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Students' career difficulties and challenges for career practitioners in UK higher education

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This paper presents the main findings from a study of career practitioners (CPs) working in UK higher education (HE) institutions. It focuses on the experience of CPs working in university career services in their one-to-one career conversations with students.

If you have questions about the research or wish to be kept in touch with further materials coming out of this study, you are welcome to contact Julia Yates at Julia.Yates.1@city.ac.uk. The authors would like to thank the many career practitioners who gave their time to this study, carefully recording their interactions with students and reflecting so thoughtfully on their work.

1. The research

The research project reported here focuses on the experience of CPs working in university career services in their one-to-one conversations with students, and how those conversations reveal the career decision-making difficulties faced by students. The main research questions were:

- What career difficulties do HE students in the UK present in 1-1 career sessions with CPs in university career services?
- How do CPs conceptualise the career difficulties of their clients and the underlying causes of these difficulties?
- What techniques and approaches do CPs use in their 1-1 conversations with students?
- Which student career difficulties do CPs see as challenging to deal with in their 1-1 conversations?
- Are there additional skills or further training CPs feel would be helpful?

A survey of 59 career practitioners (CPs) doing 1-1 work with students in 36 UK higher education (HE) institutions generated information on the career difficulties students presented at 1-1 sessions, the difficulties CPs assessed as present, and the difficulties the CPs found challenging to deal with. A list of 22 career difficulties was used in the

survey derived from previous research literature on career decision-making difficulties and refined through interaction with a small number of HE CPs. These items used in the survey questionnaire reflected 6 groups of career difficulties: lack of readiness; lack of information; conflicts; pessimism; anxiety; and identity. The survey data covered 600 conversations conducted by CPs in 2019/20.

Follow up interviews were held in the summer of 2020 with 22 practitioners from 15 institutions, varied by location and type. These semi-structured interviews were used to gain deeper understanding of the difficulties CPs observe in students, what may cause these difficulties, the techniques CPs use in 1-1 sessions, and their own professional development.

More detail about the study method is given in Annex 1 and the survey items are shown in Annex 2.

2. The career difficulties of students

Survey findings on career difficulties presented by students and assessed by CPs

CPs see many HE students who are struggling with career decision-making. As shown on Table 1 below and in the fuller table of results in Annex 2, students most often present asking about the job application process. The interviews showed this was mostly asking for help with CVs, job applications or interviews, so this is wider than just making job applications. Students also say they need help with options and how to research them. The next commonest items reflect anxiety about the uncertainty of the career choice process and the process itself. Not knowing how to make a choice is a third aspects of difficulty with the career development process. In terms of groups of difficulties, information comes out highest (including help with the application process: CVs and interviews) but nearly half the students presented with some form of anxiety and a third with lack of readiness to make a choice, largely due to not knowing how to make a choice.

Table 1 - Top career difficulties presented by students and assessed by CPs

| Top career difficulty items | Presented by students | Assessed by CPs |
|--|------------------------------|------------------------|
| <i>Need help with application process</i> | 56% | 57% |
| <i>Don't know enough about different options</i> | 36% | 48% |
| <i>Don't know how to research options</i> | 28% | 45% |
| <i>Anxious about the uncertainty of the process</i> | 24% | 34% |
| <i>Don't know how to make a choice</i> | 23% | 29% |
| <i>Anxious about process of choosing and getting a job</i> | 22% | 32% |
| | | |
| Top career difficulty groups | Presented by students | Assessed by CPs |
| <i>Lack of information</i> | 85% | 89% |
| <i>Anxiety</i> | 45% | 59% |
| <i>Lack of readiness</i> | 32% | 43% |

Percentages refer to number of career interviews in which the difficulty item or group was identified. N=600

The second column of figures in Table 1 shows the difficulties CPs assessed as present in each conversation. These are essentially the same as the items the students presented, but CPs identified these same types of difficulties rather more often than the students. In particular CPs assessed higher proportions of students as not knowing how to research options and showing anxiety about the process and its uncertainty. CPs assessed over half the students they saw as showing some form of anxiety and over 40% showing a lack of career decision-making readiness.

The groups of difficulties concerned with conflicts, pessimism and identity were noted in some interviews (see Annex 2), but they were much less common than the difficulties of information, anxiety and readiness. One item worth mentioning is low self-confidence which was placed under the identity group in the survey. This was identified by CPs in about a fifth of interviews, although presented by students in under a tenth of interviews.

Although CPs see some students who are coping well with their own career decision-making, this survey suggests that at least half of those coming for 1-1 conversations are finding it quite difficult.

The number of difficulties assessed by the CP did not vary significantly according to the gender of the student, their fee status (UK/non-UK), whether undergraduate or postgraduate, time of year for the interview or the length of the interview.

Model of how students' career difficulties are observed by CPs

Three interlinked themes came out strongly in the interviews with CPs when discussing how students present their career difficulties and concerns in 1-1 conversations:

- Many students come to the careers service late in their studies and have been reluctant to engage before this. CPs are aware, often through their work in faculties, that there are many students who do not engage at all with 1-1 careers services.
- When students attend a 1-1 session they often say they want help with their CV, job applications or interviews, but the conversation rapidly reveals that they really do not know what kind of work they want to do.
- Students are often anxious about career decision-making and indeed how it will go when they start applying for jobs.

These themes suggest that the manifestations of career difficulties can be seen as three inter-connected types of issue: cognitive (lacking understanding of how to approach career decisions), emotional (often shown in anxiety) and behavioural (often shown in reluctance to engage with career development).

In **behavioural** terms, in addition to engaging late and reluctantly with career decision-making, students often engage inappropriately. For example, many come to the conversation wanting to focus on writing a CV or applying for an internship or a job when it is clear they have not yet thought about what they want to do. CPs suggested that it may be more socially acceptable to ask for CV help than say you are stuck. Many students also seem unwilling to commit time to the career decision-making process, just

wanting it to be over and done with. CPs see some students as trying to pass the decision to them, being unwilling to take ownership of their own career development.

