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Christie, Fiona , Gilworth, Bob, Thambar, Nalayini and Winter, David (2024) Continuity and Change in Higher Education Careers Services in England. In: A History of the Careers Services in the UK from 1999. Lulu.com, pp. 36-49. ISBN 9781446625750 (paperback); 9781446174142 (ebook)

**Publisher:** Lulu.com

**Version:** Accepted Version

**Downloaded from:** <https://e-space.mmu.ac.uk/632047/>

**Document DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.23634/MMU.00632047.01833175>

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# A historical review of continuity and change in HE careers services in England

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## Introduction

This chapter charts key aspects of the work of careers services in HE in England (1999-2020). It is organised into six main sections: 1. Public policy change and the rise of employability; 2. Employability, tuition fee rises and marketisation; 3. Evolution of professional practice and identity; 4. Changing nature of student and graduate employment and work; 5. Policy and practice trends, regionalisation and social mobility; and finally, 6. Present and future challenges, big data and technology. Contextual issues are outlined, and HE careers service responses are explored addressing how the work of careers professionals has dramatically evolved during this period. The chapter reflects on developments in policy and context that influenced continuity and change in professional practices that led to the present day and considers key opportunities and challenges for the future.

Until the late 1990s in England careers service roles in HE were typically careers practitioners, information officers, and administrators who performed a range of tasks from arranging employer activity, supporting the work of careers practitioners, and collecting destination data. The Head of Service usually had experience of working as a careers practitioner and in many services adopted a 'first amongst equals' approach to their management role (Thambar, 2016). Until the late 1990s, the role of careers practitioner was dominant across HE careers services in England regarding influence and breadth of activity, usually leading enabling activities such as employer engagement and marketing. HE careers practitioners were typically drawn from two groups: entrants from an academic, or

other professional background or experienced careers advisers who had qualified through the conventional route of a Dip.CG/QCG/QCD and then experience in an LEA (or equivalent) careers service and often FE.

In the early 2000s the introduction of the AGCAS sponsored diploma for work in HE enabled those who had taken up a role as a careers professional from a different profession to gain a careers qualification once in post. Until then such moves were rare and so gaining a careers-related qualification was not usually required. Historically, the position of careers practitioners in HE careers services meant that they had security in their identity, particularly as, like their services and managers, they were not accustomed to institutional scrutiny or comparison with other roles. Nor were they expected to meet any targets or be accountable for institutional metrics. However, wider policy changes in HE, as well as labour market evolution, disrupted this established pattern within HE careers services.

Dramatic changes have occurred in careers services in HE in England as they have navigated changes in both public policy and the labour market. The early 2000s witnessed an expansion of HE careers services' roles and responsibilities, bringing both challenges and opportunities. This expansion also led to a diversification of the roles careers practitioners might hold, stretching traditional parameters of CEIAG. Importantly, defining who was a careers professional also grew beyond those who were qualified careers advisers.

### Public policy change and the rise of employability

To properly consider the period 1999-2020, particular reference is needed to the Dearing report of 1997 which heralded the rise of the policy theme 'employability'<sup>1</sup>. However, it is also useful to acknowledge the direction of policy initiatives (within and outside HE) which preceded Dearing in framing the interaction between education and employment, often

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<sup>1</sup> Employability - providing the opportunities to develop knowledge, skills, experiences, behaviours, attributes, achievements and attitudes to enable graduates to make successful transitions

expressed in terms of the knowledge economy and national competitiveness. These policy themes had real impact on the work of HE careers services and have shaped most of the subsequent policy and practice environment. A key preceding policy development was the Enterprise in Higher Education (EHE) initiative launched in 1987 under the auspices of the Training Agency, a non-departmental public body of the Department of Employment Group. Direct funding for development work in HE from a Department of Employment entity was similar to the Technical and Vocational Education Initiative (TVEI) which had been launched in schools and FE in 1983.

In both TVEI and EHE, the broad aims were around linking education and the labour market through the introduction of enterprise and what became termed 'employability' (Yorke and Knight, 2006) into curricula. The EHE projects can be seen to lay the foundation for the integration of HE careers services into the core educational endeavour of their institutions (Butcher, 2007) and were comparable to the impact TVEI had on the involvement of LEA careers advisers in CEIAG in schools.

