing their attitudes and circumstances) and risk-

taking (i.e., taking actions in the face of uncertain outcomes) were more prevalent than others from participants' successful experiences (Reyes, 2019). Based on the potential contributions of these career skills to these participants' career success, it is likely that improving HLT career skills, especially flexibility and risk-taking skills, may help university students overcome their career uncertainty, which could be beneficial for their mental health and further career development. Based on the findings, the author recommended schools and higher education institutions include workgroups, mentorships, and career coaching on campus to facilitate students in developing career skills and empower them to become more competent in the career marketplace (Reyes, 2019). These recommendations could apply to university students who may encounter career-related challenges before, during, and after unplanned events to empower them and improve their competencies for their career development.

Incorporating narrative career counselling in helping

The Narrative Career Counselling (NCC) approach could work as a great main or supplementary tool in career counselling as it helps clients construct and enact meaningful career narratives, improve their agency, and establish a career identity (Cochran, 1997, 2011). NCC is grounded in the idea that individuals construct their identities and career paths through the stories they tell about themselves. These stories are shaped by cultural, relational, and societal contexts, and they can be reshaped through NCC practices that emphasize externalizing problems, re-authoring narratives, and creating new meanings (Abkhezr, 2024).

Narrative career counselling starts with identifying a career challenge. To better understand university graduates' career planning in their school-to-work transition under the lasting influence of the COVID-19 pandemic, Parola (2020) conducted a study using the narrative approach in Italy as a starting point to understand students' narratives. The study showed that these young adults tended to be negatively influenced by the quarantine as they felt fear, uncertain, and anxious about their future career path and had no idea where and how to apply their strengths. One key NCC practice is externalizing conversations that allow students to separate themselves from these struggles and revise their relationship with negative emotions (Abkhezr, 2024). By shifting the language from 'I don't know whether I can secure a job in this era' to 'When anxiety visits, it highlights the difficulties of getting an above-standard position post-pandemic,' students may view job insecurity as an external force rather than an inherent part of their career identity, empowering them to take proactive steps (e.g., practicing interview skills) and building confidence in themselves.

Savickas (2011) summarized three elements in a narrative approach: '(1) constructing career through small stories; (2) deconstructing and reconstructing the small stories into a large story, and (3) co-constructing intention and action to begin the next episode in that large story' (p. 256). This process can be facilitated using career writing, storytelling, and re-authoring conversations. Lengelle and colleagues (2014) found that career writing could help students in higher education find a career identity that could provide a sense of meaning and direction in career development. Career writing is one of the NCC approaches that help individuals construct their career identity by exploring their life themes and challenges. The study introduced three types of writing in the narrative

approach: creative, expressive, and reflective writing. Creative writing refers to writing a fictional part of self that aims to gain self-insight; expressive writing encourages clients to explore their deepest feelings and emotions regarding an adverse event; whereas reflective writing helps clients perceive a scenario from various perspectives (Lengelle et al., 2014). Lengelle and colleagues (2014) found a negative association between career writing and negative emotions, including anxiety, anger, and sadness, indicating that career writing might help promote students' wellbeing or prevent psychological impacts during their career development. When facilitating storytelling during narrative career counselling, it is imperative for counsellors to value clients' roles as active agents in telling their stories. Counsellors may use story-crafting questions as facilitators while deeply and curiously listening to clients and finding clues to explore related stories in a culturally sensitive and respectful relationship (McMahon & Watson, 2012). During the process of storytelling, counsellors could seek to understand clients' positive and negative experiences and prepare clients to re-author their narratives in more adaptive ways to benefit their career development (Cochran, 1997). When working with university students who were negatively influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic in the field of mental health, life changes, and career uncertainty, counsellors who adopted narrative career counselling could have the chance to understand students' backgrounds, personal experiences, values, and behaviour patterns and collaborate with students to reframe their narrative in alternative and beneficial ways (Cochran, 1997). Having sufficient knowledge of students' past experiences equips counsellors to guide re-authoring conversations, where students explore alternative narratives and reclaim their sense of agency (Mate et al., 2023). The re-authoring process centers on the landscape of action, focusing on the practical and concrete steps students can take to move toward their career goals and increase readiness, and the landscape of identity, exploring the values, meanings, and personal qualities that underpin these actions (Abkhezr, 2024; Mate et al., 2023). For university students navigating the post-pandemic job market, re-authoring conversations can help them reframe their experiences of uncertainty, rejection, or self-doubt into narratives that highlight their strengths, values, and aspirations.

Group counseling and workshops rooted in NCC provide opportunities for students to share their experiences, learn from others, and co-create new narratives within a supportive community (Abkhezr, 2024). For example, outsider witness practices may invite students to share their re-authored narratives with an audience of peers, family members, or mentors, who may then offer validation and support. In a university context, outsider witness practices could be integrated into career workshops or peer mentoring programs. Collective narrative practices involve creating shared narratives that capture the zeitgeist of the pandemic and the group's collective stories that embrace resilience and agency. Moreover, workshops and info sessions can directly address career-related themes and engage students in skill training. Researchers recommended schools offer career writing workshops in a classroom setting with a whole class of students, where the presence of peers could bring out more insights through discussing and sharing their thoughts (Lengelle et al., 2014).

The post-pandemic world has exacerbated existing inequalities, making it even more challenging for some populations, such as refugees and other marginalized groups, to secure employment (International Labour Organization, 2024). Abkhezr and McMahon (2017) proposed that narrative career counselling can provide a safe space for clients with refugee backgrounds to explore their preferred life and career stories that might have been

challenged throughout their immigration process. During career counselling, counsellors facilitate students' self-reflection to enhance their understanding of the cultural, social, and historical contexts of their lives. Within a culturally sensitive relationship, counsellors could guide students to externalize unique challenges they have encountered in the past, such as language barriers or discrimination during the pandemic, focus on their strengths and aspirations, and subsequently develop a preferred alternative life and career stories (Abkhezr & McMahon, 2017). By focusing on individual narratives, collective practices, and the unique needs of marginalized groups, NCC offers a holistic and culturally sensitive approach to students' career development in the post-pandemic world, potentially helping them reclaim their agency, build resilience, and achieve their career goals.

Conclusion

University students and graduates today face a challenging career situation, where the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic has negatively impacted their psychological wellbeing, social and academic life, and the disruption of the labour market. University students and graduates may feel more uncertain and anxious about their career planning and need more support than before the pandemic to prepare them to face unplanned events due to the pandemic and its related restricted measures (e.g., quarantine). The Happenstance Learning Theory offers perspectives and career skills to turn unplanned events into opportunities, and narrative career counselling serves as a valuable intervention to help reframe clients' future career stories in a more beneficial way. HLT's emphasis on action and adaptability complements NCC's focus on narrative construction and agency, creating the momentum that helps students break free from the 'stagnation' of the pandemic and get 'unstuck.' These theories help individuals move from feeling overwhelmed by external circumstances to taking small, meaningful actions that build confidence and success.

By knowing students' challenges during this exceptional circumstance of the pandemic and the beneficial aspects of these career counselling approaches, schools and related institutes may consider incorporating tailored interventions to support students in their transition challenges and psychological and vocational impacts. Individual interventions may adopt HTL and NCC as their primary frameworks and incorporate practices from these theories to improve students' self-discovery, self-efficacy, and wellbeing and enhance their capacities to be more conscious of potential opportunities and benefit from unplanned events. On a broader scale, group or collective interventions may include workshops on building career adaptability, peer mentoring initiatives to foster social support, and partnerships with industries or field leaders to create internship and job placement opportunities. By combining theoretical insights with practical strategies, career counsellors can better support young people in navigating the complexities of the modern labour market and achieving their career aspirations.

In the hope of further advancing this discussion, we propose several directions for future research and practice. First, given the gap in the literature, future studies may explore the long-term effects of the pandemic on career development, particularly how students from diverse socioeconomic, cultural, and geographic backgrounds have adapted to or been hindered from fully participating in the evolving labour market. Second, the pandemic has exacerbated disparities in employment opportunities and pay ranges, underscoring the need for research and public attention. With international data indicating that disparities have widened across genders, social groups, and countries, more research into the current

situation and potential strategies to address inequality is urgently needed (International Labour Organization, 2024). Lastly, future research could examine the effectiveness of integrating the Happenstance Learning Theory and Narrative Career Counselling approach into school career counselling programs.

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Research Article

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Climate change and career: Strategic leaders' perspectives of the role for environmental issues in career guidance

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Abstract

Meeting the UN Global Goals for Sustainable Development will require meaningful changes to lives, learning and work. This includes how we think about careers and the practice of career guidance. This study investigated attitudes to environmental concerns and explored the role of these concerns in career guidance activities. The individuals involved in the study were mid-career leaders studying on a level 7 strategic leadership programme. Participants revealed that they feel environmental issues are important and relevant to their careers, but when it comes to including environmental issues in career guidance, they hold varied perspectives and complex feelings about what role it can play, if any. This paper adds to the current discourse around and understanding of green approaches to career, including green guidance, and posits implications for practice and practitioners interested in this area.

Key words: green guidance, career guidance, strategic leaders, environmental issues, career development, sustainability

Introduction

The challenge of addressing climate change and our planet's sustainability is widely considered to be the most pressing concern facing our world (Greenpeace, 2024; Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), 2023; United Nations, 2024).

Governments, organisations and individuals need to respond in a variety of ways. Many organisations are examining their impact and adding sustainability themes to strategic aims (Dupire & M'Zali, 2018; Global Green Growth Institute, 2025) with half of the world's largest companies committed to net zero targets (Net Zero Tracker, n.d.). The green transition within the labour market has consequences for the nature of work and careers and as such is of interest to career guidance practitioners. Studies examining work and environmental issues commonly focus on sustainability practice in organisations, including the policies and structures to modify, or 'green', individual, and organisational behaviour (Ahmad, 2015; Madsen & Ulhøi, 2001). Less is known about how the workforce of an organisation deals with or responds to sustainability and how this relates to their career. This study explores how strategic leaders working in organisations feel about environmental concerns and the relationship between this and their experience of career development. Participants were sent an online survey enquiring about their attitude to sustainability issues and what role environmental concerns play, have played or could play in their careers and in career guidance.

