'I'm Just a Plain Old Careers Adviser' – Recognising the Hidden Expert

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A new 'employability climate' with a greater attention to graduate outcomes has emerged within Higher Education in recent years. Consequently, careers advisers find their established practice and their claims to be experts in student career development questioned, even though the increased interest has potential for greater recognition of their role. An exploration of the professional identity of careers advisers in higher education suggests that they are challenged in their professional identity, yet are strongly committed to their purpose. On this basis recommendations have been developed to confirm careers advisers as experts in this increasingly visible aspect of the student experience.

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Introduction and context

For careers advisers in higher education, the recent high-profile interest in careers and employability heralds a time of great change. In 2001, school careers advice in England was absorbed into the Connexions service at the expense of a specialised careers service. In contrast, university careers services flourished where institutions allowed, sometimes expanding to encompass enterprise, volunteering and placement activity and Skills Award management. During this period careers services experienced varying, but generally limited levels of attention and expectation particularly in relation to institutional profile and performance measures. Services within the sector ranged from two or three-person bands to large multi-functional teams and in the latter, the role of careers adviser gently shifted from a pivotal service influencer to a careers education and guidance specialist. Nonetheless, university careers advisers continued to exercise their professional judgement to support students in their career planning and decision making.

In 2010, it was announced that from 2012 undergraduate tuition fees of up to £9,000 per year would be introduced for English students in the UK and for students from Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland at English universities. This change put the spotlight on 'return on investment', which was interpreted by many as 'ability to get a graduate job.' For careers advisers, the 'new' employability climate offers opportunities for greater recognition of their work, yet is more questioning of established practice and seeks greater accountability. Meanwhile, Heads of Careers Service have seen their role move often from being a 'senior partner', or 'first amongst equals', to a leader and manager, sometimes the institutional employability lead and almost always with responsibility to contribute to the University league table position via first destination data.

I am a careers adviser by training and a Director of Careers and Employability at a large, international, English university. I was drawn to research in this area through my experience of management within a careers service during this change, and by my commitment to careers advice as a critical factor in student employability success. As the employability agenda has grown in prominence, I have noted with interest, and frustration, a recurrent lack of recognition or acknowledgement of careers advisers as professional experts in this arena; either at an institutional level, by groups within institutions, or by careers advisers themselves.

I undertook this study to understand the professional identity of careers advisers in higher education across the UK in this new employability climate. In this context, professional identity is defined as 'the experience and self-understanding of those

fulfilling a particular occupational role'. Based on this understanding, recommendations have been developed for careers service leaders and managers, and careers advisers themselves, so that they can strongly position and equip careers advisers to meet institutional expectations, whilst enabling students to follow fulfilling careers when they graduate.

Professions and professional identity in the literature

A key attribute of a profession is that it solves a problem using specialist knowledge. The nature of the problem is one which is recognised by the public, who therefore value, and/or are dependent on the work of the professional (Torstendahl, 1990). Wilensky (1964) describes a profession as a group who control their own training and admission to practice and evaluate their own standards of performance, although a critical perspective on professions suggests that this is motivated by a desire to preserve a monopoly in the area of work, in order to gain privilege through money, status and influence (Scott, 2008), rather than to maintain standards.

Studies have also considered the impact of social and technological change on the purpose and nature of professions. Spada (2009) noted a decline in the positive public perceptions of professions, linked to post-industrial values, particularly a decline in deference to authority and a move away from a focus on physical and financial well-being, towards individual self-expression. This means that rather than 'simply' having their problem solved, an individual expects more personal enrichment and benefit from a professional service. However, they are less likely to defer to the professional providing that service as they are no longer perceived to be an 'authority figure'. The speed and breadth of universally available information, as a result of rapid technological changes, also complicates the dynamic between the professional and the public (Abbot, 1998) as professional power through the perception of the possession of knowledge is eroded.

Previous investigations demonstrate the challenge of establishing a collective professional identity for a particular profession. Considering architecture, Cohen et al (2005) suggest that working context (private or

public) has an impact on professional identity, while Jawitz (2009) suggested that academic professional identity is linked to their discipline and the institution in which they work. In considering the professional identity of teachers, Beijard et al (2004) identify four features of professional identity; a process of interpretation and re-interpretation; development as a result of the individual and their context; harmonisation of sub-identities; and involvement in professional development to support 'agency'.

There are also factors which challenge professional identity: a lack of public recognition of expertise (Crawford et al, 2008); multiple and non-descriptive job titles within a profession (Adams, 2008); and a lack of control over professional work (Lindsay and Sandhu, 2014). The rise of 'professional managers' can be seen as a threat to members of a profession, as their work is directed and configured by those who are privileging an organisational perspective over professional judgment (Scott, 2008). However, Noordegraaf (2011) suggests that this does not need to be a challenge and that 'Organized Professionalism', which absorbs management issues into professional thinking and judgement can overcome a dualistic conflict of 'management versus professionals' (Noordegraaf, 2011:1355).

