EMPIRICAL PAPER

Participation in career development communities of practice: Perspectives from low socio-economic background students

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About the author

Michelle Trottier is a PhD candidate at the University of Glasgow. She also holds an Associate Lecturer and Academic Mentor role at the University of Exeter teaching on the Senior Leader Degree Apprenticeship MBA programme. Prior to commencing her PhD, she spent three years teaching Careers Management to undergraduate and postgraduate students in the UK and in Canada. Her teaching has included developing and facilitating careers management and work placement modules. Through her teaching experience she noted differences in student experiences and the value of peer-to-peer support. Michelle completed her Master's in Education and has roles within UK Higher Education sharing teaching practices across the university with a focus on inclusion and student-centred teaching.

Abstract

Despite experiencing challenges in transitioning into graduate employment (Ashley, Duberley, Sommerlad & Scholarios, 2015; Boston Consulting Group, 2017) low socio-economic background students are less likely to engage with support offered through their higher education careers services (Greenbank & Hepworth, 2008; Simpson & Ferguson, 2013). This study investigates the efficacy of using a four-week online community of practice intervention aiming to build careers support engagement of students from low socio-economic backgrounds through peer learning. Through a series of 24 semi-structured interviews, it was found that students who disengaged from the intervention reported doing so due to feeling apprehensive about their lack of knowledge and experience, other commitments (especially term-time work and academic studies), and anxiety associated with transition from university to work. This research expands the careers counselling literature to not only consider career consulting practices, but also student engagement through leveraging social learning. This work has additional practical applications for careers practitioners highlighting benefits and drawbacks of offering career support through online communities of practice.

Keywords: careers counselling, engagement, socio-economic backgrounds, community of practice, peer learning, careers service interventions

Introduction

A significant challenge for university career services is student engagement (Cranmer, 2007; Cullinane & Montacute, 2018). For instance, almost half of the students in the UK never use careers service support (Purcell et al., 2012) nor have spoken to a careers service advisor by the end of their undergraduate degree (Bradley, Quigley & Bailey, 2019). Similar findings have been reported from the United States and Australia (Bates, Hayes, Walker & Marchesi, 2018; Callanan & Benzing, 2004). Students from low socio-economic backgrounds (i.e., those living in deprived neighbourhoods, who are the first generation to go to university in their immediate family or those who were in a deprived school prior to attending university) are among the least likely to engage with the services offered by the university careers service (Greenbank & Hepworth, 2008; Simpson & Ferguson, 2013).

Students from low socio-economic backgrounds experience higher education differently than those from more advantaged backgrounds (Murphy, 2009). Crucially, they report lower feelings of belonging (i.e., feeling accepted, valued, included and encouraged by teachers and peers, Goodenow, 1993) in higher education (Becker & Luthar, 2002; Keane 2011; Patiniotis & Holdsworth 2005; Lynch & O'Riordan 1998; Mallman, 2017). Students who feel a lack of belonging tend to be less likely to take advantage of the opportunities around them, as they doubt their skills and abilities to perform and therefore achieve lower academically (De Cordova & Herzon, 2007; Walton & Cohen, 2007). Similar effects are more prominent when looking at engagement with careers services. Within the careers counselling literature Willis (1977) first observed, through an ethnographical study, that careers service support was perceived to be geared much more to the middle-class students, focusing on securing middle-class, professional or managerial, occupations. In fact, low socio-economic background students ridiculed and undermined the recommendations they received from the careers service (Willis, 1977). In a contemporary higher education context, which includes students from diverse backgrounds, 79 per cent of students report that their primary motivation for attending post-secondary education is to improve their employability prospects (National Union of Students, 2011). If students feel that their motivations, interests and aspirations are not accepted, included or valued, they may be less likely to engage with the careers service.

Another reason why students from low socio-economic backgrounds may not engage with university careers services may be that they are less likely to seek help. For some students, attending higher education is a 'break away' from social disadvantage.

They may therefore be more conscious of the labels attached to their backgrounds. For instance, Massey and Fischer (2005) report that even students who do not believe the stereotype about their group to be true, feel threatened to engage in help seeking behaviour to avoid the risk of confirming or being associated with the label.

