

From passion to profession: Career journey influences on Arts, English and Language students

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To cite this article:

Lennox, E. (2023). From passion to profession: Career journey influences on Arts, English and Language students. *Journal of the National Institute for Career Education and Counselling*, 51, 1, 26-39. <https://doi.org/10.20856/jnicec.5104>

Abstract

This study examines career decision making journeys and expectations of undergraduate Arts, English and Language students, and potential benefits of appropriate interventions to support graduate outcomes. Employing a mainly social constructivist theoretical framework, objectives included gaining an understanding of student perceptions of their own employability, meaningful employment and perceived barriers to graduate progression. Twelve semi-structured interviews were conducted with final year students, and through thematic analysis results revealed students' passion for their subject and the desire to use their skillset in paid employment. Significantly, embedding a work placement option removed the barrier of limited time and increased workplace confidence.

Keywords: Higher education; graduate careers; creative careers; work experience

Introduction

While creative industries contribute significantly to the economy (DCMS, 2021), the career journeys of these graduates are less linear and predictable than other vocational professionals (Bridgstock, 2011). This can present challenges for careers practitioners supporting this cohort. Within Queen's University Belfast (QUB), the school with the most traditionally creative subject focus is Arts, English and Languages (AEL). While many of

the drama, film, music and broadcast production students within this school aspire to the creative industries, graduate outcomes data has shown it has increasingly become an area of interest for English and modern language students as well, who pursue careers in creative and screen writing, social media creation, and arts administration (QUB CES, 2020).

Student feedback on employability support is important for Careers, Employability and Skills (CES), the central careers service within the university, to develop appropriate targeted guidance and opportunities. The employability challenges faced by Arts, English and Languages (AEL) students were highlighted by data from the Graduate Exit Survey (GES), commissioned by Queen's University Belfast (QUB) in 2020 as a one-off review to examine if and how Covid had impacted the status and future plans of university leavers. Of 16 schools, AEL ranked the lowest in the GES when asked if they had secured a graduate job - only 5% had been successful.

Analysis of data gathered from the First Year Experience Survey (QUB, 2020) and the Second Year Experience Survey (QUB, 2020) revealed that students in AEL showed the lowest levels of satisfaction and awareness regarding careers and employability support. Notably, when comparing data from the two surveys, it was evident that satisfaction and awareness declined from the first to the second year of the degree. This decrease suggests a reduction in confidence and visibility concerning career support—a deviation from the overall faculty and university trends, where students typically exhibited an increase in satisfaction and confidence as they progressed in their studies.

Details from the National Student Survey students' optional comments section revealed of the 124 comments submitted, 100 addressed employability (Office for Students, 2020). That 81% of the comments freely referenced employability demonstrates a strong interest from this cohort, that they were considering options post-graduation and their transition to the workplace.

The university, and CES, were being held accountable by students for some of the barriers to gaining meaningful employment, with comments including 'We don't get the same treatment regarding careers and employability fairs and resources', 'Arts students feel very ignored by the university', 'the careers service was confusing and unused' and 'the university could have enhanced my employability' (anonymous AEL students comments, NSS, 2020). This raises questions about the balance between university support and student initiative. In what is meant to be a partnership does one side feel the other is not doing enough. In an attempt to understand the AEL student mindset towards their subject, assess any gaps in communication between students and CES, and improve support for this cohort, the research questions aim to investigate student perceptions of the following:

- What are the perceptions of AEL students regarding the employability requirements within their chosen labour market, and to what extent do their current skills align to these requirements? (Addressing sector and self-awareness).
- What does 'meaningful employment' mean to AEL students? (What do they consider 'success'?)
- What barriers do AEL students face? (What have CES missed?)
- How can CES work with AEL students to help them reach their potential?

Literature review

The purpose of this literature review is to highlight the existing collection of research featuring undergraduate students in creative arts and how they navigate their careers.

An overview of the theoretical framework applied in this context will also be outlined.

This review helped to define the interview questions to meet the research objectives of understanding student mindset and improving student support.

