

Would You Credit It? Issues in Understanding Patterns of Credit-bearing Careers Education in the Higher Education Curriculum

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The relationship between the labour market, employers and the higher education (HE) curriculum is a key area for debate. This article considers some of the issues concerning credit-bearing careers education in universities and colleges. A number of elements in the HE landscape have converged regarding the nature of the curriculum offered to students. Increased fees have made the cost of gaining a degree much higher overall, even if the up-front costs have been reduced. The move to a mass market for HE with participation rates approaching 50% of those of those under 30 years of age has changed the proportion entering the workforce with a first degree, although evidence quoted by the government on the value of a degree on lifetime earnings (Blair, 2004) in this new mass market has yet to be tested. Employability of graduates is becoming a key question for students and their families and part of their decision-making during recruitment. What students learn during their time at university is important for politicians and employers too, and political initiatives in recent years have sought to increase the integration of employability skills and enterprise initiatives in programmes (e.g. Higher Education for Capability (1988), Enterprise in Higher Education (1989), the Dearing Report (NCIHE, 1997) and, more recently, the publication of the Leitch Review of Skills (2006)).

Increasingly, higher education institutions (HEIs) are being encouraged to review their curriculum in terms of the employability of graduates (Yorke, 2004) and the nature of their careers services, and to involve employers more in developing demand-led (often used synonymously with 'employer-focused') curriculum. For example, the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) code of practice places a

responsibility on HEIs to provide integrated careers provision and to ensure that staff are kept informed of current employment trends:

If CEIG [Careers Education, Information and Guidance], as well as the employability aspects of course content and of curriculum-based skills development, are to be relevant and up-to-date, then they must be informed by accurate labour market information and by the experience and perspective of employers. This is especially important in the context of a rapidly changing employment market. Systems and procedures should therefore be in place to ensure that these feedback loops operate effectively both at the level of CEIG provision, including staff development and training, and of curriculum design and programme specification.

(QAA, 2001, para 16)

In 2005/6, a national research project, commissioned and funded by the Higher Education Careers Services Unit (HECSU), investigated the nature and extent of credit-bearing careers education provision in HE (Foskett and Johnston, 2006). This article considers some of the methodological issues which faced the project team and poses some questions to careers professionals about the nature of credit-bearing provision.

Aims and methodology

The project aimed to map the provision of credit-bearing careers education within UK HEIs and further and higher education (FHE) colleges and to produce a fine-grained typology for this provision. In order to do this, data was collected using a nationwide survey, and a number of vignettes of interesting and innovative practice were produced. The research data was collected in three stages. Firstly, key informant interviews were conducted to help scope the project and provide advice about the survey. Individuals were selected as a purposive sample well placed to be able to speak authoritatively on the nature of current provision and with extensive experience of careers education in higher education. The sample included individuals spanning all sectors (universities established before or after the removal of the binary divide between universities and polytechnics in 1992; university colleges; specialist colleges; and FHE colleges) and all home countries of the United Kingdom (England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland).

The second stage involved collection of questionnaire data, and two different instruments were used. An institutional questionnaire was sent out to the heads of careers services and the heads of HE (in FHE colleges) of all institutions with HE provision. The scope of the questions and the issues raised (Figure 1) were informed by the key informant interviews and the Careers Education Benchmark Statement (AGCAS, 2005). The original intention was to circulate a single questionnaire, but it became apparent early on in discussions with the project's advisers that someone able to offer an institutional perspective might not know, in sufficient detail, what was happening at the level of programme delivery. A second survey instrument was therefore provided to institutions to circulate in order to capture information about provision at the programme/unit level. This questionnaire gathered detail about the academic offer at programme/unit level.

In the final stage of the project, a selection of credit-bearing provision from both the key informant interviews and the outcomes of the questionnaire was identified to form a set of illustrative vignettes of practice. These were used in the final report to exemplify practice from across the sectors and home countries, and were drawn up with the co-operation of the lead people in each case.

Figure 1: The Scope of the Questionnaires

Questionnaire 1: Institution

- Overall nature of the provision
- Subject areas
- Levels of awards
- Levels of delivery
- Credit points attached
- Number of students involved
- Number of contact hours involved
- Role of personnel responsible for delivery
- Funding base
- Institutional alignment of the provision
- Origins and development
- Chronology
- Collaboration with other institutions
- Location of the career service within the institution

Questionnaire 2: Unit/Programme

- Level of award
- Level of delivery
- Credit points attached
- Number of students involved
- Number of contact hours involved
- Subject area
- Mode of delivery
- Institutional location of delivery
- Teaching and learning methods
- Formal specified learning outcomes
- Actual learning outcomes
- Personnel involved in delivery and assessment

- Content of the provision
- Assessment strategy and methods
- Evaluation strategies for the unit
- Collaboration with other institutions
- Summary description of the particular case study

Emergent issues

The research project threw up a number of issues in its design which have important implications for careers services in HE, the professionals who work in them, and institutional managers. These issues are examined here and their possible impact on practice is elaborated.