Finally, conflicting demands from work, commuting and/or caregiving responsibilities (Engle, Bermeo & O'Brien, 2006; Murphy, 2009) may prevent students from low socio-economic backgrounds from engaging with the careers service. Callender and Jackson (2005) highlight that low socio-economic background students were amongst the most concerned about consequences of debt. Not only does debt create a deterrent for entering university but also increases their likelihood of working throughout their education. Students working during term time often face challenges in meeting competing demands (Callender & Kemp, 2000). Thus, this group may have less time to engage with the careers service.

The issue of students disengaging from careers support is not a new challenge as there has been evidence of this lack of engagement from over 30 years ago (Willis, 1977). Despite new advancements in our knowledge of how interventions can support student experience, often these fail to consider student engagement with careers service. Particularly for students from low socio-economic backgrounds (Greenbank & Hepworth, 2008; Simpson & Ferguson, 2013) career engagement is a major concern. While it may be hard for the careers service to address all challenges associated with access to careers services (e.g., time limitations due to other commitments) students from low socio-economic backgrounds may be more willing to engage with interventions relevant for their belonging and, relatedly, comfort in seeking help. This article next considers the role of peer learning as a tool for encouraging participation from students.

Peer learning to support careers service engagement

The challenge in careers service engagement of students from low socio-economic backgrounds may be addressed through peer learning, where individuals receive support and help from peers relevant for their learning. Peer learning is a dimension of pedagogy that has been long established as effective, with peer groups playing a role in shaping and influencing individual's cognitive processes (Dewey, 1923; Lave & Wenger 1991; Wenger, 2000).

Learning from others is a major component of peer learning. This is aligned with Social Learning Theory (Bandura & McClelland, 1977), according to which social behaviour is

partly learnt through observing and imitating others. Bandura (1965) argues that social processes, such as observing others' behaviour and the rewards associated with these behaviours (i.e., vicarious learning), can be just as important for learning as mastery experiences. For instance, in the context of graduate employability, work-integrated learning, whereby students are socialised into occupations, has been shown to provide opportunities for students to not only master the requirements of jobs but also be part of the professional community and observe professionals perform (Jackson, 2017). There is evidence that supportive peer relations instill a sense of camaraderie, help build social capital and help students 'learn how to learn', which were all relevant for improving students' sense of belonging (Thomas, 2012). These interactions with peers were found to facilitate students' self-awareness of their strengths and capabilities and were therefore relevant for students' investment of effort and persistence in academic studies (Soria & Stuffblefield, 2015).

A crucial medium where individuals learn through observing others is communities of practice, which refers to a group of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly (Lave & Wenger, 1991). In communities of practices individuals build a community through relationships, develop a shared repertoire of resources, experiences, stories, tools, ways of addressing their concerns and thereby learn from each other. The construct 'communities of practice' is used in many ways in the literature, depending on exclusivity of membership rules (Brown & Duguid, 1991; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998; Wenger, McDermott & Snyder, 2002). For exploring university students' engagement with careers service, this research adopts Lave and Wegner's (1991) conceptualisation, where a 'community' is a group of individuals (students) that share a practice (engagement with careers service for improving employability).

Lave and Wenger (1991) focus on situated learning, where learning occurs through observing general behaviours. Drawing on experiences of midwives, tailors, butchers and sober alcoholics Lave and Wenger (1991) show how members build skills overtime by first observing and then doing. Notably within this context learning was defined as situated participation and observation (Lave & Wenger, 1991). For university students, this implies that enhancing employability skills via engagement with careers services may be via situated learning where situated participation and observation form a key building block of learning.

The present study

The overall aim of this study is to explore the efficacy of a community of practice intervention to build careers service engagement of students from low socio-economic backgrounds. Although previous literature has attempted to understand careers services benefits (Ryan, 1999), there is limited literature that focuses on improving engagement, especially of low socio-economic background students. There is therefore a lack of evidence-based strategy to provide an equal access tailored service that supports disadvantaged student populations (Andrewartha & Harvey, 2017; Bridge Group, 2017; The International Graduate Insight Group Ltd., 2011). We know from previous research that, social and behavioural change (e.g., in relation to eating disorders or anti-social behaviours) is possible through interventions targeted towards university students (Berkowitz, 2003). With the aim of informing ways of improving careers service engagement, this article explores low socio-economic background students' motivation for participation in careers service interventions, using an intervention study. The intervention presented in this study consists of an online peer-led community of practice intervention, where students can support each other's employability through sharing experiences and knowledge.