While studies in the area of career journey influences and decision making have been conducted with undergraduate cohorts including business (Taylor & Hooley, 2014; Wilton, 2012) and STEM subjects (Sucan, 2019; Castellanos, 2018), literature for AEL disciplines has focused more on PhD level students (Guerin, 2020), policy (McCormack & Baron, 2023), multiple stakeholders (Harvey & Shahjahan, 2013) or post-conservatoire employability (Bennett, 2008; Blackstone, 2019). However, Bridgstock's (2011) research with creative arts students highlighted the importance of strong career management skills by graduation to enable student progression, a need to develop a student's career identity, and that embedding careers in the curriculum helped to build career confidence. There is also a need to introduce the concept of arts entrepreneurship (Bridgstock, 2013), to prepare students for portfolio careers (Bartleet et al., 2012) and to manage student expectations by increasing career awareness of the realities of the creative sectors (Bennett & Bridgstock, 2015). This study wants to highlight the student voice behind the quantitative data of the GES (2020) and the first- and second-year experience surveys (2020), to document the undergraduate AEL student experience and add to the body of relevant literature.

When establishing parameters, the research adopted a mainly Social Constructivist viewpoint; this allowed consideration of the individuals sense making process but within a social context, through previous life and learning experiences, observations and interactions with others. Social Constructivism in careers theory is a category of perspective that places increased importance on the influence of culture and communication with others when making sense of reality and therefore making decisions (Derry, 1999), and holds that knowledge is constructed through social and cultural lenses (Ernest, 1998). It emphasizes the importance of external factors which surround an individual in understanding their career management decisions. As 'employability' is a socially constructed concept, this research was interested in how AEL students had assimilated influences and how these would be used to define 'meaningful employment'.

In particular, the work of Hodkinson and Sparkes (1997) has been influential in this study as it highlights three interacting fields of influence when making career decisions; 1) that decision making is a pragmatically rational process to the individual, 2) that interactions with others are influential and not always fairly distributed, and 3) that timings of decision making can mean that career paths and decisions are not always linear, that 'the location of decisions (often lay) within the partly unpredictable pattern of turning-points and routines that make up the life course' (p.29). Therefore, no decision, including career decision making, can ever be truly context free. They introduced the idea of 'horizon for action' (p.35), defining the arena within which an individual is either set, or perceives themselves as being set in, from which they identify they can move within.

Another relevant thinking tool is the Systems Theory Framework (STF) of Career Development developed by Patton and McMahon (2006), which hovers between constructivist and social constructivist lenses. They highlight that reality is made or constructed by the individual, that viewpoints and beliefs are subjective, relative and not fixed. It recognises the influence of external factors on an individual and also the role of chance and unplanned opportunities. The analysis will focus on when students mentioned intrinsic and extrinsic factors as career influences, as well as chance circumstances.

In regard to student identity and perceptions of future employability, previous research and writing by Bérubé (2002) and Ashton (2015) draw attention to the importance of the subject studied by Arts students as part of, and an extension of, their identity. Knights (2005) discusses 'an academic tribe' (p.33) to describe the importance of belonging. However, the introduction of an employability agenda (HEA, 2015) was a reinforcement that individuals are expected to gain the skills they need to construct and manage their own careers, regardless and independent of academic subject studied. Transitioning from an academic to professional identity can be difficult for non-vocational students (Daicoff, 2014) but Reddan (2015) was able to demonstrate the increase in student confidence and decision-making ability simply by completing an optional career management module.

How students view this social construction of employability, and the figure of 'The Graduate', influences both pre-graduation behaviours and the cultural meanings and perceptions associated with being a graduate (Christie, 2019). Holmes (2014) also highlighted the students process of how they assimilate then present their employability, how others perceive them in that identity, and the interactional nature of 'becoming a graduate' (p 220). This will impact on student goal setting and defining achievement - do students have a strong career identity to which they aspire influencing their career management, or do they have broader and more flexible identities in mind? Importantly, how can a careers practitioner best support students through these multitudes of career trajectories.

This literature review focuses on understanding how undergraduate students in creative arts navigate their careers, and the theoretical frameworks used in this context. It highlights the influence of social constructivism and how intrinsic and extrinsic factors impact career decision-making. The review also references key concepts like Hodkinson and Sparkes (1997) horizons for action, and Patton and McMahon's Systems Theory Framework of Career Development. Additionally, it discusses the significance of student identity, perceptions of future employability, and the impact of the social construction of employability on students' behaviors and goals.

Methodology

A qualitative methodology (Ritchie et al, 2013) was used in this study as the objectives were interested in student experiences and how these had been processed and developed in a careers decision making context. Semi structured interviews were chosen to give the balance of structure and flexibility needed with a narrative approach (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). For the fluidity that this study required, thematic analysis was the analytical tool used (Terry et al, 2017). This allowed for the inclusion of potential new and unique themes being identified and constructed from the data, as well as possibly accounting for and confirming trends from previous research. Qualitative research is inductive and

inductive coding (Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019) was used throughout to accommodate the viewpoints expressed.