Arguably, the single most significant public policy to impact on the work of HE careers services in this period was the focus on enhancing employability among students. This theme emanated explicitly from the Dearing report (1997), and built on the work of previous initiatives, such as the EHE scheme. Since the Dearing report, the employability agenda maintained a high profile within HEIs. This was in part driven by labour market demands for higher level skills, and growth in the proportion of jobs on offer which required qualifications at first degree level. Dearing emphasised the education-employment-national competitiveness link and advocated the idea that courses should develop students' employability. This emphasis could be seen to help to create a supportive policy environment for the careers and employability agenda in HE and for careers services within that.

However, in 2001 Baroness Blackstone described HE careers services as '*too often a Cinderella service, out on the remote edges of higher education, with little or no presence or*

*influence in the lives of students and the academics who teach them'* (DfEE, 2001, p.4).

Variation in the perceived quality of HE careers services provision across the sector, combined with a heightened sense of its importance, led to the Westminster government funding Harris '*Review of Higher Education Careers Services*' (DfEE, 2001) in England. The report helped to put careers guidance activities more firmly on the strategic map of priorities for HEIs. It made several recommendations of which six were targeted at HE careers services. These focused on developing communications with IT and building external relationships, with specific mention of the Connexions service and employers. Fundamental to careers service provision was the recommendation that the HE sector should define the core services that every HE careers service should provide to students. Also, the report proposed that HE careers services staff should hold a relevant professional qualification or have relevant experience and training.

In addition, the Harris Review advised that the QAA should place an expectation on HEIs to have clear policies towards their careers services. This was formalised in the '*QAA Code of Practice on CEIG*' (2001). Ever since, much QAA guidance continued to present HE careers services as integral to enabling student progression and achievement and acknowledged the importance of staff being appropriately qualified, trained and supported (QAA, 2018).

The significance of the Dearing report (1997) was recognised in a subsequent DfES report '*Delivering Quality*' (Maguire, 2005), a publication that was in part a response to the recommendations of the Harris Review. Maguire's report focused on the strategic role and position of HE careers services, the inclusion of careers as a component of the HE curriculum and the need for links with employers.

### [Employability, tuition fee rises and marketisation](#)

Despite its well-known legacy for employability, the aspect of the Dearing report which grabbed media attention at the time of publication was the case for sharing the cost of HE between the state and the individual student/graduate as a beneficiary. This paved the way for government to introduce tuition fees through the Teaching and Higher Education Act

1998, a theme that was revisited in subsequent tuition fee rises and in 2019 in the '*Review of Post-18 Education and Funding*' (the 'Augar report', DfE 2019).

This aspect of policy was in line with, and supportive of, the notion of HE as a private good rather than, or as well as, a public good. The idea of return on investment (ROI) for the individual became a recurring theme in institutional and public discourse around careers and employability in HE. Fees were initially raised by the Higher Education Act 2004, which also created OFFA which was set up to ensure that higher fees did not become a barrier to the objectives of increasing and widening participation. This helped to create the foundations for much of the social mobility work of HE careers services, with OFFA's role subsumed into the Office for Students (OfS) in 2018.

More than ten years after Dearing, the report of the Browne Review '*Securing a Sustainable Future for Higher Education*' (DBIS, 2010) was the enabler for the government decision to lift the cap on annual tuition fees in England to a maximum of £9,000 from 2012. This was a watershed moment for the ROI debate, as the notion of the 'graduate premium' (higher lifetime earnings than non-graduates) was central to the public justification of the tripling of tuition fees. The 'pay off' for HE as a personal investment was unequivocally couched in terms of career, with an emphasis on objective career success in relation to earning potential. Institutions moved to bolster their careers and employability efforts. In some cases, this improved the resourcing of HE careers services, but as ever, institutional choices varied across the sector, which is highly stratified.

Whilst there was an element of financial 'windfall' in the sector, the huge increase in tuition fees was accompanied by swingeing cuts in teaching grants. In many subject areas, student tuition fees became the sole source of income to support the delivery of teaching. Students had become paying customers and were actively encouraged to see themselves as such (though repayment of the fees was deferred and income-contingent).

