

Maintaining the promise without killing the dream: Developing resilience for future 'graduate' careers

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Significant numbers of recent graduates continue to enter non-graduate roles. Against this backdrop, there is a need to consider how students and graduates can be prepared for the graduate labour market. Resilience is represented as a key attribute for successfully navigating this challenging and complex labour market. Drawing on empirical research with higher education careers practitioners, we examine approaches to supporting graduates in developing 'resilience' against a backdrop of competing stakeholder priorities. We highlight the challenges of acknowledging transition experiences that are counter to dominant notions of successful graduate outcomes. We advocate support for practitioners to provide realistic insights into the graduate labour market.



Introduction

Against a backdrop of increasing scrutiny on the value and performance of UK higher education institutions (HEIs) (Department for Business Innovation and Skills, 2016; Office for Students, 2019) and the particular emphasis on their role in developing employability and preparing all students for future careers, there are reports of graduates being disillusioned with the realities of work, their career expectations being unmet and increasing numbers describing themselves as underemployed. Recent figures from the Office for National Statistics (ONS) show that in 2017, 47% of recent graduates (those who left full time education within five years of the survey date) were employed in

non-graduate roles.¹ This figure is subject to significant regional variation with rates above 50% in Scotland, Wales, the North East and the North West and rates of 35% in Inner London. There are also significant disparities within regions – for example, the rate in the West of England Combined Authority (which includes Bath, Bristol and South Gloucestershire) is 38.2%, compared to 55.1% in the rest of the South West (ONS, 2018).

Whilst there are debates over how graduate/non-graduate roles can be defined and measured (Scurry & Blenkinsopp, 2011), these ONS figures suggest a significant number of recent graduates are experiencing some form of underemployment. Previous research has highlighted that when graduates find themselves in such circumstances they may come to frame their experience in ways which might have long term negative effects, reducing the likelihood of them achieving a 'graduate career' and preventing them from engaging in career behaviours which would help them capitalise on their experiences (Blenkinsopp, Scurry and Hay, 2015; Scurry and Blenkinsopp, 2018). The notion of a 'graduate career' or 'graduate job' is not uncontested. There is significant debate in the literature about how this can be defined and understood. We acknowledge these debates but for the purpose of this research we understand a 'graduate career' as an expectation held by individuals and society of a career 'commensurate' with the investment in education. How this is understood, measured or evaluated will vary, but it is often

¹ Defined as roles which are associated with tasks that do not normally require knowledge and skills developed through higher education to enable them to perform tasks in a competent manner. Examples of non-graduate jobs include receptionists, sales assistants, many types of factory workers, care workers and home carers (ONS, 2018).

conceptualised using objective markers of salary (for example discussions about the 'graduate premium') or occupational classifications.

Underemployment is a major feature of many graduates' early careers, and this presents a considerable challenge for higher education careers practitioners, as they look to prepare students to manage early employment experiences which may be 'suboptimal' to their own, or others' expectations in a context where labour market outcomes are seen as a key performance indicator for demonstrating the value of higher education for individuals and society. There is a need, therefore, to consider how HEIs can prepare graduates to make connections between their early employment experiences and their future careers, so that in the face of unmet expectations and/or 'sub-optimal' labour market outcomes, they might utilise these experiences to develop and advance their careers.

The role of higher education careers practitioners in providing guidance for students in higher education and helping to develop 'graduate employability' is widely acknowledged. This role is often presented as providing insight into the labour market opportunities, helping with job search and communicating the importance of, and supporting the development of, employability and career management skills (Clarke, 2017). However, Irving and Malik (2005) argue that this is only a partial aspect of career education and counselling – and that those engaged in careers education and counselling have a role to play in promoting alternative and critical perspectives to challenge 'the value-laden ideologies of the global labour market' to enable individuals to 'explore alternative visions and develop their own understanding of career' (Irving and Malik, 2005, p. 5). In doing so careers education and counselling needs to acknowledge the complex and disjointed experience of work and the inequalities inherent within this – for example unemployment, underemployment, low pay, job insecurity and job satisfaction (Athanasou & Perera, 2019). Christie (2016) highlights that the experiences of higher education careers practitioners are increasingly characterised by 'professional turbulence', as roles evolve to focus from in-depth relational work to a focus on breadth, with institutional context both enabling and constraining advisers. To date however,

there has been limited critical exploration of the experiences of individuals providing careers guidance and support in HE.