Semi structured interview questions included:

- Tell me how you went about choosing your degree subject.
- Concerning the career goals you set for yourself when starting university, what is your assessment of the progress you have made towards achieving them?
- Since you have been at QUB what support have you had to understand your career options or gain relevant experience?
- Is there anything that has prevented you from engaging in career development activities?
- If you could have designed careers support throughout your time at university, what would you include and when?

These interviews were held with final year AEL undergraduate students who were completing an optional but credit bearing Work Placement Module (WPM). This double credit module spanning two semesters, integrates 100 hours of practical work placement with employability lectures led jointly by academic staff, CES and employers. These students had completed three years of study with QUB and could reflect across their time and experiences of their degree. They were also just about to complete their education and enter the world as graduates so were contemplating their next steps. This combined viewpoint at a time of transition made them motivated and engaged stakeholders, and they volunteered to participate in the interviews. The study recognises that the small sample size of twelve students, approximately 20% of the WPM cohort, could not be representative of the entirety of the AEL student body, and further research with unengaged students would also be useful.

The research project received full ethical approval from the University Ethics Committee in accordance with established protocols and guidelines. All interviewees gave informed consent to participate. Interviews were conducted online, recorded then transcribed with each participant being given a pseudonym to avoid identification. After transcription, answers and comments were analysed for recurring themes and opinions expressed, both positive and negative, and also new areas of discussion. As advised by Kvale (1996), analysis was an ongoing process and took place after each interview. Any coding was dependent on the information gathered to anticipate new themes and ideas while relating back to the literature review and research questions.

Findings and discussion

After transcription each interview was coded against the four main research questions, and six key areas of discussion were identified as being important to understanding the AEL student mindset towards employability and providing relevant support.

1. Making career decisions

When asked why they had chosen their degree course, ten of the twelve students specifically mentioned the intrinsic factor of enjoyment of their subject, for example 'I just love music, I just felt it was the only thing worth going to uni to do' (Leah, music) and 'it was my passion' (Sophia, film). Higher education was chosen as there was underlying awareness this would be an appropriate path to move closer to an end goal, even if that wasn't yet clearly defined. While three students had maintained a clear employment target, others were open to new opportunities. Four students had changed career orientation during their degree, some through disappointment realising how much they still had to learn, others had expanded their horizons for action with what they could do with their degree (Hodkinson & Sparkes, 1997). This included Rachael (drama) who was inspired by an entrepreneur programme and pursuing business, and Lola (English) who was considering using her skills in leadership and activism.

The influence of pre-university school or college careers support when considering higher education, and then what to study, was a key extrinsic influence in the student's career stories (Acquah et al., 2017). The interviewees had mixed responses when recalling their previous experiences of formal career support. One said 'it was more university guidance than career guidance' (Joel, film) with institution choice taking precedence over subject. Five students remembered a bias against creative subjects and Evan (music) felt so pressured towards STEM he initially applied for a maths and physics course. Regardless of the quality delivered, each respondent recalled embedded, in-curricular classes, in all pre-university contexts. Reflections on this structure of provision provides a framework of reference for students regarding career management support and the expectations they bring with them to higher education. Transferring this contextual environment, where the institution took the lead in career development, to HE where the student is expected to use their initiative to self-manage their professional progression, highlights the mismatch in communication and responsibility. Students have not been told effectively that they are responsible for their career development and must actively pursue initiatives, guidance and support outside of their course. In waiting for the institution to initiate and provide careers support, in line with their pre-university experience, AEL students have missed out on relevant career opportunities, including meeting employers and time to benefit from experiential learning to assess different options (Kolb, 2015).

The students struggled to find sector specific information to support career planning and expected the linear step-by-step path of previous experience. Three used snowball research strategies (Everitt & Skrondal, 2010) but found creative industries very non-prescriptive. Four embraced the experiential process of gaining knowledge through practical experience (Kolb, 2015) supporting making informed decisions before taking next steps. Subject academics were viewed as key sources of relevant sector or careers information, as were relevant industry professionals, either visiting class speakers or placement providers. Five students mentioned CES services as an information source, and all found them very useful. Limited engagement with relevant CES resources needs to be addressed to best support AEL students, matching engagement strategies with student preferences for communication to increase their social capital.

