Emerging insights from a peer-to-peer social justice careers education programme

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Abstract

The Inclusive Careers Education Ambassador (ICEA) programme at King's College London was designed to focus on the careers education experience of historically underrepresented groups in UK higher education. The project has been co-created and delivered by staff and students within the Faculty of Natural, Mathematical & Engineering Sciences (NMES). Student researchers took an active participant observation approach when reviewing the ICEA programme, drawing on social justice principles. This article explores the rationale for the programme and evaluates key outcomes from the first two years. It finds that by combining extensive training, flexibility in co-creating peer activities, and a department-focused approach, the programme has enthused and engaged stakeholders, and has enabled transformative learning experiences across the Faculty's staff and student body.

Keywords: Higher education; career education; career learning; social justice; peer-to-peer

Introduction

McGregor-Smith (2017, p. 3) states 'there is discrimination and bias at every stage of an individual's career, and even before it begins'. Careers education at university is increasingly a priority for higher education institutions (Long and Hubble, 2022), yet there are barriers in place that make it an unequal playing field.

In 2019 and 2020, the careers consultant for the Faculty of Natural, Mathematical & Engineering Sciences (NMES) at King's College London identified a divergence in data between communities with historic privilege in the higher education field and communities underrepresented in higher education. Within the NMES Faculty, the proportion of students identifying as White male who reported being in the 'taking action' phase of career planning in the annual 'careers registration' survey was significantly higher than the equivalent percentage for students identifying as Black, Asian and Minoritised Ethnicity female. The careers consultant endeavoured to understand the reasons behind this phenomenon and explored possible ways to address the issues identified. Drawing together a team of key stakeholders including student representatives, members of the NMES Faculty Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Committee, and faculty education team members, they established the 'Inclusive Careers Education Ambassador' (ICEA) programme. NMES students and recent graduates with an understanding of the lived experience of marginalised communities were recruited into 10 paid part-time positions, supported by a project officer (also a student or recent graduate). The roles included paid training which aims to help ambassadors to feel confident providing peer-to-peer careers education within their departments and at faculty careers events.

This article reports on active participant evaluation research undertaken by student researchers each summer of the programme so far. This has included observations, surveys and interviews, with an iterative approach to data analysis. We reflect on the programme through a lens of critical pedagogy, informed by literature and insights from key stakeholders.

Careers education and critical pedagogy

Using data from the Longitudinal Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education (LDLHE) survey, Bermingham et al. (2020, p. 19) found evidence that Black African and Black Caribbean graduates were less likely than their White peers to report being satisfied with their careers. This survey contacted graduates up to 3.5 years after course completion to follow up on the original Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education (DLHE) survey, now replaced by the Graduate Outcomes Survey. In parallel, McGregor-Smith (2017, p. 57) noted that Black and Minoritised Ethnicity individuals are 'as ambitious, if not more so, than their White counterparts'. Where strong career ambitions do not translate into career satisfaction for individuals from minoritised communities, it is crucial to investigate potential reasons for this within the career journeys of diverse students, and particularly to listen to the voices of marginalised individuals.

In an interview for the *Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic student attainment at UK universities: Closing the gap* research (Universities UK, 2019), Aston University student Amna emphasised the importance of role models: 'If students don't see themselves reflected in certain roles… they automatically disregard those roles as a possible future career.' This sentiment is mirrored in a study by Ranavaya (2022), in which one participant discusses how she has not seen any diversity in senior roles, and how that makes her less confident that she can progress in her role. A study by Gregor et al. (2019, p. 212) suggested that 'students who felt more prepared to cope with barriers related to gender, race/ethnicity, relationship, and financial concerns reported higher aspirations'. As Hooley et al. (2021, p. 59) identify:

'Career guidance is not a magic cure-all that can wash away structural inequalities and oppression, but it can help people to become aware of these structures, navigate them and exercise agency on both an individual and collective basis.' (Hooley et al, 2021, p. 59)

Critical pedagogy provides a framework within which careers educators can work towards these aims, based in part upon Freire's (1970) concepts of conscientização (conscientisation), 'helping people to develop a critical awareness of their surroundings' (Hooley et al, 2021, p. 60) and praxis, 'reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it' (Freire, 1970, p. 36). Four key features of critical pedagogy are described by Johnson & Morris (2010):

1. a political or ideological focus couched within the understanding that education cannot be truly unbiased or 'neutral';

2. a subjective and context-driven focus, exploring one's own cultures and contexts and speaking with an authentic voice;

3. a social or collective focus, collaborative rather than competitive; and

4. a focus on reflective action (praxis) through which systemic change can be enacted.

