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

Summary of research findings

Julia Yates, City, University of London and Wendy Hirsh, NICEC Fellow

This is a summary of the early analysis of data 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 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.

Study aims and method

The aim of this study was to explore:

- how career practitioners working in higher education characterise the career difficulties that students bring to their 1-1 conversations;
- how CPs address these difficulties;
- which difficulties CPs find challenging to deal with; and
- what further professional development they feel they need.

A survey of CPs doing 1-1 work with students collected 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 difficulties was used in the survey derived from previous research literature and refined in conversation with HE CPs. The items reflected 6 groups of student career difficulties: lack of readiness; lack of information; conflicts; pessimism; anxiety; and identity. The Annex shows the structure of the career difficulties covered in the survey.

The survey data covered 600 1-1 conversations conducted by 59 CPs in 36 diverse UK HE institutions in 2019/20.

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

The career decision-making difficulties of students

- CPs see many HE students who are struggling with career decision-making. As shown on Table 1 below and more fully in the Annex, students most often present asking for help with the job application process. The interviews showed this was usually focused on CVs. Students also say they need help with identifying career options and how to research them. The next most common items reflect anxiety about the uncertainty of the career choice process and choosing itself (if they can't work out what to do). Not knowing how to make a choice is a third difficulty with the career development process. In terms of groups of difficulties, information comes out highest but nearly half the students presented with some form of anxiety and a third with lack of career readiness.

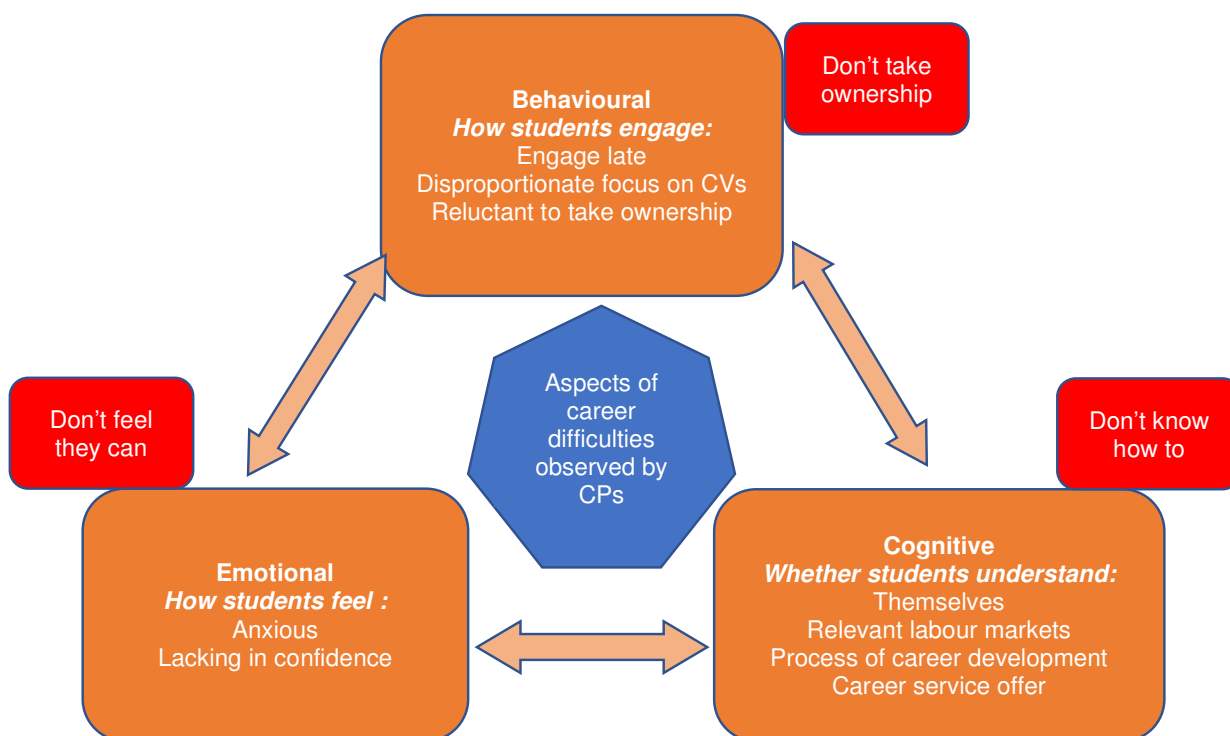
Table 1 - Top career difficulties presented by students and assessed by CPs