Eight of the students also acknowledged happenstance (Krumboltz, 2009), for example speaking with academic staff during university open days, employers facilitating lectures in their course, attending events and asking for work experience, and opportunities to

get involved in a project. While some viewed happenstance as something out of their control, for others they had been proactive to position themselves to be in the right place at the right time, and with hindsight can see how they helped to shape these influential interactions. These occurrences align with the Systems Theory Framework of allowing flexibility for chance extrinsic factors to influence decision making.

2. Student Identity

A strong recurring theme was the importance of students using their subject in their career and as an extension of their identity - every student referenced their creative skill set. For one student, working in music was non-negotiable and they hadn't even considered a career outside of this sector. The subject and skills are part of who they were and saw their degree as granting peer credibility. They commented 'I've been in music education, production and technology for six years. Six years, goodness, I could literally be a doctor but I don't want to be a doctor!' (Zarina, music)

AEL students described themselves as 'writer' (Lola, English), 'artist' (Zarina, music) and 'media producer' (Taylor, broadcast production), already starting the transition from student to professional identity in how they refer to themselves (Smith et al., 2014). The WPM created excitement seeing university skills being used in industry and made their goals appear tangible, highlighting the value of extrinsic influences and experiences. They were realistic about the challenges of becoming professionally established but determined to try. Four highlighted a sense of pressure, that if their degree wasn't being used in employment 'then I'd be a failure' (Leah, music). Having fought to study this subject, AEL students wanted to prove they had made the right decision through their graduate success. Lola (English) described her degree as a 'gateway' and a 'starting point' and had increased in confidence about her options, broadening her horizons for action.

The role of their academic peers was significant, feeling 'a sense of belonging' (Knights, 2005), and often working towards common career goals. For some it has validated their decision to study an arts subject, and many intended to retain the contacts made. Others found it added pressure, comparing themselves to peers they perceived as achieving more. They found it difficult to keep striving for their passion when they could 'settle' for a generic graduate job. Being exposed to and surrounded by this creative habitus (Hodkinson & Sparkes) influenced the students in their career resolution, either to pursue the creative arts or consider other options.

3. Measuring success

The key research questions aiming to help CES identify core student values included determining how students define success and understanding the construction of meaningful employment for AEL students. Did the students have a target in mind and how would they know they had attained it. The interviewees struggled to define this, and responses were very individual. Common themes included being paid for their skill set, aiming for an industry as opposed to a job title, using multiple transferable skills in a tangible way and being open to new opportunities. The non-linear protean (Hall, 2004) aspect of career management caused some to feel 'very overwhelmed' (Lola, English) or procrastinate; others embraced the idea that careers 'are a mix of a lot of different things' (Leah, music). How they had previously defined success, particularly within a certain time period, had

completely changed, and they were having to recalibrate how they were going to navigate the world of work in the graduate landscape. This may impact on their future horizons for action and ultimate level of professional satisfaction.

4. Perceived barriers

Several consistent themes were mentioned throughout. Before coming to university, five had direct negative reactions to their choice of study, from family members, teachers and peers, with comments including 'how are you going to get a job after' (Esther, English) and 'there's no careers in that' (Leah, music). Two were actively discouraged from attending university, notably first-generation applicants. The resilience some students demonstrated even before application showed determination and tenacity already in this cohort, and the ability to filter negative extrinsic factors to focus on positive intrinsic factors.

Since starting their course, six of the students discussed the stereotypical perceptions of career outcomes of arts students they have experienced directly in the comments of peers and notably with current academic staff. These have included assumptions they would go on to teach, do a conversion course or end up in low paid employment or underemployed. Students had experienced scepticism around gaining steady employment in what were seen as non-vocational subject choices. This had a direct impact on confidence and reinforcing feeling like an imposter. Nearly all of the students found themselves having to advocate for their subjects, and during their interviews they passionately defended their career decisions to this point in time.

Other barriers included time, balancing rehearsal, study, part time work, university society involvement and family commitments. Having the WPM built into the timetable was key, as students couldn't afford to pursue unpaid experience. Being able to approach an employer with the support of the formal QUB module gave credibility to their request for work experience and increased sector confidence, supporting the findings of Reddan (2015). Geographical factors also played a role. Situated as a regional university, numerous prospects appeared concentrated in London, rendering them less accessible as students looked for opportunities.