At this point it is useful to clarify language in this study. I use the term *career development* to encompass the different and evolving personal learning activities that individuals undergo as part of their own lifelong career project, a definition that reflects that of the Career Development Institute (n.d). I used this term with my participants to encourage them to consider a wide and flexible view as to what might be included in their reflections. Similarly, I use *career guidance* when referring to the practice, approaches and interventions of career development practitioners. As my participants are all mid-career and working in organisations it can also be helpful to add the term *organisational career support* which denotes career development activities provided by human resources departments, line managers or similar. Lastly, I use the term *green career guidance* to indicate career guidance approaches that actively seek to consider or address environmental sustainability as part of the overall practice aims.

The literature review for this project brought together studies from different disciplines, such as psychology, sociology, behavioural science and organisational studies, on the topics of environmental issues, career, work and organisations. I investigated methods of evaluating individuals' attitudes to environmental concerns (Kitamura et al, 1997; Schüssler & Axhausen, 2011) and measuring overall job satisfaction (Dolbier et al, 2005; Scarpello & Campbell, 1983). In selecting tools for inclusion in the survey it was important to consider validity, recency and application of the tool in the context of this study. Schüssler & Axhausen's (2011) 14 item scales accounts for awareness of, denial of and attitude to measures for environmental protection, meaning it could provide a holistic score for respondents' environmental attitude. Similarly, Dolbier et al's (2005) work offers a validated shorthand to determine levels of job satisfaction.

As my participants were all employed and working as strategic leaders in organisations it was also relevant to consider organisational attitudes and approaches to environment. Studies frequently focus on the role for Green Human Resource Management (GHRM) and Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) in achieving organisational strategic aims. GHRM literature predominantly focuses on employee pro-environmental behaviour as a driver of environmental performance towards net-zero targets (Wang, Zhou & Liu, 2018; Wehrmeyer; 2017). The literature on organisations and environmental attitude largely reflect a strategic, self-interested organisational approach to environmental initiatives.

The study engages with ethical principles of organisations and employees, therefore it was pertinent to examine literature on work values. A relevant concept emerging from this research is work value congruence—the alignment between individual and organisational values—which is linked to job satisfaction and career success (Erdogan et al., 2004). Studies show that individuals and employers both prefer and benefit from value alignment (Judge, Zhang & Glerum, 2020; Kristof-Brown, 2000). Psychometric tools exist to measure value congruence (e.g., Uçanok, 2009), however these have not included a focus on green values, limiting the relevance for use in this study.

At the intersection between career and environmental concerns is literature pertaining to green guidance, sustainability education and green careers. Reports from large international institutions such as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2024) and United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) (n.d.) focus on how educational organisations prepare individuals for changes in the labour market and processes for embedding green learning frameworks in primary, secondary and tertiary education (OECD, 2024, UNESCO, n.d.). Publications of this nature signify a level of import and strategy for developing career education that factors in environmental issues and the future needs of the labour market. The strategic, organisation-wide, target driven approaches are similar to those found in GHRM and CSR. Literature exploring green career guidance approaches offer examinations of career concepts, models and practice (Bakke et al, 2024; Di Fabio & Bucci, 2016; Kavková et al, 2024; Mowforth, 2023; Plant, 2014, 2015, 2020). Much of this work has examined the significance and potential of career guidance to deliver an environmentally just approach (Hooley, 2022; Nuttall, 2024) and the challenges that practitioners may face in implementing such an approach (Grant, 2024, Kavková & Šprlák, 2024). Studies explore the delivery of career guidance for 'green careers' (and the value of this) and consider the complications that may arise from a green guidance approach (and the risks of not applying it). Within these studies career guidance is presented as having a legitimate and active political role in contributing to social and environmental justice.

The notion that career guidance is a political endeavour is not new. In 1996 Watts proposed a framework identifying four socio-political ideologies—conservative, liberal, progressive, and radical—that underpin career guidance practices (Watts, 1996). He argued that guidance is inherently ideological and reflects broader societal values, particularly in relation to social justice and the role of the state in individual development. Building on this, Packer (cited by Plant, 2020) introduced a green lens to Watts' model, integrating environmental ideologies. Drawing on Dobson's (2007) distinction between environmentalism (light green) and ecologism (dark green), Packer mapped these onto Watts' ideological quadrants. The result is dark green radical and progressive approaches (focusing on system change and individual responsibility respectively) and light green conservative and liberal approaches (focusing on maintaining current practice and prioritising individual freedom respectively). This extension to Watts' typology encourages career practitioners to consider environmental sustainability as a dimension of guidance, advocating for green pedagogy and emancipatory practice that address both social and ecological justice. The work of Watts and Packer is relevant to the current project as it presents a role for sustainability within career development activities and suggests some of the complexities for consideration. What has been less explored is how workers, learners and clients might respond to this approach.

This project is an attempt to add to the discussions of green career guidance by learning about the attitudes, experiences and expectations of a group of mid-career strategic leaders working in organisations.

Methodology

This study employed an online survey with a mix of closed and open questions that explored attitudes to environmental issues, job satisfaction and the career development experiences of individuals working in strategic leadership roles. The combination of questions allowed some opportunity for triangulation of data. For example, examining how participants with positive environmental attitude feel about the role for green career guidance. The questionnaire aimed to answer the following research questions:

- What are attitudes to and awareness of, environmental issues?
- Do environmental issues impact on individuals' relationships to their organisations? How?
- Do participants see a role for environmental concerns within career guidance? What is the nature of this role?

Participants were recruited through convenience sampling drawn from students undertaking a level 7 strategic leader development programme. Students partaking in this master's programme are defined as working in, or developing into, influential, strategic leadership roles within their organisations. All participants had recent experience of career guidance activities through the degree course. A total of 131 responses were received, 80 of which were deemed suitable for inclusion. Characteristics of the participants' gender, age and industry is given in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Participant age, gender and organisation

Gender	Age (n)	Industry: Selected from Office for National Statistics (ONS) (2022) list.
39 male	20-29 years = 3	Finance and insurance: 16
39 female	30-39 years = 23	Education: 14
2 prefer not to say	40-49 years = 39	Professional, scientific, tech: 10
	50-59 years = 15	Water supply: 10
		Information and communication: 5
		Health: 5
		Arts: 5
		Electricity: 5
		Public administration: 5
		Transportation: 5

The sample is representative of the master's course in terms of gender, age and industry. Some industries are highly represented due to programme level partnership agreements within water supply and building societies. Whilst the sample size is small, and results are

not generalisable, the study offers insights into the participants' environmental and career attitudes.

Other limitations in this study include the potential for bias. Participants with an interest in climate change may have been more likely to respond. Additionally, my insider researcher role as a lecturer on the master's programme could influence participation and/or affect impartiality in the research process. Collecting data via self-report is limiting as it relies on interpretation and can be coloured by multiple factors (Hammond & Wellington, 2013). Further triangulation of the data via interviews with participants would have strengthened the approach. Nevertheless, the online survey approach allowed for collection of a significant amount of data in a short period and the anonymous nature of the data collection mitigated some of the potential for bias.

The quantitative data included responses to closed questions about job satisfaction and participant characteristics (gender, age, industry). To determine strength of feeling about the environment participants were asked 14 scaled questions about attitude and awareness to environmental issues (based on Schüssler & Axhausen, 2011) which resulted in an overall score for environmental attitude (EA).

There were eleven open ended questions in the survey prompting respondents to consider how environmental issues have affected their careers to date, their experience of career guidance activities and the nature of the role for environmental concerns as part of career development activities. Not all respondents answered all of the open text questions. Nearly fifty answered each of the open questions, yielding circa 10,000 words. Qualitative text was analysed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) (Clarke, Braun & Hayfield, 2015). This process involves six stages of sifting and coding data resulting in defined themes (see Table 2 below). RTA was deemed an appropriate approach as it encourages researchers to consider their own influence and constructs and helps to identify patterns and themes that may not be immediately apparent. RTA enhanced transparency and enabled an inductive approach whilst allowing for consideration of existing literature during the sense making of themes generated from the qualitative data.

The quantitative data accounts for a smaller (but important) part of the project. Primarily it provides an understanding of the strength of feeling about environmental issues amongst participants and characteristics of the participants (age, industry etc). The qualitative data probes into how participants feel about their career to date and their feelings about a green career guidance approach.

The themes generated via RTA from the qualitative data are defined in Table 2 below. The findings section then is organised by examining results in relation to each of the research questions and themes are identified within each section.

Table 2. Themes identified through RTA

Theme	Definition
Personal importance or relevance of environmental issues	Captures the degree to which individuals perceive environmental issues as significant or relevant to their lives. It encompasses a spectrum of responses, ranging from strong personal identification with and concern for environmental matters, to expressions of indifference or perceived irrelevance.
Agency/liberty	Explores participants' perceptions of their *agency*— the sense that they can make choices — and their *liberty* — the freedom to decide whether or not to engage with environmental issues. It reflects how individuals navigate the space between feeling empowered or constrained. Includes expressions of empowerment *and* passivity, highlighting the interplay between perceived control, autonomy, and environmental responsibility.
Individualism	Reflects participants' emphasis on the individual — both in terms of personal responsibility for environmental action and the prioritisation of individual needs, preferences, or freedoms over environmental issues. It captures tension between environmental ideals and autonomy, or lifestyle choices. Participants may express a belief in the power of individual action but also reveal limits to their engagement when environmental behaviours conflict with personal priorities.
Collectivism	Reflects participants' recognition of the need for collective responsibility, shared effort, and systemic change. It captures a shift away from individualistic approaches, emphasising the role of communities, governments, employers, and cooperation in creating meaningful environmental impact. Participants suggest that individual actions are insufficient without broader societal or structural change.
Trust in organisations	Explores the extent to which employees feel they can trust their employers' responses to climate change, including the authenticity, transparency, and effectiveness of organisational initiatives. Captures both confidence in and scepticism toward corporate environmental commitments, with attention to concerns about greenwashing, performative actions or communications and misalignment between values and practices.
Value aligned career	Explores how participants' personal values — particularly around environmental responsibility — influence their career choices, motivations, job satisfaction and expectations of workplace. Central to this theme is the concept of work value congruence, where individuals seek alignment between their ethical beliefs and the roles or organisations for whom they work. Captures tensions and trade-offs, where some participants prioritise financial stability, job security, or career progression over value alignment. Highlights the interplay between idealism and pragmatism in career decision-making.