Studies into the professional identity of careers advisers suggest that, outside higher education, the identity of careers advisers in the former Connexions service was challenged by the imposition of management imperatives on their work (Colley et al, 2008), and that now, a clear descriptive job title and engagement with continuing professional development (CPD), contribute to the professional identity of careers practitioners (Neary, 2014). My study aims to make a contribution to knowledge by specifically considering the professional identity of careers advisers in higher education.

Methodology

The methodology chosen for this study was Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), which has been found to be an effective methodology for the investigation of identity issues (Fragkiadaki et al, 2013; Butcher, 2012). The approach enables an insight into a chosen phenomenon, in this case the

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professional identity of careers advisers, adopting a social constructionist stance that reality is the meaning that individuals make of their experience (Crotty, 1998). The outcome of such an approach is to achieve 'theoretical transferability rather than empirical generalisability' (Smith et al, 2009: 51). Within IPA there is a role for the researcher to interpret the respondent's own interpretation of their experience (the 'double hermeneutic'), while acknowledging the researcher's own experience. A reflective journal was kept throughout the study in order to 'be sensitive to the subtle differences between compelling interest in a subject, advocacy and out-and-out bias' (Rossman and Rallis, 2003:35).

Data was collected through 21 semi-structured interviews with careers advisers at 14 institutions across England, Wales and Scotland, identified by stratified sampling of league table data. The institutions included the key mission groups: the former 94 Group, Million Plus, University Alliance and the Russell Group. Of the 21 respondents, two thirds were female, one third male, 76% worked full-time and 24% part-time. Interviews were analysed individually to identify themes and then considered collectively to identify super-ordinate themes which shape the professional identity of careers advisers. By understanding these themes, a suggested professional identity of careers advisers emerged.

Findings

Analysis of the respondents' accounts of feeling like a professional and being recognised as a professional, in higher education, yielded five super-ordinate themes that shape the professional identity of careers advisers. Respondents also shared a range of perspectives on how the new employability climate might affect their role. These findings are outlined here.

1. The experience of Professional Training and Continuing Professional Development (CPD)

The findings suggest that the early stages of working as a careers adviser in higher education are challenging: those with a Diploma or Qualification in Careers Guidance did not feel prepared with the knowledge required, while those coming from another role were

surprised at the assumption that they would know what to do. In some cases, they have never completed a careers guidance qualification, yet are now experienced practitioners. CPD was welcomed and valued, although some respondents commented on the challenge of finding the time to undertake it and, for those new to the profession, of establishing their own guidance style.

2. Association with the undergraduate-facing elements of the academic community.

At a very practical level, the majority of respondents depended on their academic colleagues to gain appropriate access to students to deliver their services. At the same time, respondents compared themselves and their role with academics, sometimes unfavourably, through the lens of their qualifications. Opportunities for careers advisers to work in partnership with academics, particularly co-teaching, were prized, as it fostered a sense of being a peer. However, it is important to note that while respondents rightly used the word 'academics', they were almost always referring to those who focus on engagement with undergraduates, not those who would necessarily have high levels of influence within their school, on institutional agendas, or be connected to postgraduate activity.

3. By seeking personal credibility from elsewhere

This theme emerged from a broader context. Many respondents experienced a lack of understanding of their role by students – the impact of the Connexions service – and by academics, who demonstrated their lack of understanding by, for example, asking a careers adviser to run a session on graduate job hunting early on in a first year programme. Linked to this, respondents had a clear sense that being a careers adviser was not highly regarded, which seemed to affect how they saw themselves. It is perhaps, then, no surprise that respondents sought credibility elsewhere: expressing preference for an alternative job title to 'careers adviser', such as 'Deputy Head of Careers', when taking on management responsibilities; emphasising to students their strong links to graduate recruiters; and drawing on experience in previous

non careers-advisory roles, even though they much preferred being careers advisers.

4. By framing their purpose through student interactions rather than institutional goals

Respondents were strongly motivated by helping students which provided the emotional rewards that meant that they loved what they do. There was a consistent view that the careers adviser role was not about a bigger picture, to the relief of those who were not interested in broader institutional issues and 'politics', and to the frustration of those who had moved into a practitioner role following periods of management.

5. Using a range of conceptualisations of the role

Across the sample, different terms were used to describe the role: Non-Expert; Generic; Facilitator; Educator; Empowering Educator and, in only one case, Specialist, where the respondent had senior experience in the sectors about which they provided advice. The preference for a broader conceptualisation, rather than a sense of expertise, was supported by a lack of references to a specific body of knowledge, unlike other professions. Here, as in relation to CPD, respondents felt that this was partly due to the time they felt they had to develop their knowledge.

In terms of the new 'employability climate', some respondents felt that the increased interest provided an opportunity to promote what careers advisers and careers services do. For others, it presented a threat, as they would be exposed to scrutiny and were not resourced to meet increased institutional demands.