In this article we analyse the Inclusive Careers Education Ambassador programme through a lens of critical pedagogy, drawing on the four aspects described above. The evaluation research, including surveys and interviews, was approved by the research ethics office at King's College London under the low-risk ethics application process.

The importance of representation in careers education

Students from underrepresented groups may have a more positive experience when encountering careers education from someone who has a clear understanding of the lived experiences of marginalised communities and the barriers that face underrepresented groups. A study by Frigerio et al. (2022, p. 14) highlighted a careers education practitioner's perspective on the importance of representation when coaching students:

Participants spoke extensively about the impact on their client work of their ethnicity and how this contributes positively to client engagement from similar ethnic groups as well as rapport and empathy in one-to-one career coaching practice. (Frigerio et al, 2022, p. 14)

Recognising and addressing intersectional marginalisation is an important aspect of any programme seeking to identify and mitigate discriminatory barriers in education and careers. Crenshaw (2013, p. 167) describes how categorising struggles against discrimination as single issues 'imports a descriptive and normative view of society that reinforces the status quo'. Phoenix & Pattynama (2006, p. 187) identify how intersectionality can help us to perceive the 'multiple positioning that constitutes everyday life and the power relations that are central to it'. Females from minoritised communities

are likely to be affected by complex layers of barriers and discrimination due to the interaction of two or more dimensions of prejudice (Ranavaya, 2022, p. 40).

Women, trans, and non-binary individuals in the Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) fields also face structural challenges affecting their career paths. The WISE (Women into Science and Engineering) Campaign identified that the overall percentage of women in the core STEM UK workforce is currently 26.3%, and 'only 12.4% of Engineering Professionals are female' (WISE, 2023). Disability adds another layer: in a 2023 ICEA project evaluation survey, one respondent remarked that 'neurodivergence often feels like the complete opposite of what employers or academics are looking for'.

Embedding careers education in the curriculum

An increasing focus on in-curriculum provision can be observed within the global higher education sector, as explored by Bridgstock et al. (2019, p. 59). One of two approaches are typically undertaken by institutions wanting to improve their employability:

1. Embedding employability: integrating elements of employability into the curriculum, (Manoharan, 2020);

2. Extracting employability: drawing out the existing employability features within curricular provision (Daubney, 2022).

Manoharan (2020, p. 74) found that 'students juggle multifaceted priorities alongside their studies, including financial, familial, and/or caring responsibilities'. Offering careers education solely as an extra-curricular opportunity can disproportionately disadvantage students with work or caring responsibilities who may not be able to access activities outside their core curriculum. Thus, embedding employability-related content into the compulsory curriculum, for example through problem-based learning, can be viewed as an inclusive practice.

However, focusing entirely on in-curriculum provision could result in a stretching of careers practitioner resources, particularly for universities with huge numbers of programmes, all with different compulsory components. It could result in neglected courses, for example if undergraduate courses are prioritised. It could also produce a one-size-fits-all approach in which careers and employability is 'done' once a year and students who miss those elements of the course due to caring responsibilities or work may end up unable to access careers activities.

Daubney's (2022) approach involves analysing the existing curriculum for elements of employability (for example, knowledge, attributes, skills and experience gained in each programme or module) and working with teaching staff to make these more transparent and comprehensible for students. Employability therefore becomes 'structurally unavoidable' and a collective endeavour on the part of staff and students to realise the value of their learning experiences.