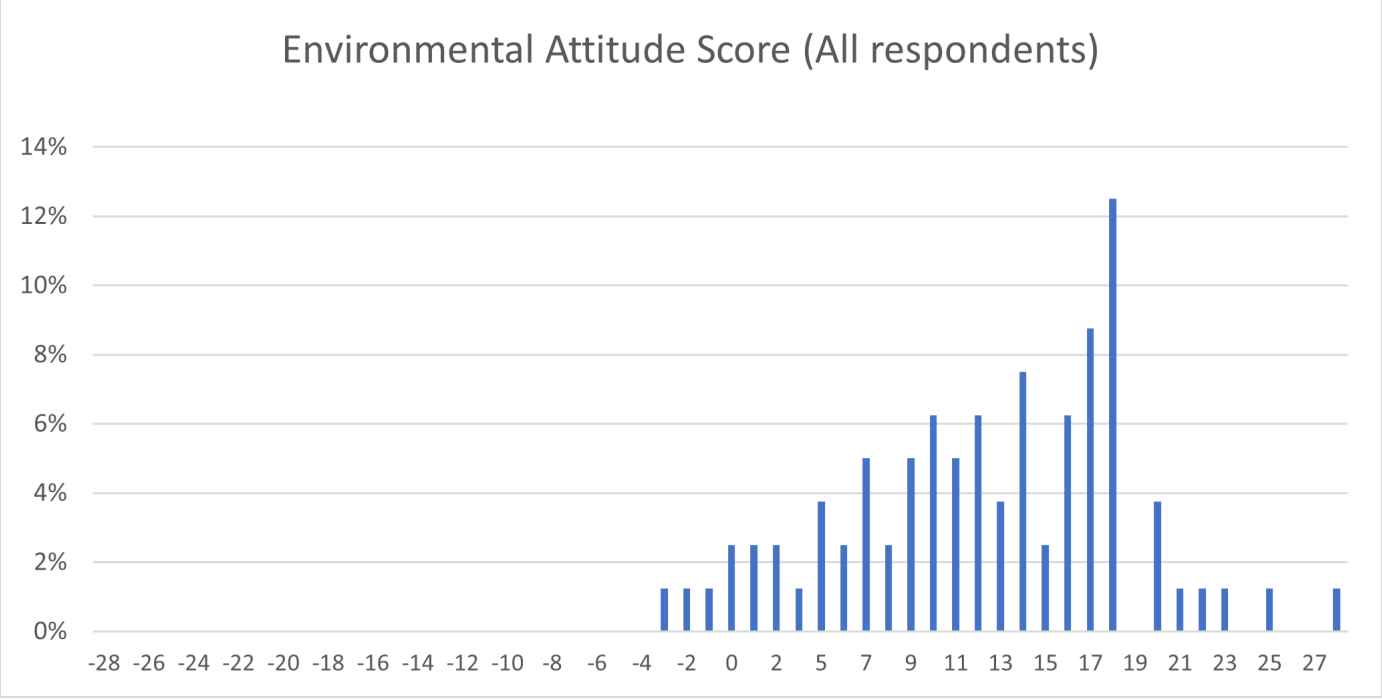
Findings

Research question 1: What are attitudes to, and awareness of, environmental issues?

Participants were asked to share their level of agreement (or disagreement) on a series of statements to determine an overall environmental attitude score (EA). Results are shown in Figure 1. A negative attitude towards the environment would be a score below zero and would be characterised by an individual who did not place importance on the issue and did not see value in measures to address it. Examples of statements that participants are asked to respond to include:

- Too much attention is paid to environmental problems;
- Environmental problems have consequences for my life;
- Jobs are more important than the environment; and
- The prices of petrol should be raised to reduce pollution.

Figure 1. Environmental Attitude Scores



The Environmental Attitude graph deliberately includes the total possible range from -28 to +28 to demonstrate the largely positive results of the respondents in this study. A participant with a high score would be very aware of environmental issues, unlikely to deny the effects of climate change and positive about the measures needed to tackle environmental sustainability. The average score was 12.5 with very few respondents (less than 4/80) scoring zero or below. Overwhelmingly participants are interested in and concerned about environmental issues such as climate change and are positive about taking action. Whilst overall EA scores were high, indicating high engagement, awareness and concern, almost all participants reacted negatively to the idea of increasing fuel costs as a solution to cutting emissions. For most a tension exists between the value of a systemic solution and the impact this may have on the individual.

Analysis of the qualitative data affords a deeper look into values and EA. Strategic leaders write about their feelings in relation to the topic and how it aligns to their personal ethics and behaviours. Here there was strong evidence of the theme of *personal importance or relevance of environmental issues* with the majority responding with answers such as; 'It's a subject that I care about and try to improve.' (Female, age 40-49, Administration) and 'It aligns closely with my personal values.' (Male, 30-39, Water Supply).

Within these responses I identified perspectives linking to the theme of *collectivism*. Many participants attribute responsibility for climate change universally and consider everyone, including themselves, to have agency and a role to play in addressing concerns.

> Climate change is really our collective number one issue right now, and doing something about it should be our collective number one goal. How we ALL contribute to that is vital to solving the crisis.
>
> (Male, age 50-59, Finance).

Respondents who talk about responsibility in this way often also expressed the need to consider environmental issues in a systemic way, suggesting it needs to be considered 'at every level to effect serious change.' (Female, age 30-39, Manufacturing).

Respondents also revealed complex, sometimes seemingly incompatible attitudes to the solutions for climate change in which they acknowledge the importance and personal relevance of the issue but do not express personal *agency or liberty* to act on their concerns. This theme was identified in responses suggesting capacity for change lies elsewhere, not with them as individuals. These participants reported that they feel like a 'small cog in the larger machine' (Male, age 30-39, Professional) or that the push 'needs to come from legislation and government and private business will follow' (Male, age 30-39, Transportation). One participant suggested that 'the development of environmental policies should be left to the experts.' (Male, age 40-49, Water Supply) whilst another trusts that their 'CEO has environmental issues in mind.' (Male, age 40-49, Water Supply). Assigning responsibility elsewhere links to the theme of *agency/liberty* and for some also a level of *individualism*. For others it was an argument for change to happen where power lies – at system level and it could be argued that this links to collectivism. Further questioning in an interview could have helped to determine more completely the nature of these responses. Examples of *individualism* were further revealed by responses relating to pro-environmental behaviours such as the importance of 'participating in the norm e.g. recycling, reducing waste, printing less.' (Female, 40-49, Finance) and comments about individual waste and excess personal travel to work.

The quantitative and qualitative findings from the survey tell us about attitudes to and awareness of environmental issues. Participants expressed strong concern for environmental issues and many linked this to their personal ethics and behaviours. Their views on responsibility and agency varied, sometimes combining collectivist and individualist perspectives.

Research question 2: Do environmental issues impact on individuals' relationships to their organisations? How?

Closed questions in the survey explored the relationship between strategic leaders' EA and their organisations' engagement with environmental issues, analysing its importance

and impact on their relationship with their organisation. 48 of the 80 of respondents feel their organisations play an active role in environmental stewardship. Of these, 40 consider this to be a valuable or positive contribution. Job satisfaction among the participants is generally high with 58/80 reporting they were satisfied, very satisfied or extremely satisfied with their job role. The findings highlight the recursive and dynamic relationship that individuals have with their employers – and with their own attitudes to environment and job satisfaction – characteristics of one appears to have influence on the other. This relates back to studies that suggest work value congruence is a factor in job satisfaction (Judge, Zhang & Glerum, 2020; Kristof-Brown, 2000). It is also conceivable that individuals with a generally positive outlook report that they are happier at work and are more engaged in world issues such as climate change. Individuals with a higher EA score tended to report that it is important their organisation is engaged with environmental issues, although the sample size was not sufficient for significance testing.

Analysis of the open questions helped to further uncover the importance of work value congruence for strategic leaders, particularly in career decision-making and the impact of *trust in organisations*. Respondents revealed a desire to trust their organisations' environmental initiatives and see them align with their own values. Where individuals report their organisation is prioritising sustainability this is most often integrated in strategic aims and linked to legislation, government emissions targets or UN Sustainable Development Goals. Other responses reveal a level of mistrust and lack of agency due to perceived lack of prioritisation or concerns about greenwashing. Participants express a need to hold the organisation to account and a risk that 'senior management don't take it seriously enough right now' (Female, age 30-39, Admin) or do not communicate their approach effectively. There is a sense that a lack of *trust in organisation* can lead to disengagement or even career changes, whereas its presence reinforces value alignment.

Environmental attitude may link with job satisfaction and choosing an employer. Here we see emergence of the *value aligned career* theme. Participants express the notion that career aspirations that connect with environmental concerns lead to greater personal fulfilment, as presented by this respondent:

> An organisation's environmental credentials are important to me, as this aligns closely with my personal values. Without a clear environmental purpose, I feel that I would not be motivated to deliver against an organisation's goals.
>
> (Male, 30-39, Water Supply)

One respondent credits their organisation with her growth in this area of work:

> My personal views changed dramatically as my knowledge grew. If it wasn't for the opportunity I had at work to learn, I would not be nearly as passionate as I am now.
>
> (Female, age 40-49, Finance).

Others take the *value aligned career* notion further by suggesting that if their organisation was having a significant negative impact on the planet they would consider leaving and/or would choose not to work for a company that ignored environmental concerns to drive profits.

> There are companies I avoid working with because I don't believe their sustainability credentials
>
> (Male, age 30-39, Professional).