Graduate career resilience

Resilience as an academic concept grew to prominence in the 1970s and 1980s through the development of 'positive psychology' (Block & Block, 1980). Within this literature, resilience was understood as a resource to negotiate an adverse or challenging environment resulting in a positive outcome for the individual. The concept has been understood either as a stand-alone phenomenon or sitting alongside other traits/qualities including adaptability, determination, recovery and hope (Taormina, 2015; Filbay, Bishop, Peirce, Jones & Arden, 2017; Rees, Breen, Cusack & Hegney, 2015; Chow, Tang, Chan, Sit, Choi & Chan, 2018). In their systematic review of graduate resilience, Burke and Scurry (2019) argue for a non-hierarchical interconnected system incorporating; adaptability, goal re-setting, recovery and self-efficacy.

A common theme running through the various definitions of resilience is the focus on the individual, with resilience being understood as 'hardiness' or 'grit'. As a consequence of the highly individualised character of resilience, there is a clear argument that resilience is something which can be taught or developed (Jackson, Firtko & Edenborough 2007), potentially inflating a deficit model of resilience. Alongside the established focus on the individual, there have been developments toward considering the role of contextual factors and social structures (Turner, Scott-Young & Holdsworth, 2017; Ungar, 2011).

Within his ecological model, Ungar (2011) provides four principles for such a conceptualisation of resilience. The first principle is decentrality where, while research still examines the individual/group, the external environment is also considered. The move away from the subject-centred focus also allows, Ungar argues, for a broader understanding of levels of responsibility. The second principle is complexity and an acceptance of the complex nature of social space when constructing research questions and considering avenues of influence. Ungar provides an example of complexity when suggesting that resilience can be

temporal in nature; while it is present at one point of life, this is no guarantee that it will be continuous, particularly due to changes in context, both personal and environmental. In addition, Ungar maintains that an acceptance of complexity allows for an understanding of the equifinality of outcomes (many different starting points leading to different but desirable ends) – helping research to move beyond a deficit model. The third principle is atypicality and a move away from a binary understanding of outcomes. The final principle is cultural relativity and considering the cultural specific context in which resilience is played out, often requiring an understanding of accepted norms and legitimate forms of navigation and negotiation. For Ungar, this navigation and negotiation is a combination of individual agency and structurally-facilitated access to resources required to insulate an individual or group during times of adversity.

Since the early 1990s a resilient workforce, characterised by continuous professional development, responsibility for career self-management and adaptability to the changing requirements of the market, has been identified as a key factor in an organisation's success (Waterman, Waterman & Collard, 1994). Career resilience is defined by Mishra and McDonald as 'a developmental process of persisting, adapting and/or flourishing in one's career despite challenges, changing events and disruptions over time' (2017 p. 218). As such career resilience is concerned with how individuals manage their own career trajectories rather than focusing on how individuals recover from adverse employment experiences. In line with broader discussions concerning resilience, career resilience is understood as a resource that can be developed and supported. A range of studies have advocated the benefits of including resilience training within educational programmes for a range of future careers including teaching and the medical profession (Mishra and McDonald, 2017). However, Bimrose and Hearn (2012) are cautious about the developmental character of career resilience as a lack of such resilience could be unfairly framed as a personal failing, without considering the broader structural influences.

University graduates are a key cohort impacted by the career resilience narrative. Graduates are increasingly expected to enter the labour market with substantial

levels of resilience in which to negotiate employment, underemployment and unemployment. An issue within the sub-field of graduate career resilience however is the focus on a small number of professions, most notably teaching and the medical profession (Burke & Scurry, 2019). In addition, research is often concerned with avoiding burnout once an individual is in a position and not the career resilience required to secure a position.

There are therefore specific issues concerning resilience within the graduate labour market including; economic hardship, social discomfort and goal re-setting in the context of underemployment and unemployment leading to self-exclusion from the graduate labour market (Burke and Scurry, 2019). Articulating these specific transition challenges experienced by graduates allows us to move beyond understanding resilience as a resource to avoid burnout when in employment; it is also a key resource required to insulate graduates as they attempt to navigate the labour market in the absence of employment and the associated resources/comforts such as reliable income and social status. Locating the need for resilience to mediate the juxtaposition between subjective expectations of the labour market (in part created by the university system) and objective realities provides the rationale and defence for providing undergraduate students with a realistic and practical account of graduate life. This approach does not stand in opposition to raising student aspiration, but provides a means to protect them in the long term. Returning to Burke and Scurry's (2019) composite model of graduate resilience, a key barrier in developing these components is an understanding of the labour market and, in particular, the need to develop resilience. Although the concept of resilience has been defined reasonably precisely and consistently in the academic literature, resilience is also a word in everyday use, and as such is open to many different interpretations (cf. Ma, Blenkinsopp & Armstrong, 2020) by different stakeholders. It is therefore important to be aware of these different understandings, and the present study focused specifically on examining how higher education careers practitioners understand and apply the concept of resilience in their practice.