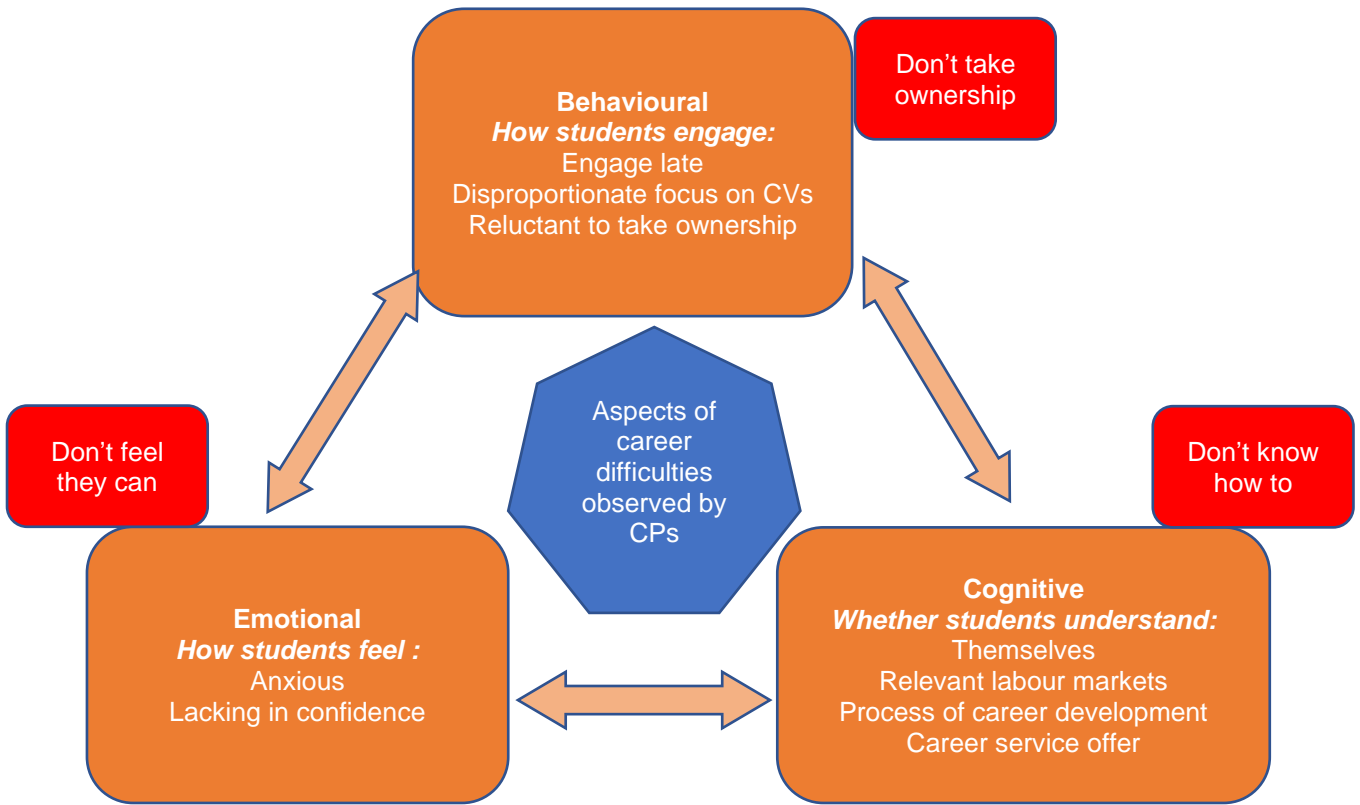
In **cognitive** terms, CPs encounter many students who do not know how to start thinking about their careers. They have a limited understanding of career development as a process and the activities of reflection and information collection within this. CPs report many students have not thought about themselves very much: what they want from work or have to offer. Students may also have limited or unrealistic ideas about labour market opportunities and how labour markets work, for example what employers are looking for and how to go about job hunting. Students hear a lot about graduate schemes and internships and may focus on these at the expense of understanding how to access and use wider experiences, including the skills they are gaining from their studies. CPs observed that students often seem to separate thoughts about their studies from thoughts about their career choices. Given that many students are not well equipped in cognitive terms for making a career choice, it is not surprising that CPs often encounter students who do not know what to expect from the career service, especially from a 1-1 conversation.

In **emotional** terms, CPs observe a range of anxieties and fears in students. These focus most heavily on feeling anxious about the decision-making process itself, often associated with a fear of failure, of letting their families down or falling behind their peers. Students often talk about feeling 'overwhelmed' by how difficult it all seems and this is translated into a lack of feeling in control. CPs also observe in some students a general lack of self-confidence: an emotion which gets in the way of them feeling able to deal with career decision-making.

These three ways in which career difficulties are shown - behavioural, cognitive and emotional – often interact. For example, unrealistic assumptions about labour market opportunities (cognitive), or a sense of anxiety about the process (emotional) might lead to a student putting off coming to the careers service (behavioural). But also, a student engaging late (behavioural) has less time to develop a realistic impression of the labour market (cognitive) and may then feel very anxious about finding work (emotional). This emotional discomfort plays into the behaviour of students wanting to make their decision quickly: in essence to have this uncomfortable process over and done with.

Figure 1 below summarises the commonest narratives from the interviews about how these three manifestations of career difficulties are shown in 1-1 conversations. It is clear that many students have no clear cognitive framework for career decision-making as a process within their wider career development. The emotional difficulties culminate in a lack of a sense of agency in relation to student's own careers. This is echoed in behaviours which indicate an unwillingness to take ownership of their own decisions and actions in relation to career.

Figure 1: Manifestations of students' career difficulties



Career difficulties observed by CPs in segments of the student population

By focussing on career difficulties, this study did not collect evidence on students who navigate their career choices and access to work much more smoothly. But it is important to note from the survey that the difficulties summarised in the model above seem to apply to significant numbers of students who come for 1-1 conversations, but not to all students or to the same extent.