There are differences across types of higher education institutions in the ways that students participate in developing their employability. Students at the more research-intensive institutions have been found to report higher participation through proactive career behaviours than those in the more teaching-led institutions (Okay-Somerville, Allison, Luchinskaya & Scholarios, 2020). This study takes place in a research-intensive institution that has received numerous awards for excellence of its careers service (e.g., National Undergraduate Employability Awards) yet has a disproportionally small representation of students from low socio-economic background (Scottish Funding Council, 2017). Accounting for the quality of careers service provided (Rowley & Purcell, 2001), the present study focuses on ways of improving careers service engagement for low socio-economic background students.

Employability building interventions generally target students who are already actively engaged in job search or career support (Goodwin, 2019). The intervention involved in the present study encourages participation from a group that has been known to participate less and provides a medium for peer learning. Although this intervention may be able to engage some students, there may be some barriers that others cannot be overcome. This paper aims to explore these barriers to careers service engagement. By doing so, the

study aims to make practical suggestions on how careers services might address some of the concerns that students raise and provide new perspectives of the benefits and drawbacks of a peer learning approach to career support.

Methodology

The present study was part of a larger (unpublished) research project. Students in their third and fourth year of their undergraduate studies at a research-intensive Scottish University were recruited through emails sent by the researcher and their subject course coordinators. These emails invited students to participate in an employability study providing careers service support. This first required students to complete an online questionnaire to identify their socio-economic background. Specifically, students were identified as being from a low socio-economic background if either their family home postal code was in a deprived area, if neither parent attended higher education, or if they attended a school that was identified as being deprived prior to entering university. Students who met at least one of these characteristics were considered to be from a low socio-economic background. To provide students with more opportunities to participate, the intervention ran at three different times over the course of the 2019 academic year; in early autumn (October), late autumn (November) and early spring (January). This resulted in a total of 222 participants in the online community of practice intervention, of which 115 were identified as from low socio-economic backgrounds. After students were enrolled in the community of practice, they were then told that their participation throughout the study was entirely voluntary and they could participate as much or as little as they liked, or even not at all.

The intervention

The community of practice intervention was set-up on the university's central virtual learning environment and was monitored by the researcher. Within the online community of practice, students were assigned into forums based on their subject discipline. Groups ranged from five to 13 members in size based on how many students volunteered from each subject, and students were suggested to discuss set topics each week. The first week students shared career goals and what type of roles they were targeting. The second week students provided each other suggestions on their curriculum vitaes (CVs) and covering letters. The third week many students shared interview questions that they had been asked during interviews, while their peers suggested possible answers. The final week was open to all discussion topics and students discussed

anything from postgraduate degree applications to where to go on campus to get a free LinkedIn photo taken. All discussion occurred on the forum and were private for only students enrolled to see.

Post-intervention interviews

After the four-week online community of practice intervention, the researcher invited all 115 low socio-economic status students who took part in the intervention for an interview. Participants were offered an incentive of £15 Amazon gift card in exchange for their time in the study. This resulted in 25 participants; however, one interview was cut short thus has been excluded from the data.

The interviews were conducted mainly in person at the students' higher education institution. There were a small number of students who requested video conferencing interviews. This was accommodated at the student's request. As this research was part of larger project, there were specific interview questions that are considered as part of this data. Students were asked two primary questions: how they participated in the community of practice; and what affected their choice to do so. The interview followed the probing questions guidelines suggested by Kvale and Brinkmann, (2009) only probing into topics already mentioned by the participant. This included questions such as "why was that?" and "what do you mean by that?". Overall, these questions were intended to uncover both levels of participation, and then further understand what motivated this. Interview audio was recorded and then transcribed by the researcher for analysis.

