

Higher Education Careers Services and Diversity: Perspectives on Collaborative Working Practices

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Recent reports have insisted that collaborative working by higher education careers services (HECAS) with both internal and external bodies is essential if students from 'non-traditional' backgrounds are to derive greatest benefit from their services. This article investigates the role and impact of collaborative working practices by HECAS in support of diversity and the perceived barriers to such working. The study has been drawn from empirical research undertaken for the Higher Education Careers Services Unit (HECSU) in 2003. The research was derived from recommendations 18 and 20 of the Harris review which argue that HECAS need to target non-traditional students at an early stage in their degree programmes. The study suggests that collaborative working is now viewed by higher education careers advisers as crucial to the future success of students from non-traditional backgrounds but it is considered as being essential to the provision of effective support for all students, whatever their background. Within institutions, the structures are in place, increasingly, for an integrated model of guidance as described by Watts (1997). In some higher education institutions, an embedded curriculum model is also being developed. Externally, collaborative working practices are patchier and tend to consist of local initiatives that depend on the input of enthusiastic individuals.

Introduction

As higher education institutions address the widening participation agenda, higher education careers services (HECAS), once viewed as the 'Cinderella Service' (DfES, 2001), have come under pressure to play a pivotal role in providing support for students from non-traditional backgrounds. The *Review of Higher Education Careers Services* (hereafter referred to as the 'Harris Review') states that 'Institutions should establish ways of identifying, within their first term of study, those students who are

particularly likely to need help and guidance from the Careers Service. Such students may include those from non-traditional backgrounds' (DfES, 2001, p.47). Several commentators have argued that, potentially, HECAS have an important role in the self-development of non-traditional students (Connor, 2001, pp.223-4; Dodgson, 2002). One of the principal ways in which this should be assisted, argues the Harris Review, is for HECAS to work collaboratively with other organisations both within and outside their own higher education institutions. They should:

'...establish working arrangements with other agencies to address the guidance needs of individual students and graduates who face particular barriers in the labour market e.g.: those with disabilities, those from certain ethnic minority backgrounds, older graduates and those who withdraw from Higher Education. Relevant documentary information needs to flow from Careers Services to those agencies to enable them to provide effective help to university and college leavers concerned.' (DfES, 2001, Recommendation 28)

The issues surrounding collaborative working practices in career guidance are not of course new. Watts (1997) stressed the need for HECAS to be embedded within the higher education institution and a move away from the older image of the service as an isolated department on the edge of the institution, both physically and metaphorically. Rayman argued (1999) that HECAS are the main interface between 'corporate America and the Academy'. Watts, Hughes and Haslam (1999) in their report, *Closer Working*, reviewed the working relationships between careers service organisations and HECAS. Maguire *et al.* (2005, p.18) argued that there is a 'need for HEIs to forge links with employers and a range of other external bodies'.

External commentators are explicit about the advisability of more fully integrating HECAS into academic study and wider support structures of their own institutions and also working more with external agencies that can provide specific assistance for non-traditional students (Dodgson and Connor, 2002). Indeed, Morey *et al.* argue (2003, p.5) that collaboration 'is increasingly being built into institutional strategies'.

In practice, the terms 'collaboration' and 'integration' are often used interchangeably and clarity is needed. In their study of working relationships between HECAS and other careers service organisations, Watts *et al.* (1999) developed a clear typology of different levels of working partnership

and this remains useful in discussing collaborative working between HECAS and external organisations but also, more powerfully, *within* higher education institutions (p.25):

- *Communication* – where no working patterns are changed, but efforts are made to help services to understand what each other offers so that they can, for example, cross-refer clients appropriately.
- *Co-operation* – where two or more services co-operate on some joint task.
- *Co-ordination* – where two or more services alter their working patterns to bring them more closely into line with one another, while remaining within their existing professional boundaries.
- *Cross-fertilisation* – where efforts are made to encourage services to share and exchange skills, and in effect to work across professional boundaries in ways that may re-draw the boundaries themselves.
- *Integration* – where the cross-fertilisation process is developed to a point which means that the boundaries between the different services disappear altogether.