(i) Definition of terms

One early problem encountered by the team was the definition of credit-bearing careers education. There is significant variation in the definition used by practitioners, which hinders investigation. The definitions finally used in this project are shown in Figure 2. These were drawn up with advice from key informants and advisory group members, and with reference to the Careers Education Benchmark Statement (AGCAS, 2006). The aim was to be as clear as possible about the nature and the scope of the project, particularly in terms of the type of provision being studied. These definitions were circulated as part of the introductory letters, and respondents were encouraged to seek clarification if necessary.

Figure 2: Definitions Used in the Study (extract from the covering letter)

We consider credit-bearing careers education to be units/modules which contribute to the career planning or career management of students, for the next stage after completion of their degree programme or other course.

We consider:

- **CREDIT-BEARING** to mean units/modules that are assessed and count towards the final award either in terms of grades received at the end of the unit/module or in terms of being one of the constituent parts in the programme which may be assessed by final examination, or as a completion requirement.
- **CAREERS EDUCATION** to mean some form of learning which seeks to position and prepare the student for the next stage in their career. We are interested in units/modules where there is conscious development among the students of awareness of career opportunities or reflective capacities. This may take a variety of forms. It may be termed as a traditional "careers course" or it may focus on employability skills or may be allied with personal

development planning etc. It may be part of professional/vocational training where the learning outcomes are specifically designed to develop career planning aspects of **employability** in the students.

- The **NEXT STAGE** might be employment or postgraduate education or time out or unemployment or voluntary activities or community and domestic involvement.

If in doubt about whether a course counts as credit-bearing careers education, please contact us.

There are many issues relating to definition and scope but three had a particular impact on this project. Firstly, we had difficulty in defining the relationship between careers education and professional training in programmes such as medicine, social work and teaching. Our aim was to capture provision where the learning outcomes were specifically designed to cover career planning and to increase graduate employability, rather than all aspects of preparing students for their professional role. Despite our attempt at making this distinction, we felt that this provision was inadequately captured and probably led to under-recording in the results.

The definition is further confused by the use of terms with overlapping meaning, e.g. employability, careers education, career planning, career management, personal development planning. In addition, there are a number of developments within the HE curriculum which also overlap with credit-bearing careers education to a greater or lesser extent, such as key skills (QCA, 2000), work-related learning (Moreland, 2005), enterprise and entrepreneurship education (Hartshorn, 2002; Moreland, 2004). This diversity of terms makes it difficult to audit provision.

Finally, we attempted to define the 'next stage' broadly in order to encompass a range of activities that students might go on to, including paid work in a 'graduate' job. This broad definition was deliberate, as it was felt necessary to include activities such as postgraduate education, voluntary work and travel as these may be part of a graduate's career plan. Considering the impact of these types of activities on future career plans and trajectories is an important part of the careers education process.

(ii) Identifying the right gatekeepers

A second major issue was how to gather information on the full extent of the provision within an institution. It was very difficult to identify who to ask about this, as knowledge within institutions is often very dispersed, particularly in large institutions which have a devolved structure. We considered various 'gatekeepers', such as quality assurance officers, pro-vice chancellors (education), heads of academic services, and programme leaders, as well as heads of careers. Although quality assurance officers should have access to the programme

specifications for all programmes within their institution, we were advised that such detail would be too difficult to gather. So we settled on heads of careers as the best placed professional officers to provide an institutional overview and access to relevant people at programme level; for FHE colleges we mailed our questionnaire to the 'head of careers or head of HE', as it is not uncommon for there to be no head of careers in such institutions. Once again, we suspect from evidence from the interviews that these decisions led to some under-recording of provision, for some of the reasons given below (in iii and v).