Considering the benefits of both approaches, we present a case study of a hybrid approach, combining 'extracting' and 'embedding' in a core third year chemistry module, facilitated by the ICEA programme.

Politics: Origins of the Inclusive Careers Education Ambassador Programme

Shury et al. (2017, p. 17) reported that 'those who had clearer plans were more likely to have reported positive outcomes two and a half years after graduation.' At King's College London, students are required to complete a series of career-related questions at each year's enrolment, which include exploring the extent to which they have career plans. In 2019 the careers consultant for the Faculty of Natural, Mathematical & Engineering Sciences (NMES) identified that over 22% of UK fee-paying white male students (n=407) in the Faculty were in the 'action' phase; whereas the equivalent percentage for UK fee-paying black and minoritised ethnicity females in the Faculty was around 12% (n=301). This difference was not evident to the same extent across the rest of King's College London.

Within the same academic year, computer science students at King's proposed the role of student 'careers representative' be established in their department. Two undergraduate students took on this role in summer 2020. They designed and ran an extensive programme of online workshops for their peers, trained and supported by the Careers and Employability team. Their sessions included tech-specific sector information; a panel event with students and recent graduates who had completed internships in high-profile organisations, and guides to technical CVs and interviews. Each of the latter workshops had around 70 attendees, and feedback from the programme was overwhelmingly positive.

The department agreed to pay the student careers representatives for their time delivering the workshops. Realising that funds might be available from the faculty education budget, a group of students, Careers and Employability staff, and NMES faculty staff proposed a new peer-to-peer programme which would aim to:

1. Address systemic inequalities in careers education by creating paid positions for students to co-create and deliver careers education activities to their peers based on an understanding of the lived experience of marginalisation; and

2. Tackle immediate disparities in 'career readiness' based on gender and ethnicity seen in NMES careers registration data by co-creating inclusive activities that help to increase students' and graduates' confidence in career planning.

In early 2021, the NMES Faculty education team approved the initial funding request of £9000 to cover 25 hours each of paid training and work for 10 inclusive careers education ambassadors (two per department), and 100 paid hours for an inclusive careers project officer (ICPO) to support the ambassadors (also a position for a student or recent graduate). The programme was featured in the 'students as co-creators' issue of *AGCAS Phoenix Journal* (Oxley et al, 2022) and the success of the programme in its first year allowed for a greater amount of funding to be allocated in 2022, increasing from £9000 to £21,000 per year and allowing for 50 hours per ambassador and 500 hours for the ICPO. The programme has also received confirmation of ongoing funding from the faculty team, demonstrating a strong commitment to the peer-to-peer careers education approach.

Paying the ambassadors a living wage was an important tenet of the programme. While studying and living in London, only a select few would be able to undertake unpaid roles and therefore by making these paid, part-time roles, students from all socio-economic backgrounds are able to participate, and they can feel confident to put the roles into their

CVs as work experience. Ambassadors are recruited in March-April, undertake paid training in June, July and September, co-create plans during the summer and carry out their activities in the Autumn term.

Self: Drawing from the experiences of marginalised communities

The application process was designed to be as inclusive and accessible as possible for students who have not had opportunities like this before. An anonymous survey of ambassadors' perspectives in July 2023 revealed three aspects that contributed to the recruitment of ICEAs from a diverse range of cultural and socio-economic backgrounds: first, not requiring extensive prior experience; second, having a clear recruitment process that did not involve an interview; and third, making the essential criteria straightforward and diversity-focused. The criteria were:

1. Some experience of participating in or attending careers activities, such as applying for spring weeks, internships, part-time or full-time roles; entrepreneurship activities; attending careers appointments and/or events.

2. Enthusiasm for inclusive education and awareness of the experience of students who are traditionally under-represented in UK higher education such as disabled students, LGBTQ+ students, women in STEM, Black, Asian and Diverse Heritage students, mature students.

Recruitment was solely based on scoring an anonymised 300-word statement containing their motivations for applying for the role, a description of a career-related experience (such as attending a careers event or appointment), and an idea for how they might engage their fellow students in careers education activities with a focus on equity, diversity, and inclusion. Applications were scored by the department careers education liaisons (academics), members of the Careers and Employability team and former ambassadors.