The professional identity of careers advisers in higher education

From these themes, a professional identity for careers advisers emerges, which lacks definition, does not recognise and is not fully recognised by the higher education context in which it is situated, is lacking in confidence yet is driven by a strong dedication to the

purpose of the role. Careers advisers' perceptions of their professional identity can be summarised as: - Undefined, Locally Focussed, Unrecognised, Unconfident and Dedicated.

Careers advisers are seen as *undefined* as a profession: the paths to practice vary; it is possible to practice without a qualification; and there is a variety of titles within the role. This, combined with the assumption that those with a careers qualification, or other relevant professional experience outside the sector, will know what to do in a university setting, leaves careers advisers vulnerable to a sense that 'anyone can do this job'. Sometimes neglected in this context, is the support to develop a guidance style, considered by many to be the key distinguishing skill within the role, leaving careers advisers feeling far from the expert problem-solver that a member of a profession is publicly understood to be.

The role is *locally focussed,* leading to a failure by careers advisers fully to recognise the context in which they work and, perhaps, the challenges that their heads of service face. By aligning themselves predominantly with the undergraduate experience, they distance themselves from the full context in which their academic contacts operate. This is demonstrated by a perception that undergraduate teaching represents parity with an academic, rather than the equivalent of a research profile, doctoral supervision and additional management responsibilities, all of which contribute to higher academic status. Careers advisers' reluctance to describe themselves as experts and the lack of reference to a defined body of knowledge also demonstrate some lack of contextual understanding given the academic imperative of disciplinary expertise.

Equally, careers advisers report feeling *unrecognised* in their university setting by their students, academic contacts and sometimes by the institution itself. The latter seemed linked to their own lack of interest in wider institutional issues which perhaps leads to a focus on student-facing activity, rather than conversation and activity that builds institutional networks. Careers advisers might collude with this lack of recognition through self-disassociation with their role, emphasising instead previous roles they consider to be of higher status, welcoming alternative job titles to those which clearly represent the role,

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and emphasising their links to graduate recruiters. The latter association positions careers advisers as a conduit rather than an expert, highlighting 'who' rather than 'what' they know, when such contacts are easily transferred. Perhaps unsurprisingly, careers advisers convey an *unconfident* professional identity, where contributory factors include a lack of recognition of their role and a comparison with the higher level of qualification which academics routinely possess. Careers advisers express a strong desire for 'kudos' and 'credibility', both words which did not feature in the interview questions for this study. The use of diminutive language such as 'I'm just a plain old careers adviser' and 'my own little part of the careers advisory room' also point to a low level of confidence or perceived importance. However, alongside this lack of confidence is a strong sense of dedication to their role. Described by one as their 'lottery job', careers advisers express a passionate commitment to helping students.

This identity presents both a challenge and opportunity to leaders and managers of careers services in higher education, who seek to position their service, and this core professional role, as institutional employability experts. There is challenge in the lack of definition and recognition of the role, and in careers advisers' own lack of recognition of their institutional context. However, careers advisers' dedication to the purpose of their role provides a powerful opportunity for leaders and managers to work with them to redefine and strengthen their professional identity. If achieved, careers advisers would be positioned as a strong professional force, working in the interests of students' career development, the careers service and wider institutional priorities. The following recommendations suggest ways that this might be approached.

Recommendations

It is suggested that leaders and managers of careers advisers work in partnership with careers advisers to: -

1. Define an externally understood body of expertise and knowledge while encouraging an evidence-based approach to practice. This will strengthen careers advisers' confidence and align their role

more closely with academic practice and other clearly understood professional roles.

2. Encourage and facilitate professional development to maintain and develop careers advisers' skills and expertise. This includes a rigorous induction process and opportunities to develop deeper levels of knowledge about industries and sectors by, for example, work shadowing graduate roles for enhanced insights.

3. Enable careers advisers to understand better their role in the institutional context. This will include an understanding of their institution in terms of funding, research and wider business engagement, how it compares to its peers, how the careers service is situated in that context and the challenges facing careers service leaders.

4. Promote the work of careers advisers in the context of the institution, focussing on student employability issues that careers advisers address and the knowledge that they have, rather than focussing on the activities they deliver.

There may also be a role here for the Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services (AGCAS). Originally a membership organisation for heads of service and careers advisers alone, now as the professional body for all careers and employability professionals across the higher education sector, AGCAS perhaps needs to consider ways to strengthen the identity of its original professional membership without feeling that it compromises its voice and its relevance to the broader employability agenda.

Conclusion

The interest in employability across the higher education sector has focussed unprecedented levels of attention on careers services and the careers advisers within. This is seen by some careers advisers as an opportunity, but by others as a challenge or threat. Closer investigation of their professional identity suggests that deliberate approaches by leaders and managers and careers advisers themselves are required, if the role of careers adviser is to be defined and deployed in ways which are clearly understood, and reflect their actual skills and knowledge,

institutional priorities, academic practice, and a stronger professional position.

By doing so, careers advisers will be strongly placed to support their leaders and managers in the positioning of careers services as centres of employability expertise, confirming themselves as experts in their field of career planning, problem solving and decision making, while continuing to support students in the development and fulfilment of their career and life ambitions.

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