HECAS work with other organisations in a range of different ways, depending on the type of institution, the level of support provided by senior management to the service and even the availability of space

Methodological approach

The data used in this paper is largely drawn from research that was carried out on behalf of the Higher Education Careers Services Unit (HECSU) and published as a report (Morey *et al.*, 2003). The research, which was commissioned to address Recommendations 18 and 20 of the Harris Review, explored the ways in which higher education careers services reach out to students from non-traditional backgrounds.

The strict definition of the term 'non-traditional' follows that used by the Widening Participation programme, which targets students from families with no previous experience of higher education; in particular, from socio-economic classes III*m*, IV and V (classifications used in British government publications). However, this study is broader, taking into account definitions used by careers services, and includes groups such as disabled students, students from ethnic minority backgrounds and mature students (Morey, 2003, pp.9-10).

Data for this paper is derived from research carried out for interviews and focus groups at sixteen higher education institutions around the United Kingdom. On average, six interviews from each institution were conducted and included a range of staff members. Students' experiences were drawn from one or more focus groups held at each institution. In addition, 30 interviews were conducted with employers and human resources personnel.

Institutions were chosen in order to reflect regional differences, the type of institution (particularly traditional and post-1992 universities) but were tempered by practicality. Willingness on the part of staff within the institution to participate in the research was a factor. The staff who were interviewed included careers advisers, widening participation officers, student support officers and course directors.

Employers, as a much more diffuse body, were more difficult to select. The principal issue that emerged during the research at the higher education institutions was that small and medium enterprises (SMEs) were thought to be less able or willing to recruit non-traditional graduates. SMEs are often elusive in studies such as this and were thereby approached. A number of large employers who are already engaged with the widening access agenda were also approached. The main staff to be interviewed were human resources officers, where available.

Widening participation and employability

Widening participation remains at the heart of current higher education policy, reflected in the recent announcement by HEFCE and the Department for Innovation, Universities and Science that Aimhigher will receive funding until 2011 and in the Government's continuing commitment to a target of 50% of the 18-30 year old cohort having some experience of HE and its strategy of lifelong learning. The problem remains as to how students from non-traditional backgrounds can benefit from the total student experience.

Apart from academic achievement, higher education is about developing 'employability' skills such as self-confidence and networking (Yorke, 2003, p.8). Employability is about the development of a range of student attributes and abilities that equip students, incidentally, for the world of work but fundamentally equip students for life. Employability is not a commodity that can be obtained but a lifelong process of learning and development (Harvey, 2003). The emphasis of employability is not on employment but on ability to learn and make use of the learning, whether in employment or not. For many non-traditional students, it is difficult simply to raise their aspirations, even when they have entered higher education (Redmond, 2006).

The two parallel issues of widening participation and employability have tended, in policy and implementation, to be focused at the opposite ends of the higher education student experience. Widening participation concentrated, initially, on getting students onto higher education programmes while employability initially focused on finding ways to help students get jobs on graduating. The Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) *Paving the Way* report into 'under-represented' entrants to higher education found, perhaps unsurprisingly, that even at the pre-entry stage, non-traditional students were most in

need of support: '[The] sense of insecurity about employment as a graduate was not shared by the traditional students. They assumed HE study would enhance their careers and did not express any anxiety about finding employment after graduation' (UCAS, 2002, p.12).

Increasingly, widening participation issues have moved forward through the student experience from access, to support and retention to successful completion and currently towards job acquisition. Meanwhile, the emphasis of employability has shifted from job-market intelligence and job-getting techniques to developing a range of attributes through the learning process, with, latterly, some institutions taking an holistic strategic approach. The two processes are, at root, about both enabling students and empowering them to take advantage of their educational experience. There is a potential for organic convergence in the implementation of a forward-looking participation agenda that empowers students as successful learners and an employability agenda that has been developed by the national Enhancing Student Employability Co-ordination Team (ESECT), that sees employability outcomes as rooted in an empowering learning process that runs throughout the higher educational experience.

HECAS potentially have a crucial role to play in the link between widening participation and employability (Morey *et al.*, 2003). Barbara Graham (2002) suggests that 'virtually all' advocates of wider access 'agree that the most effective incentive for potential students is the prospect of better employment opportunities'. The success of providing careers support to non-traditional students depends on collaboration between HECAS and others both within and without their own institutions. Careers advisers should not be expected to become experts in all areas of supporting students, particularly those from non-traditional backgrounds. However, they should be part of a network of support within the university (with external links where appropriate) that would facilitate cross-referrals. Careers services need to be a more integrated part of student services as a whole, without compromising their professionalism.