Analyses

Analyses were conducted in two stages. Firstly, the page view data from the community of practice virtual learning environment was used. This involved monitoring how many times each participant logged on to the virtual learning environment and viewed content on the online community of practice (see Table 1). This was used to gain a general understanding of what participation might look like, as such observation may be linked to situated learning by observing others (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

Secondly, the analysis of the interviews was conducted through a general thematic coding procedure (Braun & Clarke, 2006). After becoming familiar with the data through the transcription process, the data was then reviewed and coded based on categories developing within the data. This coding was refined throughout the review process based on new categories of information emerging (for instance, some codes needed to become more specific). Once the data was coded in full, it was reread and reconsidered based

on all codes generated. These codes were then sorted into more prominent themes that represented the larger topics with the data. As certain themes of the data were related to each other (as per results below), the more prominent themes acted as an umbrella category for themes within them. Although not all segments of data were considered in this analysis, all of the data that was connected to the research aims were.

Findings

The analyses resulted in two complementing forms of data to understand student participation. One was the overall virtual learning environment page view data providing details of student participation and the other was interview themes to provide a more detailed account of each student's experiences. As observed in Table 1, of the 24 participants 18 identified as female and six as male, 16 were in their fourth year of their undergraduate and eight were in their third year, and 12 subject disciples across the university were represented.

Table 1
Participant description and page views

Participant	Gender	Subject of study	Year of studies	Perceived engagement	Number of page views
19	Male	Science and Engineering	4	Active	226
20	Male	Computing Science	4	Active	179
11	Female	Business	4	Active	116
24	Female	Science and Engineering	4	Active	95
12	Female	School of Law	4	Active	88
13	Female	Critical Studies	4	Active	74
2	Female	Life Science	3	Active	69
1	Female	Chemistry	3	Less active	66
23	Male	Math and Statistics	4	Less active	61
15	Female	School of Law	4	Less active	59
3	Male	Social and Political Science	4	Less active	55
14	Female	Critical Studies and Humanities	4	Less active	53
6	Female	Science and Engineering	4	Active	52
5	Female	Social and Political Science	3	Less active	43
8	Female	Business	3	Less active	28
4	Male	Humanities	4	Less active	27
17	Female	Humanities	4	Active	20
21	Female	Life Science	4	Active	19
16	Male	Chemistry	3	Active	9
18	Female	Social and Political Science	4	Less active	4
22	Female	Social and Political Science	4	Less active	2
10	Female	Science and Engineering	3	Less active	1
7	Female	Culture and creative arts	3	Less active	0
9	Female	School of Law	3	Active	0

Page view data

On average, participants visited the virtual learning environment 56.08 times (SD = 56.11) over the four weeks of the intervention. Frequency of site visits ranged from zero (two participants) to more than 90 views (four participants). Participants' self-report engagement data did not necessarily match page view data. As observed in Table 1, although those who had the highest page views also reported high engagement, so did some participants with the lowest page views. There was one participant who reported high engagement although they never visited the virtual learning environment. It should be noted that there is a possibility that participants could have activated a function on the virtual learning environment to be emailed copies of the posts, thus, participated vicariously through reading automatically generated emails without ever clicking through to the page. Although this descriptive information is useful, the data needs to be carefully interpretated.

Post-intervention interview data

Among the students who described themselves as more active members, two key themes emerged that explained their motivation for engaging with the intervention: improving their own employability and sharing their employability-related knowledge and experience with others. Students who reported being disengaged from the intervention reported doing so due to feeling apprehensive about their lack of knowledge and experience, other commitments (especially term-time work and academic studies), and anxiety associated with transition from university to work. These themes are explained further below.

Improving employability

The initial drive to start participating in the community of practice seems to be to access the resources that were being shared on the forums. Participants recognised the usefulness of the practice of learning about career management for improving employability. Students also realised however that the usefulness of the community of practice was not just about links and signposting but was also related to the advice and sharing that they could leverage from peers:

> *"[I] was going through different forums to see what other people were saying in the other ones, and I also took their advice on, you know, what they answered and I kind of, you know, said okay that's actually quite good you know. If I get asked this in an interview, that's something that I could potentially twist around to fit into my answer."* (Participant 16)

For most participants, engagement with the forums and learning about ways of improving employability was done vicariously. Students logged onto the intervention in order to gain insights from what others were doing to improve employability. There seems to be a real value for the students:

> *"I was interested in enrolling mainly to see like other people's experiences as well. So, like, even though I didn't participate much myself, like, 'I looked through other people's CVs and stuff, but I thought that was really helpful."* (Participant 20)