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%
<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 broadly the same as the items the students presented, but CPs identified difficulties more often than students presented them. CPs observed higher proportions not knowing how to research options and showing anxiety about the process and its uncertainty. CPs assessed well over half the students they saw as showing some form of anxiety and over 40% showing a lack of readiness.
- The interviews with CPs enabled this study to extend earlier frameworks for career decision-making difficulties, suggesting a model of three inter-related sets of career difficulties manifest in higher education students. This model is shown in Figure 1. The three sets of difficulties are emotional (students don't feel they can deal with careers); cognitive (students don't know how to make career decisions) and behavioural (students are reluctant to take ownership of their own career development). CPs see many students who engage late with career services, are anxious and far from ready to make a choice. Students often ask for help with CVs or interviews when they have not really thought about what they want to do.

Figure 1: Manifestations of students' career difficulties

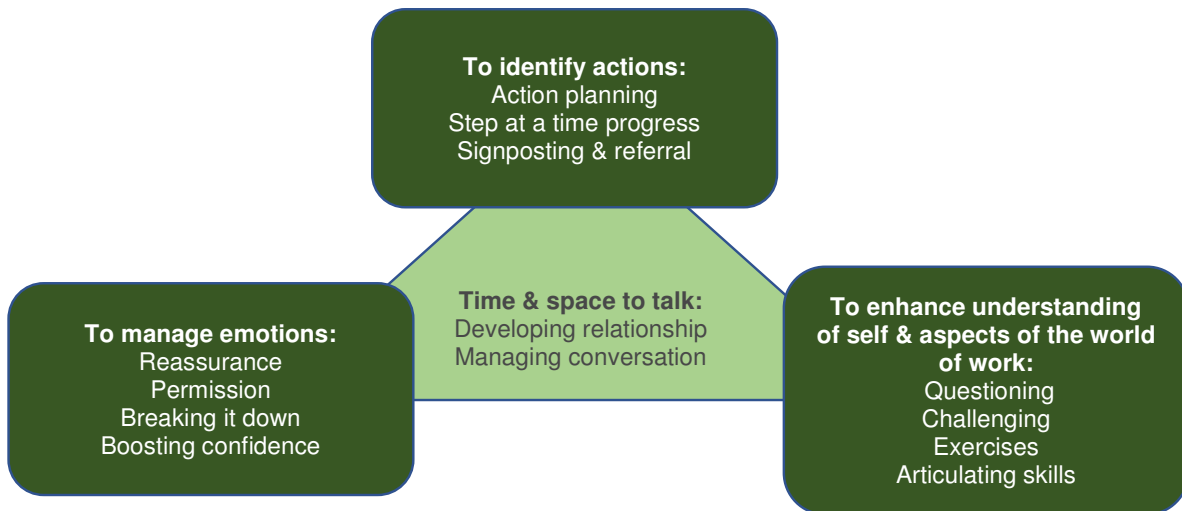


- CPs see the career difficulties of students as caused by social and practical pressures; their limited life and work experience; their limited experience of career education while at school and generally too little development of self-reflection and decision-making in the education system; the complexity and competitiveness of the labour market and the somewhat confusing messages about careers and career development that they experience in higher education.

How practitioners address students' difficulties in 1-1 conversations

- CPs support students in 1-1 sessions by giving them *space to think*, using approaches that help them with their emotions and self-awareness and encourage them to identify next steps they can take. Figure 2 shows some of the common ways in which CPs address the behavioural, emotional and cognitive career difficulties of students.
- Some elements of practice were mostly shared across CPs in this study. These include a student-centred set of values and approaches, largely based on counselling techniques. CPs have a largely shared range of techniques to manage the students' anxieties, increase their self-awareness, and give practical information about job hunting (CVs, interviews etc). Articulating skills was quite often used as a start point for thinking about jobs. CPs have a positive approach to signposting and referring students to other university services, for example where there is a significant mental health issue.