The CPs also highlighted different issues raised in relation to specific segments of the student population:

- Career decisions are not necessarily easier for students on vocational courses. Several CPs emphasised the need for a more granular understanding of the complex labour markets in vocational fields (eg law, finance, engineering, pharmacy). Application and interview processes can also be complex in specific professions. Students wishing to enter particularly popular occupations or work for high profile employers need sophisticated job getting strategies, including early access to relevant work experience.
- Some students taking vocational courses feel during their studies that they may not want to pursue the type of work to which the course naturally leads. This can be a difficult decision and has big implications for the student. Such students can feel they will disappoint their families, teachers or others if they change their minds about what

they want to do. It can also be a big relief to acknowledge the desire to think again and career conversations can provide an opportunity to do this in safety.

- Some international students, for example those coming with poor English language to short masters courses, face much bigger challenges than other students if they hope to work in the UK after their studies. Their cognitive difficulties include understanding the UK labour market, which may work very differently from that in their home country. VISA policies and processes are complex and were in flux in 2020. Some international students have high levels of anxiety, especially in relation to the expectations of their families. They may also expect the university career service to be in effect an employment service and for CPs to tell them what to do.
- Some students are dealing with additional challenges of mental and physical health. Those with physical disabilities often have a good understanding of their own needs but need specialised information about their work options. CPs say they are seeing a long run trend towards more students with a history of serious mental health issues. Students with no history of mental illness also seem increasingly likely to voice their issues of anxiety or confidence in the language of mental health. CPs are navigating a difficult boundary here between normal anxiety about finding work and students who need much more intensive, and possibly specialised, mental health support.

3. The drivers and consequences of career difficulties

The interviews with CPs explored their views on the drivers, or underlying causes, of the career difficulties they observe in 1-1 conversations with students. CPs also sketched some of the consequences for students of their thoughts, feelings and behaviour. Some of the drivers and consequences mentioned most often by CPs are summarised in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Drivers and consequences of students' career difficulties

| Drivers suggested by CPs | Consequences for students |
|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Social & practical pressures ▪ Limited life & work experience ▪ Limited career education & development of career-related skills ▪ Labour market complexity & competitiveness ▪ HE messages about careers & career development | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Get stuck in the early stages of career decision-making ▪ Miss opportunities to access support & develop their careers while studying ▪ Negative impact on mental health & confidence ▪ Less fulfilling entry to work |

Drivers of students' career difficulties

CPs identified five main clusters of drivers, or underlying causes, of the career difficulties described above:

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- **Social and practical pressures** on students drive their anxieties, especially in relation to fulfilling the expectations of their families. Students also seem to suffer a kind of self-inflicted peer pressure: not wanting to fall behind their peers in making career choices, gaining work experience and applying for jobs. The social norms of a student lifestyle also appear to set up some identity tensions between 'being a student' and taking on a fuller adult identity, which may make it harder for students to engage fully in their own career development. Practical pressures include financial circumstances, immigration issues, health and the challenges of keeping up with studies.
 - The **limited experience of life and of work** which some students have had may impede their ability to take ownership of decisions about their lives, limiting their emotional resilience and their understanding of employers, labour markets and working life.
 - CPs are concerned that many current HE students have not received effective **career education** while at school, so they are ill-prepared for tackling the process of career choice in HE. A deeper concern is that longer term shifts in the education system have reduced opportunities for **self-reflection and independent decision-making** and increased the expectation that students will be told exactly what they need to know and be taught to meet that requirement in exams. Career choice is a very personal, reflective, open ended and uncertain process for which such students are not well equipped. CPs who had worked in this field for many years, felt this lack of readiness for independent decision-making had got much more prevalent in recent years.
 - Students are making choices in a very **complex labour market** which can seem to offer almost too many alternatives. Even over recent years of low unemployment, some graduate opportunities have been very difficult to get into as high numbers of graduates compete for the same jobs. As the interviews were being conducted in the summer of 2020, CPs were seeing understandable anxiety from students that access to work experience as well as jobs would be much more difficult, at least during 2020/21 and probably into the academic year 2021/2.
 - Two aspects of the experience of higher education were raised in the CP interviews as possible drivers of career difficulties. Some students have **unrealistic expectations of career prospects** at the end of their studies because of how courses are marketed, especially overseas and through agents. While at university there are quite **confusing messages** to students, implicit as well as explicit, about the importance of thinking about career choices, the desirability of some employers and some entry routes (eg graduate training schemes, internships), the importance of CVs, and the nature of the career service. Even though CPs feel their services are clearly signposted in the university, students also hear conflicting career messages from academics, fellow students and the media. Some big employers tend to be very visible on campus, on websites and social media, colouring how students think about where it is desirable or acceptable to work.

Some of the CPs discussed some possible interactions between these drivers of career difficulties and the social, cultural and educational backgrounds of students. Less advantaged students may have received less specific preparation for higher education at school or from their family but may have had greater experience of having to take

responsibility for themselves and making their own decisions. For students from more advantaged backgrounds, especially those who have gained entry to elite institutions and always succeeded in their studies, making a career choice can be the first time they face such a difficult decision and also the possibility that may not be as successful in gaining employment as everyone expects them to be. Students from some countries and cultures may be under greater social pressure to succeed, be more vulnerable to unrealistic career expectations, and find the UK model of career guidance in HE both surprising and uncomfortably personal and non-directive.

Consequences for students of their career difficulties

The career difficulties described above result in many students who seem to be ‘stuck’ near the start of their career decision-making process: the pre-contemplation and contemplation stages (Prochaska & Diclemente, 1986) ¹.

Leaving career choice late and avoiding thinking about future work can cause students to miss opportunities they have at university to access support and to develop their work-related experience and skills alongside their studies. They may not see how the interests they are developing as students, both in their studies but also in social activities, may inform their future choices and provide useful evidence of their strengths.

Feeling ‘stuck’, anxious and without a sense of agency in their career development can further erode confidence and have a negative impact on mental health. The CPs saw some students facing a downward emotional spiral and a lack of practical progress in finding satisfactory work at the end of their studies. In such cases, students are unlikely to have a fulfilling entry to work.