They also found it useful to have more exclusive groups broken down by their subject of discipline and perceived the knowledge exchange in that context to be more useful. Interestingly knowledge shared across forums were similar in terms of content (e.g., focusing on CV building and interviews):

> *"It helped me to get like feedback that was more tailored to a path that I wanted to go down. Compared to, you know, you obviously get a lot of just genetic job interview advice or whatever or CV advice, but I think that getting the specific advice that is specific to your goals and that you're interested in was like helpful."* (Participant 21)

Sharing employability-related knowledge and experience

A second key reason why participants engaged with the intervention was being able to relate to others and being able to give back in a useful way. Community building by sharing knowledge and experience was important for engaging with careers service intervention:

> *"I was interested in maybe giving other people advice, that someone who is maybe in the same boat as me... I think just giving advice to people who don't know where to find it... just telling them you just go do this."* (Participant 9)

As students learned more about each other and as more students made informal introductions the helping behaviour within the community of practice grew:

> *"As soon as I read the first person... I just felt like, my experience would be worth sharing as well. Even thought it was, like I didn't really think much of it before, like sharing my experience, you know, who cares. But I thought it was really helpful, just in case somebody feels the same."* (Participant 13)

Notably this attitude about being able to help others was much related to perceiving one's self to have the resources needed to do so:

> *"Like you have the skill set now, so now you should share what you know to other people. So, um, I was really happy to help others in the [virtual learning environment] as well. Even doing my internship, I can now show, tell them that, oh, there's this opportunity that you can go for... I feel*

like I'm actually useful in a sense and yeah, this more than happy to… I really like the idea… where I get some feedback and then I can give some feedback to other people and yeah, just sharing experience because where else would you have seen these people or spoken to these people in and sense. And yet it's a really good environment to, you don't feel forced to say anything that you just, you feel that you're quite happy to be open in a sense, and maybe people don't judge you as much because it's online, you can't really see them." (Participant 14)

Barriers to engagement

Half of the participants (N=12) reported being not very active in their engagement with the online intervention. Feeling apprehensive in how others would view them, time conflict with other commitments and mental health challenges were the major barriers in engagement. These students were comparing themselves to others and seemed to disengage if they felt that their experiences were less worthwhile than the others':

"I did feel quite intimidated, if I am being honest. I feel like everybody else has, you know, much more experience and are much more professional and know how to talk the talk and walk the walk." (Participant 11)

For some students, feelings of apprehension and intimidation seemed to be enhanced especially when they felt that it was impossible for them to catch up due to conflicting demands on their time as a student and a worker:

"I feel like, there are people that have tons of experience related to their degree… I don't have what I would term as academic experience. Because again, I've had to work, like I just have not had time to do these things and I couldn't afford to have the luxury of volunteering for things… I didn't have the time for that. Because you need money to live, and I need money to attend here... So, I felt just quite self-conscious, in that sense." (Participant 4)

Engagement with the careers service intervention was at the bottom of priorities for those who felt pressures from work and/or university. Although students reported that they would have preferred to engage more with the intervention, in order to improve employability, prioritisation became an issue for students who were less active:

"I'd been meaning to participate more, and then I would just get wrapped up in like uni stress. And then look and be like, oh we are in week three now. And, I think yeah, I was like quite aware that it would be quite a good opportunity to get external feedback and just kind of see what other people were up to, and what experiences they've had, and how that kind of led them to where they are." (Participant 7)

Related to the many pressures students felt, issues around mental health and well-being also came into the interviews as a reason for lack of active engagement with the intervention (this would have been unknown to the researcher if it hadn't been mentioned in the interview);

> *"I've been sad and anxious before, but I was never like that. I was never so stressed, I'd never been so... I guess I never really seeked out help either, and this time I decided to go to my tutor... I didn't participate a lot, but I always went to the forums, what people were saying and stuff like that. And I think I introduced myself at the very start, and this term and last term I wasn't feeling too well, so I didn't really participate as much as I wanted."* (Participant 16)

Importantly, some of this stress and the well-being challenges were associated with the graduate recruitment process. In some students the pressures of having to find a graduate job are so intense that this may discourage proactive behaviours:

> *'I just get so stressed about getting behind in things, I didn't really engage in other stuff about interview questions or anything. Just the thought of it makes me sweaty. Um, so. That's why I didn't really participate in the bit, in the later stages of it. (Participant 23)*

Overall, most of the students in this study had some level of engagement with the careers support when it was provided in a community of practice format. However, there was a split experience of whether students felt they actively engaged in the community of practice. For those who actively participated, the motivation was to improve own and others' employability. Yet, half of the participants reported barriers to engagement concerning apprehension of sharing and various pressures to their time as students and workers.