(iii) Knowledge of provision by the careers service staff

It became clear that the knowledge of individual programmes by careers advisers was patchy at best: it was common to come across credit-bearing provision within an institution of which the careers service was unaware. We found that some such provision within programmes may not have involved the careers service directly in its planning and validation. This is linked to the position of careers services within the institutional structures and the scope of their activity. Careers services are most commonly located within student services (61 percent of the responses) and as a result are unlikely to be involved in the planning of academic programmes within their institution. In addition, the location of the careers service in the institutional structure impacts on how the service is viewed by students, academic staff and the careers staff themselves. Where the careers service is embedded in student services, there is a danger that it will be associated with 'remedial' work, providing support for students at risk, and not with the academic offer. These issues were raised in a number of the interviews and questionnaire responses, exemplified by the following quotation:

It is sometimes difficult for careers services who are part of support departments to influence and drive the curriculum. If you are part of learning and teaching, it is easier to influence academic colleagues. Academic departments have a lot of autonomy in terms of developing their own curriculum which might create barriers for developing things developed and delivered outside those academic schools.

(key informant interview)

The implications of this for the research project were significant. It was difficult to rely on the data being provided by careers service staff on the scope and scale of credit-bearing provision within institutions, particularly large ones, as they were often only aware of provision with which they were directly involved. Many careers services operate a system of individual careers staff working closely with a group of academic departments, which can help them gain an institutional picture, but there was almost certainly an under-recording of provision due to their lack of involvement in specific programme development and validation.

Some programmes have career planning and management embedded as part of the programme rubric, and unless careers staff work directly with these programmes, they may be unaware of this integrated provision. A good example of this is the new foundation degree award. There were only 11 reported incidences of credit-bearing provision in foundation degrees in the questionnaire returns. This is surprising, as explicit job-related education is part of the requirement for such degrees, and assessment should include a record of achievement and an individualised career plan evidenced through transcripts and personal development portfolios. As there are 2,720 programmes listed on the Foundation Degree Forward website (accessed May 2006), this indicates that either programmes which explicitly include such provision were excluded by the respondents, or the respondents were unaware of the provision. One of our key informants illustrated the type of confusion which might have existed more widely. She indicated uncertainty about whether to include a description of the foundation degrees in her interview, as she was not sure if the content (which included business, communications and employability skills, as well as industry knowledge) was relevant to our research. Although development of more integrated provision could be increased by careers staff becoming more involved in curriculum development, there may be implications here for the training of careers staff in curriculum and pedagogical practice.

(iv) Relationship with institutional practice

Another issue for the research project was how far credit-bearing careers education is embedded in institutional policies. A number of the key informants worked in institutions which had a clearly articulated policy for students gaining embedded careers education, and the

institutional questionnaires asked about its origins. Under half of the responses overall indicated that credit-bearing provision was enshrined in institutional policy. The results also revealed an interesting difference between institutional type and origins of the provision, with only 18 percent of the responses from pre-92 universities indicating the existence of an institutional policy encompassing credit-bearing provision, in contrast to 44 percent of post-92 institutions.

(v) Response rates

In the project, we were aiming for the most comprehensive coverage possible. We mailed to 394 institutions and received completed questionnaires from 117. The overall response rate was 30 percent. The project team made a significant effort to boost the overall response rate through follow up emails, telephone calls and publicity distribution. Figure 3 shows the response rates broken down by institutional type and home country. The numbers in the cells show the number of responses and the number of questionnaires sent out (in brackets). The percentage response rates are given in the end rows and columns.

The overall response rates were affected by a very low response from FHE and specialist colleges (19 percent and 25 percent, respectively). This is significant in producing a low overall response rate, as these colleges represented 65 percent of the total number sent out (256/394 institutions). Evidence from the interviews and follow-up telephone enquiries suggested that these figures reflect a very low rate of provision in FHE institutions. The overall response rates therefore may have suffered from non-providers being more likely not to return questionnaires, despite being asked to make nil returns.

Figure 3: Questionnaire Response Rates

Institution Type	England	Scotland	Wales	N.Ireland	Total
Pre-1992 University	29 (51)	5 (8)	4 (7)	1 (2)	57%
Post-1992 University	20 (48)	0 (5)	2 (2)	0 (0)	40%
University College	4 (8)	1 (2)	1 (3)	0 (2)	40%
Specialist College	8 (30)	1 (5)	0 (1)	0 (0)	25%
FHE College	34 (165)	4 (24)	1 (16)	2 (15)	19%
Total	31%	25%	28%	16%	30%

In terms of the universities and university colleges, the response rate for the institutional questionnaire was much higher (49 percent). In telephone conversations with a sample of universities who had not returned the questionnaires, there was a high proportion which did not have credit-bearing provision. The results from the survey are therefore likely to be more representative of the provision than the raw data suggested, with at least some of the 'no returns' more likely to be 'nil returns'.

