

Careers guidance for adult work-based learners: why traditional support services are not sufficient

Sue Wilkinson

The changing profile of higher education students and the importance of career services in enhancing student employability led to a review of higher education careers services carried out by the Department for Education and Employment (DfEE, 2001). This review highlighted the under use of career services by non-traditional students and the importance of developing models of information advice and guidance that meet the needs of these students.

This paper will report on a recent study carried out in response to this apparent deficit in the provision of careers support for foundation degree students at a UK higher education institution and its associated partner colleges. Data from an electronic survey will be presented and issues regarding the lack of careers support available to these students will be highlighted. Suggestions of how to rectify this deficit will be discussed.

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore approaches to career guidance for non-traditional students. The research aimed to identify where gaps existed in careers guidance provision for foundation degree students and to ascertain why such gaps existed and how this deficit may be addressed.

This paper details a study conducted by Foundation Direct CETL at the University of Portsmouth into the career development support needs of Foundation degree students. Foundation degrees (FD) are work-based qualifications and statistics show that, with 34,000 entrants in 2006-07 and over 40,000 in 2007-08 (HEFCE, 2008), the numbers of students enrolling on these courses continues to grow. It is expected that total student numbers will rise to 97,000 by the year 2010 as the current students work through their programmes (HEFCE, 2008). The popularity of Foundation degrees may also increase, following a report in 2006 stating that the government aims to have 40% of adults educated to level 4 and above and 90% educated to at least level 2 by 2020. It claims that the way to do this will be through co-operation between employers, individuals and institutions to respond to employer needs and individual demand. Seventy percent of the population who will be of working age in 2020 have already left compulsory education, therefore focusing on adult skills and education is crucial.

The foundation degree is one route for adults to gain professional recognition and develop skills related to their chosen career.

The profile of a foundation degree student is typically different from that of a student following a traditional undergraduate bachelor programme. HEFCE (2008) reported that 92% of full-time students were on courses that are two years or shorter and 70% of part-time students were on courses of three years or shorter, suggesting that Foundation degrees are generally shorter than more traditional degrees. This report also highlights the fact that foundation degree courses attract more mature students, many studying by distance learning, and it estimates that only between 11% and 33% of entrants have A levels. Purcell *et al.* (2007) also point out that applicants to foundation degree courses or HNDs/DipHEs were generally older (supporting the HEFCE, 2008, report), more likely to enrol for study at a new (post-1992) university, more likely to be in employment, and less likely to rate themselves highly on numeracy and literary skills than applicants to 3- or 4-year bachelors degree programmes. Many FD students have already chosen a career, and their involvement with an FD programme may be to validate or quantify their experience in their field. It thus follows that the type of career development guidance and support these students require will be different to that needed by the traditional students following a traditional course.

Purcell *et al.* (2007) also examine other apparent differences between the average profile of a traditional student versus a foundation degree student. They point out that there are differences in gender distribution with more females applying for traditional courses than FD courses (reflecting the types of subjects available at FD level), and that whilst 43% of applicants to traditional courses have at least one parent who has studied at higher education level, only 35% of FD applicants have a parent who has studied in higher education.

A review of higher education career services was commissioned in 2001 by the Department for Education and Employment (DfEE). This review reflected an understanding of the importance of career services in student employability, taking into account the diversity of the higher education student profile and the role of higher education in lifelong learning (DfEE, 2001). This review highlighted the importance of adapting and developing models of career development advice and guidance that would be appropriate to non-traditional as well as traditional students. The review also revealed that non-

traditional students do not use career services, an issue that this study also aimed to address. The review also identified that increasing numbers of students are studying part-time and/or on distance learning courses in order to fit in with work or other commitments.

The Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) reiterated the need for higher education institutions to adapt their provision of careers services to appeal to different types of student (HEFCE, 2001). The needs of non-traditional students differ widely to those of traditional students; they are more likely to have identified a career direction and be more familiar with the working world, but may still need support and advice when it comes to career progression and development.

With the exception of some research by the Higher Education Careers Services Unit (HECSU, 2003) into how careers services can increase the employability of graduates from non-traditional backgrounds which suggested a balance is necessary between the services offered to all students and special services offered to mature students, there has been little academic research into careers services for non-traditional students since 2001.

There have been no studies examining the career support needs of work-based learning and/or foundation degree students. Thus, at present, there is no careers development support in place to guide this student population during and after their studies. It was this gap in the research that has inspired the current study.