Discussion

The present study explored the motivations for engagement with career service and the barriers in the way of doing so among students from low socio-economic backgrounds. Following an online peer-led community of practice-based intervention on enhancing employability skills, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 24 participants from low socio-economic backgrounds. The findings show that students engage with the peer-led intervention in order to enhance both their own employability and that of others' in the community. However, for half of the participants there were personal and work or study-related barriers in the way of active engagement. Most of those who did not actively engage still logged into the intervention to observe and to learn from others' experience. This section discusses the theoretical and practical implications of these findings for improving careers service engagement of students from low socio-economic backgrounds.

Theoretical implications

The findings make three theoretical contributions to understanding careers service engagement of low socio-economic background students. Firstly, findings show that improving employability is a major motivator for engagement with careers service interventions. This resonates with students' motivations for joining postsecondary education (National Union of Students Scotland, 2010). Broadening this understanding, the findings from this study also show that students are motivated by helping others enhance their employability. Previous research on graduate employability indicates that students are very much aware of the need to enhance career management skills (Bridgstock, 2009). This study suggests a role for student's helping behaviour for enhancing employability of similar others, who are potentially in the competition for the limited number of graduate jobs.

A second contribution from these findings concerns the efficacy of online, peer-led communities of practice interventions for improving employability. Although peer-led interventions are common (e.g., on nutrition awareness, Story, Lytle, Birnbaum & Perry, 2002) careers practitioners often do not make use of these for improving graduate employability. Findings from this study show that this is relatively effective for two reasons. Firstly, half of the participants in this study actively engaged and felt the benefit for improving their own employability while sharing information for improving others' employability, too. Secondly, students who reported a lack of active engagement benefited from reading others' posts and were able to learn from the community's shared knowledge and experiences. This shows the value of peer learning for improving student engagement with careers service interventions. Consistent with social learning theory (Bandura, 1965), the findings show that students gain both mastery experiences (e.g., by practicing CV building) and vicarious learning by observing similar others' posts. From a communities of practice perspective, this can be explained by the concept of situated learning (Wenger, 1998), where the repertoire of knowledge and experiences in the community of practice were accessible to all participants, and they were able to benefit regardless of active participation.

Expanding our knowledge on barriers to careers service engagement is the study's third theoretical contribution. Confirming previous research on conflicting demands on university leavers, this study shows how academic and financial pressures interfere with engagement with careers service (Okay-Somerville et al., 2020). Beyond this, among students who felt intimidated and apprehensive about sharing experience, we observe

an identity threat (see Scheepers & Ellemers, 2005). This confirms that some students from low socio-economic backgrounds may be self-conscious of sharing and asking for help, as this may further reinforce stereotypes associated with their background (Massey & Fischer, 2005). Yet, we observe the dangers of this perceived identity threat, alongside pressures related juggling term-time work, academic work and university-to-work transitions, in mental health issues becoming significant barriers for engagement with careers service interventions. Health and well-being issues have been referred to as the invisible problem in higher education settings (Martin, 2010). A variety of demands (e.g., financial difficulties, self-image and identity) that impact student mental well-being have been identified (National Union of Students Scotland, 2010; Universities UK, 2015). The present study extends these findings to show how these pressures also constitute barriers for engagement with careers service interventions for improving employability.

Communities of practice can be run almost entirely without understanding the emotions of others. This became evident during interviews as students shared stories of illnesses that they experienced over the course of the peer-led intervention caused by mental health challenges. This created barriers for them in feeling that they could not access the intervention. Although it would be interesting to compare that to the barriers of accessing in-person career support, the greater concern is that members cannot observe feelings and emotions online. Although it can be argued that in face-to-face delivery these are equally hidden, it raises an alarm with whether the facilitator could have intervened and signposted to support if more was known. Herrington, Reeves and Oliver's (2014) work on authentic identities highlight the importance of building trust and authentic people in communities of practice. This study found that even when individuals make introductions and welcome others, trust is difficult to form unless emotions come out in text. One student's response that she was nervous to participate as *"other members might laugh"* highlights how important this is. The paper next discusses practical implications of these findings.

