

What Can the Higher Education Curriculum Do for Careers?

Julia Horn and A.G. Watts

The growth of career education programmes within higher education institutions has been one of the major developments in the UK career development field in the last few years. As the survey by Foskett & Johnston (2006) indicates, over two-fifths of higher education institutions now have credit-bearing career education for at least some of their students; of those who do not, just over one in ten have plans to do so. Over half of the provision has been developed in the last five years.

An important paper by Phil McCash in a recent issue of the *British Journal of Guidance and Counselling* (McCash, 2006) indicates a number of intriguing distinctions between career(s) education in schools and in higher education. In schools, careers education is statutory, with learning outcomes imposed from without, but assessment is informal. In higher education, by contrast, career education – sometimes alternately known as career management skills (Hawkins & Winter, 1995; Hustler *et al.*, 1998) or career development learning (Watts, 2006) – is non-statutory, with learning outcomes developed from within, but assessment is often formal and credit-rated.

An opportunity to review and reflect upon the state of the art in career education within higher education was provided by a conference organised by the Centre for Career Management Skills (CCMS) at the University of Reading and held over two days in January 2007. CCMS welcomed 173 delegates from 83 higher education institutions, and the programme offered 18 workshops and presentations in addition to keynote speeches from Pauline Kneale, Andrew Whitmore, Tony Watts and Simon Reichwald. The event was an opportunity for CCMS to launch its new career learning website, 'Destinations', but was also an invitation to showcase other approaches to career education and to debate and analyse issues involved in developing the role of careers in the curriculum.

What can the curriculum do for careers? This was the theme of the conference and is also the title for this special edition of the NICEC journal, which presents a small selection of articles from presenters at the conference. The

theme proved to be an apt way to examine the proliferation of career education in higher education in the UK, allowing the focus to fall upon the curriculum and questions of what the higher education curriculum is for, as well as upon its relationship to careers, and how careers professionals can best educate and help their clients.

Currently, in most institutions, the take-up of careers modules is fairly small. The only institution which makes such modules compulsory for all students is the University of Reading. A show of hands in one of the sessions at the conference indicated, however, that such an approach, or other strategies to extend the level of participation, are under consideration in a number of institutions.

Several themes arose during the plenary presentations and in the workshops. How can careers professionals gain access to the curriculum and to students in higher education without facing hostility from academics, who are fearful of their curriculum time being squeezed and of 'dumbing down'? What outcomes do we expect from career education? Should we be looking to first destinations (DLHE¹) figures for proof of effective teaching, or to student feedback, or to assessed work for evidence of learning? In a labour market in which there are more graduates than graduate jobs, to what extent are all our efforts about competition amongst universities to gain our students the best jobs at the expense of other universities? Can career education bridge the divide between governmental policy-making and liberal educational values, or is it another trend that may flourish quietly in some areas of the curriculum, but will never impact upon the vast majority?

Such questions are explored further in this issue, which invites readers to step back from their daily concerns and consider the wider issues involved in the development of career education in the higher education curriculum. Two contributions, from Ros Foskett, and from Jenny Bimrose and Jane Artess, summarise recent research projects commissioned by HECSU: the first to understand respectively the nature and extent of credit-bearing career education in the curriculum; the second to provide a literature review of evidence on the effectiveness of careers interventions. These two articles provide a useful overview of the current status of career education in the UK, as well as identifying research questions that urgently need answering.

¹ Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education

In contrast to the wider picture offered in these two articles, Glen Crust's article examines the impact and effectiveness of career education at a single institution. His in-depth analysis of different outcome measures and student responses to career education courses probes the issues inherent in career education in enlightening ways. In particular, his analogy of reluctant students on careers modules, as being like alcoholics who are not ready to give up their habit, is an important insight into the particular challenge of providing career education to those who have not voluntarily signed up for it.

Some of the suggestions which arise in Crust's article are echoed in two 'think pieces', by Phil McCash and Julia Horn respectively. All three articles advocate, via different approaches, a conception of career education which gives students the opportunity to research and define their own understanding of terms such as 'career', 'employability' and 'graduateness'. This approach can be defined by using McCash's designation, 'Career Studies', in which the student conceived as researcher and critical thinker gains precedence over the student conceived as the object of the demands of graduate employers.

Research skills are also given prominence in Pauline Kneale's article, which calls on careers education to really stretch students through assignments. In other ways, however, Kneale's approach can be contrasted with McCash's conception of Career Studies. Kneale focuses on how careers advisers and academics can work together to ensure regular contact with careers education and employability activities throughout a degree programme. She proposes embedding student contact with careers primarily through academic work and assessment, and argues that an 'information flow' between senior managers, academics and careers professionals is vital to create interest and engagement.

We might ask, as Foskett does in her review of career education, who is best placed to engender this engagement, and who is qualified and willing to create and teach courses of 'Career Studies' or indeed any form of career education? Should this be the role of academics, of careers advisers, of a new breed of teaching-focused (and perhaps research-focused) careers professionals, or of creative partnerships between careers and academic staff? The attendance at the CCMS conference of participants in all of these categories suggest that institutions are finding many different answers to this question, and offering many different varieties of career education. We hope that, whatever their own role and perspective, readers will find ideas within this special edition to challenge their thinking and invigorate their practice.

References

Foskett, R. & Johnston, B. (2006). *Curriculum Development and Career Decision-Making in Higher Education: Credit-Bearing Careers Education*. Manchester: HECSU.

Hawkins, P. & Winter, J. (1995). *Skills for Graduates in the 21st Century*. Cambridge: Association of Graduate Recruiters.

Hustler, D., Ball, B., Carter, K., Halsall, R., Ward, R. & Watts, A.G. (1998). *Developing Career Management Skills in Higher Education*. NICEC Project Report. Cambridge: Careers Research and Advisory Centre.

McCash, P. (2006). We're all career researchers now: breaking open career education and DOTS. *British Journal of Guidance and Counselling*, 34(4), 429-449.

Watts, A.G. (2006). *Career Development Learning and Employability*. Learning and Employability Series Two No.5. York: Higher Education Academy.

CCMS

The Centre for Career Management Skills (CCMS) is a HEFCE-funded Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL). The Centre was established in 2005 to build on the University of Reading's previous success in establishing a programme of Career Management Skills in the curriculum for all undergraduate students. One of the principal achievements of the Centre to date has been the creation of a flexible online learning resource to support the delivery of careers education programmes. This website, 'Destinations', can be tailored to suit the needs of different higher education institutions and customised through a virtual learning environment (VLE).

The Centre also awards fellowships to fund innovative careers education projects both at the University of Reading and at other institutions. The fellowships are only a part of the Centre's outreach and dissemination work, which also includes an annual conference and two careers education working groups focused on the needs of foundation degree and postgraduate degree students. The Centre also supports two doctoral students who are examining how higher education, careers interventions and work-related experiences impact upon students and their career choices. More information about these studentships and the work of CCMS can be found at the project website: <http://www.reading.ac.uk/ccms>