Methods

Data were gathered using 22 in-depth semi-structured interviews with higher education careers practitioners from six universities in the North East of England and Northern Ireland. Access to the different units was agreed and facilitated by the heads of each careers service. The interviews were recorded and fully transcribed for data analysis. Participants' data was anonymised, and confidentiality ensured in this and all other research outputs. Thematic analysis was used to examine the data.

Findings

In the analysis of the findings two key themes emerged. Firstly, practitioners were concerned that stressing the importance of resilience risked communicating a negative and pessimistic view to an already anxious student body. This concern was located within a broader recognition within HE careers practice of the tension between articulating a realistic picture of graduate careers and potentially discouraging student aspiration. This tension arises in part from the extent to which the sector had emphasised a dominant narrative of graduate success (e.g. the graduate premium). This linked to the second theme emerging from the data, the organisational barriers to preparing graduates for uncertain labour markets. We shall now discuss each of these in turn.

Striking a balance between optimism and realism

A key barrier career practitioners experienced in raising student awareness of the likely challenges and setbacks graduates will experience when negotiating the market was that it went against the dominant narrative of success.

There is an awful lot of peer pressure in terms of making applications and in going to the right employers and getting the right jobs and how much salary [...] and there's a lot more chat about careers in general, it's just got a higher profile um and I think that does make students more anxious about what they're going to do next and a lot of that is self-imposed pressure and peer pressure.

A number of participants discussed their concern about the potential negative association that students would make if the need for resilience was emphasised. Participants likened such discussions as 'preparing students to fail' and 'lowering expectations'. As a result, there were very limited discussions with students concerning negative outcomes for graduates.

Through the emergence and establishment of the knowledge economy, universities have situated themselves as a central actor within the economy and justified policies such as increased tuition fees through the graduate premium (Burke, 2016). This is coupled with students identifying increased life chances and employability as a key factor in reading for a degree. In the context of performativity culture within the neo-liberal higher education system (Naidoo & Williams, 2014), university staff (including careers practitioners) are pressured into meeting student expectations and continuing this human capital narrative, that investing in personal resources (education, skills, networks etc.) will foster higher levels of career capital for individuals that result in financial and social rewards (Brown and Wond, 2018). Such a perspective aligns with the attitudes of participants and echoes previous findings from Russell-Watts and Stringer (2018) where careers practitioners resisted 'using language of failure and setbacks' to challenge the dominant narratives of success.

The friction between career practitioners' approach to best practice and the need to take a proactive approach has been discussed by Hooley (2015), who maintains that adopting the stance as a neutral arbiter in an unequal system complicitly reproduces those relations. In this context, supporting a narrative of success and of the graduate premium without providing a critical discussion on the nature and reality of the market denies 'soon to be' graduates the opportunity to understand the need for resilience and to avoid short-term reactions to adverse career experiences such as self-exclusion. We suggest the dilemma participants describe, of pushing against the human capital narratives of success and neo-liberal expectations of performativity, may be alleviated by the eventual end result of higher returns on student investment and increased levels of graduate employment.

Importantly, for practitioners there was a hesitancy in embarking on such an approach without greater institutional support:

As an institution I think it's [thinking about resilience] a massive piece of work to be done - we are very context dependent as a service, we can't be that effective unless the infrastructure's around us and the university works as well.

Practitioners highlight that isolated priorities and potential contradictory messages, between university departments, are a significant barrier in developing resilience. Practitioners need the support from a range of university staff to both transmit and reinforce a singular message but perhaps more importantly to support each other as they question the dominant human capital narratives within higher education.

Organisational barriers for practitioners in preparing graduates for uncertain labour markets

A key issue within participants' accounts was the challenge of the 'self-selecting' nature of students' engagement with the services they offered. Whilst it was acknowledged this was the most feasible approach, given the number of students and the resources available, the effectiveness was questioned. As one participant highlighted, even for students that do engage, 'encounters are brief with little opportunity for follow up'. Whilst many spoke of embedding offers within programmes as a way to broaden reach, it was noted there were challenges in engaging with academics to achieve this.