HECAS within higher education institutions

Within higher education institutions there is an increasingly formalised structure of collaborative working into which HECAS fit, which follows the integrated model of guidance developed by Watts (1997). This includes a wide range of levels of working practices from sharing of information to the development of a one-stop-shop of student support services.

Sharing information and retention

Sharing information between student support offices is an essential part of an increasingly effective co-ordinated student support network and this is recognised by some

support staff as having benefits to students from non-traditional backgrounds. The link has been recognised by at least one Scottish university, where a part-time post of student co-ordinator, responsible for helping students thinking of withdrawing, has been funded with widening participation money. Another institution, a Midlands university, places considerable emphasis on cross-referrals between services and incorporated the careers service into more general support. This might involve providing advice about possible career routes if a student wanted to change course or institution, or simply providing advice about future prospects to help students overcome temporary disillusionment with their studies. Where students have particular needs, careers advisers will be able to refer them to staff with appropriate expertise. One service, for example, referred cross-referrals to special-needs tutors.

Supporting students 'in a holistic manner', it has recently been argued, is essential in successfully retaining students from non-traditional backgrounds (Dodgson and Connor, 2002, p.11). HECAS are, according to one widening participation officer from the South of England, well placed to play a pivotal role in improving the retention rates by convincing 'young people that HE is a worthwhile investment, that it is for them and not just for someone else, that they're going to get enormous personal benefits as well as financial benefits out of it...that we haven't got an agenda. So careers services are critical.'

Several advisers who were interviewed in the course of this research commented that students who were considering dropping out or were considered to be at risk of doing so were referred to the HECAS. One careers adviser explained that his department worked with outreach and welfare offices in prioritising students who were considered at risk of dropping out of university. One particularly beneficial way of 'catching' these students was in fact through teaching modules at first year level: 'we actually have more contact with some students who are dropping out or who were on the wrong course, much earlier'.

Co-operation

Co-operation as part of the student services team has been responsible for specific initiatives to help particular groups of non-traditional students. At one Midlands university, for example, the HECAS and the student welfare department have worked together to establish a team to make the careers information library more accessible to disabled students. Similarly, at the same institution, the student finance office works closely with the job shop, based in the careers service, to help disabled students into temporary work to help them through their first and second years. Such a network of integrated support allows various services to contribute their particular expertise to helping a student while at the same time not being expected to address all problems.

Integration, co-ordination and cross-fertilisation

Watts *et al.* (1999) argue that 'integration' is where the divisions between different services disappear altogether. However, in this they appear to be at variance with the QAA's *Code of Conduct for Careers Services* (QAA, 2000: point 13), which is specific about the place of career education, information and guidance (CEIG) within the overall code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education. The code notes:

the importance of integration, coherence and internal collaboration as part of an institution-wide commitment to preparing students for their future career. This should be reflected in the institution's teaching and learning strategy and should include links between CEIG services and academic departments, personal tutors, admissions tutors, placement tutors, student employment job shops, and other student support and welfare services.

In practice, the depth of integration described by Watts *et al.* is seldom a reality. HECAS may be becoming closer physically and notionally to other support services: part of a one-stop approach to student support, but they are not fully 'integrated'; it is a mixture of 'cross-fertilisation' and 'co-ordination'. At Glasgow Caledonian University, for example, the careers service is now a part of the university's learning services department whilst at the University of Central England, the careers service is part of student services (UCE, 2007). This example reflects the situation in many if not most higher education institutions today where careers services are increasingly part of student services. This logically involves the service being situated geographically near to the institution's student welfare or widening participation office, and such physical proximity brings clear benefits to collaborative work. At one university in the South of England, the careers service is said by a senior careers adviser to be 'very integrated... and we work very much together as a team.' It should be noted therefore, that where the service has traditionally been allocated poor quality premises on the margins of the campus, staff do complain of a general sense of isolation. This reflects Rowley and Purcell's finding that some students complained of the low profile of their careers service (Rowley and Purcell, 2001, p.426).

