Prioritising Learner Development in Careers Education: A Model for Higher Education

Julia Horn

2006 saw the publication of four important pieces of work about careers education which form the backdrop to this article.[1] First, the Careers Education Benchmark Statement sets out an account of careers education which uses the QAA subject benchmarks as an external reference point, and states that it 'encompasses the diversity of methods in the sector and reflects commonly accepted standards of good practice' (AGCAS, 2006, p.1). Second, Tony Watts' publication Career Development Learning and Employability offers an overview which aims to raise the status of careers education and integrate it with employability initiatives (Watts, 2006). Third, Foskett and Johnston's (2006) report *Curriculum Development and Career Decision-Making in Higher Education: credit bearing careers education* provides an account of current careers education practice across the higher education sector as reported by institutions. All three documents offer descriptions of current practice and the ideas which underpin the development of careers education. By contrast, the fourth and final publication by Phil McCash (2006) critiques the DOTS model which the Benchmark Statement, Watts, and Foskett and Johnston all identify as a key model of careers education. McCash (2006, p.440) instead proposes a form of careers education based on the notion of students as 'career researchers'.

Whether DOTS should be the model for careers education is not the only issue which arises in and between these publications. Other questions include: Is careers education a form of skills training, of academic study, or a hybrid? What role should a careers service have in a higher education institution? How can we define the aims and outcomes of careers education? Watts (2006, pp.6-7) outlines three definitions used to conceptualise the aims of employability – immediate employment, immediate employability, or sustainable employability – arguing that 'attention to career development in definitions of sustainable employability has not always been as strong as it might have been' (ibid, p. 3). McCash's formulation of students as 'career researchers' of their own lives (2006, p. 439) would match best with the concept of careers education for sustainable employability, while the formulation of careers education in the Benchmark Statement avoids differentiating between immediate employment or long-term employability outcomes by stating: 'a key aim of careers education in higher education is to prepare students for graduate level employment and study' (AGCAS, 2006, p.2).

However, none of these authors writes from the perspective I want to investigate here: whether the aims and outcomes of careers education can – and should – be conceptualised from the perspective of higher education, rather than as an extension of secondary school work or career guidance work. This is a viewpoint I want to investigate principally because it is my own, my career having started in teaching in higher education rather than in a careers guidance role. It is also perhaps the perspective of many of those academics whom we might wish to involve in careers education. I would suggest that for many such academics, careers education is likely to be conceptualised as a new branch or extension of the higher education curriculum, rather than as a new application or extension of careers guidance work.

Careers education in higher education

Careers education is different from the academic disciplines of higher education. It is not newness that makes it unusual: there are new subject areas emerging all the time. For example, Media Studies, Surf Science and Childhood Studies are or have recently been 'new' degree disciplines. However, unlike degree disciplines, careers education as commonly practised has not emerged from a new research area, and is not generally taught by specialists who are actively involved in the construction of new knowledge in the area. There is a theoretical and research base for careers education, but it is disconnected from careers educators and emerges elsewhere: principally from independent researchers or lecturers in careers who teach on the vocational postgraduate diplomas in careers guidance. Furthermore, the theoretical model on which most careers education programmes depend is DOTS, which was initially developed for secondary education.

[1] This article uses the term careers education to broadly encompass the practices which come under the headings career or careers education, career management skills, or most recently, career development learning.

Foskett and Johnston report that DOTS underpins about half of the programmes reported to them and that 'the data seem to suggest a greater underpinning of practice by frameworks such as the DOTS model than by learning theories' (Foskett and Johnston, 2006, p.45). Unlike most academic disciplines, which originate in the universities and then may filter downwards towards school education (e.g. psychology, media studies), careers education is an upgrade, a secondary school subject aiming to get to university.

What might it mean, therefore, to formulate careers education specifically for higher education? Can we develop courses which respond to the specific needs of all the following: the educational practices of higher education; evolving concepts of career and theoretical models of career development; and the changing environment of the graduate employment market?

My response to these questions is to propose a model of careers education which does not close down either the content or the theoretical basis of careers education. Rather than settling the debate over DOTS, I would like to consider a model which would allow both DOTS and other models of careers education to develop. My model is based upon three premises:

- Careers education in higher education should be derived from an understanding of the broad aims of the higher education curriculum.
- Careers educators should not be limited in their choice of theoretical model or curriculum content for careers education: variety, experimentation and innovation should be encouraged.
- We should, however, prioritise the *education* in careers education. What can we *teach* and what can students *learn*? Can the curriculum offer a different experience from careers guidance, one which enriches the types of encounters that students have with 'career'?

Learner development in higher education

Careers educationalists sometimes express concerns that the personal and individual nature of career planning makes it irreconcilable with 'academic' courses, and therefore it must be conceptualised and taught in a way which sets it apart from the traditional academic curriculum, as part of the vocational or skills-based outcomes of education. However, I would argue that the underlying concern behind these claims fails to take into account the impact of academic study and the university experience when considered overall, rather than atomised into individual modules or learning outcomes. Positing academic study as devoid of a life-relevant context is a conception of the academic curriculum as a process which delivers knowledge independent of judgement and personal engagement. This is as reductive as imagining careers services to be about no more than telling students how to put together a good CV. While it might be possible to find evidence of such practices for both cases, no one would claim that this is the overall purpose of either academic study or careers guidance.