4. How practitioners address students’ career difficulties in 1-1 conversations

Similarities and differences in CP practice

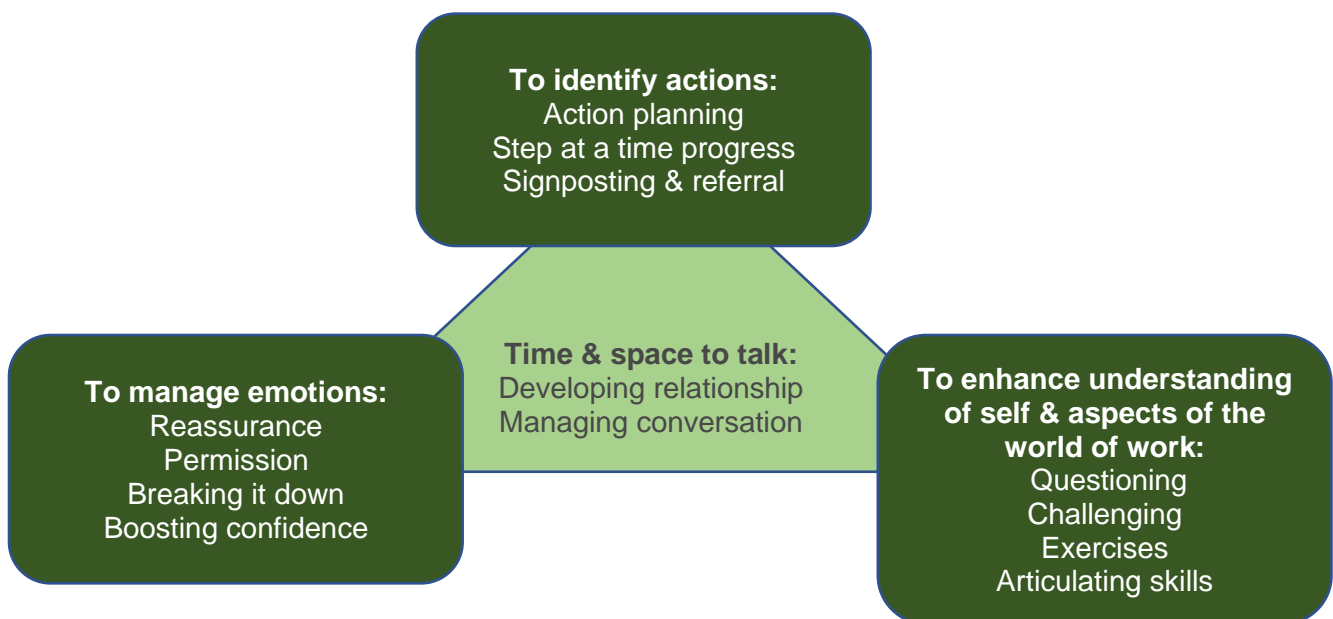
In the interviews the CPs were asked to explain the approaches they use in their 1-1 work. CPs use approaches that help students with their emotions and self-awareness, and also encourage students to identify next steps they can take. Figure 3 shows some of the common ways in which CPs address the behavioural, emotional and cognitive difficulties they observe in students.

The 1-1 conversation itself sits in the centre of this diagram. CPs see the conversation as giving the student space and time to talk and think. CPs share a student-centred and non-judgemental approach, aiming to help students achieve their own goals as far as possible in the time they have for the conversation. CPs also try to balance the conversation between what may be immediate practical concerns (eg job hunting, identifying skills to

¹ Prochaska, J. O., & DiClemente, C. C. (1982). Transtheoretical therapy: Toward a more integrative model of change. In *Psychotherapy: Theory, Research & Practice*, Vol. 19, Issue 3, pp. 276–288

put on a CV) and deeper issues of career choice. In line with the student-centred philosophy CPs seek to establish an open and trusting relationship as quickly as possible. CPs do consciously manage the flow of the conversation but generally in a light touch way. Nearly all do some form of 'contracting' with the student ie agreeing the purpose and focus for the conversation. Some do this more formally than others. Contracting is especially necessary when students come with a long list of things they want to talk about. All CPs try to end the conversation with some form of action planning.

Figure 3: How practitioners address students' career difficulties in 1-1 conversations



CPs are quite similar in how they address the emotional dimension. They often offer reassurance, for example through 'normalising' what the student is experiencing: observing that many students face the same difficulties and anxieties. They give the student permission to raise difficult issues and to say how they are feeling. Breaking down the big problem of deciding what to do into smaller pieces plays across all three dimensions of the model but is especially useful in reducing anxiety. CPs seek to encourage students by boosting their self-confidence, often by highlighting strengths in what they have already accomplished. In a more implicit way, CPs position themselves as partners in addressing difficulties so the student may feel less alone.

CPs are also fairly similar in their approaches to action planning, again always working within the context of the needs of the specific student. They do try to agree some actions towards the end of the conversation. They very often highlight the benefits of taking small steps both towards a decision and towards a preferred job. CPs observe that students tend to see getting a job as one big leap, not a series of actions and a range of preparation. CPs signpost students to other relevant university services, for example counselling, health or financial services and offices supporting international students. They accept the boundary between career counselling and dealing with mental health issues and refer students to mental health services where appropriate. Some CPs would

like to feel more confident in managing this particular boundary, as they said again later in their interviews when asked about their own development needs.

Following up students after their 1-1 conversations is a tricky issue. Some CPs felt that students should really take responsibility for follow up, but still sent students notes of their meetings and maybe contacted them later as well. Some career services have agreed procedures for following up service users and some CPs said this can make it easier for students to book another appointment if needed. This issue of follow up illustrates the tension between treating HE students as fully adult while recognising that many might not be ready to take real ownership of their career development. It also emphasises that one interview often only scratches the surface of a student's career decision-making.