The White Paper '*Students at the Heart of the System*' (DBIS, 2011) heralded a significant increase in the promotion of 'consumer' information – such as the 'UNISTATS' data

collection and Key Information Sets (KIS) with a strong emphasis on graduate outcomes data. This brought HE careers services further into the spotlight and into the debates, both institutionally and across the sector, given their long-standing association with the collection and interpretation of graduate first destinations data. The role of data in understanding employment destinations as well as measuring the performance of HEIs has continued to increase ever since.

As careers and employability in HE sits at the intersection of policy on learning and teaching (L&T) and the student experience on one hand and what has become known as knowledge exchange (KE) on the other, it is useful to reflect on an important policy report which followed the Browne Review, namely the Wilson '*Review of Business-University Collaboration*' (DBIS, 2012). As the title and sponsoring government department might suggest, this was framed in the context of KE, but it can be seen as integrating with the L&T and student experience perspectives. Significantly, it aligned the ideas of good employer engagement and employability provision with consumer choice:

*'Better informed students are more likely to choose a university and a course that provides them with the right learning experiences, and best prepares them for work in their desired career. Universities will need to respond to the demands of informed students and improve their practices in order to compete for students, and businesses will profit from being able to recruit energised and innovative graduates'* (DBIS, 2012, p.29).

With hindsight, it is not difficult to see the trend towards consumer regulation, which was played out in the creation of the OfS, replacing the Higher Education Funding Council England in 2018. This was a seismic development for the HE sector in England. The policy environment had aligned the work of HE careers services with *attraction* (the promotion of the career return on ROI), *experience* (the institutional effort to support and develop employability for *all* students) and *outcomes* (graduate destinations) These were areas of

fundamental interest to the OfS and all featured in the context of increased scrutiny and accountability.

Interestingly, the rise in tuition fees which began as a result of the Teaching and Higher Education Act 1998 did not lead to a reduction in the number of students wanting to go to university in England. Indeed, student numbers increased steadily spurred by public policy that sought to increase levels of education across society, albeit controversially depicted as a private good through the system of income-contingent loans. Despite the tripling of tuition fees in 2012, in 2018 England there were 1,911,940 students across 134 institutions. Total student numbers fluctuated between 1999 and 2020 and across different types of study, with record numbers of full-time undergraduates and postgraduates in 2016-17 (UUK, 2018).

During this period, there was a trend for increased participation in HE, driven by the government's target of enabling fifty per cent of people aged between 18 and 30 to participate in HE by 2010 (Maguire, 2005). Accompanying this trend, the number of HEIs offering degree courses increased (IES, 2004, cited in Maguire, 2005). With such large student populations in universities, HE careers services had to scale up what they could do. Also, subsequent changes in the characteristics of the annual student intake meant that HE careers services were required to address the needs of an evolving and extremely diverse student body from within and beyond the UK. Hence, the diverse nature of student populations at different HEIs meant HE careers services practices and cultures varied enormously while the need to respond effectively to student needs remained a continuous theme in professional practice.

In summary, developments in public policy during this period put the work of HE careers services in the spotlight. Their work was placed under scrutiny in relation to both employability (student, graduate and institutional), as it moved towards HE marketisation, and consumer-related regulation.



## Evolution of professional practice and identity

While the notion of enhancing graduate employability as a key purpose of HE began to dominate, there was significant investment in, and diversification of, HE careers services. An increasing emphasis on meeting the needs of the labour market saw a significant shift in emphasis away from non-directive support for individual career decision-making, towards activities aimed at providing students with marketable human capital in the form of work experience and the ability to demonstrate the desirable skills gained from this. This led to the creation and development of new roles focused on employer engagement, curriculum development and teaching, placement provision and the management of programmes designed to help students record and articulate skills development.

Many HEIs developed careers and employability strategies which could be categorised by three primary perspectives on employability which pointed towards implicit theoretical assumptions about the nature of employability (Holmes, 2013):

- 'Possessive' — focusing on students' acquisition of desired workplace skills or graduate attributes.
- 'Positioning' — focusing on students' accumulation of various forms of human, social and psychological capital (especially pertinent to equality initiatives).
- 'Processual' — focusing on the development and learning of attitudes and behaviours that increase students' chances of making successful career transitions.

The sector-wide emphasis on ROI placed mounting pressure on HE careers services to demonstrate their positive impact on all students, not just those who proactively engaged with traditional extra-curricular careers services activities. The traditional core activity of one-to-one guidance was not scalable to meet the demands of universal impact, and increasing emphasis was placed on group teaching and the embedding of careers and employability within the curriculum (AGCAS, 2005; Christie, 2016; Yorke and Knight, 2006).