Visible representation has been highlighted by the ICEAs and by participants as an important feature of the programme. One ambassador expressed their desire to be a role model for their peers, stating:

> There is a lack of representation of women, especially women of colour in my university course, and in the industry in general, so I wanted to represent my fellow students as an ICEA. (Survey response from ICEA, July 2023)

One of the greatest successes of the programme so far has been the 'See It to Be it' interview series, a project initiated in the Faculty of Life Sciences and Medicine at King's College the previous year, and adopted by the ICEAs. Ambassadors interviewed NMES alumni from underrepresented groups about their career journeys. One ambassador spoke about their favourite experience in the role:

> My highlight this year was the 'See it to Be It' interview I did with [name of alumna]. [She] spoke about her career experiences as a disabled person, and it was fascinating hearing about her experiences. As a disabled person myself I don't see enough disability representation, often not even in D&I [Diversity and Inclusion]

initiatives. It is so important to see such empowering role models speak about their experiences. (ICEA speech at a project celebration event, January 2023).

A participant in a 'Discovering Careers In: Engineering' event chaired by the ICEAs provided the feedback: 'Vivid examples and experiences from people of different backgrounds and cultures are encouraging and inspiring.' In a July 2022 evaluation survey, a student stated:

> For students with low confidence, not seeing themselves represented in different industries can make them less ambitious, but having these kind of events where they can learn from the personal experiences of others like them is empowering.

> (Student survey response, July 2022)

These reflections illustrate how role models from marginalised communities can enhance confidence in career decision making (Ranavaya, 2022), benefiting both the ambassadors and their peers.

Collective: Co-creating and collaborating to achieve our goals

The programme has a strong focus on collaborative planning and co-creation. During the training period, ambassadors work together to come up with ideas for activities they feel will benefit their peers, and in early September they present their plans to key stakeholders for feedback and iterative improvements. Hooley & Sultana (2016) note that liberal individualism often dominates careers education and guidance. By encouraging students and recent graduates to work together on collaborative careers education activities, the programme allows elements of individual competition to be mitigated in favour of a peer-to-peer collaborative approach.

The programme enables ambassadors to gain knowledge of careers and employability-related topics, and they develop a wide range of skills and experiences that they can put on their CVs and future job applications. For example, they gain marketing experience through advertising the programme on social media platforms, teamwork skills through collaborative planning with colleagues, and confidence and communication skills through leading workshops and chairing panel interviews in front of an audience of peers. They also gain networking skills as they connect with different professionals through alumni video interviews ('See It to Be It'), as well as with other students and staff from across the departments, faculty, and Careers and Employability team. Staff members working with the ambassadors also learn a huge amount, including gaining a better understanding of students' lived experiences. The programme exemplifies a reciprocity of partnership (Mercer-Mapstone et al, 2017) which includes student-staff collaboration on the annual evaluation projects and co-authorship of blog posts and articles, including Oxley et al. (2022) and Blain (2023).

Praxis: taking action against oppression and discrimination

Praxis involves a cycle of action and reflection, which has been built into the programme in several ways. Events co-created and supported by the ICEAs have included panel events and workshops covering topics such as CVs, interviews, psychometric tests and career options for international students. The ICEAs also created an NMES Careers Guide, 'by students, for students'. This guide and other online resources created and curated by the ICEAs were accessed by 439 individual NMES students in Autumn term 2022. Overall engagement with Careers and Employability events by students in the NMES Faculty increased from 1268 in Autumn 2021 to 1511 in Autumn 2022.

Table 1: Summary of event numbers, attendees, and event ratings in the first 2 years of the ICEA programme.

Academic Year	Number of events run or supported by ICEAs	Number of total attendees	Overall event ratings (immediate feedback)
2021-2022	15	544	94% 'Good'; 6% 'OK', 0% 'Bad'
2022-2023	19	659	92% 'Good'; 8% 'OK', 0% 'Bad'

The opportunity to reflect on their co-created activities is built into the ICEA programme in several ways:

1. Ambassadors are invited to analyse attendance and feedback data as part of their preparation for their end of project presentation to senior faculty staff.