5. Shared values

Throughout the interviews this group exhibited similar personal values and qualities that brought them together as a cohort who were best suited to study within AEL. The similarity of attributes supports the findings of Knights (2005) who described students as having 'a sense of belonging to a cultural resistance movement' (p. 42) by choosing subjects that weren't deemed to have direct career paths and have 'discarded previous educational identities' (p. 38). Speaking about their decision to pursue a creative subject, they talked about personal bravery and persistence. The students recognised that to be successful within the arts they would have to demonstrate flexibility, show passion for their work, be adaptable within the role, and actively seek out and create opportunities.

None of the interviewees indicated a concern about having a detailed future plan, implying that such long-term thinking might not have been a significant concern within this particular cohort. After completing relevant workplace experience, the students exhibited a pragmatic understanding of the labour market and potential fluid landscape of employment. Whether they were considering a full-time commitment to creative arts, pursuing a diverse

portfolio career, or considering other options in other industries, their expectations had been clarified through their work placement. They were realistic about taking time to find their place in the post-university world of work, and none of the students indicated they had accepted a full-time graduate level position at this stage.

6. How can CES help?

A recurring theme was the perception that any careers input was random, unstructured, rarely relevant, and students were unsure who had delivered it. Outside of their WPM 'there's been no sit down and here's where you can go with your career' (Leah, music) and this was echoed across the subjects. They appear to have transposed their existing point of reference of pre-university career guidance on to a new educational framework and found they didn't match. Of the twelve students interviewed nine stated that they had received no information or encouragement from their school to gain relevant work experience outside of the WPM. While waiting for explicit careers guidance, they had delayed decision making and labour market research, impacting on their preparedness for the job market.

All appreciated the in-curricular opportunity and wanted it earlier in their university course, ideally in second year, some from first year. They also wanted career management skills prioritised and embedded in a format they recognised. They wanted better representation at careers fairs and recognition of their career drivers. Co-collaboration with students developing these resources would be ideal, managing student expectations while also supporting the development of self-efficacy as they use initiative to progress in their careers, building networks and social capital.

Communication also needed to be improved, with future CES messaging targeting AEL cohorts through channels students used, with interventions they needed. Liaising with school academics for endorsement would increase the likelihood of student engagement (Savickas, 2005).

Summary

This study aimed to address four key areas to help understand AEL student mindset and appropriate professional progression initiatives – student awareness of employability requirements within the current labour market benchmarked against their own skill set, the concept of meaningful employment, perceived barriers faced and preferences around career management support. The students provided rich data to code and construct themes, highlighting the multiple intrinsic and extrinsic influences which had impacted upon their choice of degree study within the Systems Theory Framework.

With regard to awareness of employability requirements, the students appreciated the experiential learning of the WPM which has improved and developed their knowledge of the current labour market. Contact with relevant employers, and industry experience, has given an insight into what is and will be required when they look for post-university employment. The participants were also able to benchmark their own skill set against industry standards. Some were encouraged, and plan to follow the creative industries route, others have expanded their horizons for action (Hodkinson & Sparkes, 1997) and will take their skill set into other sectors.

All of the students stated how much they enjoyed their subject. When discussing meaningful employment, a majority saw success as using their creative skills in future paid work, regardless of the level of the job. All wanted to use their degree skills in some capacity even if that was within another non-creative sector. Their experiential learning influences and exposure to a contextual variable (Patton & McMahon, 2006) have given new labour market insights to support their career management and broaden their horizons for action (Hodkinson & Sparkes, 1997).

Barriers mentioned included time, non-linearity of career trajectory, social capital and confidence. Additionally, students reported having to defend their academic choices to peers and external influences, which impacted on their decision-making confidence. Being able to experience professionals working in the area to which they aspire has increased their determination to succeed.

The research revealed that participating students demonstrated resilience and determination but brought previous experience of career guidance with them to the new model in HE. In most cases their expectations regarding career support have not been fulfilled, and they wanted more interaction with relevant employers, integrated curriculum support in a familiar format, and acknowledgment of their distinct career motivations. To address these findings, fostering stronger and more effective collaboration between students, academics, employers, and CES is recommended. This collaborative approach would enable the development of tailored interventions that benefit all stakeholders involved while supporting AEL students to achieve their career goals.

Acknowledgments

Thanks are extended to the peer reviewers of this journal and Dr John Gough (University of Warwick).

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