Environmental issues influence how individuals relate to their organisations, with value alignment seeming to boost trust, motivation, and job satisfaction. Genuine sustainability efforts strengthen engagement, while perceived greenwashing or lack of priority can cause disengagement or a questioning of career choice. Many participants see environmental credentials as key to career choices and fulfilment. Despite this strength of feeling around *trust* and *value aligned careers*, participants are not consistent or clear on the role for environmental issues in career guidance, as we see in the next section.

Research question 3: Do environmental concerns have a role in career development activities for participants? What is the nature of this role?

This research question attempted to examine to what extent environmental issues have influenced or do influence career development and how individuals respond to the idea that topics such as climate change might be relevant to career guidance. In response to the statement *Career development activities should include discussions of environmental concerns* 46/80 participants agreed or strongly agreed. 22 of respondents were neutral and 10 did not see a role for environmental issues. Whilst the level of support for including environmental issues in career guidance is not as positive as overall environmental attitude, most participants responded positively to the proposal. When probed on this topic the analysis of qualitative text revealed a range of positions from a strong commitment to a green perspective in career guidance, to very definite opposition. Those who regard environmental concerns as relevant to career guidance express different perspectives on how this can be included, with some advocating for individual choice as a key focus and others focusing on a system wide approach to ensure full coverage.

Below, to strengthen coherence, I have grouped participants' perspectives into three groups on a continuum from *not supportive* (My development is my development), *somewhat supportive* (It's complicated), to *very supportive* (I have an idea). The majority of responses were found in the middle ground in which participants consider the idea of green guidance to be positive but express concerns about implementation.

1. My development is my development

This type of response is characterised strongly by the theme of *individualism* and a lack of *personal importance or relevance of environmental issues*. There is reluctance to consider a role for sustainability within career guidance.

> I am not certain how you can draw a link in an obvious way between career development and environmental concerns.
>
> (Male, age 40-49, Manufacturing).

For these participants concerns about their own agency and liberty often take precedence over responsibility to the environment, linking again with individualism, Respondents believe career guidance should prioritise individual needs. Concern is expressed that raising politics or personal views could present an obstacle to individual career development.

> I don't believe career guidance should include discussion on climate change. These may be personal to the individual, and it should not be feared by the individual their views could hinder their career progression.
>
> (Male, age 40-49, Transport).

Summarising these findings, one respondent expressed the individualistic perspective succinctly with the phrase 'My development is about MY development.' (Female, age 40-49, Education).

2. It's complicated

These responses express a wish for sustainability to be considered within their careers but focus on barriers that hinder this. Many suggest that, under different circumstances or systems, they could imagine a greater role for environmental issues within their careers and in career guidance. Respondents express the value and importance of environmental issues and share concern about how this may affect individuals adversely, linking with themes of personal importance or relevance of environmental issues, individualism and agency/liberty.

Strategic leaders identified reasons why it is difficult for the environment to play a role in their career or career guidance, some of which link with the theme of *agency/liberty*. One barrier was limited capacity or expertise, with one respondent writing: 'People don't know enough!' (Female, age 40-49, Finance). Others suggest that personal priorities are a necessary constraint, suggesting that if these were resolved they may feel environmental issues could play a more important role.

> Fundamentally the environment is not the main priority for me on a personal level, it is to adequately provide for my family.
>
> (Male, age 40-49, Professional).

Barriers are identified as being outside of their individual control as seen in this example:

> I would like the environment to have more influence, but the cost of living has more impact at present.
>
> (Female, age 30-39, Water Supply).

Competing organisational priorities also have a role to play, as highlighted here:

> Implementing climate change conversations in career support activities is impossible. HR professionals and managers are constantly pressed to achieve cost efficiencies to meet business targets.
>
> (Male, age 30-39, Information).

Though respondents acknowledged a role for sustainability in career they expressed concerns for how including it in career guidance might impact individuals in terms of personal conflicts and emotional stress. The findings suggest that a green career guidance approach would need to be done with sensitivity and caution to ensure individual *agency/liberty* is not at risk and to protect against undue stress. As one participant advises:

> Environmental factors may align closely with personal values. These are sensitive and sometimes controversial topics...
>
> (Male, age 30-39, Water Supply).

Another evokes concern for individual agency by suggesting that:

> Climate change and environmental concerns should be included in such a way that it still supports the person with their career choice.
>
> (Female, age 50-59, Education).

Others expressed concern that thinking about the scale of the challenge will leave individuals anxious and weighed down.

> I think lots of conscientious people have feelings of despair or dread over sustainability and the environment.
>
> (Male, age 30-39, Professional).

To summarise these findings, these responses hold the view that, whilst there is a value and importance to finding a role for sustainability within career guidance, their priority is for personal freedom and wellbeing, indicating a perspective aligning with themes of *individualism* and *agency/liberty* and potentially a lack of *personal importance or relevance of environmental issues*.

3. I have an idea

Participants who responded positively to the idea of green career guidance held different views on how this could be operationalised. Some felt it would best sit within personal career decision making, suggesting there is value in career conversations that discuss environmental issues as a vehicle to information about 'green' jobs. There is a sense that 'green jobs are less visible or understood' (Male, age 40-49, Electricity) and that this is best addressed as part of information provided at career decision making points. It is suggested that this is a key component in career guidance as it can help individuals understand predicted areas of growth for the future. This *individualistic* approach would enhance early career decision making and help align future career choices with personal values.

> The career of the future may look very different and therefore [it is important to be able to] position yourself to ensure you can convert opportunities and improve understanding of industry dynamics and what industry may fit with values on environmental issues.
>
> (Female, age 40-49, Public Admin).

Some participants expressed feelings of regret that this type of information had not been available to them earlier in their lives but also concerns about how applicable it would be.

> It is very specific to an individual's career. Where an individual wants to develop their career in more environmentally focused areas it should form part of the discussion, but it doesn't need to be a mandatory element for all.
>
> (Male, age 40-49, Finance).

Participants' responses propose that there is interest in conversations about work value congruence and careers advice 'on industry options that fit with [their] values and concerns' (Female, age 40-49, Public Admin), returning to the concept of *value aligned careers* and retaining a mainly *individualistic* perspective.

There were also those who saw green guidance as an opportunity to incentivise pro-environmental behaviours. As this participant suggests:

> We could hold conversations about not participating in the norm e.g. recycling, reducing waste, printing less (…) rewarding good behaviours works better than punishing bad behaviours.
>
> (Female, 40-49, Finance).

These suggestions centred on *individual* responsibility for change in which:

> Individuals could each be asked how they can impact environment in their role (…) thinking about new initiatives and the impact this will have not only on career development but also sustainability.
>
> (Female, 30-39, Health).

Conversely there were respondents who were enthusiastic about institution wide approaches flowing from 'organisational strategy rather than being dependent upon the strength of feeling of individuals' (Female, age 40-49, Education), linking to the *collectivism* theme. Here organisational career support is considered an ideal medium. This might include, for example, delivering leadership education programmes that would advance expertise on climate issues and spread knowledge and actions throughout the organisation or department wide professional development targets linked to UN Sustainable Development Goals (United Nations, 2024). One participant comments on the strength of an organisational career development approach that:

> Builds environmental concerns into career development will raise the profile of them and embed them as a business priority rather than a fad, or a singular department initiative.
>
> (Female, age 40-49, Administrative).

One participant shared a more radical perspective characterised by the *collectivism* theme:

> As people move through organisations they need to be coached and developed to understand how capitalism is going to need to change to accommodate a system where perpetual growth is no longer possible, where resources are becoming scarcer and scarcer, and where energy to produce products needs to be prioritised to things that are important.
>
> (Male, age 30-39, Professional)

To summarise these findings, most participants supported including environmental concerns in career development activities, though opinions ranged from outright rejection to strong advocacy. Responses fell into three groups: those who saw no role, those who supported it but worried about barriers and personal impact ('it's complicated'), and those who offered

ideas for integrating it, either through personal career choices or organisational strategies. Many appreciated the idea of aligning careers with environmental concerns but differed on how career guidance could balance individual agency with systemic change.

Discussion

A foundational learning from the data is that strategic leaders in this study care about the environment and share concerns about existential threats to our planet. They largely identify this as having strong personal importance and relevance. Whilst this is not a surprising outcome it establishes a useful starting point for exploring how these concerns may play a role in career guidance activities. The study also demonstrates a desire for careers that align with values - in this case values that link to environmental attitude – and that a trusting relationship with employers and organisations is an important factor. Some, but not all, see the benefits and possibility of a green career guidance approach but differ in terms of who benefits – the individual or society. Throughout the results from this study there are conflicts between individualism and collectivism, sometimes expressed by the same respondent. Environmental issues are seen as important to address in system wide approach whereas support for career development requires an individual approach. In this it could be concluded that most do not see career as something that can be a collective enterprise, or which lends itself well to address sustainability in a systemic way. The tensions between individual-focused and systemic approaches reflect broader debates about our impact on the planet and how this is addressed – through individual pro-environmental behaviours or system change from governments and organisations.

Reflecting on this tension led me to consider the resonance between this project and the typologies of guidance outlined by Watts (1996). The results of this study and the Watts' model could be seen as trying to tell two sides of a story. The first side of the story (Watts') offers the typologies of guidance, describing and categorising practitioner approaches to career guidance. The second (based on the research in this paper) tells the story of individuals (or clients) and their openness to different forms of guidance. In mapping this I found synergy in the dichotomy between individualism and collectivism and in attitude to change. In table 3 I attempt to demonstrate the interaction between these two stories. It is worth noting that the majority of respondents in this study are best characterised as aligning with Liberal, Progressive and Radical approaches and most expressed views that bridge across more than one approach.

Progressive or radical career guidance approaches focus on challenging the status quo and therefore offer the best opportunity for green guidance. In the mapping below I have attempted to expand on Watts' framework and relate it to responses to green career guidance. The table indicates where the themes from this study help to characterise individual responses to the different approaches and how they align. This may help careers practitioners to build understanding about openness or resistance to a green career guidance practice.