Some aspects of the cognitive aspects of practice are again common across CPs. They often concentrate on opening up the conversation with the student about themselves, using questioning and gently challenging approaches. Many will shift a student who asks for help with a CV, to talking about which jobs they want to use the CV for, thereby giving the student an opportunity to use the conversation to talk about what they really want to do.

Some CPs use self-assessment tools or exercises more than others. This is sometimes a feature of the CPs as a team or service. Some HR career services are experimenting with online CV checkers, virtual interviews etc, mostly to augment rather than replace personal conversations.

Nearly all the CPs encourage students to research job options they have in mind, but relatively few see giving students specific labour market information as a major part of their role. There is a continuum of views among the sample of CPs about the extent to which they should have in-depth knowledge of the graduate labour market or opportunities and employers in specific sectors or occupations. This issue has become more pressing as most CPs do at least some of their work with specific faculties or subjects. This might lead others to assume that such CPs know about the labour markets most relevant to their job role in considerable depth.

Some CPs hold fast to the idea that their core expertise is in counselling and that they can deal with any kind of student. They see it a down to the student to research their possible labour markets.

At the other extreme, a few of the CPs interviewed do extensive research on the occupations and sectors they work with most and establish extensive networks of contacts with links with individuals or employers. A few CPs talked about sharing their contacts with students via social media.

Somewhere in between were CPs who were doing their own labour market research in the summer of 2020, partly because they wanted to know more about what their students were facing. Some see knowledge of the labour market related to a specific faculty, for example, as useful in increasing their credibility with students, even if they do not feel it is essential to giving effective 1-1 support.

In summary, shared elements of practice included a student-centred set of values and approaches, largely based on counselling techniques; a range of techniques to manage the students' anxieties, increase their self-awareness and a positive approach to signposting and referring students to other university services, for example where there is a significant mental health issue.

There was less commonality around the role of CPs in acquiring and sharing labour market intelligence with students, with some CPs very ambivalent about this aspect of their work. Although none of the CPs felt they should be directive about career choice, some were more directive than others about action planning. CPs had varied practices and attitudes about following up 1-1 conversations with students, sometimes depending on the policy in their career service.

What CPs did not articulate

CPs are critical of the lack of understanding in students of career development as a process and that students have unrealistic expectations of what the CP will do for them. It is therefore interesting that most of the CPs did *not* articulate:

- How conversations with students reflect a process or systems view of career development or career decision-making.
- How 1-1 work is used to develop the career management skills of the students, and indeed what those skills are.
- How to generate career options having done some self-reflection, for students who have no ideas about what they want to do.
- Where 1-1 guidance fits into career development and into the overall career service. For example most CPs also teach career education sessions or courses, often in faculties, but rarely discussed how these two aspects of their work support each other.

These apparent gaps may arise because CPs are so familiar with career development as a process that they do not spell it out. But given that students do not seem to understand career development, one would think articulating these processes clearly might be helpful. One or two CPs said they did signpost what they were doing with students as part of a bigger picture of things the student might need to think about.

The lack of discussion of career development as a process may also relate to CPs' answers to a question about the use of theory in their work.

Most of the CPs interviewed said they do not use theory in a specific way as the basis for their practice, beyond general adoption of a student-centred, counselling type approach, including significant emphasis on action planning (Egan was often mentioned). Some had been trained in specific approaches to structuring career conversations but tended not to use these in a mechanical way. Few CPs referred to models or theories of careers or career development. Ideas about values and social or structural factors in careers were sometimes mentioned in general terms.

A number of the CPs said they worked by 'instinct' or had developed approaches of their own. It seems that initial training and theory may inform practice as CPs develop their

own ways of working. But those interviewed expressed some unease that their practice is not firmly grounded in theory or evidence. The relationship between theory and practice in training and CPD is highlighted below.

5. What do CPs find challenging?

Challenges CPs identify in 1-1 conversations

The survey asked CPs to identify the career difficulties they found challenging to address against the same list of items used to identify what students present with and what CPs identify (see Annex 2 for list and full results).

The CPs surveyed identified at least one challenging issue in just under half of the 600 interviews covered. Table 2 shows the most commonly identified challenges both at item and group level. The highest scoring survey items for challenging issues were present in under 10% of all the interviews scored.

Table 2 - Top challenges identified by CPs

| Top career difficulty items | Identified by CPs as challenging |
|---|---|
| <i>Unrealistic idea of how to make a choice</i> | 9% |
| <i>Low self- confidence</i> | 7% |
| <i>Don't know enough about different options</i> | 6% |
| <i>Anxious about the uncertainty of the process</i> | 6% |
| <i>Don't know how to make a choice</i> | 6% |
| | |
| Top career difficulty groups | |
| <i>Lack of information</i> | 17% |
| <i>Lack of readiness</i> | 16% |
| <i>Anxiety</i> | 14% |
| <i>Identity</i> | 13% |

Percentages refer to number of career interviews in which the difficulty item or group was identified. N=600

The challenges highlighted in the survey seem to reflect the issues CPs also described as frustrating in their follow-up interviews. They are not necessarily the most difficult issues for students, but they do get in the way of the CP being able to help the student effectively in a single 1-1 conversation:

- Students with an unrealistic idea of how to make a choice presented a challenge because they often seemed to expect the practitioner to decide for them, or at least to be more directive than CPs feel they should be. This item aligns with the student behaviour of not wanting to take ownership of their own careers, but also students' lack of understanding what the career service offers. Some students are disappointed that the career service will tell them what to do or get them a job.
- Students who have unrealistic views of their future work prospects put the CP in the unpleasant position of being the person who disappoints them. Some of the examples given by CPs were of international students who had been led to believe that getting a

degree, especially from a prestigious institution, would of itself guarantee swift entry to a high-status job.

- Low self-confidence is difficult to deal with a short timeframe, as are complex psychological issues, shading into clinical mental health.
- There can be complex practical issues too. For example, some international students may have strong family pressures to succeed, be struggling with studying in English, have unrealistic expectations of getting work in the UK and also need to deal with immigration regulations. A single conversation cannot hope to tackle all these difficulties.
- Some of the other items on Table 2 - lack of information about options, anxiety about the uncertainty of the process and not knowing how to make a choice - reflect students being at an early stage of decision-making and probably with weak career management skills, as discussed earlier.