Embedding career development in the curriculum

Embedding careers advice into the curriculum is one method of collaborative working that has been thought to be effective in reaching out to non-traditional students and is used by many of the institutions in this study and it reflects the popularity of the 'curriculum' model of institutional integration of career guidance suggested by Watts (1997). This has the advantage of both increasing the employability awareness of students from non-traditional students and that of those from more

traditional backgrounds. This is particularly pertinent in a context where many careers advisers, whilst aware of the need to help students from non-traditional backgrounds, are wary of 'overt targeting' of particular groups (Morey *et al.*, 2003, p.27). 'The best way', commented one member of academic staff in the North of England, 'isn't to actually target them... But registering all students into the system and making available to them a range of our services in a managed learning environment'. This reflects the more general concern in providing student services. As the report *Student Services: Effective approaches to retaining students in higher education* (Thomas *et al.*, 2003, p.14) argues, targeted, bolt-on initiatives potentially 'engender a view of non-traditional students as deficient and the perception that academic standards are at risk simply through widening the range of entrants to HE programmes'.

Despite the apparent pessimism of commentators such as La Valle *et al.* (2000), much progress in this area has already been achieved. The Harris Review recognised that an increasing number of higher education careers services were making 'substantial contributions to the academic curriculum, sometimes by directly designing and teaching modules, but also through establishing partnerships with academic departments' (Harris, 2001, para. 4.1.2.). Several universities have clearly given their recognition and support to internal collaboration between HECAS and academic departments. One careers adviser at an institution in the South of England commented that this was essential in making things happen: 'this will mean that all courses... when they go through their review and accreditation process they will have to show how they are making their students employable and careers will be one of the themes within that.' At an institution in the Midlands, developing employability for its students through 'faculty agreements' is part of the university's published mission. Such explicit support from the university authorities is essential in encouraging academic departments to take the career development of *all* their students seriously.

Links between academic departments and HECAS are variable, however. There are some particularly strong relationships. For example, every faculty in one university in London 'has a named appointed person within the HECAS. The careers advisers get together every fortnight within a staff meeting where we feed back'. At a Midlands university, personal development planning modules are conducted only where academic staff are interested as individuals.

Career development modules have typically been viewed as add-ons and as most careers advisers interviewed in this research are aware, this is not sufficient to reach all of the students who need such help. One career adviser from Wales commented that 'these things have to be integrated into the curriculum ... that's the only way it really works'. Indeed, some go even further: a careers adviser from the south of England commented that 'embedding careers in

the first year is crucial, but not...as a stand alone.' Individual modules, as Knight and Yorke (2003b, p.5) argue, 'risk being treated as marginal'.

In order to solve this problem, therefore, some careers staff argue that there is a need to make career development modules compulsory for all students and for the module to be accredited. One careers adviser thought that 'if that was compulsory for everybody, I just think there'd be a much more powerful interaction between the need for students to have this sort of input in this sort of institution, the academics' recognition that that's necessary, and for us to be taken a bit more seriously'.

In most institutions included in this study, careers staff are trying to get employability embedded into the curriculum: 'the main thrust of our work is about getting careers into [academic] programmes' (careers adviser, South). The ideal scenario for many careers advisers would be for academics to provide careers advice as part of the curriculum. This is reflected in this comment by one senior careers adviser in the Midlands:

'[We] provide resources, which tutors can deliver themselves, we can teach them how to do it. Or we can just come up with a resource pack that has all the handouts, all the OHPs, all the exercises. We've got it. We do all these things anyway, and a lot of these things are already formally written up.'

Personal development planning

In particular, both government and university authorities have put their weight behind personal development plans (PDPs), a collaborative venture between HECAS and academic departments that enables students to reflect on the transferable skills that they have developed whilst at university. It would appear to be an ideal method of collaboration that works to the benefit of all students (Dearing, 1997, recommendation 20). For many careers staff the development of PDPs is crucial to enabling students to reflect on their transferable skills, and the 'careers bit is going to get very urgent' (senior careers adviser, Midlands). One careers adviser from Wales envisaged 'decreasing involvement from ourselves, but what we would hope is to integrate this personal development planning activity into some sort of taught module'. At the Open University, PDPs have been used for some time. Careers representatives in the regions work with faculties and are available at day schools and run special workshops. This occurs at the local level and there is now interest from some faculties in working together on employability issues (for example, in arts and technology). A generic PDP model is being developed, which will then be customised for each faculty. More research needs to be done into the overall effectiveness of PDPs, although work at the University of Surrey shows that PDPs tend still to be implemented by enthusiastic individuals rather than with institutional support (Centre for Learning Development, 2005).