Table 3. Characterising approaches and responses

Watts' characterisation	Career guidance approach characterised as:	Participants aligned to this approach characterised by:
Conservative	• resistant to change • maintains status quo in existing norms, systems and processes • not well aligned to green career guidance approach	• perceived lack of individual agency within existing systems and norms • environmental issues hold less personal import / relevance • not open to green career guidance approach - attributed to organisational or system constraints or priorities
Liberal	• resistant to change • supports individual decisions and choices within existing norms and structures • not well aligned to green career guidance approach	• individualistic perspective • environmental issues hold less personal import / relevance • concerns relating to liberty and career decision making • not open to green career guidance approach - attributed to personal concerns, context and priorities
Progressive	• open to or drives change • supports individuals to make decisions and choices that challenge existing norms • aligned to green career guidance (within parameters of individual perspective)	• individualistic perspective • express desire for value aligned career • environmental issues hold personal import / relevance • perceived individual agency/ liberty • open to green guidance approach - within parameters of individual perspective
Radical	• open to or drives change • challenges existing norms, systems and processes • aligned to green career guidance approach	• express desire for value aligned career • collective perspective • environmental issues hold personal import / relevance • open to green guidance approach

Conclusions

Results from this study may help career practitioners and those working in organisational career support to consider the need for different approaches, how people may engage with or respond to methods and how we can work in more progressive and radical spaces towards green guidance. The study identifies barriers and concerns that individuals experience in relation to a green approach and characterises alignment to different

approaches. Below I suggest three takeaways from this study to support further development of green career guidance approaches.

1. Build on the existing positive environmental attitude

This study establishes that the strategic leaders who participated are almost universally concerned about climate change, and many see it as a relevant and important issue that demands attention from them and their organisations and links to their preference for a career aligned to positive green values. This does not equate to universal support for a green career guidance approach, however knowledge that positive attitudes to environment exist can be helpful to career guidance practitioners working within similar settings and cohorts and is a positive foundation from which to build.

2. Awareness and addressing context and barriers

Existential concerns such as climate change are, by their very nature, complicated problems and require complicated solutions. Individuals in this study expressed this sentiment by outlining a variety of barriers, concerns and systems that impede their openness to a green guidance approach. This included worries about their personal liberty, development, priorities and context, a lack of knowledge or expertise, the presence or absence of work value congruence and the value of trust in relationships with employers and organisations. Guidance practitioners can support an openness to green guidance by deliberately attempting to uncover, name, address and/or challenge barriers such as these. We can learn about and acknowledge complexities, including systemic issues, and facilitate access to climate education and experts. In Watts' terms this would involve practitioners working towards progressive or radical approaches to career guidance.

3. Critical reflection for practitioners

The role of career development professional requires reflection and continual professional learning. Moving to a green career guidance approach necessarily involves critical reflection of our current practice and perspectives. The results from this study suggest that to support clients and learners we need to be conscious of their perspectives, as well as our own. Taking time to reflect on positionality can help practitioners to; a) acknowledge their stance and; b) identify next steps and possible adjustments. The 'How green is your practice workshop?' outlined by Grant (2024) offers a structured approach to reflection and prompts to aid practitioners.

This study adds to the current discourse on the topic of green career guidance by exploring strategic leaders' perspectives, experiences and concerns relating to a green career guidance approach. In doing so it supports the view that career practitioners play a role in building critical consciousness around sustainability and our relationship to the natural world. Further studies involving the application of green career guidance strategies and tools with strategic leaders in organisations could advance our understanding and practice.

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Conceptual Article

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A look into the future for career education and guidance in schools in England, while learning from the past

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Abstract

Following a ten-year review the Gatsby Benchmarks have been revised and updated. The review report emphasises the need for an infrastructure of policy, training, support and resources to provide the conditions for successful implementation. The current position is reviewed, positive elements are acknowledged and, reflecting on past experiences, recommendations are made for improving the infrastructure to facilitate the development of good career education and guidance practice in schools in England.

Key words: career guidance, schools, England, Gatsby Benchmarks, policy, training

Introduction

Since September 2018 schools in England have been expected to use the Gatsby Benchmarks as a framework to review and plan their careers programmes (Department for Education, 2017). The Benchmarks cover the provision of careers information, careers education and individual career guidance, as well as experiences of work and encounters with employers and providers of future study (The Gatsby Charitable Foundation, 2014). They set out clearly what schools should put in place.

The original framework emphasised the importance of stability and the need to avoid continuous tweaks and amendments. However, as the years passed the context for career guidance changed and practice in schools adopting the Benchmarks evolved, and so early in 2023 the Gatsby Foundation announced a major review. The review involved extensive consultation with schools, young people and sector experts, analysis of data on progress against the Benchmarks, literature reviews and the collection of case studies. In late 2024, ten years after the Benchmarks were first launched, the Gatsby Foundation published its report of the review. It identified widespread support for the Benchmarks but at the same time included several updates and revisions to the framework (The Gatsby Charitable Foundation, 2024).

The report urges schools to adopt the revised Benchmarks but also states that there must be a supportive system of policy, infrastructure and resources to create the right conditions for their successful implementation. In this article I reflect on my own 50-year career in careers to examine what we have in place at present, identify what is still needed and draw on the lessons from the past to make suggestions for what should be done to ensure that young people in schools receive the careers support they need.

My career and key developments in career education and guidance

The following overview of my career in career education and guidance (CEG) sets the context for the various developments and initiatives I will describe and draw upon[1].

My interest in careers work was first sparked on my Postgraduate Certificate of Education (PGCE) course at the University of York in 1975. I trained as a secondary school biology teacher, but we had to take a subsidiary subject as well and I chose vocational guidance. I taught for 10 years at an 11-18 school in St Ives, Cambridgeshire, and for the latter five years (1981-86) I was head of careers. When I took on responsibility for careers I embarked on a two-year, part-time course for careers teachers at Hatfield Polytechnic, which led to a Postgraduate Diploma in Careers Education and Guidance. I learned so much from not only the tutors but also my fellow course members. I immediately saw the value of training for the role, but such courses were not available in every part of the country and participation was dependent on the school releasing the careers teacher from teaching to attend and the local education authority (LEA), school or individual paying the course fee.

For the year 1986-87 I was seconded from my school into Cambridgeshire Careers Service as an advisory teacher for CEG. One of the projects I worked on was to develop, in partnership with the Cambridge Institute of Education and Homerton College, a Certificate course for careers teachers across the county. Having experienced the benefits of training myself I was pleased to be part of a project which would make a similar opportunity accessible initially to any careers teacher in Cambridgeshire and in subsequent years, as a Regional Certificate, to all careers teachers throughout the East of England. At the time similar developments were happening in other regions, although not in every part of the country.

In 1987, instead of returning to my school, I moved on to the position of County Adviser for Careers Guidance and PSE in Hertfordshire LEA. This new post was part-funded by TVEI

1 Anyone interested in a fuller account of my career can find details on LinkedIn at https://www.linkedin.com/feed/update/urn:li:activity:7325099896238202880

money. The Technical and Vocational Education Initiative (TVEI) was the most impactful development on CEG practice in schools that I have personally witnessed. It was a national programme of curriculum development, led by the Employment Department and rolled out through LEAs, to make the 14-19 curriculum more relevant to an increasingly technological world of work. As well as introducing new vocational courses and qualifications, schools and colleges were required to develop their careers and PSE programmes, introduce more time for guidance and counselling and organise work experience for all students. The schools and colleges worked together on curriculum planning and development in local consortia and were allocated quite generous levels of funding. Careers advisers joined each of the consortium groups and brought insights from their work with young people and their contact with employers and providers of further and higher education.

I worked in the advisory and inspection service for 11 years but towards the end of this time the job had changed. I joined as an adviser and I was becoming an inspector. I decided that the only way I could continue to do the things I enjoyed, like leading training and offering curriculum and leadership advice, was to move into freelance work. I left my job with Hertfordshire LEA at the end of 1998 and have been a self-employed consultant specialising in CEG ever since. Throughout the past 25 years my core work has comprised leading courses of professional development, providing curriculum support, undertaking research and evaluations and offering policy advice.

In addition to being a NICEC Fellow I have held other roles from time to time. For example, from 1999 to 2004 I worked for a day a week in the then Department for Education and Skills (DfES) as the adviser for careers education. In 1998, ten years after the introduction in England of the national curriculum, careers education had at last been designated part of the statutory curriculum, albeit only in years 9 to 11. During my time in the Department, we produced a National Framework for CEG 11-19, which set out recommended learning outcomes for careers education for key stages 3 and 4, and the post-16 phase (DfES, 2003). At the same time the statutory duty on schools to provide careers education in the curriculum was extended to include years 7 and 8. To this day I have yet to hear a convincing rationale for why the Coalition Government removed careers education from the statutory curriculum in 2012.

I had planned to retire in 2018 but at the end of 2017 something happened to delay that for seven years. The Department for Education (DfE) published a careers strategy which included, among other things, plans to introduce a national, centrally funded programme of careers leader training (Department for Education, 2017). Having advocated for this for my entire career, I could not walk away. For almost 20 years I had led the professional studies certificate courses in CEG at the University of Cambridge Faculty of Education and witnessed the impact of training on both the individual and their work in school. For the past seven years I have been supporting The Careers & Enterprise Company (CEC) with managing and quality assuring the programme. After TVEI, the careers leader training programme is the second most impactful development I have seen.

Towards the end of my consultancy to the CEC I provided some assistance to the Education Development Team as they developed the Careers Impact System. Throughout my career I had been interested in approaches to quality assuring CEG programmes and had watched the 25 local quality awards evolve into the single, national Quality in Careers Standard. Schools now have both a tool for reviewing and evaluating the impact of their CEG

provision, using the Careers Impact System either internally or in a peer-to-peer review, and the further option to seek accreditation if they wish by submitting to an external assessment for the Quality in Careers Standard.

In the next section I will look at what schools need in order to provide high quality CEG for their students, review what is currently in place and reflect on developments over the past 50 years to see what can be reconfigured to plug any gaps.