During the 2000s, a particular growth area of HE career services roles was employer engagement. Partly in response to the expansion of a graduate recruitment 'industry' HE careers services developed more distinct employer engagement functions. In addition to roles which channelled employer recruitment activity, other roles engaged employers in institutional skills awards and mentoring schemes and, where appropriate, enterprise education and business start-up. This attracted further people from a range of other professional backgrounds into HE careers services and the careers practitioner role was no longer dominant. Careers services management teams expanded to represent the full range of activities for which the services were responsible.

Throughout this period, AGCAS – originally a professional association for careers practitioners, then information professionals – extended its activities to include these new facets of careers work. However, the choice of quality standard for member services, Matrix, introduced as a condition of membership in 2002, focussed on IAG, and was thus closer to AGCAS's origins than many of those by then working within HE careers services, in diverse roles other than a more traditional careers practitioner or information officer. Moreover, the attainment of the matrix Standard demonstrated the commitment to high professional standards across careers-related activities which increasingly involved work in partnership with academic staff in the curriculum.

The development of policy traced from the reviews of Dearing to Browne to Wilson put HE careers services in the spotlight as 'employability' became an institutional priority and a graduate level outcome a representation of value for money. This led to a deep questioning of HE careers services and, by extension, careers professionals about professional identity, and what they did and how they contributed to graduate employment and employability. Careers professionals in this period – particularly careers advisers – found themselves in the unusual position of having to explain and defend their role and work in a university setting. Chronicled in Thambar's (2016, 2018a) research, this questioning could be considered a crisis in traditional careers adviser identity. Describing the professional identity of careers

advisers as 'undefined, locally focussed, unrecognised, unconfident but dedicated', Thambar argued that this was associated with greater levels of 'professional encapsulation' (Ackroyd, 1996) and identified a tension in identification between 'profession' versus 'institutional employer'. She argued that this tension presented a huge challenge for managers of HE careers services when trying to promote services as the solution to employability challenges within an institutional setting (Thambar, 2018a) as careers advisers were required to work more explicitly with colleagues across their services, articulate their skills and approach their roles within their institutional context. Her research reflected on the evolution of institutional approaches to employability which led to greater levels of cross-institutional working and academic alignment in HE careers services: the nature of careers and employability professional work was transformed with many new roles emerging. However, arguably, those who completed a professional qualification that was careers-related (most notably careers advisers) were more invested in a careers professional identity than colleagues from other backgrounds.

### Changing nature of student and graduate employment and work

HE careers services in England consistently utilised a wide range of data sources and publications to understand labour market patterns and trends. This knowledge of the labour market remained a defining feature of professional practice and was fundamental to guiding students and graduates in consideration of their career options. The occupational structure in the English system was such that graduates could move into many jobs irrespective of their degree background. Careers advisers required an in-depth understanding of the nature of opportunities and entry routes into a wide diversity of roles which were constantly changing.

Economic and social change contributed to a changing student and graduate labour market in England and beyond. The annual collection of graduate career destinations by HESA – transforming over time from First Destinations Statistics (FDS) to DLHE, to Graduate Outcomes (GO) consistently underpinned understandings of how opportunities for work

compare dependent on a range of factors, including region, university attended and subject of study.

Various research, policy and professional organisations sought to analyse such trends. The annual joint AGCAS and 'Graduate Prospects'<sup>2</sup> publication '*What do Graduates Do?*' typically focused on subject of study and occupations, while the Institute of Fiscal Studies (IFS) (e.g., Britton *et al.*, 2016) highlighted salary differences between graduates of different disciplines, universities, and demographic characteristics. Meanwhile the Social Mobility Commission (e.g., 2016) in its annual '*State of the Nation*' reports illustrated how employment outcomes were influenced by socio-economic background.

Employer organisations such as the Confederation of British Industry, the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development and the Institute of Student Employers also regularly reported on the graduate labour market with a focus on the employer perspective, very often reflecting demand for new skills and occupations. Their analyses revealed that demand from certain sectors/occupations and skills varied over time. For example, the onset of the year 2000 created considerable demand for IT professionals due to fears of the Millennium bug. Demand for such professionals continued albeit with different emphases and purpose as technology advanced with needs for expertise in areas such as software development (linked to growth in artificial intelligence and related areas) being cited in the in-demand skillset in 2020.