Developing an institutional strategy that places employability and careers at the heart of the student experience allows for the incorporation of extant schemes so that initiatives are no longer duplicated and resources throughout the institution are used more effectively. One university in the South West of England 'pulled together the different activities which relate to employability: PDPs, web-based learning, careers, learning skills, information literacy skills... Basically they've all been agendas that have run simultaneously and contributed to overloading initiatives and what we've done is pull it all together and try to see it a bit more realistically'.

All this is part of a wider attempt (both nationally and internationally) to provide effective support for *all* students rather than specifically those from non-traditional backgrounds (Butcher, 2001). Indeed, many careers advisers spoken to during the course of the research commented that they saw their role as providing support to all students, whatever their background, and advice that is tailored to the individual rather than to those of particular backgrounds. Geoff Layer has argued (2003, p.14) 'most HE careers services operate a universal service on a demand-led basis'. This may be viewed as problematic because much research has suggested that 'traditional' second generation students are more likely to take advantage of the opportunities made available to them (Woodrow *et al.*, 2002).

Barriers to internal collaboration

Although careers advisers at the sample institutions appear to be generally positive about collaborative working within an institutional context, there are barriers. Such barriers were viewed by careers advisers as problematic as a whole and affected the support they could give to all students. Academics are often perceived as resistant to the idea of supporting careers advice. One head of careers at a Scottish university commented that there was a 'perception of careers breaching boundaries' by trying to reach students via their courses. Another senior careers adviser, based in the North East, noted that academics 'don't really respond... A lot of the time they are more interested in the teaching of the subject rather than getting [their students] into jobs. ... if they were more career minded it would work to the students' advantage a lot more'. In a minority of cases, however, the reason is a fundamental resistance by teaching staff to the process.

The most widely expressed objection to incorporating careers modules into existing courses is the understandable problem of finding space in the curriculum. One senior careers adviser, based in a higher education institution in London, reflected this problem by noting that 'some lecturers are very willing to let us have part of a lecture slot, others will say I haven't got enough time to teach what I've got to teach anyway. So, there is a tension there'. However, time barriers are not always insurmountable. A departmental careers adviser at a

southern university explained that she has learned to be sensitive to academic schedules and in doing so has elicited a more accepting attitude from academic staff: 'Planning has been a key learning point because you understand that academics are very busy at certain times of the year and other times are quite good so the summer seems a good time to sort of plan for the following year, and they are more receptive to what can happen during the following complete year that we've planned for.'

One way to overcome department heads' scepticism is to fit in around major lecture slots: 'If they timetable our session in between two lectures, that can work well'. The same careers adviser also recounted, however, that 'there are times when I arrange to run a series of workshops, perhaps over three lunch times, and I remember, with one department, no student turned up for any of them' (careers adviser, London). Such experiences are not uncommon. It is, therefore, important to deliver careers support at times when, even if it is essentially 'add-on', it is not seen as such by appropriate use of scheduling.

Several careers services spoke about the enthusiasm of individual academics for incorporating careers support into their courses: 'a lecturer came to one of our workshops, and I've set up something to do with her students, she's really keen to do something, which is brilliant' (careers adviser, North). Arguably, such individual enthusiasms need to be nurtured by careers services and built into something more substantial.

While there might always be academics who are fundamentally resistant to linking careers support and study, this stereotype is not as widespread as it is sometimes thought to be. Nevertheless, careers advisers perceive reluctance on the part of academics to take on responsibilities for activities beyond their expertise. One Scottish careers adviser reflected this:

'The majority of our academic colleagues, if they actually had time to sit down and think about it, would say "Oh no, careers is a good thing, a good idea, but ideally can someone else please do it, because really it's not my forté, you know, that is not what I am professionally trained and qualified for".'

Careers services on their own, therefore, cannot dictate to academic departments how they should address employability issues.