Frameworks and system-wide support

Benchmarks and learning outcomes

The DfE's careers strategy (Department for Education, 2017) states clearly that every school needs a careers leader who has the energy and commitment, and the backing from the senior leadership team, to deliver the careers programme. In turn, the careers leader needs to know what to put in place to build an effective programme and that is the purpose of the Gatsby Benchmarks. But knowing what to provide is not enough: the careers leader, just like the leader of any other part of the school's curriculum, needs to have a clear idea of what the programme is aiming to achieve for the students. One of the most important additions to the Benchmarks following the ten-year revisions is the explicit reference to making sure that the careers programme is underpinned by learning outcomes.

In the 1970s and 1980s the planning for CEG started with aims and objectives, based on the DOTS-model (Law & Watts, 1977), and schools then thought about what to put in place to deliver those. Law and Watts' book has proved to be a seminal work in the field of CEG in schools, influencing policy and practice in many countries. It was based on one of the first projects undertaken by NICEC after the organisation was established in 1975. Bill Law, Founding Senior Fellow, and Tony Watts, Founding Director, analysed the emerging careers programmes in a sample of schools across England and soon identified a common pattern of content which comprised four elements: self-awareness; opportunity awareness; decision learning; transition learning - soon to become known as 'the DOTS model'. This framework was then offered to all schools as a tool for reviewing and planning programmes. To this day the same four broad aims underpin many of the frameworks of learning outcomes for CEG that have been developed across the world.

In the last 10 years, and especially since the Gatsby Benchmarks were first introduced, schools have often gone about planning their careers programmes the other way round, starting not with aims but with content and using the Benchmarks to decide what to put in place before then later thinking about what the aims, objectives and learning outcomes should be for the programme of activities. However, as a result of several factors, including the impact of careers leader training and other professional development, careers leaders are now using the Benchmarks and frameworks of learning outcomes at the same time. The revisions to the Benchmarks will help to support this approach and schools also now have access to a framework of recommended learning outcomes, the CDI's Career Development Framework (Career Development Institute, 2021), which can be viewed as a modern-day DOTS framework.

Used together, the improved Benchmarks and the CDI's Framework provide the guidance careers leaders need to design and implement good quality career programmes fit for

contemporary times. As Gatsby's review report makes clear however, the Benchmarks and a framework of recommended learning outcomes alone are not sufficient. There also needs to be an infrastructure of policy, training, support and resources, to provide the conditions for successful implementation into practice. I will consider the current position for each of these four elements in turn, beginning with policy.

Policy context

In England schools have two statutory duties which underpin firstly the provision of careers information and secondly the provision of careers guidance, but there are no policy imperatives for the provision of careers education or work with employers. It can be argued that the Provider Access Legislation, under which schools are required to give providers of technical and vocational education access to pupils to provide them with information on opportunities for future study beyond school, underpins Benchmarks 2 and 7. Similarly, the statutory duty to secure access to independent careers guidance underpins Benchmark 8. What is missing are any equivalent duties to provide careers education and work-related learning, which would underpin Benchmarks 4, 5 and 6. Schools did have statutory duties to provide both of these aspects of the curriculum up until they were removed, without any convincing explanation, in 2012. From the time the national curriculum was first introduced in 1989 these remain the only two areas that were previously statutory and have since been made non-compulsory. The government's current review of the curriculum and assessment provides the opportunity to reinstate these duties, without which, I suggest, it would not be possible to achieve the declared aim of developing a curriculum which prepares pupils for future study, life and work (Department for Education, 2024), nor the recently proposed work experience guarantee (Department for Education, 2025).

I would go further and suggest that both duties should not only be restored but also extended to age 18. Since the era when careers education and work-related learning were first made statutory, the age of participation in learning has been extended to age 18. It is therefore entirely appropriate that both the Provider Access Legislation and the duty to secure access to independent guidance cover the age range 11 to 18. Reinstated duties to provide careers education and work-related learning in the curriculum should similarly cover the full secondary school age range.

Training

As described earlier, there is now a national programme of careers leader training in England, funded by central government, managed by The Careers & Enterprise Company and delivered by several universities and careers-sector, or school leadership, training organisations. The programme has been running since 2018 and over the past seven years more than 4,000 careers leaders have completed the training. Most of the courses offer accreditation, either a university certificate or the CDI's Certificate in Careers Leadership based on three units of OCR's Level 6 Diploma in Career Guidance and Development. The funding covers the course fee and in addition, when the careers leader completes the course, the school receives a bursary to cover the cost of travel and teacher release. Any money left over is used to help fund development work in school.

The careers leader training programme has been highly successful, with a positive impact on the development of careers programmes in schools (Williams et al., 2020). While the

number of careers leaders that have completed the training is roughly equivalent to the total number of state-funded secondary and special schools and colleges in England, this does not mean that the job is done. Many of those 4,000 careers leaders have been the second, or in some cases third, person from the same school or college. The continuing turnover of staff in the careers leader role underlines the importance of maintaining the training programme.

The one change I would propose would be to bring the programme into the mainstream of teacher and school leader training by developing it into a National Professional Qualification in Careers Leadership (NPQCL). This would make it less vulnerable to possible future budget cuts and would attract more teachers looking to progress into school leadership. Because the job involves working on whole-school issues and collaborating with almost every member of staff, careers leadership provides excellent preparation for senior leadership and this should be reflected in the qualification structure. A precedent has been set by developments in the training for school special educational needs co-ordinators (SENCOs). The job of SENCO shares some particular characteristics with that of careers leader in that both roles involve working with the whole staff and with a wide range of external partners and agencies, and in recent years the formerly standalone SENCO Award has been brought into the NPQ framework.

While the programme of training for careers leaders has been a most welcome development, it needs to be complemented by training on CEG for all teachers and school leaders if the Benchmarks are to be implemented in full. This point was acknowledged by the DfE four years ago when they committed to building training on careers into every stage of teachers' professional development, from initial training to education leadership (Department for Education, 2021). Unfortunately, this has not happened, apart from a pilot project to integrate training on careers into the National Professional Qualification for Headship (NPQH).

Over the years there have been many calls to include training on careers in initial teacher training (ITT), so that teachers would be prepared to contribute to the careers programme, as subject teachers and tutors, once they started working in a school (for example Rice & Hooley, 2025). All too often the response from ITT providers has been that they have too much to cover as it is and could not accommodate work on careers as well. My own view is that, while a brief introduction to CEG in ITT would be helpful, the main focus should be on building training on careers into the Early Career Framework (ECF), which specifies a programme of professional development for teachers in their first two years of teaching. Trainee teachers' main concerns, understandably, are about teaching their subject, assessment and classroom management. Training on CEG is much more likely to have impact when it is delivered once teachers have started a job in a school and are being asked to contribute to careers activities.

Support

I have already said how valuable I found the formal training course I embarked on when I started my job as head of careers. The other form of support which was immensely useful was the local careers association convened by the careers service. Once a month the careers teachers and careers advisers in the area would come together for an afternoon, to be updated on national and local developments and to share practice. The careers leader in

a school is one of the most highly networked roles, working with all the staff and a host of external partners. But, at the same time, it can be quite an isolated position as there is no-one else in the school with similar responsibilities. Opportunities to network with colleagues in similar roles are important and in the modern era this form of support is provided by the careers hubs and the central leads for careers employed in the multi-academy trusts. The hub leads and the trust leads are, in turn, supported by The Careers & Enterprise Company.

As well as managing the careers leader training programme and supporting the hubs and trusts, The Careers & Enterprise Company produces a range of guidelines, resources and tools. One recent addition to these materials is the Careers Impact System, which comprises a framework schools can use to self-evaluate their careers provision. It can also be used for peer-to-peer reviews. So, schools now have access to a framework to quality assure their programmes, individually or with others.

Resources

In 2012 the approach in England to providing young people with CEG was changed from one where responsibilities were shared between schools and an external careers guidance service to one where schools were given sole responsibility for providing careers support. Prior to the closure of Connexions schools provided careers information and careers education, and the external service provided individual careers guidance plus support for careers information and careers teachers. Now schools are expected to provide a programme of CEG that meets the Gatsby Benchmarks, and required to secure access to independent career guidance. And they are required to appoint a careers leader to lead and manage the whole programme. However, schools have been given no additional funding to take on these new responsibilities. None of the money that local authorities spent on providing careers guidance was transferred to schools when the Connexions service was closed. Furthermore, although schools in the Gatsby pilot in the North-East were each allocated a few thousand pounds to help with the development costs, no similar grant was made available to all schools when the Benchmarks were rolled out nationally as the central part of the careers strategy.

Schools have made good progress with implementing the Benchmarks thus far (The Careers & Enterprise Company, 2025), but it is debatable how much more they can achieve without some financial support. We need to find a way of properly funding the provision of personal careers guidance. In the approach to the general election in July 2024 the Labour Party promised to deliver 1,000 new careers advisers in schools (The Labour Party, 2024). Despite some initial scoping work, the DfE has since said that this commitment will not be taken forward at present (Career Development Policy Group, 2025). This is disappointing and leaves unanswered questions about how we will build the capacity for schools to meet their statutory duty to secure access to independent career guidance and deliver the level of personal guidance set out in the revised Benchmarks. My proposal would be to create a workforce of careers advisers based on the careers hubs, and the hubs could make local decisions about where to deploy the advisers, to meet the needs of schools. This approach could also provide a means of starting to address the problem of a lack of access to careers guidance for young people not in school. It would require additional funding but investing in support to help pupils move successfully on to their next best step after school would help to prevent young people dropping out and adding to the NEET figures which have reached the highest level since the Connexions service was closed (BBC News, 2025).

With regard to helping schools with some development funding to work on the careers programme, and the costs of the responsibility allowance for a careers leader, the model used for the TVEI programme described earlier provides a possible way forward. Grants could be administered via the careers hubs. Schools could be organised into clusters and invited to undertake an internal leadership review using the Careers Impact System. They would then be eligible for an allocation of funding to help implement the plan of action. The work on the Benchmarks would be supported by the hub, which would monitor the use of the funds. The whole development programme could be overseen and supported by The Careers & Enterprise Company, and part of the funding could come from repurposing the bursaries currently linked to the careers leader training programme.