Method

Participants

All participants were students currently enrolled on a foundation degree at Portsmouth University and partner colleges. 151 students participated in this research, 82.9% of whom were female and 17.1% were male. Most of the participants (40.8%) were in the age range of 36-45, 27% in the age range 26-35, 20.4% in the range 46-55, 9.2% in the range of 18-25, and 2.6% were over 55. Most of the participants were studying at Portsmouth University (73%). The rest were students at South Downs College (8.6%), online/distance learning courses (7.2%), Alton College (5.9%), St Vincent's College (3.9%), and Isle of Wight College (2%). Most of the participants were in Year 1 (44.7%) or Year 2 (40.1%) of their course, but some were in Year 3 (9.9%) and in Year 4 (5.3%). Most of the students who responded to the electronic survey were doing a foundation degree in Business and Management or Early Years Care and Education (both 24.3%). Others were studying Education Administration (14.5%), Learning Support (10.5%), Paramedic Science (9.9%), Medicines Management (7.9%), Government (4.6%), Medical Imaging (0.7%), and Working with Young People (0.7%).

Design and Materials

This was an electronic survey created online using SurveyMonkey.com and sent to c.450 students on foundation degrees. The survey collected both quantitative and qualitative data. The survey covered questions such as what level of careers support they already received, whether they used this support, how important they rated career development, and why they were doing the FD.

Procedure

An email was sent to students which contained a link to the electronic survey. The purpose of the research was briefly explained to the students and they were invited to take part in the research by clicking on the web link. They were advised that the survey would only take a short time to complete, and that their data would be kept anonymously (their name and email address being separated from their responses before analysis). In order to encourage participation, students were advised that if they completed the survey they would be entered into a draw to win an iPod and that this would take place after the survey had closed and they would be notified by email if they were successful. The survey was active for about 6 weeks before it was closed.

Results and discussion

This section will analyse the results of the survey under the following themes: current careers support, and attitudes to career development.

The majority of foundation degree students study part time (96.7%), with only a few studying full time (3.3%). This is due to the fact that all of the students in this research work at the same time as studying; 81.6% work full time and 18.4% part time. Taking this into account, it is no surprise that these students have different career support needs to students following a more traditional route on a full-time undergraduate degree. Only 16.6% of the students in this study started their foundation degree with the intention of changing their careers, the remainder having embarked on the degree to progress further in their current field. Despite this desire of participants to progress in their professions, almost half (49.5%) of these students were not aware of the options that would be available to them on completion of their foundation degree. This clearly indicates a lack of careers support which needs to be addressed in order for these students to make informed choices about which direction they take after their degree. In the same vein, over three-quarters of participants were intending to carry on after their foundation degree to top it up to an honours degree, but 64.4% of these students stated that they did not know what steps they would need to take to arrange this, or where they should go to find out.

HEFCE (2008) reported that 55% of 2004-05 foundation degree students registered to do an honours degree top-up, and of these, 24% did not graduate (this could be due to not finishing in time, or failed to qualify). Of those who did graduate, 40% achieved a first or 2:1, and 28% achieved a 2:2. To compare this with figures for students overall, 37% of foundation degree students who topped-up to an honours degree achieved a first or 2:1 when finishing in 2006-07 compared to 55% of students overall in 06-07.

Research into the clarity of career choices and qualifications required by students when embarking on a degree course has been conducted by the Higher Education Careers Service Unit (as cited in Purcell *et al*, 2007). This research reveals that on a scale of 1 to 7 (1 being 'I have a clear idea about the occupation I hope to enter and the qualifications required for it' and 7 being 'I have no idea what I will do when I complete my course'), just under 60% of foundation degree students rated themselves as 1 or 2 and only approximately 5% rated themselves as 6 or 7. Furthermore, this study reveals that when asked what the main reasons were for choosing a particular course, foundation degree students stated interest in the course subject, and employment and career related reasons (Purcell *et al*, 2007). Older students, across all degree/course groups were more likely to give the reason as needing to gain the qualification in order to enter a profession. This highlights the fact that foundation degree students are aware of their career development needs and further illustrates the need to assist these students in maximising their potential.

