

Career and sustainability

Editorial

10.20856/jnicec.5301

Tristram Hooley

International Centre for Guidance Studies, University of Derby, UK

For correspondence:Tristram Hooley: t.hooley@derby.ac.uk**To cite this article:**

Hooley, T. (2024). Career and sustainability. *Journal of the National Institute for Career Education and Counselling*, 53(1), 3-7. <https://doi.org/10.20856/jnicec.5301>

Introduction

At the start of July 2024, the National Institute for Career Education and Counselling (NICEC) held its first conference, and indeed its first face-to-face meeting of any kind, since the pandemic. We have now been living in the 'new normal' for a few years, and while face-to-face interactions have clearly re-emerged, they are undoubtedly less frequent than before Covid. Given this, I cannot have been alone in looking forward to the opportunity to get together with friends, colleagues and a wide range of new people at the conference.

In fact, the conference exceeded my anticipation, as not only did it bring together the NICEC community, but it also presented an opportunity for new and innovative thinking. The conference was advertised as addressing 'career and sustainability' with sustainability being defined primarily through three concepts: skills; wellbeing and the environment. Inevitably these three concepts intertwined in a variety of interesting ways across the two days of the conference.

The concepts that were addressed in the conference broke new ground, with participants whispering to each other that 'we might be onto something new here' and some anxiety as we interrogated seemingly untouchable concepts around 'impartiality', 'client centredness' and the need to be politically neutral. Asking difficult questions and wrangling with definitions is one of NICEC's specialities, but on this occasion, we went all out.

By the end of the conference, it was clear that there was much more to do. The tentative plan to create a special issue of the journal, inspired by the conference was strongly endorsed with the conference organisers, presenters and participants all highlighting things that they wanted included. Less than six months later, we are in a position to present this special issue to you and ask you, whether you were at the conference or not, to engage with these debates around sustainability.

Within this issue you will find a wide range of perspectives and even some outright disagreements and contradictions. We hope to stimulate thinking and debate about what sustainability is and what it means for the career development field. You may not agree with everything that you find in here, but hopefully it will challenge you to think differently. If you are outraged by what you read, why not write a response for the next issue, there is a call for papers at the end of this issue.

Defining sustainability

At the conference we drew on the University of California's definition which describes sustainability as 'the integration of social equity, economic vitality and environmental health and well-being in order to create thriving healthy, diverse and resilient communities now and in the future' (UCLA, 2016). We then identified the themes of skills, wellbeing, and the environment to focus discussions and create a structure for the conference. However, for the purpose of the journal, it is important to dig a little deeper in our consideration of what we mean by sustainability.

'Sustainability' is a contested term which various authors, policymakers and actors seek to define and, often, claim for their own (Brown, 2016). It is variously used to describe sustainable careers (as discussed by Ans De Vos in her article in this issue), sustainable guidance (Šapale et al., 2021) and many other concepts both within and beyond our field. Sustainability literally means 'the quality of being able to continue over a period of time' and this concept can be applied to *individuals and their careers*, where it might be used as the opposite of burnout, to *communities and societies*, where it might address the need to build fair, equitable and just societies which will not collapse into internal conflict, and perhaps most commonly to *ecosystems* where it is used to recognise the finite and fragile nature of such systems and the need for careful stewardship.

Perhaps the most famous definition of 'sustainability' is that offered by the United Nations' *Brundtland Commission* (1987) which defined sustainability as follows.

Humanity has the ability to make development sustainable to ensure that it meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. (p.16)

Such a definition connects the recognition of the need for environmental justice with a desire for social justice. The adoption of such a concept into the theoretical lexicon on career guidance throws us a range of challenges for guidance practices which has often centred the individual and given limited space to social, environmental and multi-generational framings to career decision making and management.

The Brundtland definition has been built on in the UN's (2017) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), perhaps our most influential contemporary articulation of sustainability. The SDG's version of sustainability, as with much of the work on sustainable careers, adopts a broad definition of sustainability which extends beyond environmental sustainability to include other normative values of social justice and human wellbeing such as decent work, clean water and a functioning social infrastructure. The SDGs have in turn influenced the development of thinking in career guidance (Nota et al., 2020; Robertson, 2021) and this work is continued in the current collection particularly in the articles by Candy Ho and Eileen Cunningham and colleagues.

Collectively the papers in this issue make the argument that careers should firstly be sustainable, secondly that they should contribute to wider aims for social and environmental sustainability, and thirdly that purposeful interventions with people (career guidance) can help them to achieve both greater sustainability in their own career and contribute to wider forms of sustainability. At the heart of this is the need to challenge accelerationist narratives around career which focus on money and hierarchical progression and refocus towards broader, more inclusive approaches to careering which emphasise personal well-being, the development of a more holistic conception of the good life which includes paid work, but also recognises the breadth of people's life worlds, and social and environmental connection.