The current position in overview

Taking stock of the current situation for schools striving to develop good quality programmes of career education and guidance, there is a clear expectation that they should use the Gatsby Benchmarks as a basis for designing their provision and a requirement to have a careers leader to take responsibility for this work. The Benchmarks have been updated to reflect the best of practice, with a particular emphasis on linking the programme to explicit learning outcomes to make sure activities are meaningful for each and every young person. To assist with identifying a set of progressive learning outcomes appropriate for their pupils, schools now have available the CDI's Career Development Framework. So, all schools have access to clear guidance on what to put in place and what to achieve.

With regard to a supportive infrastructure, the position is patchier. From a policy perspective, schools have statutory duties relating to the provision of careers information and careers guidance, but no equivalent requirements to provide careers education and work-related learning. There is a national programme of centrally funded training for careers leaders but, despite CEG being a whole-school undertaking, training on CEG is not included in any of the other professional development frameworks for the school workforce, from ITT to education leadership. Careers leaders have access to ongoing support through the national network of local careers hubs and, if they work in an academy, the trust leads for careers. In addition, they have access to a wealth of free tools and guidance materials from The Careers & Enterprise Company. Finally, it is important to acknowledge that, despite having been given total responsibility for all aspects of CEG for the past 13 years, schools have been given no additional funding to cover the costs of commissioning a careers guidance service or employing a careers adviser, appointing a careers leader or developing their careers provision.

Before I conclude this article with a set of recommendations for plugging the gaps identified in the previous paragraph, I want to examine briefly an emerging issue which could determine the future direction of some of the developments I propose.

Two jobs: one person or two?

When the Connexions service was closed and the statutory duty to provide independent careers guidance was transferred from local authorities to individual schools, the expectation was that schools would continue a partnership approach to CEG by commissioning the guidance service from an external provider. By the time the careers

strategy was published in 2017, with the Gatsby Benchmarks at its heart, many schools continued with this model but several had changed their approach, opting to provide personal career guidance internally, either through recruiting a qualified careers adviser or by supporting a member of staff to gain a recognised guidance qualification. The number of schools employing their own careers adviser has continued to grow and in recent times there has been a further development. Some schools have opted to combine the two roles of careers leader and careers adviser into one, either through the careers leader going on to gain a guidance qualification, or by the school asking their 'in-house' careers adviser to take on the careers leadership role as well, thereby moving to the model that applies in Ireland and most of mainland Europe, where a guidance counsellor employed by the school provides individual career counselling and also leads a programme of careers information and careers education (Euroguidance, 2025).

Several factors have driven schools to adopt this approach: the lack of careers advisers to commission services from in some areas of the country; a perceived financial saving; the fact that the full QCD or Level 6 Diploma is the most obvious progression route from the qualifications currently used to accredit the careers leader training courses. There is nothing inherently wrong with this 'dual' or 'hybrid' role, as long as the individuals themselves and their line managers understand there are still two jobs to be done, both of which require resources and support. Guidance counsellors in other countries often report that they find it difficult to lead the careers programme while also providing a career counselling service, partly because they have insufficient time to do both jobs and partly because of their position in the leadership structure they lack the authority to strategically lead the development of the whole-school programme.

In England, apart from having to have a careers leader and having to secure access to independent careers guidance, schools are free to decide for themselves how best to organise the roles. Anecdotal evidence indicates that there are schools where the separate roles approach works well and others where does not, and similarly there are schools where the combined roles model is effective and others where it is not. We need to know more about why schools adopt the different approaches and the pros and cons of each, so that schools can make informed choices over what model would best suit their situation and needs. I suggest there should be a research study that has both a quantitative element and a qualitative element: a survey to find out the extent to which schools are adopting the dual, or hybrid, role; and then case studies to examine the benefits, challenges and strategies for overcoming the challenges of both the separate roles model and the combined roles model.

The models that schools adopt will have implications for how we develop the infrastructure to support the successful implementation of the Benchmarks. For example, if most schools keep separate the roles of careers leader and careers adviser it would be sensible to retain the current arrangements for training for those two roles, with the possible addition of bringing the careers leader training into the NPQ framework. If, however, more and more schools combine the roles, it might be appropriate to offer options which combine the training provision as well, by integrating the current careers leader training as an option into the QCD, something that is already possible with the Level 6 Diploma. Another area where a move to the dual/hybrid role could have implications is any future initiatives to increase the careers adviser workforce. For example, funding could be to schools to enable careers leaders who have completed the careers leader training to go on to complete a

guidance qualification. These are matters for the future: the first priority should be the research into the models schools adopt for leadership of CEG.

Recommendations

In this article I set out to review what is in to place to support schools in England with their work on developing high quality programmes of CEG now that the Gatsby Benchmarks have been revised and enhanced, to identify any gaps in that support and to make suggestions for plugging those gaps, drawing on my experience of having been a careers leader and having spent the past four decades supporting careers leaders. These are my recommendations to the national government.

The Department for Education (DfE) should:

- promote the use of the CDI's Career Development Framework to assist schools with identifying learning outcomes for their careers programme;
- re-introduce statutory duties to provide careers education and work-related learning in the curriculum, and extend both to cover the age range 11-18;
- bring the current careers leader training programme into the NPQ framework and create a National Professional Qualification in Careers Leadership;
- add an introduction to CEG into the framework for initial teacher training (ITT);
- add a module of more in-depth training on CEG into the Early Career Framework (ECF);
- ensure that the framework for the National Professional Qualification for Headship (NPQH) includes training on the school's responsibilities and expectations for CEG;
- fund a workforce of careers advisers, qualified to level 6 or above, based in each careers hub, to be deployed to meet local needs both in schools and in the community;
- make development funding available to schools, through the careers hubs, with allocations linked to use of the Careers Impact System; and
- commission a research study into the respective benefits and challenges of the 'separate roles' or 'partnership approach' and the 'dual, or hybrid, role' models of careers leadership.

In the meantime, while we wait for the DfE to act on these suggestions, there are actions careers leaders can take on some of these areas. For example, the careers leader could work with the school's leader for professional development to make sure that any programme of ITT that the school is involved in includes an introduction to CEG. Similarly, the careers leader could develop a module on CEG to be included in the school's ECF programme for newly qualified teachers.

The Benchmarks have been updated to reflect the best of practice. The infrastructure to support their implementation now needs to be similarly updated.

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Book reviews

Book Review

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Decent work, inclusion and sustainability

Editors: Deirdre Hughes and Maria Eduarda-Duarte

Publisher: Routledge

Publication year: 2024

Number of pages: 193

ISBN13: 978-1-032-66221-3

Price: £128.80

Reviewed by **Anne Chant**, NICEC Fellow, Canterbury Christ Church University, UK.

This timely and important book is an edited collection of chapters by authors from around the world. The book explores the needs of a wide range of people who have challenges emerging from socio-economic, environmental and political events and contexts since the Covid-19 pandemic and for whom the notion of decent work is in stark contrast to their circumstances. The book focusses on interventions, concepts, ideas and frameworks that promote a holistic approach to career counselling and a movement towards a sustainability of work within communities, with the principles of decent work at its heart.

Both of the editors of this book have international profiles as academics and researchers as well as a reputation for speaking to policy development around adult learners and lifelong career guidance. Associate Prof. Deidre Hughes (OBE) is vice-president of the International Association for Educational and Vocational Guidance (IAEVG). Emerita Professor Maria Eduarda-Duarte is from the University of Lisbon's Faculty of Psychology and is the former president of the UNESCO chair for Lifelong Learning Guidance and Counselling at the University of Wroclaw. Their profiles and reputations in the careers sector have contributed to bringing together such rich and wide-ranging chapters from other well known and distinguished contributors.

The book is organised into 13 chapters which collectively explore decent work, inclusion and sustainability in the context of guidance and counselling services from around the world; Brazil to Singapore, Canada to West Africa. The chapters are divided into two sections: part one considers different approaches and tools in practice, and part two focusses on the skills needed by practitioners to meet the needs of different client groups.

This book examines issues that touch the lives of people who do not benefit from globalisation, technological advancements, capitalism and economic growth. It thereby lies at the heart of the social justice remit for careers work and an important source of

information and illumination of these issues for policy makers, practitioners, educators and social scientists. Changes in the world of work, migration, poverty and the impact of technology on how and where we work, are examined critically. The introduction from the editors and the brief concluding section do not seek to provide trite answers to these issues but to highlight them and to stimulate further debate, discussion and awareness for the reader of the sustainability of work, of communities and of the environment.

The current cost of the book may be a barrier to an individual but not to institutions where it will be a significant source of information and understanding for careers and employability practitioners and tutors but also those interested in social justice, economies, politics and education.

Book Review

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Developing employability capital in university students: A practical guide

Author: William E. Donald

Publisher: Routledge

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Available from: https://www.routledge.com/Developing-Employability-Capital-in-University-Students-A-Practical-Gu/Donald/p/book/9781032912936

Reviewed by **Fiona Christie**, NICEC Fellow; Senior lecturer, Manchester Metropolitan University, UK.

Developing Employability Capital in University Students: A Practical Guide presents the conceptual foundations, rationale, and evolution of the Employability Capital Growth Model (ECGM). It offers a strong blend of theoretical exposition and practical application, positioning itself as both a scholarly monograph and a practitioner-oriented guide. The book will be of particular interest to academics, researchers, and career development professionals engaged in employability and higher education.

William E. Donald, Associate Professor of Sustainable Careers and Human Resource Management at Southampton Business School, University of Southampton, and founder of Donald Research & Consulting (est. 2022), brings an engaging authorial voice to the text. His enthusiasm for the subject matter is evident throughout, contributing to a highly readable and accessible narrative.