Support from senior management

However, an institutional strategy, such as those described above, coupled with the ongoing efforts of careers staff to demonstrate to academic staff the benefits of an integrated approach to employability is the most likely strategy for enhancing students' career prospects. The success of career support as an embedded element in the

curriculum is, therefore, recognised by some advisers, at least, as being dependent upon the support of academic staff and management. As one senior careers adviser based in London commented:

'If the academic staff and the corporate management team think that that is a good way forward, then they can make it happen. If they don't want to make it happen there is nothing the careers service can do to make it happen and I just don't know how else you can get departments to take the issue of employability seriously.'

External collaboration for diversity

The typology of Watts *et al.* (1999) for external collaboration still holds true, but the structures of collaborative working practices are inevitably more varied and diffuse, as HECAS interact with employers, local authorities and other careers services organisations. Collaboration with external agencies is much harder to develop in an effective and consistent manner.

The structures of external collaboration are threefold. First, there are a number of government-backed collaborative programmes currently in operation that are designed to help people from disadvantaged backgrounds to go into higher education. These projects are designed primarily to raise awareness amongst young people of the value of higher education as a path to a desired career. Second, there is collaboration with local authorities. This is generally of a more immediate nature, satisfying the needs of equal opportunities. Third, there is collaboration with national and local employers. Maguire *et al.* (2005), following the lead of the Harris Review, argue that higher education institutions need to forge links with employers and whilst this does take place, links remain rather patchy and depend on local initiative. One human resources officer at a law firm in the North of England argued that she had very little time to approach HECAS and that employers would appreciate careers advisers getting in touch with them directly.

External collaboration is usually part of an attempt to raise awareness of higher education to potential students from non-traditional backgrounds (pre-entry) and the value to employers of employing graduates from non-traditional backgrounds (exit). However, there are examples of external organisations being involved in attempts to develop the employability of students whilst on their course.

Pre-entry guidance

HECAS are taking more of a role in pre-entry guidance for non-traditional applicants and the initiatives that are designed to support this can be divided into national and locally-based approaches.

Following the merger of Partnerships for Progression and Excellence Challenge in 2004, the national Aimhigher programme has been the umbrella heading for a multitude of national, regional and area-based targeted initiatives to widen participation in higher education. In October 2007 the Minister for Lifelong Learning, Further and Higher Education, Bill Rammell, announced continuation funding from DIUS and HEFCE for Aimhigher through to 2011.

Although higher education careers services are not specifically targeted in HEFCE policy, they clearly hold an important role as one of the groups of higher education staff that should go to schools and colleges to talk about the purpose of higher education. Careers services are working increasingly closely with widening participation offices to raise awareness of higher education and to raise aspirations amongst school children from disadvantaged backgrounds. The programme formalises a process that has been occurring in some institutions for some years. One south London university, for example, has, for several years, organised an annual event in conjunction with a local college and the local Connexions service. For one day each year, each secondary school in the borough is invited to send twenty of its year-eleven pupils to the event. The event, called 'Aiming Higher', asks pupils to consider their career goals and then helps them to investigate the possible routes to those goals. Another university careers service in the Midlands has developed links with a local further education college. A careers adviser works with some of the students who take part in a foundation course at the college.

The success of student ambassador schemes have yet to be fully evaluated but they have been clearly greeted with enthusiasm by some universities. At one university in the South West, for example, many aspects of partnerships for progression, outlined by HEFCE, are already operational. The university employs 280 students, mainly from disadvantaged backgrounds:

'to work as student ambassadors... school activities assistants. We employ students to work in our summer schools, residential experiences, when young people come on visits, for open days to see what's happening, we run a major school mentoring project from here. So we match students.' (Widening participation officer)

Not only does this provide role-models for schools pupils and an effective method of raising awareness of higher education, it also provides valuable work-experience for the students themselves. Nevertheless, there is discussion within higher education careers services as to the value of taking part in pre-entry careers advice. One senior careers adviser in the Midlands explained that:

'The only students we don't target are pre-entry... we're not equipped really to deal with them. We've chosen that our expertise is better aimed at current students - undergraduates - and that there are other

services - Birmingham careers and education business partnership or similar, Connexion services - much better equipped to do pre-entry. ... we still do end up with people coming in, and asking to see us, or ringing in, saying "we want to know how to get onto courses" or "I'm interested in this course, how do I get onto it?", and so you will give them starter information, and then basically refer them on'.