Across both decades (1999-2020), other changes reflected changes in government policy. The New Labour government of 1997-2010 led to an increased number of roles in the public sector, which then reduced due to the onset of austerity led by the Coalition government of 2010-2015. New and evolving occupations could be traced in AGCAS profiles on the 'Graduate Prospects' website. This period saw the growth of new roles related to the expansion of technology, e.g., game developer, cybersecurity analyst, social media

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<sup>2</sup> Graduate Prospects <https://www.prospects.ac.uk/about-us/who-we-are>

manager, digital marketing executive, search engine optimization specialist. Similarly, more traditional sectors witnessed the evolution of new roles, e.g., in healthcare, genetic counsellor, health improvement practitioner, physician associate, and psychological wellbeing practitioner.

Throughout this period, the Institute of Employment Research (IER) at Warwick University was seminal in its work on the graduate labour market. Its predominantly quantitative work (e.g., Elias *et al.*, 1999; Elias and Purcell, 2013; Purcell and Elias, 2004) charted the changing nature of graduate jobs, departing from classic definitions of a graduate versus non-graduate job which did not always reflect new and niche graduate positions. Its work led to a new typology of graduate jobs – traditional, modern, new and niche – which it went on to map onto a categorisation of the use of certain skills and knowledge which it described as expert (specialist knowledge-intensive roles), orchestrator (managerial roles), and communicator (highly interpersonal, creative and technological roles) (Elias and Purcell, 2013).

In contrast to government policy (e.g., DBIS, 2013; DfE and IFS, 2020) the IER's analysis of the job market over time became notably less positive about labour market returns on a degree (most markedly after the 2008 financial crash). It depicted a diversity of returns which may be because of expanded participation in HE, with the implication that such an enlarged population may not match traditional or even newer graduate-level work opportunities (Behle *et al.*, 2015). The impact of the global financial crash of 2008 on the labour market put strain on the graduate labour market for all stakeholders. Behle *et al.* (2015) described the 'recession effect' visible in the class of 2009-10, with higher graduate unemployment and underemployment, but suggested that although the intensity of this down-turn was temporary, it was likely that a lack of work that made full use of graduates' skills and abilities would prevail.

The COVID-19 pandemic economic recession raised fears that the disruption caused by the 2008 financial crash would be repeated (Purcell *et al.*, 2021; UUK, 2020). Notably, the

emergence of graduate internships evolved after the 2008 recession, an indicator of a more challenging labour market in which graduates take short term opportunities in the absence of more permanent roles. Fears of graduate underemployment was an issue careers services had to grapple with in their work with students and in the pressure of expectations from their institutions which sought to market courses based on positive destinations.

The process of making employment relationships flexible ('flexibilisation') was a feature of the labour market from the 1980s, with trends including a growth in temporary, agency and freelance work. The development of platform-based gig economy work in the 2000s was a more recent trend, adding to the atypical work that students might do whilst studying. HE careers services were part of the debate about protecting the quality of student work e.g., via unpaid internships. Even so, ethical issues for careers advisers remained (Buzdugan, 2020) and work via AGCAS on addressing these concerns was ongoing.

Careers services (AGCAS and Prospects, 2016) and commentators such as Ball (2015a, 2018) navigated the complex media and public policy messaging about careers and broadly aimed to foster realism and optimism. AGCAS research in 2012 on graduate transition to employment or further studies focused on discovering what characterised graduates who made a 'successful' transition (Pennington *et al.*, 2013). Arguably, in certain parts of the job market, there were not enough graduates (e.g., nursing, engineering, construction, teaching, IT, and parts of the business services industry), a trend unevenly spread across different sectors as well as geographical locations (Ball, 2015a), with very few employers investing in converting graduates into skill shortage areas of work. AGCAS members in their research also sought to face with candour the challenges of the labour market, highlighting the varied values and experiences of graduates (Scurry and Blenkinsopp, 2018, Christie, 2017a).

In summary, the period from 1999 to 2020 witnessed changing trends in the structure of the labour market which reflected changes in the number and nature of work opportunities for graduates, with a growth of diverse outcomes. These trends raised questions among careers advisers and others about normative definitions of what a successful graduate

outcome really was, and the diverse social and personal benefits gained by securing a degree. Throughout, HE careers services navigated these complex issues in their work in their institutions, juggling competing pressures.