The book is structured into four parts:

- Part I outlines the theoretical underpinnings of sustainable career ecosystems and introduces the development of the ECGM.
- Part II explores the ECGM in depth, detailing nine forms of capital, alongside contextual, temporal, and personal outcome factors.

- Part III offers a 10-step guide for applying the ECGM with university students, enriched by insights from international case studies from career development practitioners and academics.
- Part IV considers the broader implications for stakeholders within a sustainable career ecosystem and provides a reflective chapter-by-chapter summary from the author.

Donald skillfully traces the development of the ECGM, weaving together literature from the often-disconnected domains of career development and graduate employability. His clear articulation of the model's foundations is particularly welcome, as is his engagement with the broader discourse on 'capitals' as a proxy for the resources students and graduates possess — or need to cultivate.

A notable strength of the ECGM is its holistic approach. Donald deliberately avoids the term 'human capital,' instead presenting nine distinct forms of capital: Social, Cultural, Psychological, Personal Identity, Health, Scholastic, Market-Value, Career Identity, and Economic. His synthesis of existing theories into these categories is both thoughtful and well-executed.

Part III stands out for its practical relevance. It includes reflective contributions from practitioners who have implemented the ECGM, offering a transparent account of processes of application. Particularly valuable is the chapter on good practice, which provides actionable guidance and suggested activities for both one-to-one career guidance and classroom-based learning.

However, like much of the literature on graduate employability, the book's scope is also defined by what it does not bring to the fore. While it draws on the language of sustainability — particularly in reference to sustainable career theory and ecosystems — it uses the term 'sustainable' in ways that are different from other societal debates, e.g., around the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The book does not engage with broader global challenges such as climate change, neoliberalism, labour market injustices and inequalities, although it does point to contextual factors of importance. These omissions are understandable given the book's scope, which is focused on individual employability and organisational structures that influence this.

A minor critique concerns the book's layout: an index at the end would have enhanced usability, and some content — such as citation guidance — might have been better placed outside the main text.

Overall, this is a valuable and timely contribution that successfully bridges theory and practice. It deserves a place on employability module reading lists and will be a useful resource for those supporting students' career development in higher education.

Book Review

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Sustainable careers: Navigating career options for a resilient and sustainable future

Author: Liz Painter

Publisher: Trotman

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Pages: 176

Price: £29.99

ISBN: 978-1911724537

Reviewed by **Korin Grant**, Assistant Professor, University of Warwick, UK.

In a world increasingly shaped by climate urgency, political unrest and transformation, Liz Painter's *Sustainable Careers* arrives as a timely and enabling guide for practitioners supporting young people to prepare for the future. As a former science teacher and career development professional, the author is in prime position to offer informed insights. Whether you are a career development professional, a careers leader, a teacher, or simply someone curious about green jobs, this book offers a clear, practical and thoughtful roadmap to navigating the evolving landscape of sustainable work. Painter widens the net beyond 'green jobs' to focus on three themes within the broader topic of sustainable careers.

The dominant theme is *sustainability and careers* and deals with questions such as what do we mean by green careers, how can we define green skills and, where can I find green jobs? Painter provides case studies, world of work examples and links to lesser-known job sites to support the search for roles aligned to sustainability. The book also helpfully defines what is meant by green jobs, how these can be categorised and what this tells us about green transition in the labour market. If, like me, you would benefit from learning fundamentals about the energy and waste sector, carbon budgets, circular economy and more, then this book has the overview you need.

The second theme looks at how we can support young people to develop a *sustainable career*, meaning a life of decent work that encompasses wellbeing, happiness and productivity. In this Painter calls on the work of De Vos et al (2020) and explores the complexity of careers. She also introduces the concept of green guidance as a method for encouraging clients to consider how careers can help them to do good and feel good.

The third theme focuses on how we *teach about sustainability* and how we can *teach for sustainability*. Here we find familiar learning frameworks and career development models mapped to UN sustainable development goals and a selection of resources aimed at those working in schools and colleges. There is a detailed case study of an academy with sustainability at the heart of its operations *and* curriculum which brings ideas to life and offers practical advice to consider.

Along the way I learned several interesting facts which informed and sometimes delighted me. The energy sector supports one in fifty jobs in the UK (a figure predicted to rise nearly 50% by 2050). The NHS contributes 4% of our carbon output, some of which is attributed to asthma inhalers. And urine waste from a product called Peequal (look out for them at your next festival!) is being re-purposed as fertiliser.

Key strengths of the book are the pitch, practical style and resources. Throughout you will find clear language, helpful definitions, and an organised approach to the various topics. The author takes an optimistic, yet grounded tone which is welcome and acknowledges the tension between sustainability goals and the realities of accessing the modern labour market. There are practical tools for educators and career development professionals, including classroom-ready scenarios. At times I wished I had access to an electronic copy of the book to make better use of the many web links provided.

What the book is not, is a detailed venture into career theory and models that link with sustainability or green guidance methods. Painter acknowledges this and still manages to cover a number of approaches, frameworks and examples, such as Dimsits and Hooley's five dimensions for environmentally sustainable career guidance (2024). She also provides a brief but insightful guide to well established career theories relevant to sustainability.

The book is concise without sacrificing depth. It's a must-read for those guiding the next generation on career decisions —and a helpful text for anyone who believes that work should be both meaningful and mindful of our planet's future.

References

De Vos, A., Van der Heijden, B. I. J. M., & Akkermans, J. (2020). Sustainable careers: Towards a conceptual model. *Journal of Vocational Behavior, 117*, Article 103196. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jvb.2018.06.011

Dimsits, M., & Hooley, T. (2024, 2-3rd July). Introduction to the framework of environmentally sustainable career guidance: The five dimensions. *Career and sustainability*. NICEC conference 2024, Birmingham. https://www.nicec.org/pages/2024-conference-videos

About the Career Development Institute

The Career Development Institute (CDI) is the UK's professional body for all aspects of career development, supporting our members to work to the highest standards and championing the profession.

Our role includes:

- ✓ Setting professional standards: We establish best practices, including the CDI Code of Ethics, which is recognised by the government.
- ✓ Regulation & qualifications: The CDI manages the UK Register of Career Development Professionals and oversees the Qualification in Career Development (QCD).
- ✓ Training & development: Through the CDI Academy, we offer training opportunities for both new and experienced professionals.
- ✓ Research and resources: We provide a wealth of resources to help practitioners build on their knowledge and develop.

We are proud to collaborate with NICEC on The Journal and host research-focused events twice a year for members across the UK. CDI members can access The Journal via our website.

Website: thecdi.net

Professional recognition

The CDI has a critical role to play in setting standards and articulating what quality looks like for the sector. Importantly we are an awarding body, managing the Qualification in Career Development (QCD) and the UK Register for Career Development Professionals, which is pivotal to our ongoing quality agenda and is fast becoming recognised as the sector's equivalent to chartered status.

Becoming professionally qualified: thecdi.net/professional-qualified

The Register: thecdi.net/professional-register

Valuing careers campaign

The Valuing Careers Campaign highlights the essential role of career development in empowering individuals, strengthening the economy, and addressing workforce challenges.

Our campaign advocates for:

- ✓ Greater access to high-quality career development support at all career stages.
- ✓ Stronger collaboration between educators, employers, policymakers, and career development professionals.
- ✓ Policy recognition and increased investment in career development as a driver of economic growth, workforce resilience, and social mobility.

Valuing Careers campaign: thecdi.net/valuingcareers

Championing the profession within government

Career development is critical to individual success, economic growth, and social mobility—which is why we continue to advocate for it at policy level.

Through our partnerships with the Career Development Policy Group, the Skills Federation and other stakeholders, we ensure career development remains a national priority.

Career Development Policy Group: careerdpg.co.uk

Raining the professions profile

We are committed to increasing awareness of the importance of career development through extensive media engagement. Our efforts include:

- Publishing articles in leading educational news outlets and providing expert commentary.
- Strengthening our social media presence to share press activity and contribute to themed awareness campaigns.

Search for 'Career Development Institute' on linkedin.com

A commitment to research

We support research about and for the profession. Last year we completed two major studies of our own; the YouGov survey of 5,004 UK adults for the Valuing Careers campaign and iCeGS' research on getting qualified to work in career development. We also host the career development Research Directory enabling easy access to a wide range of research.

Valuing Careers research: thecdi.net/Valuing-Careers-Research

CDI training, CPD and events

We offer a comprehensive range of initial and progression qualifications and now offer an annual CPD programme that provides members with access to free and discounted support to meet all their key professional development needs.

For the full training and events programme, including expert training sessions, conferences, webinars, CDI Academy courses and more, please visit thecdi.net/training-and-events.

UK Career Development Awards

The annual UK Career Development Awards (UKCDAs) celebrate excellence and innovation across the career development sector in the UK and internationally. The event honours individuals and organisations making a significant impact through career guidance, education, and support services. With categories ranging from outstanding professionals and programmes to innovative resources and lifetime achievements, the awards highlight the dedication and creativity of those shaping futures.

thecdi.net/UKCDA

The National Careers Leaders' Conference

The National Careers Leaders' Conference (NCLC) is a key professional development event for Careers Leaders, Advisers, Hub Leads, and Enterprise Coordinators working across primary, secondary, SEND schools, and colleges. Organised by the CDI and iCeGS, it supports the development of best practice and tools to enhance careers programmes in response to evolving education policies and the changing world of work.

thecdi.net/NCLC

The CDI National Conference

The CDI National Conference is the flagship annual event for all professionals across the career development sector. It brings together practitioners, policymakers, researchers, and educators to explore the latest trends, challenges, and innovations in career development. It covers a wide range of topics relevant to career guidance for young people and adults and is designed to support continuous improvement and collaboration across the sector.

thecdi.net/national-conference

The National Research Conference

The National Research Conference, hosted by the Career Development Institute in partnership with iCeGS, AGCAS, and NICEC, is an annual event dedicated to showcasing and supporting practitioner-led research in the careers sector. It provides a platform for careers professionals from all settings to share their work, engage with evidence-informed practice, and build confidence in conducting and applying research.

thecdi.net/research-conference