Application for careers practitioners

In the context of low socio-economic background students building career knowledge, these results provide preliminary evidence that online community of practice-based interventions does provide opportunity for vicarious learning. This may explain why most students viewed multiple pages, and many students were motivated to participate to help others. Implementing the community of practice was relatively light touch for the researcher due to the peer-led nature of the intervention. This study reached 222

students in total, which was manageable for one researcher to oversee. Multiple students asked to be enrolled in repeat rounds of the intervention, suggesting that a longer period of offer support would have been beneficial, with more open access for students to continue their membership. Notably, the behaviour of peers helping peers could have been due to no formal career 'expert' leading the community of practice.

Careers practitioners should also consider ways that they can create a more cohesive community. In retrospect, this could have been done by separating those students who were looking for their first internship from those that already have had internships. It would be interesting to explore whether early supportive feedback to students on their qualification, highlighting their strengths, could have helped mitigate this.

There were also concerns raised about privacy and trust. Allowing opportunity for students to see the emotion and personality of other students is part of creating authentic identity. For some students a written introduction is not enough. It would be useful to test whether a synchronous welcome meeting would have helped.

This research also highlights the interplay that mental health challenges have on career service participation. Searching for graduate jobs and receiving multiple rejections is stress inducing even to the individuals who are at an optimum mental health. Mental health and well-being resources, specifically targeting stress and anxiety should be incorporated into careers service offerings. In hindsight, perhaps a link to the well-being resources that focus on stress and rejection should have been shared by the community of practice facilitator at the onset of the programme. Notably, this was only caught as a problem during the face-to-face interview where the researcher was then able to signpost to well-being resources.

Limitations

Although this study has been able to provide new insight into the motivations underpinning student participation, a pragmatic approach was taken throughout the study aimed to uncover the fullest information possible. There are some limitations that came along with that. Firstly, the participants involved in this study were students who self-selected to take part. There may have been additional motivations for students to participate as they were told ahead that they would receive a £15 gift voucher to acknowledge the time spent. Compensation was provided mainly due to the long duration of the study and concerns that students may withdraw. The £15 gift voucher was provided to students at the end of the study regardless of levels of participation.

The participation data used in this study should also be discussed. The community of practice virtual learning environment's 'page view' data only provides a rough indicator of participation. It is recognised that this data cannot be weighted as a strong indicator of participation, as the individual who spends 15 minutes on a forum page is weighted the same as the individual spending 15 seconds within the data set. This data should be taken only as an additional piece of information that provides more context to the qualitative data. Finally, it should be noted that questions about the community of practice intervention were not the primary focus of the interviews with the 24 students; instead, they represent one section of data that was collected from participants. In a separate section of the interview, students shared stories of their life experiences and developing their employability aimed at addressing a different research question. Although this should be acknowledged as a limitation, it is also a strength in the quality of data produced, due to the closeness that was developed between the researcher and the student during the interview process. Comments about sharing deep secrets and oversharing were commonly made by students. The researcher believes that this allowed for students to share honest challenges regarding mental health and social anxiety that may have otherwise not been available in this type of research.

Conclusion

This study contributes to the evidence-base that incorporating peer learning into careers service interventions improves active and passive engagement by building a cohesive community. Theoretically, this highlights the relevance of peer learning and social learning theory (Bandura, 1965) for engaging a group of university leavers who historically lack engagement with the careers service. Nevertheless, there are still major obstacles that need more consideration, such as individuals' awareness of stereotypes associated with their background and associated feelings of intimidation, the conflicting demands on students' time (e.g., between academic study, term-time work and preparing for life after graduation) and ensuring presence of well-being resources with a recognition of how difficult it is to detect a need for it through online text. Although this research cannot point to a solution to these obstacles, it suggests that practitioners should consider them throughout the planning and implementation of community of practice careers support.

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