Figure 2: How practitioners address students' career difficulties in 1-1 conversations



- Practitioners have less commonality around their role in acquiring and sharing labour market intelligence with students, with some CPs very ambivalent about this aspect of their work. In the 'enhancing understanding' area of Figure 2, CPs were much more confident describing how they help students understand themselves than how they enhance labour market understanding. Although none of the CPs felt they should be directive about career choice, some were more directive than others about action planning. CPs had practices and attitudes about following up 1-1 conversations with students, sometimes depending on the policy of their career service.

Gaps and challenges

- There is limited evidence that CPs *explain career development as a process* to students. Practitioners are frustrated that students do not understand what a CP can do in a 1-1 session, especially that they cannot take a decision for the student. But the CP interviews did not include clear *articulation of the place of 1-1 guidance* within the broader process of career development. There also seems to be a gap in relation to approaches to *generating career options* with those students who have no ideas about what they want to do. This is another key difficulty the CPs observe in students.
- Although most of the CPs also have roles in career education, often within faculties, and despite the sector-wide focus on 'employability' only a few offered descriptions of their 1-1 practice that explicitly included the development of *career management skills* in students.
- Most CPs say they do not use *theory* in a specific way as the basis for their practice, beyond general adoption of a student-centred, counselling type (or Rogerian) approach, including significant emphasis on action planning (Egan was often mentioned). Some had been trained in specific approaches to structuring career conversations, often as a series of steps, but they did not use these in a detailed way. Ideas about values and social or structural factors in careers were also mentioned in

general terms. It seems that initial training and theory may enable CPs to develop their own ways of working. But those interviewed expressed some unease that their practice is not more firmly grounded in theory, especially career theory, or evidence.

- CPs identified at least one challenging difficulty in just under half of the 600 interviews included in the survey. The challenges most often cited were students with an unrealistic idea of how to make a career choice (for example expecting the CP to tell them what to do); low self-confidence; lack of information about options; anxiety about the uncertainty of the process and not knowing how to make a choice. Again, we see the interplay between lack of information, lack of readiness and student anxiety.
- In the interviews it was clear that CPs feel challenged most when they feel they are disappointing the students. Their frustration is felt when students expect the CP to tell them what to do, or where students have very unrealistic career expectations or in the small proportion of students with complex needs. Complex needs could be practical, for example in the multiple difficulties faced by some international students, but also emotional, including some students with significant mental health issues.

Professional development and tensions in professional practice

- The CPs interviewed wanted a much more serious approach to CPD, like “proper professions”, as several said. Some would like peer review and supervision. CPs are interested in short courses, both within their own service and more widely, although budgets are often a constraint. Some CPs interviewed had undertaken or were planning further academic study. Where CPs were in services with leaders who encouraged peer and team learning, this was helpful and much appreciated.
- In terms of the content of CPD or further training, those interviewed were interested in keeping up to date with theory but want this to be integrated with its practical application. There is also interest in acquiring a wider range of helping techniques, especially coaching and, for some, a deeper knowledge of counselling. Another common area of interest is in dealing more confidently with mental health issues and effectively managing the boundary with specialist mental health services.
- There are some evident tensions between CPs’ commitment to a counselling approach to guidance and their commitment to addressing the career difficulties of students, who come expecting the CP to offer concrete suggestions, give them information and help them get a job. The lack of readiness of so many students to make informed career choices does seem at odds with the still prevalent model of a single careers interview, even an in-depth and skilfully conducted one. Only in some institutions is it easy to book follow up sessions, and some students need more support than can be offered.
- CPs understand the logic of delivering career education teaching in faculties, but most do not experience students as engaging well in these activities. CPs appreciate the cost drivers for using less highly trained staff for quick queries, but also observe that students who ask for tactical help with job getting are often really need help with career choice. These are some of the tensions highlighted by this study between the career difficulties of students; career service organisation and resources; and the experiences, professional identities and preferences of career practitioners in UK higher education.

Annex – Career difficulties survey results

For each item, the table shows the percentage of career practitioner (CP) interviews with students in which the difficulty was reported. For each group of difficulties, percentages refer to interviews in which at least one item in that group of difficulties was reported.

<i>N=600 interviews reported by 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.