Participants also highlighted how a range of organisational factors compounded the challenge of opening up students to the possibility that they may need to prepare for entering employment that fails to meet their expectations, or in which their skills and knowledge are not utilised. These included the resourcing of careers and employability services, the changing nature of HE careers service provision and an emphasis on performance metrics (institutional, service, individual). This was epitomised by the following respondent;

I often see my job as you know, er, like a juggler, you're juggling lots of different balls and

sometimes those balls are different colours so someone says, okay make sure you don't leave that blue curveball so it's making sure, even if you drop any it's making sure that ball is not missed. [...] It's meeting some expectations, it's meeting staff expectations as well and, with [University X] being a very small team often you are doing similar things, similar KPI's which are matched by let's say a team of 50 people at other places.

One individual spoke of the need for the 'right ecosystem' to be in place to provide effective support for students but felt the 'people with purse strings and the strategists...[their] attention is elsewhere' and although 'we know [students] respond very well to one to one [sessions], resources are being allocated to IT systems and automation'. This challenge of resourcing, and competing against larger strategic infrastructure projects for investments was most acute in the accounts of practitioners from post-92 institutions. This observation echoes previous arguments from Naidoo and Williams (2014) that post-1992 institutions are vulnerable in a neo-liberal context and are required to more fully engage with performativity culture to ensure a reproduction of their institutional capital.

This changing nature of the job and wider pressures left practitioners feeling that they had little space to reflect on current debates and challenges as they were busy being responsive and 'doing the day job'. Although institutional context and practice provided challenges for respondents, they could also play a role in enabling practitioners to support students and develop resilience. Respondents highlighted the value of existing practices supported by their institutions, including; credit bearing skills development modules and extra-curricular employability awards. However, this institutional support varied across the institutions represented in the study, and respondents highlighted academic support and buy-in for such activities as crucial in determining their success. In addition, respondents discussed the desire for greater institutional support in the form of dedicated training on tools and activities which support the development of resilience. Respondents were aware of some 'tool-kits' that were available but discussed the need for support in selecting the most appropriate combination for their students.

Conclusion and implications

The graduate labour market is complex and highly variegated, with very different entry routes and career pathways depending on such diverse factors as degree subject, target occupation and/or sector, university, location etc. This contextual information is important for career practitioners and students, and will have very different implications in terms of resilience. Students seeking to enter a line of work which is known to be highly demanding but for which there is an acknowledged skills shortage need support to develop resilience in dealing with in-work pressures. Whereas students seeking a career in a field in which supply routinely exceeds demand (e.g. performing arts) need support to develop resilience in coping with the job search, and potentially underemployment or even unemployment.

Our data suggest career practitioners recognise that resilience takes various forms and will need to be supported and developed in different ways for different students. This requires the development of an evidence base, as well as space for practitioners to develop tailored interventions. This forms part of a wider agenda for careers and employability practitioners seeking to develop more critical understandings of the likely challenges within the graduate labour market. However, as our findings demonstrate, career practitioners face a dilemma of balancing realism with optimism against a backdrop of individual, organizational and societal expectations of successful graduate outcomes that both enable and constrain their practice.

One way forward would be to draw upon the idea of 'threshold concepts' (Land, Meyer & Flanagan, 2016), defined as 'ideas that act as conceptual gateways to transformed understandings of the ways of thinking and practising within a discipline or field of study' (Irving, Wright & Hibbert, 2019, p. 357). It would be of great benefit to graduates to have a basic 'theoretical' understanding of the nature of careers, and of the labour market, as this would enhance their career resilience. An understanding of careers and the labour market is recognised as improving students' preparedness for the graduate labour market (e.g. Burke et al., 2020), and in terms of resilience, even a basic understanding of supply and demand in a labour

market context provides graduates with a basis for putting their short term experiences of unemployment or underemployment in context, thus making the situation easier to handle emotionally, and also allow them to develop better strategies for moving on.

Treating career and the labour market as threshold concepts has several benefits for practice. First, the approach can be readily fitted into existing institutional arrangements, in particular curriculum based approaches to careers and employability. Second, by helping all students gain an understanding of these concepts practitioners can avoid the risk of being seen to be lowering students' ambitions. Finally, it provides a basis for graduates to become, and remain, reflective learners when it comes to their own careers.

Clearly introducing such a process requires institutional buy-in, to allow for critical and realistic discussions and also for a greater focus on the long term benefits of fully preparing graduates. In the context of short-term metrics in the UK higher education system, universities have reproduced the image of a 'work ready' graduate, one who is ready to cash in on their graduate premium once they have processed across the graduation stage. In an effort to maintain the promise of opportunity for increased life chances and to support the development of a critical and socially aware cohort without killing the dream, we argue that students and graduates need to be at a realistic starting point to develop career resilience in support of reaching these goals.



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