### Policy and practice trends, regionalisation and social mobility

There was increasing recognition over time that there was not one graduate labour market in England or in the UK. Ball (2015b) focused attention on critiquing the notion of there being a national labour market and highlighted different patterns of employment and movement of graduates. The typology of 'loyals, stayers, returners and incomers' was influential in understanding different migration patterns. An important body of work highlighted regional differences (e.g., Finn and Holton, 2019) and problematised the magnet of London and other urban areas for new graduates. This work also challenged assumptions that graduates were highly mobile and recognised that original home domicile was an important predictor of where graduates ended up working.

HE careers services were closely connected to the policy relating to the regional agenda, which was of great importance to the vast majority if not all of English HEIs. Their contribution was a natural combination of support for local business through student and graduate talent and the provision/surfacing of local and regional opportunities for students and graduates. In some cases, where enterprise and entrepreneurship were incorporated into HE careers services, this included support for business creation.

Over the years there were numerous graduate retention initiatives in English regions. Arguably, their heyday was in the early- to mid-2000s when the creation of Regional Development Agencies helped to support large scale careers services-led graduate retention programmes such as Graduates Yorkshire, Grad Southwest and Advantage West Midlands amongst others. Following the introduction of Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) in 2010, HE careers services engaged with them and local authorities in this space.

The focus on regional/local initiatives gathered pace during the latter part of the period from 1999 to 2020. This was due to a growing understanding of the changing student demographic, notably the rise in the number of 'commuter students' (Thomas and Jones, 2017) and increased awareness of poorer graduate outcomes on average, for students who chose to or needed to study and work locally. In 2018, application rates for 18-year-olds living in areas in England with low participation in HE increased to the highest levels recorded (22.6%); many such students chose to stay local to their family home (UUK, 2019). In 2019 the OfS announced the successful bids into a Challenge Fund to support projects addressing these issues. These were overwhelmingly, but not exclusively, HE careers services led.

The position of HE careers services in relation to KE policy and regional development has played out over several years in what might be seen as KE through student engagement, notably internships (including research internships) and enterprise activities, often supported through institutions' allocations from the Higher Education Innovation Fund. This focus was brought to the fore through another Challenge Fund competition run jointly by the OfS and Research England in 2020.

Social inequalities in relation to graduate outcomes were an enduring concern through this period. Predictions that the tuition fee increases in 2006 and 2012 would be a widespread deterrent to students from lower socioeconomic groups were found to be misplaced (Harrison, 2017). However, data collected annually for HESA about graduate outcomes consistently illustrated how destinations were influenced by social background, more than by attendance at an elite or non-elite university.

Equality, diversity, and social mobility were the specific responsibility of OFFA from 2004. However, the emergence of 'Access and Participation Agreements' could be considered one of the most impactful policy initiatives for HE careers services (Hewitt, 2020). These were formal agreements between HEIs and the OfS in which HEIs had to evidence their intentions and actions in relation to widening participation, equality, and social mobility. Notably, this



was a policy area in which there was a high level of congruence between the intention of the policy and the ethos, which drove HE careers services and the people in them. HE careers services involvement grew as policy became increasingly concerned with differential outcomes from, as well as differential access to, HE for disadvantaged groups – both ‘getting in and getting on’ (Hewitt, 2020).

### Present and future challenges, big data and technology

From the mid-2000s increasing amounts of data about student participation and outcomes became available which underscored information available to HEIs and the bodies that measured their performance. Metrics were a key feature of the accountability environment and graduate outcomes continued to be significant amongst them.

Ironically, the gathering and interpretation of graduate destinations data was originally instigated by careers services for careers guidance purposes (Maynard and Kingston 2007). Yet over time, following the development of league tables (Christie, 2017b) and particularly in an era of consumer regulation, these data became inextricably bound up with measurement, scrutiny, and accountability (though they can still be used for CEIAG purposes).

HE careers services had to juggle this accountability environment, while also recognising critically that the growing marketisation and ‘massification’ of HE served to raise questions about the value of a degree and relatedly how different occupations were valued. They realised that the metrics which measure institutional employability and were used by the Teaching Excellence Framework (introduced under the government paper ‘*Success as a Knowledge Economy: Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility and Student Choice*’, (DBIS, 2016)), often ignored structural inequalities such as how region of domicile and social background impacted on graduate outcomes.