The development of the individual student in higher education has been a subject of research since the 1960s, and it is this model of development which I want to propose as a way to conceptualise careers education for higher education. The field was established by William Perry (1970), whose grounded research project followed a group of middle-class male students through their time at college in order to develop a model of what he called 'intellectual and ethical development'. Perry was concerned to find out not what knowledge the students were gaining, but rather how individuals came to know, what theories they had about knowledge and how these theories influenced their approach to gaining knowledge and to thinking and reasoning. In short, he sought to find out from the students the following information: how can you know what you know; and what relationship do you have to information, authority, judgement and decision making[2]?

Perry created a nine-stage model of student development, but the scheme I relate to careers education here is a simplified one that has emerged from subsequent research. In an article summarising the approaches and findings of several research projects, Hofer and Pintrich (1997, p.92) proposed a version with four stages rather than nine. This model has also been used by Jenny Moon (2005) in her recent work on critical thinking in higher education[3]. The model is laid out in brief below in my own words. For each of the four 'positions' in the scheme, I have added a section to suggest how a student in this position might conceptualise their career and their career planning needs.

Position 1 Dualism

- Individual is reliant on authority. Authority figures own the truth and can share it. Expertise is unchallenged.
- Learning is focused on information and facts.

Imaginary student
'I went to Careers but they wouldn't tell me what to do.'
'Why won't the careers adviser tell me what job to do with my degree?'

2 A large-scale research project into this field is currently under way, led by the Open University and funded by the ESRC. *The Social and Organisational Mediation of University Learning* (SOMUL) asks 'what is learned at university' and considers learning and intellectual development; academic and disciplinary cultures; and the social experience of student culture (Brennan and Jary, 2005).
3 Moon's work also includes an excellent summary of this strand of research (2005, pp.8-9).

Position 2 Multiplicity

- Individual is reliant on authority. Authority figures own the truth and can share it. Expertise is unchallenged.
- Learning is focused on information and facts.
- Information is right or wrong, and uncertainty is temporary, even if long-term. There may be an increase in self-ownership ('we may never know') but also a sense of the arbitrary ('if you don't know, anything goes').

Imaginary student
'I just need to be told how to write a good CV.'
'I know what I want to do, so I don't need careers education.'

Position 3 Relativism

- The individual makes a transition from a world in which there are right/wrong answers in most cases, to a world in which knowledge is essentially relative and context-bound, with a few exceptions.
- Experts are an authority, not in authority.

Imaginary student
'I have to take responsibility for choices in relation to my future.'
'Even though I have ideas about what I want to do, I need to explore them carefully and accept they may not become reality.'

Position 4 Contextual Relativism

- Individual is aware of their responsibility for constructing meaning. Choices are made in face of genuine doubt and legitimate alternatives.

Imaginary student
I have to constantly re-evaluate my life and what I want from work. Nothing is fixed.'
'I have to make choices and I may regret them, but the choices form part of who I become. I must confront and cope with uncertainty.'

Key concepts of the developmental model

We might identify some key features of the way in which I have related this scheme of learner development to careers education and career planning. Perry and subsequent researchers have found few individuals who reach position four in this scheme during their undergraduate years. It is also the case that few students arrive at university in the first position of the scheme. Rather, it is the shift between positions two and three (multiplicity to relativism) which is crucial for learner development in higher education. This is a shift from receiving knowledge from authorities, to participating in the construction of meaning: a construction in which authorities are consulted, rather than obeyed. In practical terms, it is also a move from expecting others to help you to do something, to taking responsibility for action, learning and knowledge.

Degree programmes in higher education often mimic this movement, leading from relatively guided study in the first year, towards individual projects and specialisation in the final year. Underlying this programme of increasingly individualised learning is the aim of increasing student autonomy in understanding the different underlying theories and concepts of their discipline. Students are encouraged through higher education to move from a position of learning from the authorities, to seeing the same authorities as resources which are open to challenge.

Research into the concept of learner development has also made important links between the academic curriculum and activities in the rest of an individual's life. For example, Marcia Baxter Magolda (1994) observed that both postgraduate education and work can draw young adults towards contextual conceptions of knowledge (e.g. positions three and four) because in her research they 'held participants responsible for making their own decisions, required direct experience in making decisions and involved interactions with peers or co-workers to explore and evaluate opinions' (ibid, p.34). As such, experiences outside the curriculum (e.g. work experience) may help a student to develop their understanding of conceptions of knowledge and knowing within the academic discipline. The challenge for careers education is to use these same conceptions within the academic curriculum to inform and engage students' perceptions of their 'career' after university. If authorities in the field of careers education are careers advisers, employers, and researchers of career and employment, then we should be aiming to encourage students to perceive each of these parties as 'an' authority, not 'in' authority.

What does this mean for careers education?

