

Higher Education Careers Services - a Glimpse into the Future

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Looking over horizons is a fascinating pastime, but where service to customers is involved, forward planning needs to be grounded in an understanding of their fundamental needs. This cardinal rule applies to forecasting the way ahead for higher education careers services as much as it does to any other form of future-gazing. In a period of intense scrutiny of careers services and rapid development of technology and instruments of assessment it is good to pause and ask some fundamental questions about what higher education careers services are trying to do for their customers and how they are going about it. This article reviews the role and future development of higher education careers services, giving an individual practitioner's viewpoint based on lengthy experience in a progressive, medium-sized university careers service.

A model fit for purpose

For more than half a century careers guidance for higher education students has been delivered by careers services which are based in and are an integral part of academic institutions. Is that still the best model – and is it one which will serve its clients well in the foreseeable future?

There are many reasons for answering this key question in the affirmative. As institutions have grown in complexity, offering a very wide range of courses at a variety of levels to an increasingly diverse student population, the need for careers guidance practitioners who can relate to the experience which students and graduates have had has become more pressing. It is not obligatory to share the same background as one's clients, but in the context of higher education it is an enormous advantage for guidance practitioners to belong to the same academic community as their clients – not least because that lends credibility to the relationship, which is a pre-requisite when working with graduates.

Integration within the institution is the key to extensive developments in careers education within the curriculum, an area which has made substantial progress in the last decade. The Quality Assurance Agency's Code of Practice in Careers Education, Information and Guidance assumes that the entire institution will work towards the fulfilment

of students' entitlement to assistance with career choice and job search. Although the QAA stops short of insisting on the existence of a dedicated careers service in each institution, its expectations of what an institution should provide will increase rather than diminish the likelihood of such units being the preferred means of delivering careers education, information and guidance, in partnership with academic colleagues.

A third reason which secures the future of the institution-based careers service is its role as an interpreter of the higher education system for employers. Until all higher education institutions have the same academic profile, identical student populations, carbon copy missions and operate in exactly the same way, (and pigs may fly sooner!), attempts by employers and the recruitment agencies to which they outsource graduate recruitment to deal with all institutions in the same way will be frustrated. As long as institutions set out deliberately to differentiate themselves from one another, a key role of careers services will be provision of consultancy to employers on the particular benefits of recruiting students from various courses and on the best ways of raising their profile within the institution, given its structure and operating systems. In view of the complexity within a single institution, with Faculties which differ from one another, it is virtually impossible for an employer or an external agency to grasp the finer details for even a handful of targeted universities and colleges, let alone all the higher education institutions in the U.K.

In relation to its core client groups – students and graduates, academics and employers – it therefore appears that the institution-based careers service is not only currently a model fit for purpose, but it is likely to remain the best model as institutions continue to diversify their images and offerings.

Whither higher education careers services?

Assuming that the model is correct, are higher education careers services headed in the right direction and are they focusing on the kinds of services which their clients want? At a time of rapid development in careers guidance and graduate recruitment, coupled with rising client expectations, it is not at first sight obvious which of many possible activities higher education careers services should pursue. What is clear, however, is that if they pursue every possible option without adequate resources, they will end up providing a thin veneer of services with little depth below the surface.

At such a time it makes sense to re-visit fundamental professional principles and values and to ask how these can be better served in new ways thanks to the advent of technology and alliances with new partners. Above all, it is important to avoid jumping on every passing bandwagon in order to be a weak competitor in arenas where there are others better placed to succeed. Excelling in areas where one has distinctive expertise is generally the way to success and superb customer service.

It is becoming increasingly clear that while information gathering on careers for graduates is a vital role for higher education careers services, they cannot expect to thrive either by having a monopoly of that information bank in a web-enabled world or by offering that as the sole plank in their manifesto. Gaining access to information will become increasingly easier for all of the careers service's clients – but information alone does not always provide the answer to questions which are couched in the midst of dilemmas about what steps to take next.

Likewise, placement activity beckons with the potential of income generation. This could become a significant role for some larger careers services, but it is unlikely to become the distinguishing feature of all higher education careers services. There are too many well resourced competitors in the over-crowded recruitment industry for careers services to make significant inroads into the placement of hundreds of thousands of graduates emerging from higher education.

Beyond the practical aspects, there is a conflict between the impartiality of careers services' core guidance role and the almost inevitable selectivity of a placement role, which works well for the elite, but rarely for the majority.

Whatever additional functions are assumed, in future, higher education careers services will survive and flourish only if they can promote and deliver to high quality standards their unique selling point – namely, consultancy on their intimate knowledge of the graduate labour market, from the perspectives of both supply and demand. Their detailed knowledge of the supply of graduates – not only in numbers, but also characteristics – is the foundation of their value to employers. Conversely, their knowledge of the trends sweeping through the graduate labour market underpins the advice which they pass on to students, graduates and academics.

Listening to individuals in a mass higher education system

Addressing individuals' core needs is a sure way to offer a viable service in any line of business. Though much of the information which students need when finding out about careers can be produced for a mass audience, there is a kernel of unanswered questions for many, if not most, students which can only be addressed in the context of knowledge of the individual. This is at the heart of expert guidance. It is

an invaluable experience for individuals to be heard and understood by an adviser who can give feedback with insight, reveal career options with assured knowledge and provide support through the selection process (however that may change in future).