The challenge thrown down to the careers field by this issue of the journal is substantial. In a world where the planet is burning, business as usual is not possible. But, determining what this means for policy and practice within our field of careers remains challenging. I hope that the papers in this issue stimulate thinking and experimentation and point the way forwards for new types of sustainable careering and career guidance.

About the issue

One of the unique features of the NICEC journal is its ability to draw together different kinds of contributions from a wide range of different participants. We have contributions from the UK, the Netherlands, the Czech and Slovak republics and Canada and from a mix of academics, researchers, practitioners, consultants and sector leaders. Furthermore, we have contributions which offer theoretical arguments, which present empirical data, which offer models and activities for practice and which state, at times, challenging arguments. The diversity of the journal is its strength and again we would encourage all readers to consider whether they would like to contribute to the journal further in the future.

The issue begins with a contribution from **Ans De Vos**, who provided the keynote for the conference and remains as one of the leading thinkers on sustainability in career. Her article argues that in an uncertain world we can no longer think about career as linear sequence of predictable work experiences that one has full control over. Instead we need to develop new forms of sustainable career theory that recognises the new context that we are in and provides tools for career counsellors. The argument that we need new theories and concepts is picked up by **Cathy Brown** who draws on Hartmut Rosa's theory of resonance to set out a new vision for what sustainability could be in the context of career.

In the next article we move from theory to practice, as **Candy Ho** sets out the way that she has worked with the UK SDGs in practice to develop a careers education programme in Canadian higher education. **Eileen Cunningham and colleagues** present similar ideas and approaches to practice in their article. This time they focus on the concept of Decent Work and use this to underpin the development of a critical careers education programme in UK higher education.

In her article **Laura Walker** picks up many of the themes that have emerged so far but with particular reference to the careers of women in mid-life. Is meaningful, and sustainable work, even a possibility for such women she asks, noting the interplay between gender, work quality, health and wellbeing and individual subjectivity. While **Kate**

Mansfield offers practical ideas for careers professionals to more successfully integrate discussion of wellbeing into practice.

The final three papers turn attention to environmental sustainability and what is sometimes referred to as 'green guidance' (Plant, 2020). **Eva Kavková and Tomáš Šprlák** engage with the ethical dilemmas of connecting career guidance to politicised areas such as climate change. They highlight the tensions in existing frameworks and make the argument that all too often attachment to impartiality and neutrality has crowded out other ethical imperatives around acting in the best interest of the client and supporting social justice. **Korin Grant** picks these issues up in her article which sets out a facilitated process designed to support practitioners to collectively reflect on their current practice, acknowledge existing positions, discuss concerns and imagine new, 'greener' practices. Finally, **Belinda Nuttall**, the winner of the Bill Law award, for outstanding new research by a student, draws on her research with careers practitioners and their attitudes towards green guidance to propose a new framework for green career education and guidance.

In conclusion

This issue shows that the concept of sustainability can be highly enriching for career studies and career guidance. It is, of course, not without its challenges and controversies, but the importance of sustainability as a concept is unlikely to wane. As governments push towards net zero, as the mental health crisis increases in prominence and as employers and workers negotiate over precarity and decent work, the role for career guidance is only going to increase. We hope that this issue provides some insights that can help the field to engage with these ideas and successfully develop new forms of theory and practice in response to them.



References

- Brown, T. (2016). Sustainability as empty signifier: Its rise, fall, and radical potential. *Antipode*, 48(1), 115-133. <https://doi.org/10.1111/anti.12164>
- Nota, L., Soresi, S., Di Maggio, I., Santilli, S., & Ginevra, M. C. (2020). *Sustainable development, career counselling and career education*. Springer.
- Plant, P. (2020). Paradigms under pressure: Green guidance. *Nordic Journal of Transitions, Careers and Guidance*, 1(1), 1-9. <https://doi.org/10.16993/njtcg.25>
- Robertson, P. J. (2021). The aims of career development policy: Towards a comprehensive framework. In P. J. Robertson, T. Hooley, & P. McCash (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook of career development* (pp. 113–128). Oxford University Press.
- Šapale, S., Iliško, D., & Badjanova, J. (2021). Sustainable career guidance during the pandemic: Building pathways into a 'new normal'. *Discourse and Communication for Sustainable Education*, 12(1), 140-150. <https://doi.org/10.2478/dcse-2021-0010>

United Nations. (2017). *Resolution adopted by the General Assembly on 6 July 2017. Work of the Statistical Commission pertaining to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*. <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N17/207/63/PDF/N1720763.pdf?OpenElement>

University of California, Los Angeles. (2016). *Sustainability charter*. <https://www.sustain.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/UCLA-Sustainability-Charter.pdf>

World Commission on Environment and Development [The Brundtland Commission]. (1987). *Our common future*. <http://www.un-documents.net/our-common-future.pdf>