The classroom should feel as if it is a place where risk-taking is tolerated. It is a place for the exploration of ideas, rather than the simple transmission of knowledge, it is a place in which there is time to tease out problems rather than jump to a solution in an absolutist manner.
(Moon, 2005, p.16)

Some careers educators in higher education will find little to disagree with here; they already encourage students to reflect upon concepts of career and career planning, and to engage with different approaches and resources. I would argue, however, that this scheme does present some challenges to careers education, three of which I outline below.

A careers education course is a quick and easy way to sort out your career (or the careers of your students)…
This scheme of developmental learning for students challenges any form of careers education which is based on an authority (e.g. teacher, employer) telling the student 'how to' plan their career (as opposed to 'how to' write a CV, which of course is based on a set of conventions and as such is better suited to this form of teaching). Such a model of education would oblige the student to remain in position two of the developmental scheme, rather than encouraging students to adopt a more independent, reflective position. While various authorities (careers advisers, teachers, employers) may come into a course of careers education to put their point of view, the overall course should allow the student to compare and contrast these different approaches in order to reach their own decision about the value of each. It is tempting to offer courses which look as though they will solve this 'problem' of career quickly; but, like a self-help manual, they bear little relationship to the difficult and complex nature of 'career', or to the philosophy of higher education with its focus on enquiry and critical thinking.

In consequence, models such as DOTS cannot 'be' careers education, although this model could certainly be one approach which students encounter. If DOTS is used as the basis for a course of careers education, students should be given the opportunity to consider criticisms of and, if possible, alternatives to this model.

Careers education will improve institutional employment figures…
A developmental scheme of student learning also poses a challenge to careers education conceptualised as a way to get students to make a 'career decision' or to increase the numbers of students getting graduate jobs within a certain timeframe. Although these may be outcomes of a well-run course, they cannot and should not be conceived as a predictable outcome of an educative process. Otherwise, this 'education' would be a form of manipulation of both student and academic freedom. Indeed, this is a problem with which careers advisers are very familiar from their guidance activities, and careers services are expert in balancing institutional or governmental demands for employment outcomes with client needs for unbiased and personalised guidance. As such, careers education should aim to improve student understanding and knowledge – an improvement which may, in turn, increase employment outcomes, but which may equally lead to better-informed uncertainty about one's future, or indeed to well-informed decisions to postpone entry into the labour market.

Careers education will help you (or your students) make a career decision, and will sort you (or your students) out with a good CV as well…
Some careers education programmes are currently more suited to students who are career-decided – or to those students who are strategic enough to realise that picking a well-defined profession (teaching, for example) will make their coursework easy to complete. Such assignments aim to give students an opportunity to practise a real-life exercise – but may also encourage students to shy away from investigating professions which are not well-defined or easy to get information on.

This is a difficult challenge for careers education courses, but one which must be acknowledged. Realistic assignments may also be assignments which students can and do complete without reflection. Assignments which require critical engagement and which are difficult to tackle may not resemble the graduate recruitment process. Furthermore, students should be aware that a CV which gets a 2.1 may not even be short-listed by an employer. The criteria of assessment in higher education and employment criteria in the labour market do not, and cannot, be made to match. While higher education usually depends upon criterion-referencing (marks are given for attainment at a level specified – the marking criteria), the labour market works upon competition, and only the top candidate gains a reward, regardless of the achievements of those further down the scale.

Finally, career decision-making is a personal and long-term process, and encouraging students to believe that they need to 'choose' a career is unrealistic in today's employment market. The majority of people move between jobs and professions, and 'construct' a varied career rather than 'choosing' a single occupation. Careers education should help students to be aware of this and to 'manage' rather than choose. Yet many careers education courses do not go beyond instruction in the process of job hunting with a specific focus on graduate recruitment, even though many of today's graduates will get to a graduate job through their day-to-day performance in a non-graduate or graduate-track job rather than as a result of their performance in graduate recruitment rounds. Should careers education take a longer view of their students' futures and aim for career self-management (Watts, 2006, p.12) rather than, or in addition to, job-hunting skills?

Conclusion

Careers education has a unique position in the range of activities in which careers services and academics become involved. Higher education can make a specific contribution to careers education by placing the emphasis on learner development and critical thinking in the context of career. Programmes of careers education can help students to develop complex ideas, to debate, and to research their own concepts of career. These are all activities which go beyond the scope of individual guidance with its emphasis on the personal and with its time constraints (most students only having one or two guidance interviews), but which are equally valuable in preparing students for their lives after university.

However, we do need to reflect upon the types of activity that work best in the classroom, and how students might be expected to develop through a careers education

course. This reflection should not be about which models are the 'best' models of careers education, and may not be about personalised career planning; rather, it may be about how we can develop our students into independent, critical thinkers. If we contrast the individualised, supportive and private environment that a careers guidance interview provides to the group, developmental and public environment of the careers education curriculum, then both can be conceptualised as offering distinctive contributions to the development of students in higher education. That development in turn can be properly understood as both vocational and academic, personal and intellectual, in which careers education can properly become, in the term recently favoured by Watts (2006), 'career development learning'.

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For correspondence
Dr Julia Horn, Development Officer, Centre for Career Management Skills (CETL), University of Reading
Email: j.r.horn@reading.ac.uk