2. Several ambassadors have continued as ICEAs for a second year, and have brought valuable reflections from their experience of the previous year.

3. King's College London undergraduate research fellows have conducted annual evaluations of the programme, including surveys and stakeholder interviews, which has enabled the project team to receive extensive feedback and make evidence-based iterative improvements.

Another example of the action-reflection cycle was the development of an alternative CV workshop format by ICEAs. In the first year, ICEAs put on both CV information seminars and CV review workshops. An NMES student commented:

> ICEAs shouldn't just be putting on the same events the careers departments and faculty already do: there needs to be an emphasis on the student peer-to-peer experience.   (Student survey response, July 2022)

In the programme's second year, ICEAs therefore focused entirely on the CV review workshops, based on a "roasting" model, in which ambassadors running the workshops gave constructive critiques of anonymous CVs sent in by the workshop participants. The ICEAs reviewed and improved a total of 24 CVs and these events proved to be popular, with a total of 54 attendees.

Case Study: An in-curriculum peer-to-peer chemistry careers activity

For four of the five departments participating in the programme, ICEAs have focused almost entirely on extra-curricular careers education. In project evaluations, stakeholders have expressed interest for ICEA interventions to be embedded in-curriculum. A senior lecturer in the Department of Chemistry has piloted an integrated approach to careers education within a core third-year research methods laboratory module. The sessions were co-created with two career consultants and co-delivered by ICEAs.

The careers education training sessions involved signposting careers resources and opportunities and an employability framework which 'extracts' knowledge, attributes, skills, and experience (KASE) from the chemistry curriculum. This draws on work by Daubney (2022), who conducted a textual analysis of UK Quality Assurance Agency Subject Benchmark Statements to create the 'KASE' framework. The chemistry third years were divided into small groups and allocated example scenarios of chemistry students from a range of underrepresented backgrounds and at different stages of career planning, as an empathy exercise. Supported by the ICEAs, they were tasked with using their research skills to analyse the careers resources and generate appropriate responses to support the 'example students' in their next steps. 85% of students (n=35) reflecting on the activities said they found them helpful and learned something new.

As this intervention took place within a compulsory module, it helped to provide access to careers education to students who may not have been aware of the Careers and Employability service or could not attend extra-curricular events due to scheduling conflicts or other responsibilities. Using the results from this pilot, the senior lecturer has been able to facilitate expansion of this pilot to all undergraduate year groups in chemistry. Such interventions also act as inspiration to other departments who may seek to emulate successful practice, as the higher education employability agenda gains momentum (Woodfield and McIntosh, 2022).

Conclusion: The benefits and challenges of peer-to-peer inclusive careers education

Elements of critical pedagogy have been woven through the ICEA programme. It has received positive feedback from all participants and stakeholders, and the continued funding and support from the faculty education team demonstrates its relevance and value to all stakeholders. However, the scalability of the project is uncertain. Evaluations have identified that its successes have been influenced by the personalised nature of the ICEA training and support, and the collegiality of having two ambassadors per department and ten in total supported by a project officer, elements which might be lost on a larger scale.

Programme evaluations have been somewhat hampered by issues with data availability. The project team is not currently able to connect engagement data with data on ethnicity, disability, and other protected characteristics, particularly at a granular level by event or by department. It is hoped that when this becomes available, a detailed analysis of the numbers of students from marginalised communities engaging in ICEA activities will enable the team to reflect on ways to make the programme more accessible and inclusive.

The wider King's College London community has recognised the programme as an example of good practice in inclusive education, inviting the project team to present to the King's College inclusive education network and at internal learning and teaching conferences. The ICEAs and their project team are taking action towards a more inclusive future by educating all students about career-related barriers faced by marginalised communities and how these can be dismantled, uplifting the voices of role models from marginalised communities, and taking an active and collaborative approach to addressing systemic inequalities in higher education.

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