The pattern by home country shows very low responses for FHE and specialist colleges across the board, and a higher response rate from England than from the other home countries (although total numbers of institutions in England are much higher). At institutional level, 41 percent of the returns indicated the presence of credit-bearing provision (Figure 4). Of those institutions which provided credit-bearing careers education, less than half of the pre-1992 universities and university colleges which responded offered it (49 percent and 33 percent), whereas most of the post-1992 universities and specialist colleges did (82 percent and 66 percent). Of the 41 FHE colleges which responded, only a small number (6, or 15 percent) actually offered credit-bearing careers education.

It is interesting that the sectors which indicated the highest proportion of credit-bearing careers education were the post-92 universities and the specialist colleges. This may reflect their more vocational nature and/or a greater focus on teaching and student support. One key informant, from an English post-1992 university, suggested a further reason for the relative popularity of credit-bearing provision in post-1992 universities:

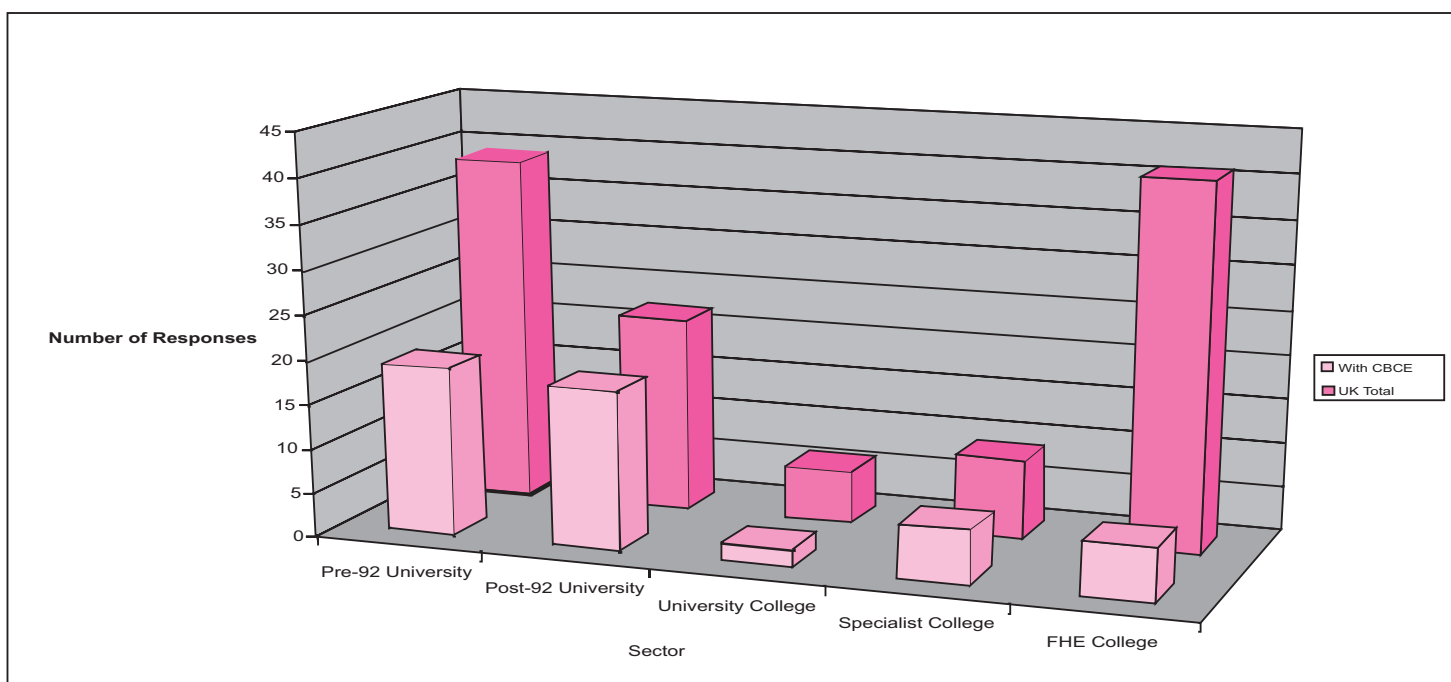
These universities are interested in widening participation and introducing PDP because of the kind of students they have who need something of this nature. They are not courted by employers. It is more difficult for the students at new universities in the employment market.