For this adviser, the issue was largely one of resourcing: there are too few careers advisers to work effectively at pre-entry as well as on-course guidance. However, as Watts *et al.* (1999, p.27) argue, there are other factors that limit the value of pre-entry guidance on the part of higher education careers services, such as the potential for partiality.

The Harris Review recommends much closer collaborative working with *Connexions* (Harris 2001, Recommendation 27). Although in a period of change, careers education and guidance in schools and colleges, and in particular the *Connexions* service, will continue to play a significant role in raising awareness of higher education and career development for non-traditional students at university in future. Hence, there is a need for careers as well as the widening participation office to be feeding into it. The widening participation officer of one south-western university, comments that:

'that's very important. It also means that our careers service here doesn't have to work in a vacuum. So although their major focus may be supporting students once they are here, they need to work with Connexions, they need to work with careers teachers in schools. Because unless we get early messages down the line about what higher education is and what it's for, then some of the early work careers won't happen.'

There are some specific collaborative schemes organised by universities and their local *Connexions* service. Liverpool Hope University, for example, has worked in partnership with Greater Merseyside *Connexions* on a scheme called Future Focus, designed to help raise awareness of higher education and career opportunities amongst the region's 16 year olds (Liverpool Hope University College, 2002).

At a more local level, there are careers service and local authority initiatives to support particular disadvantaged groups such as Black and ethnic minority students and children in care (Morey *et al.*, 2003).

Collaboration with employers

It is noticeable that as more funding has gone into employer engagement schemes since this research was carried out in 2003, HEIs generally have become much more sophisticated in their approaches. Collaboration between HECAS and employers tends to be regionally based and operate in two ways. First, there are work

placement and employer mentoring schemes that allow students from non-traditional backgrounds to make contact with companies outside university. These can be broken down into schemes that are organised by the local development agencies and those that are managed through agreement between the higher education institution and individual companies. A number of student placement activities in Wales, for example, exist as a result of Welsh Development Agency initiatives. Second, some institutions invite national and international companies to provide direct input into career development programmes. KPMG, for example, is involved in a number of ways with the new universities as part of their commitment to diversity. At one Midlands university, for example, it provides a session on assessment centres as part of the HECAS' careers education programme. Local employers who position themselves as having a clear commitment to supporting local graduate employment often contribute to university careers support programmes. One Blackburn law firm, for example, gives lectures at the University of Central Lancashire from time to time and runs work experience for students, as well as sponsoring one of the prizes for Blackburn College's law course. Departments of the City of Edinburgh Council are similarly invited to present guest lectures on careers in local government in social work and accountancy. These, however, are individual initiatives and depend upon the commitment of companies to promoting diversity.

Enterprise initiatives at various universities such as the Graduate Gateway schemes are designed specifically to help graduates develop their employability skills. The Graduate Gateway organised by the Careers Advisory Service at Salford University, for example, involves a large number of local employers and aims 'to enhance graduates' job prospects by developing their confidence, business awareness and job search skills' (Salford, 2003). It involves an extended work placement and can lead to graduate employment. One problem which we are not likely to solve easily is that employers have varied agendas (Purcell and Rowley, 2001, p.430).

Mentoring is one of the main methods by which diversity is promoted and this remains a preferred approach in many different countries, and many universities around the world offer mentoring programmes that link students from non-traditional backgrounds with local and national employers (Williams, 2007). Hall (2003, p.v.) warns that 'the UK literature reminds us that mentoring needs to be properly integrated into its organisational context and establish appropriate links with other services and opportunities'. Focused collaborative schemes include LINKnet, a Black and ethnic minority mentoring service. HEIs in the Edinburgh, Lothian and Fife regions, for example, work closely with principal employers in their regions to find mentors for black ethnic minority graduates. A human resources manager of one city council argues that the benefits of the initiative are that 'just being in contact with somebody, someone else who knows the system and how to apply for jobs in the council can guide the person through the system'.