The metrics enacted by public policy also ignored more nuanced success measures of having a degree. Careers services continued to have insights into how individual career

aspirations were more subjective than public policy would have the public believe. They were aware of the risks of overplaying a focus on economic benefits of a degree, and of the failure to give sufficient attention to the wider societal value (social trust, volunteering, and political efficacy) of having a more highly educated population (Green and Henseke, 2016).

The growth of big data and the ability of careers services to use it was a trend echoing wider societal patterns. As well as reactively responding and interpreting available data via graduate destinations statistics, HE careers services took a more pro-active approach in collecting data. In 2012 the University of Leeds Careers Service introduced Careers Registration, an annual snapshot of the career readiness of all enrolling students (Gilworth, 2021). Subsequently, a significant proportion of UK universities adopted versions of this approach which provided the first opportunity to use big data to monitor the career development of current students. These data were used to develop tailored institutional or departmental employability strategies and to design and promote activities and resources according to students' career development needs.

The mounting importance of data in HE careers services resulted in a need for research and analysis expertise within careers teams (Winter, 2019). Some of this expertise came through the creation of special analyst roles within careers services or the redefining of more traditional careers information roles. However, the requirement for evidence-based practice and impact evaluation meant that these skills became increasingly important across all roles.

The period explored in this chapter witnessed the acceleration of technological change and what has been called the 4<sup>th</sup> Industrial Revolution. This had implications for HE careers services in adjusting to the changing world of work for their own work and how they prepare students (Thambar, 2018b). In particular, careers professionals' expertise and identity associated with long-established knowledge of a steady-state graduate market was at risk of being undermined.

The spread of new technologies had a significant impact on the functioning of HE careers services and the role of HE careers advisers. An increasing number of HE careers services

adopted careers service management systems which captured information on a range of service activities, making it possible to track the engagement of students and employers with careers service activities and to monitor the reach and impact of these activities.

The evolution of technology on the delivery of expert careers and employability services was rapidly accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Research into the identity of '*The 21<sup>st</sup> Century Careers Professional*' (Thambar *et al.*, 2020) confirmed a significant move towards curricular delivery and strong identification with teaching and learning amongst careers advisers, sometimes more strongly than with the HE careers services themselves. Similarly, the research confirmed the move to the use of varied technologies and the subsequent expansion of opportunities for gaining greater access to students, increased potential to share content, and more scope for employer engagement. However, challenges were also recognised for professional practice, such as maintaining the (perceived) quality of in-person delivery, whilst also keeping up with student and recruiter technological expectations.

## Conclusion

Despite there being no statutory requirements around the provision of careers advice in HEIs, careers advice and guidance was an important student service offered by all HEIs during the period from 1999 to 2020. The general sense of movement from periphery to core has been a constant (if not always consistent) trend in the history of HE careers services over these last twenty years. This seems to have been reinforced at each significant stage of policy change, but it is always important to bear in mind that HE careers services are departments of their universities. The organisational responses to external policy have always been subject to local interpretation by autonomous institutions (Gilworth, 2019). The common trend towards the perceived importance of employability in HE has been consistent, but autonomous institutions will understandably make their own choices about the internal deployment of resources and structures to address the employability agenda.

Contextual changes to the labour market and rising numbers of students have transformed the practice of HE careers services. Even where role titles remained the same, what careers advisers did and their professional identity evolved in response to complex environments, despite a prevailing core professional purpose. This pattern of change was accelerated due to the COVID-19 pandemic which threatened to disrupt key activities such as careers fairs forever. AGCAS as a professional association played an important role in arguing for the interests of members and maintaining professionalism, alongside an increasing advocacy role regarding strategic themes of learning, quality, research, knowledge and community. Throughout, HE careers services continued to do their work, effectively managing the competing pressures of varied stakeholders – students, universities, employers. Their position at the boundary of their institutions placed them in a unique position to put HE careers-related policy into practice.

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## Footnotes

1. Employability - providing the opportunities to develop knowledge, skills, experiences, behaviours, attributes, achievements and attitudes to enable graduates to make successful transitions.

2. Graduate Prospects <https://www.prospects.ac.uk/about-us/who-we-are>