The top three groups of items from the survey (shown on Table 2) are the same as those most commonly assessed by CPs. However, the identity group is not far behind as that is where low self-confidence fits into the model used in the survey.

In essence then the most challenging interviews are those in which CPs feel they will disappoint students or fail to give them enough help to really move things forward. This occurs when students want CPs to give them something the service is not set up to deliver, or where the emotional response of the student is likely to be negative or where the student has complex sets of needs or is far from ready to make a career choice.

Challenges and opportunities of working during the pandemic

This study was not set up to examine the delivery of 1-1 career support during the pandemic and the interviews discussed CPs' general experiences over recent years, not mostly what was happening in the summer of 2020.

But CPs were asked for any specific observations they had of working during lockdown and online from home, rather than face-to-face in rooms in university buildings.

- Although students had not engaged much in the very early weeks of the pandemic, virtual footfall was brisk by the early summer of 2020.
- CPs often missed the non-verbal clues they could get from being in the same room as their clients and their ability to provide emotional support, including tissues, cups of tea etc.
- Working online did however enable CPs to book more 1-1 meetings. They realised the extent to which shortages of interview rooms had previously constrained their services.
- Working from their homes also made some CPs think about how formal – even intimidating - their offices must seem to some students.
- Many CPs missed informal but work-related conversations with colleagues, for example being able to share ideas about difficult situations or possible techniques.

-
- A few CPs relished working in a more isolated way and felt liberated to use new work practices – especially around technology – and to somewhat re-define their role or professional identity.
 - Where teams had previously been strong, they tended to continue sharing ideas through online meetings. Where teamwork was less well established some CPs, especially if less experienced or new to the institution, could feel isolated.

6. CP work in its wider career service and institutional context

The satisfaction and challenges of CPs' 1-1 work are affected by the way career services are set up and by the wider university context in which they operate. Features of the wider context were very often raised by CPs in the interviews, especially in relation to why students do not engage with career services or have an unrealistic view of what a CP can offer.

- 1-1 sessions with CPs are directly affected by the very variable levels of CP resource between institutions. In some universities, CPs said it normal practice to encourage a student to come back for further appointments, or even to extend a 40 minute conversation to an hour. In other institutions, a student would be lucky to secure even one 20 minute 1-1 conversation during their entire degree. CPs recognise that career development is continuous, but students experience 1-1 career services largely as a series of single, separate interactions. A few CPs suggested that students with complex needs should be offered a series of appointments after an initial interview, but services are not currently set up this way.
- 1-1 discussions with CPs are part of quite complex career services, positioned both centrally and in faculties. Services can span in-depth 1-1 interviews with individuals, more tactical support in job getting and sometimes also in accessing work experience and the delivery of careers courses. Although CPs said students can easily find descriptions of their career services, this is quite a complicated picture for students to get their heads round if they do not understand beforehand what career development covers or the different models of how individuals can be helped by career professionals. The term 'employability' is quite often used in the title of services or activities but is not used by CPs when they talk about what they and their colleagues do. Interestingly, CPs did not use the term 'career guidance' much either in their interviews except when referring to their professional training courses. CPs are very concerned that students do not have clear and realistic expectations of what a CP will be offer in a 1-1 interview, but career services in HE do not seem to be offering a clear, shared vocabulary for describing what they do.
- 1-1 support is often split between short 'drop-in' sessions often with unqualified staff and booked 1-1 conversations with fully trained career professionals – the latter being those in this study. But most CPs do not see a clear line between tactical help with CVs or interviews and in-depth conversations, partly because students present with the former when they may need the latter. In some institutions these two kinds of staff work

closely together in one integrated team so they can refer students easily from a drop-in enquiry to a longer interview. But this does not happen everywhere. Some CPs are concerned that some students coming to 'employability' interviews may have deep seated career difficulties that a qualified practitioner never even sees.

- Most CPs in this study combined 1-1 work with at least some career education teaching, and some CPs were on teaching contracts. A clear majority of CPs interviewed found it difficult to get students to engage effectively in their career education sessions in faculties. Some CPs felt that career education is more successful when it is an assessed part of the course and/or part of professional practice requirements for professional bodies. It is then part of becoming an engineer, a doctor or whatever, which is more congruent with what the student is studying for. A few CPs saw their career education sessions as a chance to market the 1-1 service in a personal way and be at least a 'familiar face' to students.
- Some services were using novel ways of increasing engagement for example by having intensive weeks of career activities across the institution or conference-style events with attractive marketing and a wide range of sessions. Such initiatives do seem to have positive potential to engage students.
- CPs had mixed attitudes towards at least some of their work being concentrated on students in particular subject areas. Some really enjoyed becoming more knowledgeable about certain kinds of careers while others felt this undermined or undervalued their ability to deal with all students. This may be an issue of preferred professional identity and links with the ambivalence already noted towards researching and sharing labour market information. CPs fully allocated to one faculty sometimes felt they missed out on being part of an integrated career service team.
- The attitude of academics affects the positioning of career education within the curriculum, how much time it is given, integration of CPs into the teaching team in a faculty and whether students are encouraged by lecturers and tutors to use career services. Such attitudes were found by CPs to be very variable between academics, with no clear pattern by subject or type of course.
- CPs want their services to be approachable. Working during lockdown had made some CPs reflect on how formal, even 'bureaucratic', their services may appear to students when situated with administrative services in rather 'cold' office environments, sometimes far from teaching buildings. This reinforces the separation between study and career development which CPs see as problem with students.
- CPs were often positive about increasing collaboration with other student services to give more joined-up support. In one case a CP had worked very intensively with mental health specialists to support a student with especially complex psychological problems and had learned a great deal in the process.

There is logic to the way career services are now organised, aimed at reaching the largest number of students with limited resources and bringing careers work closer to the curriculum. However CPs looking from the students' perspective observe that service delivery models, jargon terms (like employability) and institutional culture may not help students to engage early and effectively with their own career choices and wider career development.