Bridging the divide between higher education and local employers, particularly SMEs, is a key element in promoting diversity. For example, 'Graduates for Growth' (<http://www.graduatesforgrowth.co.uk/>), a non-profit organisation that is funded by Scottish Enterprise Edinburgh and Lothian and sponsored by a number of local companies, involves all four Edinburgh universities (Graduates for Growth, 2003). The head of careers of one Edinburgh university argues that this is useful in promoting diversity in some respects: 'mature students may well have to stay in Edinburgh and therefore they may well be more interested in smaller and medium employers'. Such locally-focused collaboration is particularly useful to certain categories of non-traditional students who are often keen to remain in the local area after graduation.

Making connections between HECAS and employers

Students place considerable faith in the importance of links with employers. Many called for more talks from employers, careers fairs, work experience opportunities and so on. Careers staff were aware of such thinking, and often expressed frustration at the difficulties of persuading employers to become involved. Employers, for their part, often stated that they had not been approached by university careers services. Cold calling of employers is in fact a fairly fruitless task; more effective is building upon, and most importantly maintaining, links with employers. An important part of this is developing relations in such a way that links with an employer is not entirely dependent upon one individual since that often leads to a scenario where, if that person leaves the company, then the link breaks.

Utilising local networks of employers to spread the message about the benefits of mentoring, or coming in to give talks at universities is probably the most effective means of disseminating information. As this study shows, many graduates are looking to remain in their local area after graduation. Therefore, local public sector employers and SMEs could make much better use of the local graduate market than at present. One very interesting point a careers adviser made was that in some cases, asking employers to contribute financially to a mentoring scheme made them *more* enthusiastic about participating:

'Lots of our employers who've worked with us have said "it costs nothing, are you sure?", and we say "well, if you have a budget you could maybe sponsor the website", so they said "sure, here's a couple of thousand pounds, it seems crazy you are doing this for nothing". You know it's just the culture — it's nothing, it's free, and somehow they kind of, they don't devalue it, but it's like can it be any good if it's free.' (Careers adviser, North West)

Realistically, however, it is the responsibility of careers services to take the initiative. The human resources manager of one north-western law firm explained that she had looked at the local university's website but 'nobody

has ever contacted me from there', and, she admitted, 'to get employers on board you need to do the work for them, I am afraid'.

Conclusions

Collaborative working practices, both within institutions and with external bodies, are believed by a range of commentators and practitioners to be crucial for reaching and retaining students from diverse and non-traditional backgrounds. It is increasingly being integrated into the practice of HECAS and higher education institutions as the most effective way of maximising resources. Internal collaboration between HECAS and other student services is increasingly becoming a reality with the co-operation of staff and senior management. HECAS are increasingly becoming part of a closer-knit community of student services that is physically closer to the centre of university life, by being physically integrated into a one-stop-shop student services. Institutions are clearly paying most heed to Watts' (1997) model of 'integrated guidance'.

Embedding career support into the student curriculum is also increasingly becoming a reality in many institutions, following Watts' (1997) 'integrated curriculum' model of guidance, as HECAS are asked to play a role in providing career guidance modules. How effective such modules will be is still being evaluated but it is assumed that they are valuable tools in promoting diversity. However, the success and extent of such modules still depends on the interest, enthusiasm and time resources of individual lecturers. Opposition to curriculum-based guidance tends to be the result of a lack of timetable space rather than fundamental criticism of the principle.

Collaboration between careers services and external bodies is, perhaps naturally, more varied in its success than internal collaboration. Much work has been done to enable a greater degree of networking between HECAS and between HECAS and other careers service organisations (Watts *et al.*, 1999). Collaboration with employers is dependent upon the willingness of local employers to be involved because of time resources and individual interest in the promotion of diversity. Much of the attention of careers advisers has been focused on the need to make local companies aware of the value of graduates to their businesses and this is particularly important to many students from non-traditional backgrounds as they often need to remain in the region on graduation. For employers in particular, however, there appears to be a continued need for more effective communication from HECAS about what graduates from non-traditional backgrounds can offer.

Collaborative working practices are popular among many higher education careers advisers. Careers staff are beginning to feel more central to the implementation of institutional missions to provide effective support to all students. It also appears to reduce some of the tensions

between different fields of work within higher education institutions. This research, however, demonstrates that the success of such schemes in developing the employability skills of non-traditional students is difficult to evaluate effectively. Evaluation is necessary, but resources are needed.

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