(key informant interview)

(vi) FHE colleges and credit-bearing careers education

Some of our key informants spoke about the difficulty of FHE colleges providing credit-bearing careers education. One referred to the isolation of franchised colleges from her university college in terms of careers provision. Another mentioned the small numbers of HE students in most FHE colleges, making it difficult to offer credit-bearing careers education. Another suggested that as his post-1992 university had little interest, there was little chance of its franchised colleges having such provision, since in such cases it is the university which largely determine the nature of the curriculum. One key informant, working in a post-1992 university, said that most of her university's franchised colleges focused their careers provision through Connexions for a younger age-group and that older students were likely to receive little careers advice. Careers provision was viewed as a 'bolt-on' to the main business of FHE colleges. In addition, careers provision in FHE colleges is often individualised, so there is little careers education located in the curriculum. There are, therefore, significant issues for HEIs which are validating provision in FHE colleges in terms of equity of experience for HE students with their counterparts in HEIs, and the model of careers education which should be provided in such collaborative arrangements.

Figure 4: Institutions with credit-bearing careers education



Conclusions

The previous section considered some of the methodological issues faced by the research team which, in turn, raise important questions for careers services, careers professionals and institutional managers in HE. These questions, in my view, should form part of the debate on what kind of careers services we need in future. The list is not exhaustive, but some questions are:

How can the terminology associated with careers provision be clarified?

Without clarity, it will be difficult for careers professionals to argue for more involvement in determining the academic offer. The importance of developing graduate employability relies on the curriculum becoming more of a vehicle for delivering some of the key skills, knowledge and messages for career planning and management. To get these messages across to the whole student population in a meaningful way, careers professionals need to engage with pedagogy, including assessment. Clarity about the nature and scope of credit-bearing careers education is an essential first step, particularly if academic colleagues are to be convinced of its importance.

How far is the location of the careers service within the institutional structure an impediment to careers education becoming more embedded within programmes?

The location of careers services within student services seems to have an impact on how the service is viewed by academic staff, students and the careers staff themselves, and this may be a significant barrier in some institutions to careers education becoming embedded in the academic offer. Where careers services are part of academic services or a separate service, there is some evidence that careers staff find it easier to engage with the academic offer. Given the fact that this is true in a minority of institutions (15 percent in this survey), senior managers will need to consider how best to facilitate careers education development.

Should the process of validation of new programmes routinely involve careers staff?

This research suggests that it is unusual for careers staff to be involved in programme development and validation. Yet if programmes are to become more 'demand-led', labour market analysis, employer engagement and graduate employability are likely to become even more important elements of whether programmes are fit for purpose. Attendant issues include the development of effective models of engagement for careers staff with programme development, and identification of the implications for the training of careers staff. If the academic community is to welcome careers advisers into

curriculum teams, then it will be necessary for careers advisers to have a credible understanding of the process of curriculum design and pedagogic practice and their specialist professional knowledge.

What is the appropriate professional model for careers staff in today's HE environment?

Following on from the previous point, there may well be room for debate about the professional competences required by careers professionals if they are to play a full part in developing the employability agenda. Innovative examples of practice intended to develop professional skills are beginning to be found in the sector. These include, for example, careers staff becoming part of programme development teams, the use of peer review processes in delivery to develop pedagogic practice, and careers staff following programmes in learning and teaching alongside new lecturing staff.

Should institutions have a policy on careers education embedded in academic programmes?

The results of this research suggest that this is the exception rather than the rule, particularly in pre-92 universities. Clearly, in many departments in many institutions, having an articulated policy on what should be in the curriculum would be highly controversial. However, the importance for students of careers education in developing their employability and their ability to make a return on their investment in HE should make the sector think carefully about how best to deliver this element of the student experience. This may be even more critical in long-term participation rates, as the students of today advise their own children of the benefits of investing in HE in the future.

In this article I have raised a number of what I believe are key questions and issues for careers educators in developing credit-bearing careers education further. These questions were raised directly from the challenges of developing the research methodology and undertaking the project on credit-bearing provision. The full results from the project are available and give the reader a snapshot of current provision across the sector (Foskett and Johnston, 2006). Further development of this provision will require the sector to answer the questions raised here. Enhancing graduate employability is likely to remain a key aim in the foreseeable future and to be driven through into HE strategy by the use of funding levers. Although there have been challenges to the notion that investment in human capital is the key to economic well-being (Morley, 2001), a focus on employability is here to stay. As Yorke suggests: 'the notion of employability has far too much face validity for politicians to abandon it' (Yorke, 2004, p.3).

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