7. Training and continuing professional development

The CPs interviewed were asked to comment on how well their initial training had equipped them for their role; their access to continuing professional development (CPD) and further training and development they would like to have.

There was a wide spread of experience within the CPs interviewed. Some were several decades away from their initial training and had worked in several institutions. Several had trained recently and were considering options for further study. Their career paths into careers work in higher education were very varied and included guidance work in other parts of the education system, but also teaching and university administration.

Initial training

Most CPs valued their initial training in career guidance. Positive comments were about strong practical training, especially from tutors with practitioner experience themselves and involving work placements. Courses which had involved a probationary year were seen as giving a stronger base for entering professional roles than those without significant practical experience built into the training model.

Less positive comments were about some courses which lacked intellectual challenge, lacked enough practical experience and some which were focussed too heavily on working with school age children.

Breadth of understanding was valued, but skills specific to career guidance and counselling were also seen as important. CPs feel that initial training should link theory with practice more strongly. CPs feel they have developed their own approaches to practice but are often not clear what underpins it theoretically.

The application of theory and models in practice

As noted above, CPs were not often clear about how the theories they may have studied in their initial training supported their current practice. They were also interested to know how theory may have moved in since their initial training.

In addition to the counselling approaches already mentioned (especially Egan and Rogers), other theories or models mentioned by CPs included Holland, DOTS, developmental theories (Super etc) and planned happenstance. Ideas about values and social/structural factors in careers were mentioned in general terms.

Some services are moving towards a coaching-style approach, using models like GROW. Some CPs see coaching as potentially more action-oriented, although CPs included goal setting when they talked about counselling. In one case the term 'coaching' was associated with a possible change in service model towards students being seen over a period of time rather than in a single appointment.

How CPs want to develop further

The CPs interviewed almost all wanted a much more serious approach to CPD in the HE sector, including peer review and supervision like a “proper profession”, as several said.

Although AGCAS provision is appreciated, it is not always affordable for less well-resourced career services.

Some CPs interviewed had undertaken or were planning further academic study.

In addition to individual learning, CPs value peer learning, including feedback and team learning events. The team context and how people are managed make a big difference to whether CPs feel they are developing in their practice. Leaders of career services very much set the tone for CPD, both individual and collective.

What CPs want to learn

Overall CPs did not feel their practice was firmly grounded in theory and there was an appetite to learn more about theory but also to bring theory and practice together.

Specific training needs mentioned included:

- More recent career theory and its potential application in career guidance.
- A wider range of helping techniques, especially coaching theory and skills and, for some, a deeper knowledge of counselling.
- How to deal with mental health issues more confidently and manage the boundary with specialist mental health service effectively.

Interestingly there was little mention of training needs around technology, beyond wanting to keep abreast of online tools available.

8. Tensions and reflections

This final section of the paper offers some reflections from the researchers, often emerging from tensions that surfaced in the CP interviews. Some of these issues may be useful areas for further research.

The CPs involved in this study seemed generally committed to their work and to obtain considerable satisfaction from it. But their interviews did suggest some tensions:

- Most of the CPs espoused a **counselling** approach to 1-1 careers work, typified by student-centred and non-directive principles. But they encounter students who expect the CP to almost “tell them what to do” or at least offer concrete suggestions and perhaps give practical help with job getting. There is a tension here between the dominant professional approach and the kind of help students are asking for. Do CPs now need to have a much wider range of helping skills? Is that why the CPs in this study are reaching for other skill sets, for example in coaching?

- CPs seem ambivalent about acquiring and sharing **labour market information**, even though their work is quite often focused on students in specific subjects of study. Students find the labour market hard to understand. This is not about facts and figures or how to write a CV but complex, often tacit understanding of how sectors and employers operate and how opportunities and employment practices change over time. There is a tension here between students who lack information and CPs who do not see giving it as a significant focus of their work.
- Universities often sell their courses in terms of **career prospects**. But graduates in the UK are entering an extremely competitive and demanding labour market. There is a tension here between encouraging high aspirations and promoting careers as self-actualisation on the one hand, and the realities of graduate employment on the other. The shifting labour market also raises the issue of whether university career services could usefully become employment services to a much greater extent than they are now.
- CPs try to help students as much as they can in a **single career interview**. A career interview is an old idea, established when students were perhaps making simpler choices and entering a much less competitive labour market. Students now often come to career interviews very unready to make career decisions, both cognitively and emotionally. There is a tension here between the old single 1-1 interview model and the unreadiness of students. Should career services argue for the resources to offer a significant proportion of students a proactively planned series of career conversations?
- Most CPs seemed to see their 1-1 work as more important, more skilled and more valuable than their **career education** work. But they also highlight the lack of career management skills in students, including their overall understanding of how to make career decisions. Given that the development of career teaching is an important policy direction for many career services, it would be useful to know if CPs simply find 1-1 work more satisfying or have real grounds for their prevalent view that students do not engage effectively in career courses or taught sessions.
- CPs are committed to being professional in their work but they highlight some tensions between this aspiration and the patchy access to CPD and the lack of a firm **theoretical or evidence base** for their work.
- Given the commitment of the CPs in this study to helping students, and their observations on the career difficulties of students, it is interesting that they do not seem all that frustrated by the scale of this challenge. Students come to interviews hoping to find an answer – to “tick the job box” as several CPs said. CPs seem to see the interview as moving the student forward, often just a little bit. Further research might usefully look at how both CPs and students define an **effective career interview**.

Annex 1 – Research method

The research project has been led by Julia Yates of City University with the support of Wendy Hirsh (NICEC Fellow) and Lynsey Mahmood (City University).

The study set out to explore how career practitioners (CPs) working in UK higher education (HE) see the career difficulties of students in 1-1 conversations; how CPs interpret and respond to student needs; where CPs identify challenges in their work; and the implications for their own professional development.