This is the labour intensive aspect of careers guidance which may be under threat, but far from being a luxury, it is highly cost effective in the long run. Assistance with informed career choice can help to prevent a 'wandering in the wilderness' experience for graduates in the early years after graduation. Effective support for job search (sometimes intensively for graduates who do not fit employers' ideal profile) can reduce a period of unemployment, to the benefit of the individual and the economy.

This one-to-one relationship does not eschew all the advances of technology. Instead, it works with them to ensure that the model of human intervention plus technology offers a better service than either could alone. For instance, a careers adviser may proceed from diagnosis of needs to refer students to trustworthy websites for reliable careers information, course options and job vacancies. It is also possible to provide on-going support, tailored to the individual, via e-mail and telephone help-lines. Thus, a careers adviser now and in the future needs to be proficient in careers counselling skills as well as familiar with the potential of information and communications technology. If ever the latter eclipses the former, however, the unique distinction between careers advisers and information providers will be lost – to the detriment of clients.

Quality assurance

Assuming the careers services are heading in the right direction and concentrating on delivery of appropriate services, they will still have to prove that they meet quality standards. Performance indicators and quality assessment are embedded in the spirit of the age, but the choice of factors to measure must be informed by advice from careers guidance practitioners. Otherwise, the wrong conclusions may be drawn and the exercise of accumulating data about scarcely relevant issues will detract from developments which should move the guidance profession forward.

The true impact of quality careers guidance is difficult to measure as its outcome may be separated from the point of delivery by a period of months or even years, during which other factors may have intervened, making it difficult, if not impossible, to gauge the true value of the guidance.

At present most higher education careers services are in the foothills of evaluation, collecting by laborious means basic data about whether various services and facilities are in place. Much of this data collection is done for compliance rather than development purposes – for example, for accreditation or in order to be eligible to bid for resources. It is to be hoped that in future careers services will progress beyond

this level of quality assurance to a situation where impact evaluation is driven by a desire to use market research to determine whether the services on offer are those which clients would prioritise and to arrive closer to assessing the value added by careers services to clients' successful career decision making.

There will also have to be more ingenuity and sophistication employed in the collection of customer feedback. The public is sinking under the weight of questionnaires and so it is necessary to be very selective in what is attempted by that means. There is scope for electronic means of quantitative data collection via electronic diaries, swipe cards and electronic counters alongside qualitative evaluation via brief question and answer sequences on websites, telephone surveys and focus groups.

Once evaluation acquires an internal rather than an external impetus, the Quality Assurance Agency would do well to adopt the 'lighter touch' which has been promised. An insistence upon an excessive amount of basic level evaluation data will only serve to stunt progress in improving customer service in higher education careers services by diverting their resources and energies away from developmental activities.

Resource allocation

Whether resources are liberal or frugal, acquired through income generation or Government largesse, at the end of the day decisions have to be taken about how they are allocated. Almost without exception, higher education careers services are run prudently within existing parameters. The question, however, is whether the parameters set by authorities outside the guidance profession are the correct ones. Is optimum use being made of the expertise residing in careers services?

At present, for instance, a disproportionate amount of resource is spent on the collection of graduate destination statistics at a single point in time after graduation. Viewed logically, is it sensible for a purely administrative task to be undertaken by staff who have the skills and expertise to provide guidance and so improve the quality of graduates' destinations? It is logical that their understanding of the labour market should be used to interpret destinations data and to use it for the purpose of guidance, but it does not follow that the data collection should be the sole responsibility of careers services to the detriment of their core activities.

There is also the wider issue of national resource allocation. There is a fundamental flaw in a system which requires all institutions to comply with a common standard of excellence in careers education, information and guidance, but sets no minimum standard for the resources to be allocated for this purpose. Not only is there no recommended staff-student ratio for careers services, but neither is there any parity in the funding available for higher education careers services

in the constituent parts of the United Kingdom. Development funds which exist in one country are not available in another – yet all are reviewed via a common quality assurance model. A common goal should be supported by equal access to funding.

It is not unreasonable to expect higher education careers services to generate some income, but since the most likely source of this income is employers, the extent to which careers services can do so depends on variable factors, such as the nature of courses offered by institutions and the buoyancy or otherwise of the graduate labour market. Unless there is an equitable public funding allocation as a foundation for service delivery, the better and less well resourced careers services will drift further apart in what they can offer to students, graduates and employers and the concept of equal access for all to quality guidance will remain a pipe-dream.

Conclusion

Standing at the portal of the twenty-first century, it appears that the model of the institution-based higher education careers service remains viable for its clients. Careers services should recognise that their unique selling point is adding value to information on higher education and the graduate labour market by offering guidance to students and graduates and consultancy to employers, using both traditional and electronic means of communication.

Quality assurance should outgrow a compliance mentality and become an effective tool for careers service managers as they seek to identify trends in consumer demand and develop appropriate services to meet emerging needs. Quality audits are a reasonable expectation for recipients of public funding, but scrutiny of quality service delivery should be preceded by the introduction of more equitable funding arrangements.

Higher education careers service staff are already well motivated towards excellence in service delivery for all their customers. It is, therefore, critical that this motivation should not be stifled by a compliance culture born of mistrust, but rather supported and encouraged to develop new means of sharing valuable expertise with all of the careers services' client groups.

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