In terms of current careers support available for participants of the current study, 30.7% stated that they receive some support from their employer, and only 14.5% reported that they receive support from their university or college. However, the University of Portsmouth has a careers service which is open to all students on all courses. The fact that most of the FD students surveyed stated they did not receive support from their university suggests a serious lack of awareness of existing support services. Those who were aware of the university careers service claimed that they did not use this service because they felt it was not geared towards helping adult work-based learners and gave advice more appropriate to a 21-year-old undergraduate bachelors programme student. Those who claimed they had support from their employer mentioned that they had time off work to study, in-house training, advice and support from their line manager, and financial support. However, the kind of support participants mentioned specifically was financial support for the course, flexible working hours and time off to study etc., with very little specific careers guidance/development support. For those who did state that they received support (in whatever format), 43.9% find this support helpful, 22% find it very helpful, 29.3% are neutral, and 4.9% do not find it helpful.

Over half of the students in the survey rate career development as very important, 42.8% rate it as important, 4.8% were neutral, and only 0.7% rate it as not important. Some of the reasons given by participants as to why they think career development is important were: motivation, job satisfaction, to feel valued and more confident, to feel empowered, to provide opportunities, to achieve aims, for personal development, to continually progress, to increase skills base, to earn more money, to give direction and goals, to feel satisfied, to be challenged, to be aware of future developments in field, for self improvement, to remain interested in job, and to secure a future for self and family. One participant wrote that their personal and professional development was important to them because 'Stillstand ist Rueckschritt' (to stand still is to go backwards). This clearly indicates an awareness of the importance of career development amongst foundation degree students.

A relatively large proportion of students, 55.2%, believed that careers support would definitely increase their confidence in applying for new jobs, and 33.8% believed that it may increase their confidence. Almost half of the students stated that they thought they would benefit from specific tailored careers advice, 44.8% said they may benefit, and only 7.6% believed that they would not benefit from careers advice.

Most respondents stated that their main obstacle in doing their FD was time management. All students work whilst studying, and many also have family commitments. It was noted that juggling studying, family and work left little time left for career development learning, which suggests the need to focus on guidance and support that is easy to access and can be engaged with at any time. E-guidance is one way of ensuring that all students are able to have access to the support. If time is a significant component in students' reluctance to engage with career learning activities, then it may be that transforming career development learning into a more interactive process with tangible benefits may be the way forward.

Conclusion

This study has shown that although foundation degree students rate career development as very important, very few know what their options are on completing their foundation degree, and very few are aware of how they would arrange to continue onto a top up year for an honours degree, despite a large percentage of participants wishing to pursue this. This lack of provision of careers support and guidance seems crucial considering the nature and purpose of these degrees as work based learning qualifications. These students comprise a population who are very aware of the importance of linking their studies to their professional development, yet this is a student group for whom careers advice and support is significantly lacking. In addition, most of the students stated that they would benefit from tailored advice if this were available to them.

ARTICLES

This research highlights the need for careers support services and educational institutions to join forces in developing services to support non-traditional students. In response to this apparent need for careers support tailored for mature work-based learners, the Foundation Direct CETL at Portsmouth University is currently designing and developing a careers support website that is focused on supporting this student group. Research is being carried out into what areas to target in terms of careers support and what facilities and information such a website should contain. It is hoped that this online resource for career guidance and support for work-based learners will begin to close the gaps in careers guidance provision for non traditional students.

References

Higher Education Careers Services Unit. (2003). *Higher Education Careers Services and Diversity*. Manchester: HECSU.

Higher Education Funding Council for England. (2001). *Strategies for widening participation in higher education – A guide to good practice*. London: HEFCE.

Higher Education Funding Council for England. (2008). *Foundation Degrees: Key statistics 2001-02 to 2007-08*, published May 2008. [Available at http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/hefce/2008/08_16/]

Purcell, K., Elias, P., Adam, D., Behle, H., Ellison, R., & Wilton, N. (2007). *Applying for Higher Education – Career Choices and Plans*. HECSU. [Available at <http://www.prospects.ac.uk/downloads/documents/HECSU/FUTURETRACK/Futuretrack%20Applying%20for%20HE1.pdf>]

Purcell, K., Elias, P., Ellison, R., Artfield, G., Adam, D., and Livanos, L. (2008). *Applying for Higher Education – the diversity of career choices, plans, and expectations*. HECSU. [Available at http://www.hecsu.ac.uk/hecsu.rd/documents/Futuretrack_Report0408.pdf]

Department for Education and Employment. (2001). *DfEE Careers Service Review 2001 Working papers. Stage 2 report to the Student Sub-Group Employment Studies Research Unit*. London, UK: Department for Education and Employment.

For correspondence

Dr Sue Wilkinson, Senior Developer
Foundation Direct CETL, University of Portsmouth
sue.wilkinson@port.ac.uk