The study involved both a survey of CPs about specific 1-1 conversations they had with students, followed by semi-structured interviews with a sample of CPs.

The study took at its start point, two previous frameworks of career decision-making difficulties. Gati et al (1996)² proposed a framework of cognitive career decision-making difficulties and Saka et al (2008)³ of emotional and personality-related difficulties. These frameworks are not very recent and were not derived from the experience of higher education students in the UK. Practitioners reviewed these frameworks to develop a list of career decision-making difficulties applicable to UK HE students to use in the survey. One additional item added at the suggestion of practitioners concerned students needing help with the application process (CVs, interviews etc). The list of career difficulties used in the survey consisted of 22 items within 6 groupings: lack of readiness; lack of information; conflicts; pessimism; anxiety; and identity. These items are shown in the table of survey results in Annex 2.

The survey asked the CPs to identify which items on this list of career difficulties were (a) presented by the client in a particular conversation (b) assessed as present by the practitioner and (c) felt to be challenging to address by the practitioner.

The study recruited 59 practitioners (qualified staff in roles usually called Career Adviser or Career Consultant) from 36 HE institutions with a mix of Pre/Post 92, varied research intensity, subject mix and students. Participants were asked to complete one survey form for every scheduled 1-1 career conversation, even short ones, in a chosen week between September 2019 and March 2020. 600 completed survey forms were used in the analysis.

In addition to the simple counts of items shown in Annex 2, some comparisons were made between items presented, assessed and found challenging ie the questions (a), (b) and (c) above. Further statistical analysis could be undertaken to look at clusters of responses across questions and items in order to refine the theoretical models used as the start point of this study.

Follow up semi-structured interviews were conducted by two researchers with 22 practitioners from 15 institutions in the summer of 2020, again varied by location and type.

² Gati, I., Krausz, M., & Osipow, S. H. (1996). A Taxonomy of Difficulties in Career Decision Making. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*

³ Saka, N., Gati, I., & Kelly, K. R. (2008). Emotional and personality-related aspects of career-decision-making difficulties. *Journal of Career Assessment*

These interviews probed the early findings of the survey, especially around the drivers of student career difficulties and behaviour and the challenges practitioners identified in their work. The interviews also covered the training and skills of practitioners and the impacts on students and practitioners of how career services operate within their institutional contexts. At the time of the interviews in 2020, the CPs were working online as a result of the pandemic; a few questions were added about their experiences of working with students in this situation.

The interviews were transcribed and an initial coding frame was derived from detailed thematic analysis of the transcriptions. Coding was then conducted against these initial themes in parallel by the two researchers who had done the interviews, looking across all the interviews. This was used to refine the initial identification and interpretation of the main themes emerging. The interview analysis also suggested how those who completed the survey may have been interpreting the items they were offered there.

Annex 2 - Survey results

For each item, the table shows the percentage of interviews in which the difficulty was reported. For each group of difficulties, the percentages refer to interviews in which at least one item in that group of difficulties was reported.

| <i>N=600 interviews from 59 CPs</i> | Client's presenting difficulties | CP's assessment of difficulties | Difficulties challenging to CP |
|---|---|--|---------------------------------------|
| They are not ready to make a decision | | | |
| <i>They are not showing much motivation</i> | 2% | 6% | 2% |
| <i>They seem really indecisive</i> | 12% | 15% | 3% |
| <i>They don't know how to go about making a choice</i> | 23% | 29% | 6% |
| <i>They have an unrealistic idea of how to make a choice (eg they expect you to give them the answer)</i> | 6% | 16% | 9% |
| Lack of Readiness Group | 32% (74%)* | 43% | 16% (38%)** |
| They don't have enough information | | | |
| <i>They seem to be lacking in self-awareness</i> | 7% | 21% | 5% |
| <i>They don't know enough about different options</i> | 36% | 48% | 6% |
| <i>They don't know how to go about researching options</i> | 28% | 45% | 4% |
| <i>They need help with the application process (CVs, i/vs etc)</i> | 56% | 57% | 5% |
| Lack of Information Group | 85% (95%)* | 89% | 17% (19%)** |
| There is some conflict holding them back | | | |
| <i>Internal conflicts, eg between two different sets of values</i> | 8% | 11% | 3% |
| <i>External conflicts, eg between them and their parents</i> | 5% | 9% | 4% |
| <i>Conflicting information about options or other aspects of the world of work</i> | 13% | 15% | 3% |
| Conflicts Group | 22% (77%)* | 28% | 8% (28%)** |
| They seem to have a pessimistic attitude | | | |
| <i>About the world</i> | 2% | 3% | 1% |
| <i>About the process of choosing or getting a job</i> | 8% | 13% | 3% |
| <i>About their ability to control the process</i> | 9% | 14% | 4% |
| Pessimism Group | 14% (66%)* | 21% | 6% (29%)** |
| They are showing some anxiety | | | |
| <i>About the process of choosing and getting a job</i> | 22% | 32% | 3% |
| <i>About the uncertainty of the process</i> | 24% | 34% | 6% |
| <i>About choosing: what if they can't work out what to do?</i> | 9% | 13% | 2% |
| <i>About the outcome: what happens if it doesn't work out?</i> | 15% | 21% | 4% |
| <i>When comparing themselves with their peers</i> | 9% | 13% | 3% |
| Anxiety Group | 45% (75%)* | 59% | 14% (24%)** |
| Their sense of identity is holding them back | | | |
| <i>Their self-confidence is low</i> | 9% | 21% | 7% |
| <i>They are unclear about their own identity – who they are and what they want</i> | 7% | 15% | 5% |
| <i>They are struggling with breaking away from the past</i> | 3% | 6% | 3% |
| Identity Group | 15% (45%)* | 34% | 13% (38%)** |

KEY to figures in brackets

* number of presenting cases in this group as a proportion of the number of assessed cases in this group. A low number suggests a group which CPs assess as present more often than students present it themselves.

** number of cases in which a career difficulty in this group was challenging for CP as a proportion of the number of assessed cases in this group. A higher number therefore shows a group more challenging to CPs.